

# THE RENSSELAER PLATEAU AND YOUR LAND



## A GUIDE FOR LANDOWNERS

This booklet is a guide to finding information in the Rensselaer Plateau Regional Conservation Plan that is useful to landowners. It provides resources and tools to assist in making decisions about your land.

Rensselaer Plateau Alliance

Conservation Through Community  
[rensselaerplateau.org](http://rensselaerplateau.org)

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

In September 2013 the Rensselaer Plateau Alliance 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 a landowner to help guide decisions about your land. Ultimately, we hope it might inspire you to think about all of the opportunities that might exist on your land.

## FIRST STEPS TO USING THE PLAN

Are you facing any of these decisions?

- Where to build on your land?
- How to manage your woodland?
- How to protect your property?
- How to plan for the future of your land?

Or, just want to know more about your land?

Then this guide is for you! Keep it handy as a reference for the tools and resources available when you need to make decisions on your property.

As you read through this guide, find out more about the natural features around you and think about your own goals for your property.

You can submit comments and suggestions on the plan and how you are using it to:  
[comments@rensselaerplateau.org](mailto: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 (RPA) 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 and landowners might need to achieve their goals.



## A WALK THROUGH THE PLAN'S SECTIONS FOR LANDOWNERS

- **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 Landowners (pg 42)** provides a wide range of potential options available to assist in achieving your goals for your land.
- **The Maps (Appendix A)** display a wide range of natural features from the Ecological Assessment - check them out and explore your area!

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

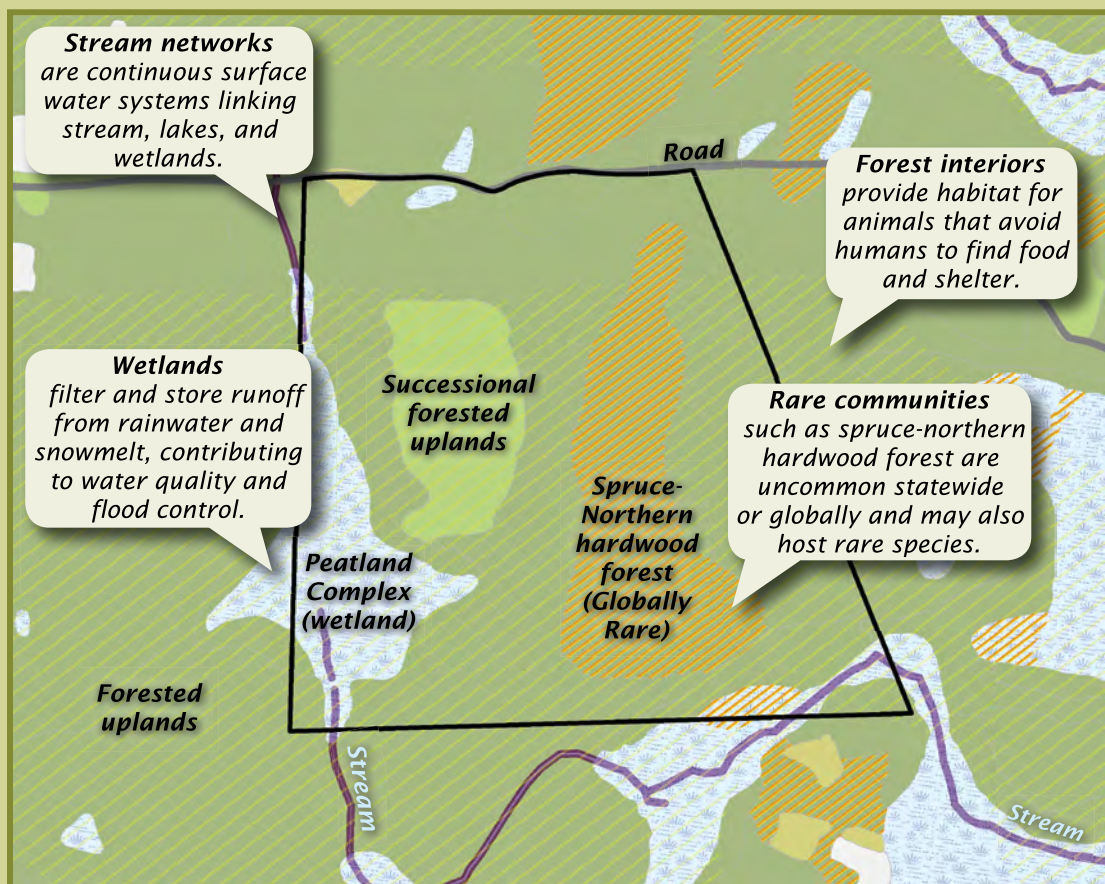
## KEY FINDINGS FROM THE PLAN

- 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 NATURAL FEATURES ARE ON YOUR LAND?



