

# CONCORD MONITOR

## Why conserve land?

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Why are many landowners so passionate about conserving their land? Why do people volunteer at Moose Mountains Regional Greenways to help conserve other people's land? Although these topics have been an underlying theme in this series of articles on land conservation, this article will elaborate, offer insights into what motivates conservation-minded people, and explain some of the many benefits of land conservation. Throughout the series, we have emphasized the importance of the individuals whose generosity makes MMRG's work possible and suggested great places for readers to explore.

Jon Nute is both a conservation landowner and a dedicated conservationist, who also volunteers his time to serve on MMRG's Board of Directors and its Stewardship & Lands Committee. Jon and Anne Nute's 37-acre Tree Farm is protected by a conservation easement held by the Town of Milton, backed up by MMRG.

"Having inherited it, we wanted it to remain as forest into the future, valued for its natural attributes," Nute said. "The land adjacent to ours has houses every 200 feet along the road, so keeping ours undeveloped provides some balance."

Nute elaborates on some of the benefits for his family as well as for water quality and the wildlife that inhabit the woods.

"As a retired forester, I manage the forest to improve the quality of trees for timber. We harvest the low-value trees each year for firewood and cut some of the big white pines and red oaks every ten years or so to pay the property taxes," he said. "The big oaks provide plenty of acorns for wildlife and two seasonal brooks have clean water, thanks to the surrounding trees. The forest looks beautiful and we love to walk the timber harvest trails and see something new each time."

The benefits of forests for wildlife and for recreation probably seem obvious, but how do trees keep the water clean? In a forest, the abundance of tree leaves overhead diminishes the force of falling

rain, tree roots stabilize the soil, and the forest soil itself acts like a filtering sponge that absorbs and gradually releases water, all of which help to reduce runoff, even during heavy rainstorms. As rainwater seeps downward through the soil, it is purified before eventually replenishing the water table or refilling rivulets and streams. In contrast, a paved area or other surface impermeable to water (such as a roof), allows rainwater to run quickly across without soaking in, carrying surface contaminants with it. These fast-flowing currents can then erode exposed soil, picking up more soil particles. Often the runoff and all the noxious waste it carries ends up polluting rivers and lakes, and the increased volume of runoff may cause destructive flooding.

For Ron Gehl of New Durham, conservation has been a lifelong passion, ever since he first experienced the Adirondacks wilderness as a Boy Scout. Now Gehl serves as a volunteer member of MMRG's Board of Directors, Chair of MMRG's Stewardship & Land Committee, and Chair of the New Durham Conservation Commission. The things that inspire Gehl to devote himself to land conservation range from personal factors to long-term public benefits, with public access topping his list of reasons.

"Everyone needs wild or natural places to spend time, get away from it all, even if only in your own neighborhood. It's restorative!" Gehl said. "I myself get outside as often as possible, even if only for a few minutes. I'm lucky to have a tract of old woods right out my back door."

Gehl is also passionate about the advantages of land conservation at the town level, saying, "It's a concept I fought for during my term as ND Planning Board member. Open space provides an economic benefit to towns by encouraging local recreation and purchases at town businesses, such as lodging, restaurants, and general stores. It's also been proven that conservation land can lower property taxes for residents, because an acre of open space demands only a fraction of the services required for a residential parcel. The percentages differ by town, but the Planning Board did a study and got the hard numbers to demonstrate that in New Durham."

Gehl calls attention to even broader benefits, such as the ability of healthy Northeastern forests to absorb carbon and help mitigate climate change. He also points to MMRG's emphasis on landscape scale conservation. He explains, "We want to create greenways – connected open spaces that provide pathways for critters to move and adapt to changes in their habitats brought about by encroaching development, increased human use, and a warming climate. This is the concept of a resilient landscape, one in which plants and wildlife can adapt to change."

Stephen Snow's 325-acre tree farm on Tumbledown Dick in Brookfield, protected by a conservation easement held by MMRG, is an example of land with this type of resiliency, because it provides connectivity among various habitat types and with abutting conserved lands. The Snow Family easement project was completed with grants from the N.H. Land and Community Heritage Investment Program and the State Conservation Committee (Moose Plate), and the land is open to the public for non-motorized, low-impact recreation and hunting. MMRG's Education Coordinator Kari Lygren recommends a visit.

"In spring, there are vernal pools coming to life at different times, and in mid-summer, the meadows are full of wildflowers, but watch out for ticks during this time of year," Lygren said.

Since MMRG was first formed 20 years ago, Lygren has either volunteered or worked as a staff at member, organizing a multitude of outreach events and interfacing with the public, volunteers, MMRG members, board members, and landowners. She expresses her appreciation to all involved in MMRG's mission.

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