

SAVING THE





BEST OF THE HIGHEST

Why the Quabbin-to-Cardigan Initiative is Getting Conservation Done

By Brenda Charpentier

*Viewed from the summit of Silver Mountain in Lempster, the sun sets over some of the best remaining intact forests along the western spine of New Hampshire and south into Massachusetts. They are the last frontier in the suburbanization of central New England.
Photo by Jerry and Marcy Monkman, EcoPhotography.*



With focused goals, collaboration and a grants program, the Quabbin-to-Cardigan initiative works with landowners who want to create a land legacy by conserving intact forests like these, viewed from Wilson Hill in Deering. Wilson Hill is part of the Forest Society's High Five Preserve, protected in 2004. Photo by Jerry and Marcy Monkman, EcoPhotography.

From the day he saw ‘for sale’ signs go up, Don Davis worried. He worried that the open land of Black Mountain, with its tree-covered slopes forming a peaceful backdrop for his town of Sutton, would be sold, developed and lost—“gobbled up by somebody.”

“It was ripe to happen. The high school is right there at the base, there’s a paved road, it’s close to I-89, has incredible views, beautiful forests and streams. It had everything anybody could want,” said Davis, now retired from the N.H. Div. of Parks and Recreation.

So he alerted the town conservation commission, on which he serves. The prospects didn’t look good.

“It was beyond our means. There was no way we were going to come up with the kind of money they were asking,” Davis said in a recent interview.

What he didn’t see at the time was that the commission wasn’t on its own. He would soon come to know the strength of the Quabbin-to-Cardigan Initiative.

The Quabbin-to-Cardigan Initiative, or Q2C, is a partnership of private conservation groups and public agencies with a single mission: conserve the last, best forests that remain in a two-state region stretching about 100 miles from the Quabbin Reservoir in central Massachusetts to Mount Cardigan in west central New Hampshire.

The region is as big as it sounds—about the size of the White Mountain National Forest. Growing on its 2 million acres are some of the largest remaining interconnected, ecologically significant forests in New England. These forests cover a spine of land that rises

to a watershed divide. The western side drains to the Connecticut River; the eastern side drains to the Merrimack.

Davis’s precious Black Mountain is on the northern end, and as such was prized by not just folks with a view of its slopes but also by the entire Q2C partnership. The ensuing Forest Society-led fundraising campaign to acquire the land resulted in the conservation of Black Mountain’s 1,025 acres in 2011.

“I was just ecstatic beyond belief,” said Davis, who rallied the Sutton community to the cause. “Q2C is just incredible.”

The Black Mountain project is one of a slate of Q2C successes celebrated since the initiative began in 2003 under the leadership of the Forest Society. In the first 10 years, Q2C partners have conserved 90,240 acres of land in the region (62,240 in New Hampshire and 28,000 in Massachusetts). That’s 22 percent more land protected in one decade than in all the years leading up to the Q2C.

“Clearly, the level of activity has ramped up,” said Chris Wells, the Forest Society’s senior director for strategic projects and Q2C partnership coordinator. “The partnership is working.”

WHY IS IT WORKING?

The reason the Q2C works is its unique mix of goal-setting, funding and collaboration.

“The Q2C is a landscape-scale partnership—one of the first such partnerships in the country. We’re looking at bigger, geographical units—not town, county or state boundaries—then asking ‘Who are the right people to bring to the table?’” Wells said.

10 Years of Land Conservation Progress

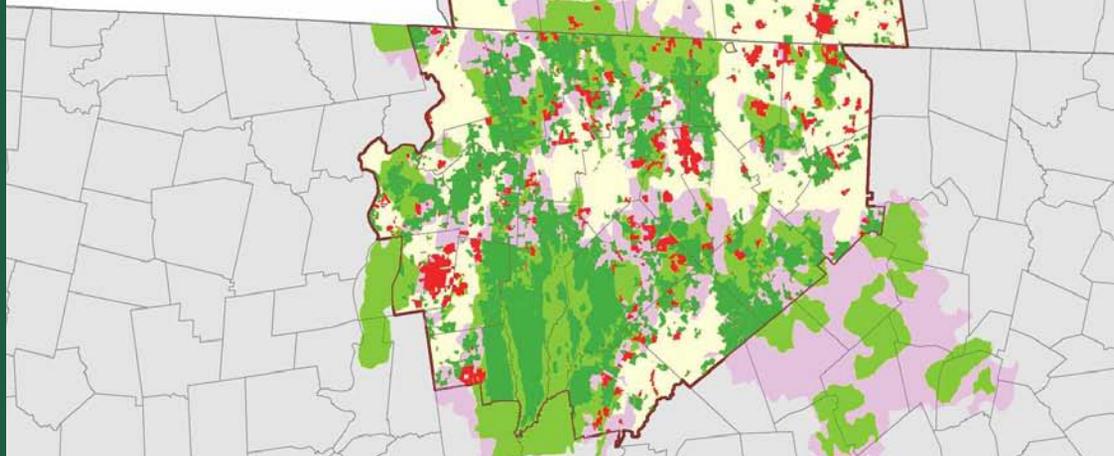
The Quabbin to Cardigan Conservation Collaborative 2002 - 2012



