

THE RENSSELAER PLATEAU AND YOUR MISSION



A GUIDE FOR ORGANIZATIONS

This booklet is a guide to finding information in the Rensselaer Plateau Regional Conservation Plan that is useful to organizations. It provides resources and tools to assist in your mission with respect to the needs of the Plateau.

Rensselaer Plateau Alliance

Conservation Through Community
rensselaerplateau.org

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

In September 2013 the Rensselaer Plateau Alliance (RPA) completed a Regional Conservation Plan with the intent of providing information to municipalities, community organizations and individuals regarding the ecological, economic, and social importance of the Rensselaer Plateau. The following pages provide a brief snapshot of the plan, but more importantly provide information, tools, and real-world examples that you can use as an organization to inform your work. Ultimately, we hope that this guide will help inspire you to think about the needs and opportunities that exist on the Plateau with respect to your organization.

FIRST STEPS TO USING THE PLAN

- 1) Familiarize yourself with the plan and use it when working on or near the Plateau.
- 2) Take advantage of the plan's ecological, social, and economic data and other information in your maps and analyses of the area.
- 3) Consider using information from the plan to strengthen your grant applications.
- 4) Partner on your projects in the Rensselaer Plateau area with the RPA and its other Alliance Members, and appropriate municipalities.
- 5) Likewise, consider partnering with the RPA in its ongoing work on the Plateau.
- 6) Submit comments and suggestions on the plan and how you are using it to:
comments@rensselaerplateau.org



WHAT IS THE RENSSELAER PLATEAU?

The Rensselaer Plateau spans 11 municipalities in eastern Rensselaer County, New York. It is a geologically distinct upland region with an escarpment steeply rising from the surrounding lower elevations marking its boundary. The Plateau's relatively high elevations (1,000 - 1,800 feet) and cool climate, acidic soils, and its poor drainage contribute to plants, forests, and wetlands more similar to New York's Northern Forest than to the surrounding local area.

WHO IS THE RENSSELAER PLATEAU ALLIANCE?

The Rensselaer Plateau Alliance is a diverse group of organizations and people living on or near the Plateau with interests to conserve the qualities and character of this region and the benefits it provides. The RPA seeks to work cooperatively with municipalities, groups, and residents to provide information and promote actions that protect the environmental and economic values provided by the Plateau for the long term.

ABOUT THE REGIONAL CONSERVATION PLAN

The Regional Conservation Plan was developed through collaborative effort and community involvement under the guidance and oversight of the RPA. The plan includes studies of the region's significant ecological communities, economy, and community values, as well as historical and demographic research.

Many aspects of this work are ongoing, including:

- (1) Fostering communication and collaboration within and between municipalities, landowners and stakeholders about regional resources;
- (2) Working with local governments, landowners, and NY state to raise conservation awareness;
- (3) Recognizing the value of planning to conserving the Plateau's qualities and character; and
- (4) Identifying and developing the necessary tools and information that municipalities, landowners and stakeholders might need to achieve their goals.



A WALK THROUGH THE PLAN'S SECTIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS

- **A Brief History of the Plateau (pg 11)** provides historical background and context.
- **The Plateau Today (pg 17)** analyzes current demographic trends and data.
- **The Ecological Assessment (pg 23)** describes significant natural areas, important forest-interior areas, ecological communities, and much more.
- **The Economic Study (pg 31)** documents the region's direct and indirect economic activities and values ecosystem services (or non-market benefits, such as clean water, storm water handling, clean air, etc.) of the Plateau.
- **Tools and Techniques for Organizations (pg 54)** provides specific examples of efforts to consider to protect the Plateau's natural resources.
- **The Appendices** include more detailed maps and tables from the full Ecological Assessment, as well as the full Ecological Report.

See the back cover for how to find a copy of the Conservation Plan.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE PLAN

- The ecological study identified 73 of New York's 174 types of wetlands, forests, and other natural areas, including numerous uncommon and high quality habitats.
- Community workshops found that local residents most appreciate the Plateau's recreational, biological diversity, and economic values.
- The forest products industry contributes over \$9.2 million annually to the local economy, more than any other economic sector on the Plateau.
- Plateau ecosystems provide clean air and water, flood control, nutrient cycling, and wildlife habitat - natural benefits valued at over \$300 million annually.



