

Notes for Talk for Matunuck Hills Ponds Group
June 26, 2008 by Clarkson Collins, Land
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Elements for Management and Stewardship Plans

Inventory and Description

- Basic Information, Soils, Topography, Geology, Water Bodies, Drainage Areas.
- General description of known typical biota and natural communities, forest, grassland, wetlands, what is known of common and unusual plants and animals on site. Presence or threat of invasive plant or animal species onsite or nearby.
- Human activities, agricultural, residential and commercial, transportation etc., and how these may be affecting existing resources.
- Cultural Resources, such as ruins, graveyards, stone walls, historic and archaeological sites.
- Aerial Photos, Mapping, Ground Photographs and Graphics showing and interpreting existing conditions.
- Known pollution sources or areas in need of remediation onsite or nearby.
- This information should be recorded as a base line document in land evidence records with the recording of deeds.

Statement of Management Goals.

- Clear and concise statement of goals relating to the property, among which one will commonly find:
 - protecting sensitive ecological sites
 - protecting native habitat from invasive exotic species
 - preserving historical landscapes and features
 - establishing a productive forest environment-conducting silviculture
 - establishing or restoring agricultural uses
 - protecting aesthetic qualities— experiences, views, water quality, tranquility
 - establishing recreational trails etc. for public access or scientific inquiry or education
 - protecting groundwater quality (wellhead protection).
- Note: In many cases the management priorities will be established or strongly influenced by grants in aid by financial sources for land acquisition relating to the property. For example lands acquired through Forest Legacy funds will accentuate active forestry, RI Water Resources Board will not allow uses that would interfere with water quality on site, DEM Recreation Grants will likely require a specific recreational use for the property.

- Some of the above goals are compatible, but certainly not all. Many will compete with each other for the attention of the manager. Carefully consider priorities, and how implementation of multiple goals can practically take place on the property. The range and intensity of the uses will greatly influence the complexity and effort of the owner's management activities.
- Active management such as Agriculture and Silviculture will certainly have effects on the natural environment.
- Trails and the intensity of their use (or abuse) may affect many of the conservation values, and will result in increases in management effort.
- Protecting sensitive ecological sites will generally entail careful monitoring, and vigilance against invasive species, but also may require some manipulation to keep conducive conditions for the targeted natural values. Protecting a property clearly does not mean leaving it alone.
- Recognize that for every goal identified in the goal statement, there should be a corresponding element in the management and stewardship plan.

The Management Plan:

- The management plan is the expression of how to realistically pursue the goals identified for the property. It should reflect the best levels of knowledge and practice to address the goal or goals, but should clearly be viewed as a dynamic document, and be updated and amended as conditions change.
- It should be general enough to accommodate a number of possible ways to achieve a management objective, as long as the means is consistent with the plan's purpose.
- The plan should clearly describe through maps and description specific areas for active uses, such as agriculture, forestry, trail creation, clearing for views, and historical restoration activities.
- Major activities that will substantially alter the property should be supported by a separate plan element or appendix that details the purpose and methods of the operation, such as a forest management plan, grassland restoration plan, or remediation plan.
- The plan should include a schedule for monitoring and maintenance activities, a minimum of one time per year, and depending on the type, size and relative importance, more frequent monitoring may be needed.
- Management Plans should be recorded in applicable Land Evidence Record

Implementation Planning:

- Work plans effect the implementation of the management plans, and are drawn up by the Stewards or Land Manager, and involve finding the resources, (funds for contracting, arrangements for contract or volunteer labor, supplies, and scheduled times) to undertake the individual projects.
- In many cases the practicality of work plans is at least partially dependent on outside financial help as may be available from state, federal or private grants. SKLT has relied on State and Federal trails grants, USDA wildlife habitat incentive programs, US Fish and Wildlife Service grants, and the Rhode Island Foundation.
- These funding sources are unpredictable, and usually non-repetitive, so the managing agency will have to provide maintenance activities over the long term. The options for dealing with long term costs include attracting a volunteer labor force, funding services through donations to dedicated management funds, developing endowments for acquired properties, and in cases involving productive agricultural lands, using lease fees for property management.
- As an example, maintenance costs at this 100-acre farm which is used to support dairy farm operations (67 acres feed corn, alfalfa and hay) and wildlife habitat (11 acres) amounted to \$3,500 or \$35 per acre in cash, and if counting volunteer help (valued at \$7,200), the overall maintenance cost is \$110 per acre.
- For many organizations involved in Natural Resource Protection, implementation can be the weakest link, since both funding and volunteer labor are limited and variable. Therefore, improving communication and cooperation among the network of individual conservation groups is a growing necessity.

Practical Concerns for Land Protection

- Given the scarce financial environment that conservation groups work in, The South Kingstown Land Trust concentrates effort and spending on our most significant properties. Although perhaps crude, the approach of triage in determining the level of care to be invested in each property has been useful. Based on parcel size, location, accessibility, and resource value all SKLT properties are divided into three basic stewardship categories A, B & C as follows:
- “A” consists of properties are our “signature” holdings due to high habitat or scenic value and ability to accommodate a relatively high level of public use. Twenty-two out of 126 SKLT properties are in category “A.” and make up 929 acres in total. Of these 17 are held in fee ownership (690 acres), and five are held as conservation easements (239 acres).
- “B” consists of valuable lands managed with low levels of public use, often because of sensitive ecological features or restricted access. Twelve out of 126 properties fall into this category, constituting 325 acres. Of these eight properties are held in fee ownership (125 acres), and four are held as conservation easements (167 acres).

- “C” consists of 101 properties that numerically make up the majority SKLT holdings, and comprise 1096 acres. They typically have limitations of use or value due to size, ownership restrictions, relatively low habitat value or location, or properties on which SKLT owns conservation easements (or development rights) only. Sixty-one of the properties that fall into this category are in fee ownership (496 acres), and forty-three are covered by conservation easement only (623 acres).
- Under this scheme “A” parcels (in particular lands with public trails and farmland) receive the greatest stewardship attention because of their need for continuous maintenance. Properties in the “B” category in large part have intact natural habitats, and maintenance consists of monitoring for invasive plants and overall health and diversity of the biota. “C” properties are either maintained by their owners, in which case monitoring of conservation restrictions is necessary. By contrast “B” and “C” parcels normally generate relatively little cost aside from minor volunteer costs of property monitoring (estimated at \$72 per property per year) and the applied management programmatic cost of \$400 per parcel per year. However, it is recognized that substantial cost and effort may be needed to address occasional incidents and conditions on an as needed basis, such as clearing dumped materials, and defending against encroachment from others. To date encroachments have been handled satisfactorily without resorting to the courts.
- Another means of reducing management and stewardship costs at the macro-level is to be more selective in property acquisition. Since the adoption of resource-based selection criteria in 2000, SKLT has opted not to pursue acquisition of low-ranking properties on numerous occasions.

Conclusions:

Management and Stewardship responsibilities are becoming an increasingly important concern for groups involved in protecting valuable natural resource lands.

Specially crafted management plans are critical for all significant properties: Management goals should be carefully selected based on an accurate scientific evaluation of a range of environmental criteria. Most plans will require collaboration with professionals.

Management plans should be practical and flexible in approach towards management objectives, specific in cases where multiple conservation/land use goals are being pursued on one property.

Implementation of Management Plans is a major cost consideration for most conservation organizations. Managers must take advantage of financial grant assistance, peer information sharing, and volunteer efforts. In a situation of scarcity, the most important resources should receive highest priority.