

York River Study Committee / ORV Subcommittee Meeting

Topic: Watershed Conservation Lands

Tuesday, June 20, 2017, 10:00 AM – Noon

York Public Library Community Room

Meeting Notes

Attendees:

York River Study Committee members: Karen Arsenault, Jean Demetracopoulos, Paul Dest, Cindy Donnell, Jennifer Hunter, Chuck Ott, and Judy Spiller

Roundtable participants/conservation organizations: Doreen MacGillis and Joe Anderson, York Land Trust; Scott Lindsay, Maine Inland Fisheries and Wildlife; Tom Gilmore, Great Works Regional Land Trust; Karen Young, Mount Agamenticus to the Sea Conservation Initiative; Ward Feurt, Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge, USFWS; Keith Fletcher, Maine Coast Heritage Trust; and Kim Richards, Eliot Conservation Commission

Other participants: Priscilla Cookson, Jean Rae, Paula Sewall, and Gary Stevens

Meeting goals: The York River Study Committee has organized a series of meetings on specific topics to gather and share information to help characterize watershed resources and develop management plan actions and recommendations. Experts, project managers, and others interested in topics are invited to provide input and share ideas, information, and concerns at these meetings. The meeting was organized as a roundtable discussion and organizations with conservation lands in the York River watershed were asked to participate to share information on: drivers that led to protection of existing conservation lands; future conservation priorities; stewardship/management plans for conservation lands; and public use and access.

➤ **Overview of York River Watershed Conservation Activities – Karen Young, MtA2C Conservation Initiative**

Presentation: <http://www.yorkrivermaine.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/YRS-Conservation-Session-Presentation-KY.pdf>

Karen gave an overview of existing conservation lands and priority habitat areas in the York River watershed, as part of the larger Mount Agamenticus to Sea Conservation Initiative's area of focus. She indicated she was using "open space" to represent the collective conservation lands that are under a wide range of ownership types and management priorities. The MtA2C focus area includes parts of six towns and contains the largest intact coastal forest area in the northeast, with the greatest species diversity in Maine due to the convergence of different forest types. The York River is significant for its free-flowing state, exemplary estuary habitat, migratory bird habitat, endangered species, and good water quality. The York River and parts of its watershed lands have been identified as conservation priorities by multiple regional, state and federal conservation organizations, including the Beginning with Habitat program. Much of the watershed is in one of two Beginning with Habitat focus areas. Karen noted a Climate Resiliency study conducted by various MtA2C partners that looked at factors such as elevations, microclimates, undeveloped habitat blocks, and landscape complexity. It found the region, including parts of the York River watershed, to have high resiliency in light of climate change impacts.

➤ **Roundtable Discussion on Conservation Topics**

Ward Feurt (Rachel Carson NWR) – The York River Division, which includes lands in York and Eliot, was added to the Refuge in 2007 based on its wildlife habitat values. Wildlife is the priority for USFWS. With assistance from YLT, they recently completed acquisition of 90 acres from the Davis family for the York River Division. USFWS is aiming for acquisition of about 2,200 acres within the YR Division. They only work with willing sellers to acquire lands. USFWS is using GIS/LiDAR to determine the best areas to concentrate their efforts within the overall focus

area. Their management of YR Division lands will involve managing for young forests (shrub/scrub) to keep portions with thick, dense growth. Approximately 65 species, including New England cottontail, depend on this habitat type. Regarding public use and access, on the Davis property, traditional uses including hunting and walking on trails are still allowed.

The Great Thicket NWR is a new refuge area in six states, including York River watershed lands in Eliot, York and South Berwick. It targets early successional habitats for wildlife.

Ward noted that the Land and Water Conservation Fund, that is funded from offshore drilling activities, has been the best source of funding for USFWS conservation activities.

Keith Fletcher (Maine Coast Heritage Trust) – MCHT just started working in southern Maine in the 1990s and doesn't own land in this region but would like to. He is always looking for great projects to bring forward. MCHT has been working with the MtA2C organizations and other partners in southern Maine to support their work. They have MOAs with land trusts to provide various support and funding. MCHT has its "Whole Places" initiative to identify statewide priorities. Originally it was focused on the York River salt marsh areas, but it now has expanded to include the full York River watershed and Braveboat Harbor/Gerrish Island as a priority. MCHT's management philosophy is to keep conservation lands open for use and access. They've encouraged public use and programming on their sites (e.g., kids growing food, stewardship interns).