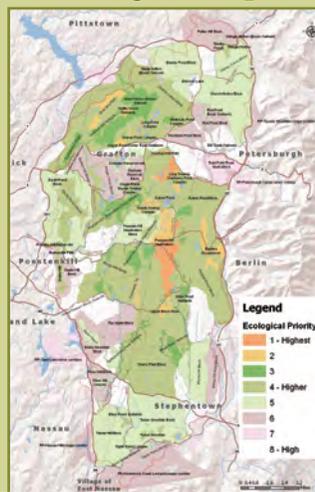
Public Workshop - Fred DeMay

WHAT INFORMATION DO THE MAPS PROVIDE?

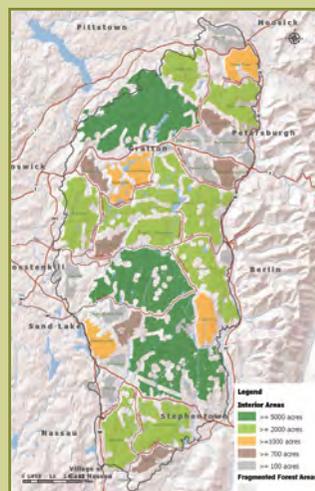
The ecological assessment produced outstanding data and maps for natural features spanning the Rensselaer Plateau's 118,000 acres that can help your organization to identify areas of greatest ecological significance. The digital data appearing in these maps are fully documented in the Ecological Report and available for use in Geographic Information Systems (GIS). The nine distinct map datasets are described below:

- **Significant Natural Areas** ranks areas in ecological priority by rarity, size, quality, distribution of ecological features, and connections to other large forested areas.
- **Natural Ecological Communities** delineates the distribution of 73 habitat types on the Plateau, including important ecological communities that are globally or regionally rare.
- **Plateau Physiography** identifies different physiographic sections including the Central Plateau and the Plateau Escarpment.
- **Large Forest Blocks** identifies important forest blocks that are characterized by relatively road-less areas.
- **Forest-Interior Areas** identifies those areas of high ecological integrity with little or no human disturbance.
- **Internal and External Corridors** (in the ecological report) identifies important corridors for wildlife movement.
- **Important Ecosystem Complexes** identifies important complexes that are not necessarily within the forest blocks.
- **Important Aquatic Networks** identifies the highest quality streams and water bodies suggested as "conservation targets" because of their size, condition, and diversity.
- **Major Ecological Disturbances** grades disturbances by type, intensity, and restoration potential.

Ecological Maps



Significant natural areas

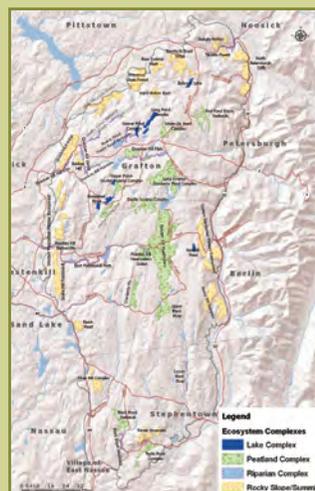


Forest interior areas

The natural communities data link to New York Natural Heritage Program guides (<http://guides.nynhp.org>) describing:
 o Characteristic plant and animal species and vegetation structure
 o Potential rare species present
 o State or global rarity and trends
 o Conservation and management recommendations



Important aquatic networks



Important ecosystem complexes

HOW CAN ORGANIZATIONS USE THE MAPS AND INFORMATION IN THE PLAN?

Information from the Regional Conservation Plan on the local economy, ecosystem services, and community values complements the ecological maps and together can inform your organization's efforts on the Plateau. These data can help your organization identify actions or projects that will contribute to the identity and vitality of the region while protecting important environmental and economic values now and for the future.