Map Prepared by the
Society for the Protection of NH Forests
Land Protection Department

-  Municipal Boundaries
-  Q2C Plan Boundary
-  Land Protected 2002 - 2012
-  Land Protected pre-2002
-  Q2C Core Area
-  Q2C Supporting Landscape

0 5 10 20 Miles



The two-state region spans 100 miles from the Quabbin Reservoir in Massachusetts northward to Mount Cardigan and the White Mountain National Forest. In the first 10 years of the Q2C Initiative, 22 percent more land has been protected than in all of the years leading up to the effort.

■ QUABBIN-TO-CARDIGAN REGION ■ WHY HERE? WHY NOW?



Jeremy Turner, forester
Meadowsend Timberlands

Big is Beautiful for Sustainable Forestry

Furniture, cabinetry, door panels.
Baseball bats, pellets, shovel handles.
Railroad ties, gunstocks, hardwood flooring.

These are some of the end products of the Quabbin-to-Cardigan region's strong and stable wood products industry. The region is known for its productive forests, from northern hardwoods to white pine and spruce.

These resources support mills, wood energy plants, manufacturing facilities, loggers, foresters and trucking companies. All of them rely on responsibly managed forests to keep contributing to the statewide forest products industry's \$1.15 billion annual boost to the state's economy.

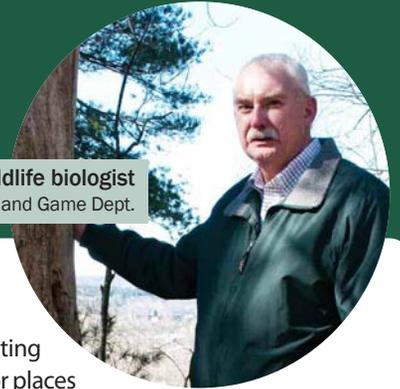
The Q2C initiative aims to help its partners to work with landowners to conserve large parcels of land that are still intact in order to keep them that way as demand for land grows. The large swaths of forests still unfragmented in the Q2C are big enough to make sustainable forestry economically feasible for landowners.

"When that starts to get teased apart and broken down, the function of a working forest becomes compromised," said Jeremy Turner, a forester with Meadowsend Timberlands, which manages working forests in 26 towns within the Q2C region.

As a culture, we have a lot to lose if working forests are fragmented and the forest products industry falls apart, Turner said.

"It's about knowing what a logger is, knowing what a forester is, knowing what a sawmill is—all those cultural things that are critical to have people connected to land and wood."

It's like milk, he said. People who don't live near farms assume milk comes from the grocery store. "It's the same with wood products. Wood doesn't come from Walmart. It comes from a piece of the earth that produces a tree that hopefully has been raised wisely in a sustainable way."



Charlie Bridges, wildlife biologist
N.H. Fish and Game Dept.

For Wildlife, a Refuge of Connectivity

Moose grow such thick insulating coats that they actually look for places to cool off in winter. If they live in the Quabbin-to-Cardigan region, they're in luck, because they've got somewhere to go: up.



"In fall and winter they're moving up, looking for higher elevation fir stands and protection from overheating," said Charlie Bridges, the habitat and wildlife diversity programs administrator with the N.H. Fish and Game Dept. "They'll often seek out hardwood cuts where they can feed on woody browse in the evening and then retreat into softwood cover during the day to stay cool."

