

Encountering the Community in Town Forests



Photo: USVLT

The following piece, written by Board President Doug Burnell in late spring, showcases how a USVLT project from 2012 can benefit our community in myriad ways. For a list of other preserves and easement properties that are open to the public, please visit www.usvlt.org and click on “Our Lands.”

In spite of having, or maybe because I have, many other USVLT and life-in-general issues to deal with, I want to tell about a lovely Friday-morning jaunt out our door and up the Swift River into the Albany Town Forest. There is something calming and reinvigorating about poking along a river trail – a coolness of air, a tumbling of water, a mustiness of silt – which touches all our senses. But so are the other human pursuits taking place along the river...

We first spied a multitude of middle-schoolers, on the sunny cobble beach across the river, spread out along the scoured-bare trunk of a recumbent uprooted tree, their teacher back-to-us giving animated instruction. We awaited the juvenile disruption of elbowing and gesturing which would surely be caused by our presence, conspicuous as we were through holes in the vegetation, yet they all remained transfixed.

Heading into the woods from the tenant farmers’ larger-than-ever expanse of mulched and drip-irrigated beds of delectable-looking vegetables, we saw with a bit of horror a pack of dogs coming our way and then spotted an athletic runner in their midst, calling after yet another pooch with wanderlust. As the tongue-wagging troop ran gleefully past us, I asked the runner if these were all hers – “Nope. It’s my job” was the reply.

On the return loop, another group, which we had spotted earlier gathering over by the remote-controlled airplane club’s runway, was now scattered and circling back towards us on the field trail, which is mowed by the school district as Kennett High’s cross-country running course. An array of backpack-laden individuals marched past, until I just had to inquire of an official-looking stationary leader with a stop watch about what all this might represent. I was informed that they were getting certified by the Forest Service as backcountry firefighters, needing to

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P.O. Box 2233
 Conway NH 03818
 (603) 662-0008
 info@usvlt.org • www.usvlt.org



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Executive Director's Message



Strategic. Planning. Two words that, while potentially exciting on their own, usually elicit yawns when linked together. And yet, what we do, at our core, is governed by a strategic planning process that I'd argue is multi-faceted, engaging and yes, exciting.

USVLT's strategic planning is comprised of two parts: charting organizational growth (our strategic organizational plan, or SOP) and highlighting properties worthy of long-term protection (strategic conservation planning, or SCP). The two are very different. Our most recent SOP was adopted in June 2017, and is revised annually at board retreats to assess progress against metrics and goals set just a few years ago. It's iterative and adaptive, too, which means goals can change as unforeseen opportunities arise that would better further our mission. This is meant to be a public document, shared with our constituency, and is posted on the Land Trust's website.

Our current capital campaign effort, as detailed on page 3 of this newsletter: It's in there. Increased stewardship staff? It's in there. Better signage, more

welcome kiosks, and more public access, where appropriate? It's in there. More partnerships with fellow nonprofits in the Valley and beyond? Maintaining high ethical and legal standards, as evidenced by our recently renewed status as an accredited land trust? Absolutely!

The SCP process unfolded on a different timeline: first adopted in 2011, a 10-year update is underway. Our Land Committee and staff have been working on readjusting conservation priorities in order to identify those most vulnerable resource-rich lands. But it's also heartening to see how much of what was highlighted in 2011 has now been protected. In just the last five years, we have conserved over 4,700 acres of land within those conservation focus areas. The revised SCP, due out next year, will build on this foundation of work by incorporating climate change threats in our analysis (among other topics) – stay tuned.

Strategic planning (yawn) does work, as evidenced by USVLT's growth in the past twenty years. Thank you for your support in helping achieve this vision, together.

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complete three laps of this course with 45-pound packs within a certain time in order to qualify!

On the way past the school group again, only a couple of boys scouring the beach at the mouth of Pequawket Brook were still in sight – all were now scattered on a scavenger hunt perhaps?

I considered this a most gratifying little outing – even after schlepping out new trash and gear from an abandoned campsite – showing off the fruits of our labors at conservation and the many uses of a true community forest.