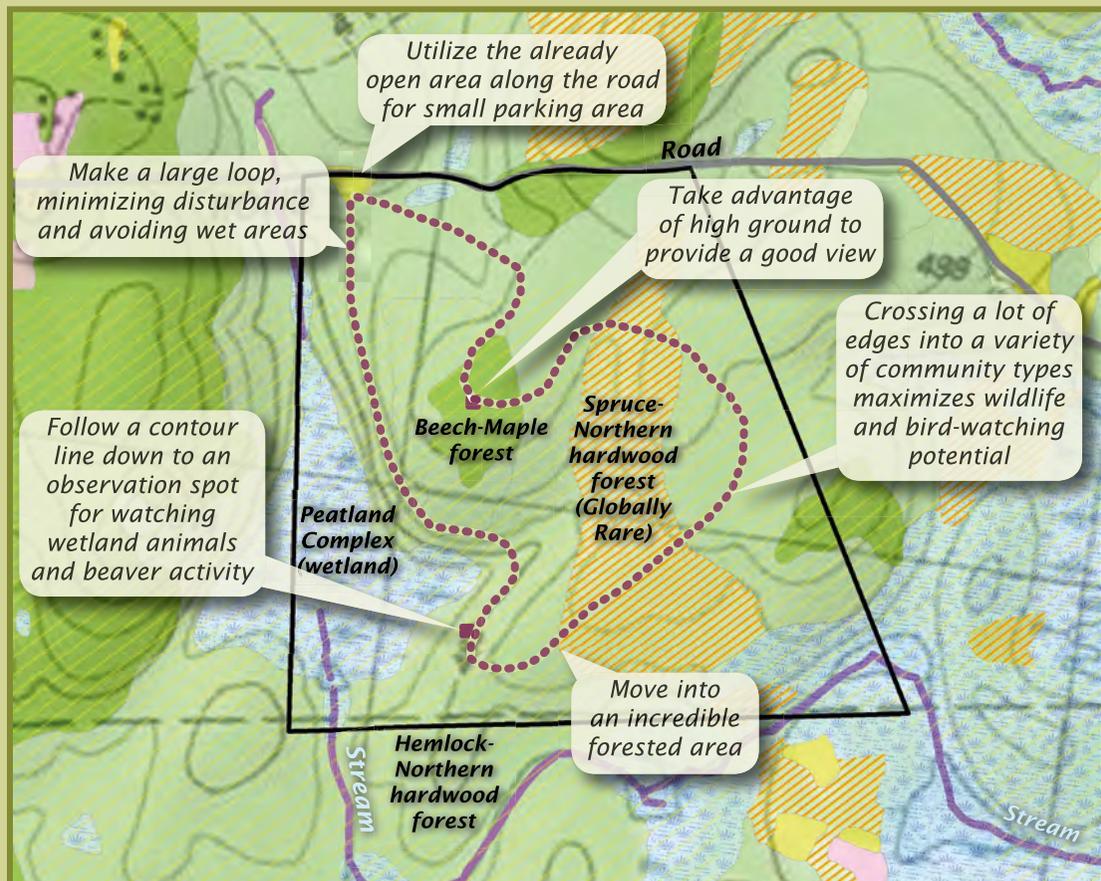
For help with the plan's maps or GIS data, contact: maps@rensselaerplateau.org

Activities these data could support include:

- Strategic conservation planning
- Property management planning or monitoring
- Trail network development
- Nature interpretation or environmental education
- Wildlife assessment or other research studies
- Promoting sustainable and ecologically sensitive economic development ideas

Using Data from the Rensselaer Plateau Regional Conservation Plan

The following example demonstrates how the maps could be used to site a new trail to avoid impacts to the most sensitive areas of the landscape, while drawing attention to interesting natural features and providing opportunities for nature interpretation and outdoor enjoyment.



HOW CAN ORGANIZATIONS HELP THE PLATEAU?

Identify how the goals of your organization overlap with the character and needs of the Plateau.

Use information from the plan in your education, outreach, and research efforts.

The Regional Conservation Plan and its data are an educational resource suitable for use in classroom or workshop settings. The information is also available for use in student or professional research studies. For suggestions or assistance, please contact: education@rensselaerplateau.org

Integrate information from the Conservation Plan into your curriculum.

