

From the Ground Up: Neighbors Unite to Manage Conservation Landscape

By Martha West Lyman and Will Abbott

The headwaters of the Lamprey River, located in the Rockingham County Town of Northwood, are the focus of a unique collaborative of landowners who just may be inventing the next big thing in community land management.

The Northwood Area Land Management Collaborative (NALMC) has a new way of viewing traditional boundaries. NALMC describes itself as a neighborhood organization built from the ground up, with “neighbors working with neighbors across our stone walls to enhance the ecological, social, recreational, and economic resources of the local landscape for present and future generations.”

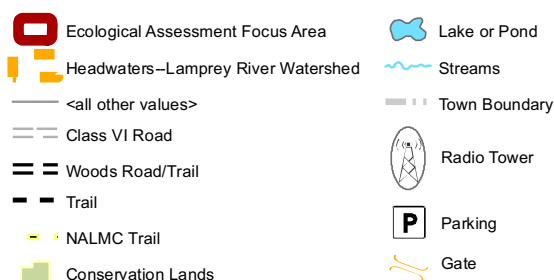
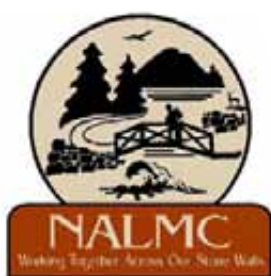
The Lay of the Land

NALMC is an informal group of landowners whose individual ownerships include an ecological focus area of 6,000 contiguous acres just east of Northwood Lake and south of Route 4. Encom-

passing the headwaters of the Lamprey River, this landscape includes the 660-acre Northwood Meadows State Park; the 456-acre Forest Peters Wildlife Management Area (WMA) owned and managed by the NH Department of Fish and Game; the 277-acre Saddleback Mountain property owned by the University of New Hampshire; two town forests totaling 215 acres owned and managed by the Town of Northwood; and a 51-acre property owned and managed by Coe-Brown Academy and more than 45 other private landowners.

Carl Wallman, one of the founders of NALMC and now chair of the organization’s steering committee, owns Harmony Hill Farm, 211 acres deep in the heart of the NALMC region. In 2001 he donated a conservation easement on 164 acres of the farm’s open space to the Forest Society. Carl understood that no matter what he did to conserve his land, it was only one piece of a much larger and very important landscape.

***Facing page:** A large and central portion of the NALMC neighborhood includes several public lands laced with trails and woods roads, including Northwood Meadows State Park and Forest Peters Wildlife Management Area. This creates a unique opportunity for NALMC to model land stewardship techniques on a mosaic of public and private lands. The Collaborative hopes to serve as a model for others, encouraging “neighborhoods” throughout the state to work across boundaries on collaborative, voluntary, and community-based land stewardship.*



Trails provided by NALMC and NH Fish & Game. The background image is a dem and hillshade from the USGS. The following data layers were mapped at 1:24,000 and distributed by NH GRANIT: conservation lands; watershed boundaries, from NRCS and NH DES; hydrography, from the US Geological Survey, and town boundaries, from the USGS.

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Ecological assessment by Ibis Wildlife Consulting
Map prepared by Neatline Associates July 2009





Above: The Northwood Meadows area is laced with trails large and small, including the five-mile hiking trail linking Northwood Meadows State Park with Harmony Hill Farm that was one of NALMC's early projects. Today, these trails are enjoyed by hikers, fishermen, students, cyclists, and snowmobilers. Photo by Joyce El Kouarti.

Right: Local landowners often share a common vision, but their specific forest management goals are often quite distinct. Earlier this year, five foresters representing five different landowners got together to compare the forest management plans each had developed for their respective clients. Photo courtesy of the NH Fish & Game Department.

Reaching Out

In 2006 Carl and Jim Oehler, from the NH Department of Fish and Game, began talking about opportunities to share management goals across the boundaries of the State Park, the Forest Peters WMA, and Harmony Hill Farm. When they began to see the potential, they decided to offer abutters to the three properties the opportunity to participate in a collaborative land management initiative. A good idea for sure, but they soon learned they were plowing very new ground.