Doreen MacGillis and Joe Anderson (York Land Trust) – YLT has been active for over 30 years and has about 2,400 acres in its holdings. Drivers generally have been ecological and recreational interests. In their work, they've found people do recognize the values of the York River watershed. The new YLT headquarters will connect 350 acres of conservation lands and allow for low impact recreation. They do identify stewardship opportunities on lands, have three forest management plans, and have improved access to lands for the public. They are recently monitoring changes in saltmarshes as part of a statewide program to track saltmarsh elevation over time. YLT uses Beginning with Habitat data to identify important habitats and species for protection. It is working on invasive species management on its sites (e.g., buckthorn).

Kim Richards (Eliot Conservation Commission) – The Punkintown area has been a priority for the conservation commission because of the rare and endangered species and its historic and cultural resources, including mills, dams and historic structures. Access to Eliot's current holding is an issue. Punkintown Road is private and residents don't want public access to the road and are concerned about public access to sensitive resource areas. She noted the Town recently voted in support of using Town money for the Goodwin Road conservation project.

Tom Gilmore (Great Works Regional Land Trust) – GWRLT works with six towns, and the York River watershed is a small but important area of interest. It has 3 easements in Eliot on farmland. York Pond region has been a primary focus area since 2008 and remains a priority, for water quality, unfragmented area, cultural values and its proximity to Marshwood High School for educational value. GWRLT was involved with partner acquisitions around York Pond (Maine IFW and Town of Eliot). GWRLT provides and promotes public access to lands it owns, and supports timber management activities to maintain healthy forest conditions.

Scott Lindsay (Maine Inland Fisheries and Wildlife) – MIFW has had its MtA Wildlife Management Area since 1990 and it includes about 500 acres in the York River watershed. Wildlife is the priority and recreational uses such as hiking and wildlife viewing are allowed. MIFW generally won't create new trails but will maintain existing ones. They've found that existing ATV and snowmobile trails can be problematic in other areas but haven't found that in this area so much. Their MtA WMA holdings are surrounded by so many other conservation lands. The MtA WMA has wildlife "hot spots" for rare reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates. They are conducting research and

monitoring on Blanding's turtles and black racer snakes. They conduct timber management to improve wildlife habitat, since you don't generally get naturally forming young forests in this area. They will have two timber management sites this summer including one at the York Pond holding. York Pond fills a niche – there aren't many remote ponds in York County; it includes a deer wintering area; and previously has been stocked with brook trout. Better access is hoped for through the York Woods subdivision, but that's not been secured yet.

New land acquisition by MIFW is not occurring at this time, but when they do, they would anticipate focusing on areas adjacent to existing conservation lands. Scott indicated Cory Stearns is the IFW contact to the MtA group for coordination.

Karen Young (reporting for Kittery Land Trust) – Braveboat Harbor is a primary focus currently but KLT does have two holdings in the York River watershed: Norton Preserve and Rustlewood Farm.

Roundtable Questions:

- How would a Partnership Wild and Scenic River designation impact conservation projects?
- How do we prevent resources from being "loved to death?"
- What recommendations would you have for the York River watershed management plan to support your work?

Comments and additional discussion:

- Best biologic diversity in the state is here in York. York River Study is complementary to USFWS efforts to identify and protect resources.
- York River Study can provide additional information and layering of information to bring greater focus to Eliot resources for protection.
- New data from studies will be valuable to support YLT conservation efforts.
- Designation if promoted might bring additional paddlers but unlikely additional land users. The advantages of designation are significant – providing a huge benefit for protection efforts and giving local control in the process.
- Patrol of town watershed lands in Eliot could be helpful in educating users on importance of resource protection (similar to water district patrol model).
- Management plan should include model ordinances and best practices along the river. Several people noted a recent municipal trend to roll back or minimize resource protection standards.
- Management plan and designation should bring state recognition for the river and identify what the state can do around and on the river; identify special areas to be set aside for access and for protection; and could establish a "river keeper" position.
- Harbormaster needs to do a better job of policing the river.
- A coordinated policy is needed to address use and resource protection; need better code enforcement of ordinances; need "ranger" to enforce rules; and need to be able to close trails and river access when the system is stressed. Worried about opening more spaces to public access because of spread of invasives.
- There should be a management focus on the history and heritage of the river to tie in economics and sustainable use.
- Would designation impact potential aquaculture projects in the river? There would be NPS review of any new river project that involves federal funds.
- Landowner education is needed for good practices to minimize pesticides and maintain shoreline buffers