Today's students are tomorrow's landowners. By integrating information about the Plateau's history and culture, economic and ecosystem services, ecological characteristics and geological features into their curricula, local teachers and school districts can help our students become aware of the value and benefits of the Rensselaer Plateau and the importance of conserving this natural resource for them and future generations.

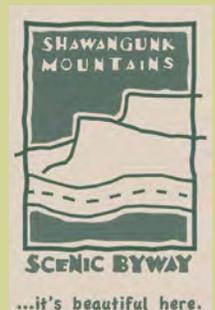


Help facilitate regional cooperation.

Conservation of the natural resources on the Plateau in the short and long term is dependent upon the vitality of local communities and the region, maintenance of cultural identity (including “home rule” by municipalities and individual landowner rights), and the fostering and development of regional cooperation. An example of regional cooperation is the development of a “scenic byway” as part of a regional tourism development strategy.

An Example of Regional Cooperation

In the Shawangunk Mountain area near New Paltz, 11 towns and 2 villages have signed an intermunicipal agreement to work together to help promote and preserve the quality of the region. The communities have organized around the mountains and, interestingly, along the scenic highway routes by forming a state and federally-recognized “scenic byway.” The Shawangunk Mountains Scenic Byway - <http://mtnscenicbyway.org> - ties together these communities in the Hudson Valley. It serves to raise awareness about the resources found in the region and to generate economic activity in the form of increased tourism.



Consider opportunities for economic development.

Sustaining the natural resources on the Plateau depends upon a sustainable economic future for the Plateau as well. The plan provides some ecological, social, and economic information to support assessment of existing economic development efforts and sheds light on potential new opportunities that could also directly support the long term sustainability of the natural resources on the Plateau. A sampling of ideas supported by the Plan includes:



- create a buy-local forest products program
- celebrate yesteryear
- promote tourism
- create a regional trail system

Help develop conservation tools.

Tools that support the conservation of natural resources on the Plateau include:

- compilations of educational/informational resources
- financial resources
- relevant legislation (such as the NYS 480-a Forest Tax Law Program)
- readily available data and information
- access to technical and resource expertise
- opportunities for collaboration

Your organization may already be working in these areas and have something to share, or you may be interested in working with the RPA to further develop tools that could be used on the Rensselaer Plateau and elsewhere. Further development is welcome in all areas. If you have comments or ideas, please contact the RPA at: tools@rensselaerplateau.org



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Rensselaer Plateau Alliance wishes to thank the many contributors to the User Guides and the Regional Conservation Plan, especially the local officials and residents who participated in the public outreach process. We are committed to helping the organizations involved with the Plateau by providing resources and sharing information. Please do not hesitate to contact us; we want to know how we can help you advance your mission, while maintaining the qualities and character of the Plateau that we love.

WHERE CAN I OBTAIN A COPY OF THE PLAN?

<http://rensselaerplateau.org/RensselaerPlateau/ConservationPlan.aspx>
Hard copies are available at your town hall and public library.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

NYSDEC Hudson River Estuary Program - <http://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/5094.html>

Hudson River Valley Greenway - <http://www.hudsongreenway.ny.gov>

Tools for Engaging Landowners Effectively (TELE) -
<http://www.engaginglandowners.org/>

Parks and Trails New York (PTNY) - www.ptny.org

Capital Region Economic Development Council -
<http://regionalcouncils.ny.gov/content/capital-region>

Land Trust Alliance New York Program -

<http://www.landtrustalliance.org/about/regional-programs/ne/new-york-service-center>

More information is available on the Rensselaer Plateau Alliance's Website: <http://rensselaerplateau.org>



Rensselaer Plateau Alliance

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*Black-throated Green warbler photo by Gordon Ellmers,
Spotted Salamander photo by Camazine at en.wikipedia*



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THE RENSSELAER PLATEAU...

- ...is approximately 118,000 acres.*
- ...is the 5th largest forested region in NY.*
- ...is a US Forest Legacy Area.*
- ...is about 445 million years old.*
- ...is home to over 8,000 people.*
- ...is approximately 90% forested.*
- ...is approximately 90% privately owned.*
- ...is amazing!*