

CONSERVATION PLANNING DEMYSTIFIED

Why and How You Can Develop a Conservation Plan for your Region

By Erin Lloyd, Conservation Partners, LLC

Conservation planning is a term we are hearing more and more these days. From regional land trust conference workshops to scientific journal articles in international conservation journals, leaders in the conservation community are increasingly stressing the importance of planning. Why should your conservation commission think about drafting a conservation plan for your town or region? Can it be done without having a trained conservation biologist on staff? This article will shed some light on what conservation planning actually means, and how a small all-volunteer or minimally-staffed organization can create such a plan.

So, what *is* conservation planning? Simply put, it is the procedure by which your organization decides where to concentrate its proactive efforts – which parcels you should conserve and how best to protect the significant open space in your community. For example, your mission might include protecting the water quality of a river that flows through town. Since you have limited money and no paid staff, you want to be sure you focus your efforts on significant parcels of land within the river’s watershed, without spending much time or money on properties that don’t accomplish that objective.

There are a variety of ways in which a strategic conservation plan can help your organization practice good conservation. First, it helps you to stay *focused on your mission*. Your plan will be based on the fundamentals of your mission. If you are primarily concerned with wildlife habitat, the actions proposed in your plan should reflect that. Often, it is easy to become distracted by projects that are really outside the bounds of your mission or capacity. We all got involved in this business because we care deeply about the land and ecosystems in which we live – it is hard to turn down projects, but sometimes practicing good conservation means doing just that.

Planning can also help *keep your stewardship obligations in check*. Many land conservation organizations are now finding that the amount of land they have conserved is requiring more time and money to steward than they may have planned for. Stewardship responsibilities increase with the amount of land protected, and also when land changes hands to second or third generation landowners. Some advance planning can help you refine which projects you’ll take on and, therefore, keep your stewardship activities focused where they are most needed.

Furthermore, conservation planning helps to ensure that your *important and/or sensitive areas get protected sooner rather than later*. If your organization is like many small, all-volunteer organizations across the country, it is still in “react” mode. This mode can cause you to spend energy and resources on easements or land donations on disconnected parcels with minimal conservation value and can distract the organization from protecting large holdings or ecologically significant areas. Your conservation plan will in effect guide you toward prioritizing the parcels you want to protect or classify various regions within your town in which you will either accept or decline offers of easements or land. In the best-case scenario, you will specify a prioritized list of landowners with whom you want to engage in discussions about proactive land protection efforts. As we all know, a five-acre easement along the railroad tracks can take just as

much (if not more) time to negotiate and monitor as that prized 300-acre undeveloped forest tract. If you are able to turn down the five-acre piece, you will have freed up your time and funds to work on the 300 acres.

The *potential for developing collaborations* or *partnerships with other organizations* can be another beneficial outcome from your planning efforts. In the course of doing your planning, it may become evident that significant opportunities in your region about the *region* covered by a neighboring conservation commission or land trust. *Developing partnerships or collaborations with these organizations can result in much more significant overall conservation objectives being achieved.* Your planning efforts may also inspire your neighboring organizations to do the same. The most successful conservation happens when groups work together and pool their resources.

Collaborations have the added benefit of *increasing your likelihood of receiving foundation support for projects.* Foundation money (like all other money for conservation) has become harder to come by. My firm's experience has been that foundations are looking more seriously at organizations that have undertaken some type of *planning process*, whether that be conservation planning or strategic organizational planning. Why? Because the projects undertaken by these organizations are much more likely to be successful and will ultimately be examples of good, well thought-out projects that the foundation's name can be connected with. In addition, they look favorably on collaborations and coalitions of grassroots groups working together. If your planning reveals opportunities to work with your neighbors, all the better!

We've discussed the "why" of developing a conservation plan, and now we come to the "how." To keep this relatively brief, I will not go into all the steps of how to develop a plan, but will offer the following basic steps:

1. *Define your conservation goals.* Your goals should be realistic and quantifiable. What kind of land is most significant for conservation in your region – farmland, working forest, riverfront? Choosing more than one is certainly acceptable, but you may want to prioritize by type. How much land would you like to have conserved within a set period of time? For example, your organization may want to see a river trail expanded by five miles within the next three years. Or, you may want to have easements or fee donations on 30% of the undeveloped forest upland bordering an existing preserve. The process of quantifying your goals allows you to see how realistic they may be, and will ultimately allow you to monitor your progress along the way.

2. *Gather your data.* You will want to gather all of the data you can find on your region. The following list is what my firm typically includes when working with a client on developing a conservation plan:

- boundaries (natural, governmental, roads, etc.);
- topography (contours, slope, elevation, streams, wetlands);
- geology (soils, bedrock, aquifers);
- wildlife habitat values (including anecdotal information);
- vegetation and natural community types;
- rare, threatened, or endangered species or communities;
- existing regulatory protections (zoning, resource protection);

- current land ownership distribution (large holdings, conservation-friendly landowners);
- current land use patterns (open space, farming, residential);
- cultural/historical data (archaeology digs, historic sites);
- location of existing trails and public access points; and
- existing conserved lands (easements, fee, state parks, national forest).

3. *Create maps.* If you can get any or all of your data digitally, and you know someone who has Geographic Information System (GIS) capability and can donate some time, this is the best way to create your maps. GIS will allow you to consolidate the information in various ways, analyze your data, and create great maps for grant proposals or for meeting with partner organizations or landowners. However, the old-fashioned way works too. If you don't have access to GIS, break out the tracing paper and colored pencils and you can still have a completely acceptable and functional map with which to begin your planning. Your goal with the maps is to put all your information in one place to give you an overview of your region's conservation values.

4. *Analyze your maps.* The overview that your maps provide will make clear where the work needs to be done and where the opportunities lie. Pay particular attention to areas with overlapping conservation values (for example, deer wintering areas overlapping vernal pools and an eagle's nest, or a large block of land overlapping river frontage at the end of an existing recreational trail system) - these will be your "hot spots."

There are many resources available to help you gather your data and map it. Some are free of charge, some will require a financial investment. If you have volunteers who can take on the data gathering, you can work as a group to come up with your plan on all-volunteer power. If your volunteer base can't take this on, you can have them get as far as possible and then look to your regional planning commission or land trust for assistance, or if funds allow, hire a consultant to come up with the final plan based on the work you've already done.

With these basics on the why and the how of conservation planning, hopefully you've been convinced that conservation planning is important and do-able. If you have questions or would like references for other planning resources, please feel free to contact me at erin@conservation-partners.com. Keep up the good work!

Conservation Partners, LLC is a Maine-based consulting firm working with local land trusts, conservation commissions and state agencies throughout northern New England on land protection, stewardship, and planning issues.