Campaign Update



Photo: Joe Klemenovitch

As this newsletter goes to print, USVLT is wrapping up the most significant fundraising effort in our organization's history. Thanks to the support of our community, the 20 Years & Onward – Preserving Land for Life campaign has been a success by any standard of measurement.

Planning first started in early 2019, the first major pledges were secured by the fall of 2019, and a campaign committee had been assembled in early 2020. All was running smoothly, but after only six committee meetings, the pandemic hit our shores, forcing us to pause, re-evaluate, and possibly abandon the undertaking. After a hiatus of seven months, it was clear that government grants and signed option agreements with property owners weren't going to be delayed, even as Covid-19 spread throughout the world and the US entered a period of economic and social uncertainty not seen in generations. So, we braced ourselves and plunged back into the campaign waters, more uncertain than ever whether the goal was achievable. A year later, we can attest that it was.

The campaign goals are three-fold: to increase the Land Action Fund to purchase two new land holdings that will become future community forests; to create a Capital Reserve Fund for future stewardship work and organizational stability; and to seed a Farmland Fund for agricultural easements and farm advocacy work. (For more details about these funds, please see sidebar.)

The total campaign goal is just shy of \$6M – nearly evenly divided between government grants and donations from individuals and foundations. As with most government grants, those awarded for the community forest acquisitions require "match funding." Here's where our community showed up, in force, and with incredible generosity. Thanks to that generosity, we are looking forward to the early-2022 acquisition of the Dundee Community Forest in Bartlett and Jackson, and a 134-acre expansion of the Pine Hill Community Forest in Conway.

This outpouring of support has been truly humbling. Together, we're now poised to chart our next 20 years of preserving land for community benefit.

Thank you.

The Land Action Fund (\$4.3M goal) will be for exemplary conservation projects, where irreplaceable natural resources would otherwise be lost or threatened by development. As a Board-designated fund, the Land Action Fund could be used in three ways: 1) to purchase conservation easements on private land; 2) to purchase lands "in fee" and retain them as Land Trust preserves open to the public; or 3) to buy properties that are currently for sale, safeguard them with conservation easements, and then resell them once protected. More than 95% of the donations earmarked for the Land Action Fund will be used to complete the two large projects at our doorstep – the establishment of the Dundee Community Forest and the Pine Hill Expansion project.

The Capital Reserve Fund (\$1M goal) will sustain the Land Trust's stewardship obligations in the future. The fund's earnings will offset operational costs by an amount equal to one full-time stewardship staff person. Currently, 100% of operations are paid through the "annual fund" (mostly yearly membership donations). A capital reserve will underwrite future growth, while providing for organizational stability during periods of economic downturn. These funds are overseen by USVLT's Finance Committee.

The Farmland Fund (\$600K goal) will provide matching financial support for agricultural easement acquisitions, while also supporting advocacy efforts on behalf of local family-scale farms. Currently, the US Department of Agriculture provides funding for easements on "prime agricultural soils," but this federal funding is capped at 50% of the easement's value. Our goal is to have funds already set aside for qualifying projects, which will speed the pace at which we conserve farmland. Past projects include the Lucy Family Farm, Weston's Rivercroft Farm, Hussey's Cross Farm, the Amos Merrill Homestead, and the Lucy Brook Farm. Despite these victories, we have conserved less than 10% of the eligible farmland in the Mount Washington Valley.

2021 has been a busy year for land conservation in the greater Mount Washington Valley. While the future Dundee Community Forest and the Pine Hill Community Forest Expansion projects have taken much of the limelight, staff and generous land-owners have been working behind the scenes on no less than 17 active projects. Several of these are slated to be completed by the end of 2021.

In early 2021, USVLT, together with project partner the Trust for Public Land (TPL), were awarded up to \$2.3M in Forest Legacy funding for the future Dundee Community Forest. This grant requires “match” of two types: cash and non-cash. While “cash match” is straightforward enough (and please see the updates on our capital campaign on page 3), the “non-cash match” component is designed to leverage local conservation efforts. In other words, the more property owners we can identify who would donate conservation easements on their property, the more federal dollars would be awarded to the Dundee Community Forest project (up to the full grant amount of \$2.3M).