The region's higher elevation habitat of northern hardwoods, spruce and fir is found neither to the east nor west and is one of many reasons this region is so vital to wildlife—and a high priority for both the Massachusetts and New Hampshire state Wildlife Action Plans. Species typically found in northern New Hampshire live here, as do many species of concern such as wood turtles, Blandings turtles, black racers and birds like bitterns, Canada warblers, cerulean warblers, nighthawks, northern goshawks and peregrine falcons.

This region also still offers large privately owned expanses of undeveloped land that are interspersed with public lands like state parks, state forests and wildlife management areas. As blocks of the private lands are conserved, species like bear, moose and bobcats keep their room to roam.

"When you have that kind of scenario, that's setting the stage for establishing connectivity between habitats that allows wildlife to securely cross the landscape. That's what makes this area so important," Bridges said.

Portrait photos on pages 18 and 19 by Chelsea Pathiakis Photography;
Photo of moose (above) Danno333/Dreamstime.com; Photo of dwarf
wedge mussel (page 19) by NHFG/Victor Young.



Phil Bryce, Director
N.H. Division of Parks and Recreation

Wildly Attractive to Tourists

Tourism and marketing research clearly shows that New Hampshire's attraction can be measured in trees and rocks, mountains, lakes, rivers and wildlife. A 2010 consumer perception study leaves no doubt:

"All the activities associated with New Hampshire were outdoors activities. For people outside of the state, New Hampshire is defined by the outdoors," summed up Phil Bryce, director of the N.H. Division of Parks and Recreation.

The Q2C initiative's goal of helping its partners conserve more of the large, intact forests in this region supports the state's \$1.12 billion in annual forest-based recreation and tourism. More conserved forests means more unspoiled scenery, open lands and recreational opportunities beckoning to visitors.

There are many opportunities in the Q2C region to complete land protection projects that will abut and extend public lands like Sunapee and Pillsbury state parks, or conserved private lands, like Mount Monadnock. Just in the past year, large tracts on the shoulders of Monadnock were conserved, protecting its views, hiking experience and future as a tourist magnet.

Conserving more lands in this region is good for our tourist based economy as well as making the area a great place for those fortunate enough to live close by.

"There is an increasing research showing the importance of the outdoors to people's health, and we have the benefit in New Hampshire of having a lot of open space close to major population areas, which means it can benefit more people," Bryce said. "That's what's nice about the Q2C region. As the community around it grows, they're going to have the benefit of those protected lands to make living there a better experience."



Gerry Gold, Trailmaster
Sunapee Ragged Kearsarge Greenway Coalition

Doug Bechtel, Director of Freshwater Science & Conservation
NH Chapter, The Nature Conservancy



Wonderful Water

Dwarf wedge mussels are unassuming little creatures. Silent, dark and quarter-sized, they devote themselves to filtering river water and straining out bits of plants and plankton to eat. Unfortunately for them, if that water isn't exceptionally free of pollutants and disturbance, they die.

It's hardly surprising that the dwarf wedge mussel is federally endangered.

And yet, the species does still live in the Ashuelot River in the Quabbin-to-Cardigan region.



"This particular species only lives in rivers that have good water quality, and that just speaks to the long-term and ongoing river quality in the Q2C geography," said Doug Bechtel, director of Freshwater Science & Conservation with the NH Chapter of The Nature Conservancy.

And the reason for that high-quality river water? Large, intact, upland forests. Forests that are the headwaters of the Connecticut and Merrimack rivers and the source of drinking water for some 200 towns and cities downstream. Forests that gather the waters of the Warner, Baker, Smith and Contoocook rivers on their way to the Merrimack, and the Ashuelot, Mascoma, Sugar and Cold rivers on their way to the Connecticut.

"Because the Q2C region features a ridgeline and a watershed divide right down the center of the geography, the river waters flow over and through forests. And in order for the water quality to be good, those forests have to be intact," Bechtel said. "Working forests fulfill this role as well as wilderness forests, and there are both in the Q2C."

Trails to Tranquility

Forests for as far as the eye can see is the reward for hikers in the Q2C, triumphant views from atop Monadnock, Kearsarge, Ragged, Cardigan or other vantage points along the 100-mile expanse.

When landowners who love their land here conserve it for future generations, hikers, snowmobilers, wildlife watchers and other outdoor recreationists get a gift beyond compare: vistas that remain soul-quieting, rugged playgrounds that remain heart-lifting. Often, conservation easements and land acquisitions result in new opportunities to extend trails or build connectors between public and private lands or protect existing trails.