Some of the first steps included creating a map of the landscape so people could see where their property fit into the conservation mosaic. Potluck suppers were held so neighbors could gather and meet. Events, projects, and workshops were organized with the goal of engaging landowners and neighbors, sharing information on nature and land stewardship, and demonstrating the benefits of working together across property boundaries. One early project created a five-mile hiking trail linking Northwood Meadows State Park with Harmony Hill Farm. Other activities included workshops on maple sugaring, invasive species, and prescribed burns for habitat management.

Last July, with permission from the State's Division of Parks and Recreation, NALMC organized a one-day event at the Northwood Meadows State Park. Called "Northwood Meadows Discovery Day," the event attracted more than 300 people from the community and featured a variety of activities designed to celebrate the Park and the many volunteers who assist in its stewardship. The event also provided NALMC with an opportunity to tell its story to the larger community and to engage local groups in NALMC's "neighbor-to-neighbor" land management vision. The Northwood Crankpullers Snowmobile Club, which maintains trails on the NALMC landscape, provided food – including the pulled pork sandwiches that rapidly sold out. NH Department of Fish and Game and NH Division of Parks and Recreation provided displays, as did the Telephone Pioneers and the Saddleback Mountain Lions Club. The Northwood Historical Society, Board of Selectmen, and Conservation Commission each contributed time and energy to the day's success.



Left: Forest management is one of many goals of NALMC landowners, along with wildlife habitat improvement, the protection of water quality, public education, and outdoor recreation. Photo courtesy of the NH Fish & Game Department.

Assessing the Natural and Community Landscapes

In September 2009 Ellen Snyder of Ibis Wildlife Consulting completed a comprehensive ecological assessment of the NALMC landscape (available on line at <http://nalmc.net>), funded by a grant from the Otto Fund of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation. The assessment demonstrated what many landowners already knew: the NALMC region is important not only because it encompasses the headwaters of the Lamprey River, but also because it contains important wildlife species and plant communities throughout. Of the 6,000 acres in the focus area, 85 percent is forested, making this one of the larger unfragmented blocks of forestland in an area of the state consistently under development pressure.

As important as the landscape's natural capital is, Snyder observes in her assessment that NALMC also has a wealth of collective knowledge, experience, and interests among the state, community, and private landowner participants. This community capital, she suggests, "can be tapped to help understand and implement best practices for land stewardship that help protect shared values for the region."

Snyder's assessment concludes, "This ecological assessment can serve as a springboard for continued and enhanced work across boundaries on collaborative, voluntary, and community-based land stewardship." The report lists a series of opportunities for NALMC to consider while going forward, including environmental stewardship, habitat and forest management, and land conservation as well as recreation, education, and interpretation.

The Next Level

Even as NALMC creates opportunities to exchange information, to connect neighbors, and to demonstrate the benefits of working across boundaries, Wallman is looking ahead to an even more innovative challenge.

"What if we could bring individual landowners to a common table, define exactly what values they actually share, and then embed these shared values into the stewardship of the larger landscape?" he asked.

As an example, imagine that the NH Department of Fish and Game wanted to establish ten acres of new successional habitat in the NALMC focus area, and the most appropriate place to do this was on private land. If the private Harmony Hill Farm owner agreed, the project to improve habitat could be done on their land, where it best fits on the landscape, rather than on the Forest Peters WMA owned by the NH Department of Fish and Game.

Collaborating on shared land management goals while retaining landowner sovereignty can be challenging, especially when public and private landowners try to coordinate objectives.

Earlier this year, as a first step, five foresters representing five different landowners got together to talk about the forest management plans each had developed for their respective clients. While the larger visions of these landowners may have much in common, the specific goals and objectives for each forest are often quite distinct.

Determining how to collaborate on shared land management goals while retaining landowner "sovereignty" is not as easy as it sounds, particularly when public and private landowners try to coordinate objectives. Teasing out the different objectives among a larger set of shared values will consume time, conversation, and probably even some debate. But if the debate takes place at neighborhood pot luck suppers, it is a healthy, homegrown debate. And, if it leads to some consensus, the landscape itself will benefit for many years to come. ♪

Martha Lyman has been working in the field of community-based natural resource management and is a consultant with the Community Forest Collaborative, a partnership of the Trust for Public Land, the Northern Forest Center, Sustainable Forest Futures, and the Quebec-Labrador Foundation. Will Abbott is the Vice President of Policy & Land Management at the Forest Society.