Thanks to the success of the Forest Legacy grant, several generous property owners in Jackson, Bartlett, Conway, Albany and Eaton have all been working with USVLT on possible “match easements” – spurring the large number of donated easements that will close in 2021 and 2022. And, thanks to their generosity, we are now on track to receive the full \$2.3M in federal funding.

We thank these easement and land donors for their prescient contributions, which allow access to the full Forest Legacy grant available for the future Dundee Community Forest. Here’s a snapshot of a few such properties:



Windy Hill Farm Photo: William Abbott

Windy Hill Farm

- 114 acres in Jackson directly abutting the proposed Dundee Community Forest
- historic hillside farm with a mix of pastures, wetlands and grassland habitat across 3 legal lots
- 80+ acres of forestland adjacent to the White Mountain National Forest, adding significantly to an existing block of conservation land
- incredible scenery from a trail network maintained by Jackson Ski Touring Foundation



Tilney Easement

- 41 acres in Jackson abutting other Town of Jackson conservation land
- predominantly forestland near Carter Notch Road



Kent Hill Photo: Abby King

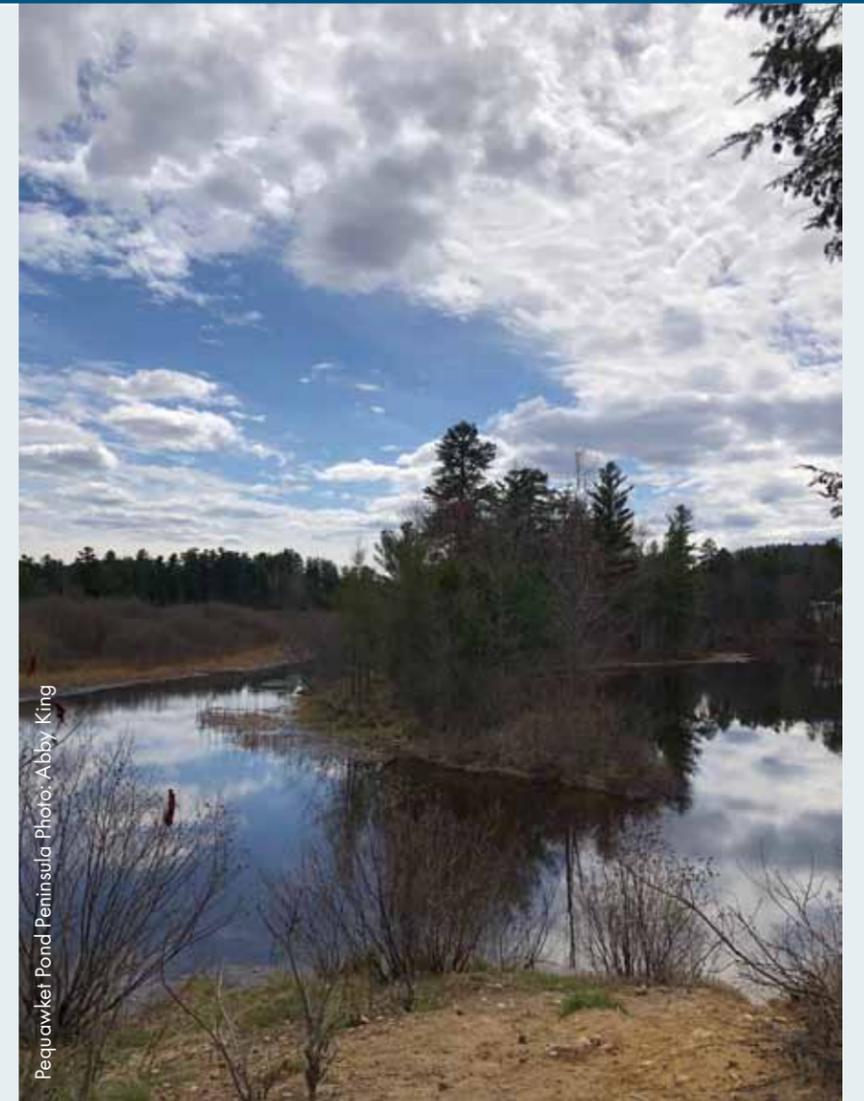
Anonymous Donation

- 152 acres of forestland along Stewart Road and Foss Mountain Road, donated “in fee” to USVLT as a new preserve property
- directly abutting other proposed and existing conservation land
- incredible scenery from the height of land

Kent Hill Properties 490 Acres in Eaton

Marquis Donation

- 338 acres proposed as a USVLT-held easement property, qualifying as a Forest Legacy match
- Directly abutting Town of Eaton conservation lands, creating an impressive habitat block for wide-ranging species



Pequawket Pond Peninsula Photo: Abby King

In addition to potential match easements for the Forest Legacy grant program, USVLT will soon be the proud new owner of an unusual slice of conservation land: the Pequawket Pond Peninsula property. This 12-acre parcel, which straddles the town line between Conway and Albany, was once a pronounced esker jutting into the southwestern portion of Pequawket Pond. Forty years ago, the site was mined for gravel and aggregates, and in the 1990s, the land was subject to a wetland creation