New and improved trails will be a part of the Q2C effort, thanks to an anonymous donor's \$500,000 gift (see story), half of which will provide grants to trails groups.

More trails can lead to more support for land protection efforts, said Gerry Gold, the volunteer trailmaster for the Sunapee Ragged Kearsarge Greenway Coalition, whose volunteers have spent hundreds of hours building a 75-mile trail system surrounding Lake Sunapee and crossing Sunapee, Ragged and Kearsarge mountains.

It's a simple formula, he said. "If you hike you will love the trails and land; if you love the trails and land, you'll want to preserve them for the future; and if you want to preserve trails and land for the future, you will want to help by supporting land conservation organizations."



Q2C partners discuss trails systems at a public input session at Colby Sawyer College in New London. A group consensus-driven process is key to the initiative's success, and partners meet quarterly. "There is a genuine culture of collaboration in the Q2C project," says coordinator Chris Wells of the Forest Society, at right in the photo. Photo by Laura Alexander.

Currently 26 partner groups and agencies have come to the table, sharing vision, talents and resources. Their guide is a science-based conservation plan, created in 2007, that targets the region's most ecologically significant areas—566,000 acres of "focus areas", as well as 438,000 acres of "supporting landscapes."

Individual member groups use the plan to develop land protection projects in keeping with each group's own mission. The plan provides impetus for reaching out to landowners within high priority areas and offering resources and options should they ever want to look into creating a land legacy.

"You start to develop a relationship with landowners that sometimes lasts years," said Brian Hotz, the Forest Society land agent who covers the Q2C region. "Then when they are ready to make decisions about their land, you hope they think of you as a resource and call. Getting to know landowners is a really key component of this style of focused land conservation," he said.

Conservation outcomes can take many forms within the Q2C framework: donations or purchases of conservation easements, or donations and purchases of the land itself. How each project gets done is up to landowners and member groups, but the partnership provides the priorities and—very importantly—access to funding.

GRANTS "MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE"

The Q2C initiative acts as a land protection accelerator in large part because it includes a targeted grants program. The grants provide partnering land trusts, towns and other groups with money to cover transaction costs—appraisals, surveys, title searches, etc.—that are necessary parts of every project.

The targeted grants fill a niche otherwise overlooked or not seen as dramatic or attractive from a fundraising standpoint, said Ryan Owens, executive director of the Monadnock Conservancy.

"People are excited to buy land or put on a conservation easement, but these kinds of due diligence items, which are so very important, aren't quite as exciting," he said.

The Monadnock Conservancy has used the grants to complete 10 projects so far. Owens said the Q2C grant process is refreshingly efficient. "It's a great contrast to some federal and state funding sources that are so bureaucratic and exhausting to wade through. We don't always have the luxury of spending that kind of time seeking grants," he said.

Debbie Stanley, the executive director of the Ausbon Sargent Land Protection Trust, a Q2C partner, said the grants have made "all the difference" in several recent projects her group has completed in Andover and Bradford.

It's often transaction costs that hold up a project, Stanley said. People may want to donate their land or an easement on it to a trust but aren't prepared to pay for surveying or title searches.

"These people are willing to make a tremendous gift to us. It's always hard when they find out, 'Oh, I'm going to give a gift and it's going to cost me money to give this? That's what they really struggle with, and that's the beauty of the Q2C."

Over the last three years, federal funds provided \$500,000 for grants that were awarded to partners for 36 projects in New Hampshire that have conserved 12,360 acres of land. The earmarks ended in 2010, but this past December, an anonymous donor provided \$500,000 through the N.H. Charitable Foundation, giving what Wells calls a "huge vote of confidence" in the Q2C initiative.

"The impact of this new grant cannot be overstated," he said. "Without it, the grants program would have shut down. Now we'll be able to continue making grants for at least the next two years and help protect thousands of additional acres."

In addition to the land protection grants, the donation will fund a second grants program to support hiking trails-related work in the Q2C region.

As the Q2C begins its second decade, there is much to celebrate and much work to do. The Q2C forests are on the front lines of long-term population growth and development in New England. Will the remaining forests become fragmented by vacation home lots or bedroom communities? Or will they continue to provide wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, clean water for people and wildlife, reasons for tourists to visit, and resources for sustainable forest products?

If the next 10 years of the Q2C initiative bring as many successes as the first, there's ample reason to look to the future with hope. ♪