project connected to the ill-fated Conway Bypass. Several acres of wetlands were created onsite to “mitigate” for wetland filling for the never-built roadway. Now, the new branch of the Conway Rec Path heading south from Cranmore – to be built this fall – also needs mitigation credits. With a bureaucratic sleight of hand, and with the original mitigation credits for the bypass still available, the Department of Environmental Services has now agreed that those credits could be applied to the Rec Path project as long as a local conservation organization agrees to long-term ownership and stewardship of the Pequawket Pond Peninsula. USVLT gladly agreed.

Newest Members of the USVLT Community



Pictured left to right are USVLT's new Land Steward Jeff Sires and new Board Members Tucker Gordon and Megan-Mack Nicholson

Jeff Sires Joins Staff

Land projects are USVLT's core mission, and as the organization celebrates its 20th anniversary, more than 75 have been completed conserving over 12,700 acres. At the same time, the 20 Years & Onward Capital Campaign is underway to create the Dundee Community Forest and expand Pine Hill. The associated stewardship issues are complex, and in 2021 Jeff Sires joined USVLT to focus on them.

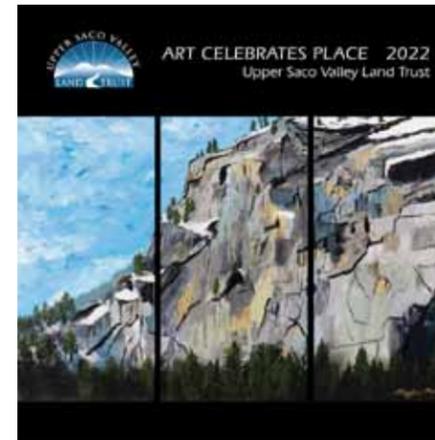
Jeff brings a unique background and a local connection to land and water conservation efforts in the Saco River watershed. He grew up in Conway, graduated from the University of New Hampshire with a degree in civil engineering, and subsequently spent three years in southcentral Alaska working for the Kenai Watershed Forum. On the Kenai River and its tributaries, Jeff's work centered on water quality and hydrologic research to promote a healthy watershed and improve fish habitat. After returning to the Mount Washington Valley in 2017, he spent three years with HEB Engineers, primarily working as a water resources engineer for stream crossing projects. Jeff has maintained a dedication to conservation through his service as the current Chair of the Jackson Conservation Commission, past Chair and current Vice-Chair of the Saco-Swift Rivers Local Advisory Committee, and Treasurer of the Saco Headwaters Alliance. In his free time, Jeff enjoys riding bikes, skiing, and generally being outside in the beautiful area he calls home.

Upper Saco Valley Land Trust welcomed two new board members in 2021, Megan-Mack Nicholson and Tucker Gordon. Both have deep roots in the state of Maine, connections to the outdoor recreational community, and a commitment to land conservation. In the meantime, veteran treasurer and three-term member Jim Hastings has returned to the board, for which the Land Trust is eternally grateful! USVLT would also like to express sincere gratitude to two members who departed the board in 2021, Rick Jenkinson and Rebecca McReynolds.

Megan-Mack Nicholson grew up spending as much time as she could in the woods behind her childhood home in China, Maine. She has worked for Wilderness Therapy Programs, run outings programs, and taught at several universities and colleges including Ithaca College and Cornell. In 2016, Megan-Mack moved back to Maine to take the position of the Director of The Hyde Wilderness School in Northern Maine. She is currently focusing on Holon Healing: her business that provides Forest Therapy and Shamanic Reiki Practices. She is a Registered Maine Guide, Certified Yoga Teacher, and Certified Forest Therapy Guide. Creating experiences and opportunities for people to connect and heal in nature is why she is also so passionate about protecting and conserving the gorgeous land of the Upper Saco Valley.

Tucker Gordon spent childhood summers and weekends at his family's home in Fryeburg. He moved here full time after graduating from Johns Hopkins University in 2016 with a B.A in Earth & Planetary Science. Through college, Tucker worked summers at Weston's Farm (run by his great-aunt and uncle), where he honed skills that prepared him for the farm manager position at the Thompson House Eatery in Jackson. In 2018, Tucker joined the team at HEB Engineers, Inc. where he works as an Environmental Specialist. Besides his family ties to the region, Tucker was drawn to live here by the ample outdoor recreational opportunities the area provides. He is an avid skier, mountain biker, hiker, and enjoys anything that involves time spent outdoors. He currently lives in Intervale with his wife Maika and their two dogs Emmy and Sawyer.

ACP Calendars and Merchandise



The pandemic has put USVLT's major fundraising events on hold, including Art Celebrates Place and the ACP Calendar as well. The good news is that the Art Celebrates Calendar is back, and once again offers the wonderful opportunity to appreciate local landscapes and easement properties in print form, month by month. A huge thank you to Linda Gray, who launched the calendar project six years ago and shepherds the process, and to participating artists. And thank you to its business sponsors Computer Port, Jim Doucette Real Estate, Minuteman Press, Spice and Grain, and White Birch Books. Pick one up today at Jackson Art Studio, the MWV Chamber of Commerce, Edge of Maine Gallery, Spice and Grain, White Birch Books, the Local Grocer, Poppy and Vale, or the USVLT office in Conway.

As we head into late fall, and the holiday gift giving season, also keep in mind USVLT vests, blankets, water bottles and Elizabeth Vincent Foster's book, *When I Have a Bear*. All are available at the Land Trust office, or by visiting usvlt.org.

2021 Easement Exploration Series

USVLT's Easement Exploration Series was launched six years ago to highlight conserved properties and provide an opportunity to get out onto the land. Like so many activities, the EES was curtailed in the pandemic, but reemerged in 2021 with a difference. This year, as the Land Trust continues to raise funds for its capital campaign, the ESS has strategically focused on the Pine Hill Expansion project, and the 16 parcels that comprise the future Dundee Community Forest.

Since May the series has offered residents and visitors a wide range of experiences showcasing the history, flora and fauna, views and unique properties of each parcel. Local historians, scientists, and neighborhood residents came together in a team effort to offer their expertise.

"Taking a walk in the woods" doesn't mean the same to everyone, so a variety of experiences was planned. Some prefer to bushwhack up the steepest of slopes, others want to stop and enjoy the views or bend down to examine exquisite orchids next to the smallest sundews in a wetland. For some, wild areas offer the opportunity to stretch and relax or focus on themselves, while others want to record the landscape through a photographic lens or enjoy the history and stories of past generations living on the land.

With each EES event, participants suggested other explorations. Stay tuned for more to come!



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(603) 662-0008 info@usvlt.org www.usvlt.org

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