## Example Property Analysis

Identifying natural features can help inform your decisions for your land. This property contains several important ecological features, as well as important forest and stream connections to the surrounding area that contribute to wildlife movement and water cycling. Much of this property is composed of interior forest land (yellow hatching). A well-managed working forest is compatible with maintaining interior forest. There are several wetlands on the property, which provide important habitat and natural water filtration, but can be relatively easily protected by maintaining appropriate development buffers. There is a globally rare forest community (orange hatched area) and an important Plateau peatland complex located on the property, as well as important stream networks (purple line). These areas should be avoided when considering new development. A working forest, however, that is managed to encourage regeneration of the same community species can be compatible with the natural landscape.

For a description, photos, and management guidance on any of the natural community types, go to the Community Guides found on the New York Natural Heritage Program website at: <http://guides.nynhp.org>.

To find the ecological communities and other natural features on your land use the GIS Maps on the RPA Web Site and zoom to your land. Choose "Maps - GIS" from the "The Plateau" menu. For help with maps contact: [maps@rensselaerplateau.org](mailto:maps@rensselaerplateau.org)

New York Natural Heritage Program

HOME ANIMAL GUIDES PLANT GUIDES COMMUNITY GUIDES ADVANCED SEARCH

Summary Conservation and Management Range Identification Comments Classification Additional Resources

**Spruce-Northern Hardwood Forest** Printer Friendly Version (PDF)

System: Terrestrial  
SubSystem: Forested Uplands

State Protection: Not Listed  
Federal Protection: Not Listed

State Rarity Rank: S3  
Global Rarity Rank: G3G4

**Did you know?**  
A common plant in spruce-northern hardwood forests is gold thread, which takes its name from its golden, thin, root-like rhizomes. Native Americans and early settlers used gold thread rhizomes and leaves to dye cloth yellow.

Spruce-northern hardwood forest at Raquette River Forest. © Shane Gibson



## How can the maps help me decide where to build a home on my land?

### Know your property and its context.

By identifying important natural areas and connections to other habitats surrounding your land, you can design a building project to avoid sensitive environmental features and maintain connections across property boundaries. Using natural feature data and some basic conservation principles can help you to preserve important wildlife habitat, timber resources, or other values on your property while achieving personal enjoyment of your land.



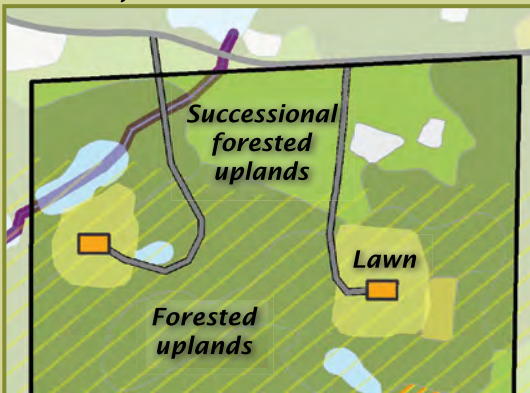
For help with the plan's maps or GIS data,  
contact: [maps@rensselaerplateau.org](mailto:maps@rensselaerplateau.org)

## CONSERVATION PRINCIPLES

- **Avoid or minimize forest fragmentation**, which results in habitat loss and degradation, creates barriers to species movement, and limits forestry potential.
- **Maintain or restore links between large forest blocks** to allow for animal movement and seed dispersal between forest interiors and the maintenance of ecological integrity.
- **Establish and maintain broad buffer zones** of natural vegetation along aquatic networks (streams, water bodies, and wetlands) and at the perimeter of other sensitive habitats to maintain habitat quality, reduce erosion, and provide wildlife corridors.
- **Minimize impervious surface area** (e.g., pavement) to avoid increases in surface water runoff and the pollution of streams and water bodies.
- **Concentrate development along existing roads and in altered areas** to reduce impacts on high quality, intact forests and, other habitats.
- **Identify and protect habitats and species of conservation concern.**

Adapted from Kiviat, E. and Stevens, G. (2001) Biodiversity Assessment Manual for the Hudson River Estuary Corridor. NYSDEC, Albany, NY. [www.hudsonia.org](http://www.hudsonia.org)

### Instead of This...



### Strive for This



Building homes closer together, minimizing driveway construction, and limiting the size of lawns lessens the impact of new development on natural features and wildlife. In the first example, the home to the left is built too close to a wetland and the driveway crosses an important stream. In the second example, the two homes share a driveway so the stream is not crossed, and the home has been placed away from the wetland.

## ***How can the plan help me make decisions about timber harvest?***

Many landowners on the Rensselaer Plateau are interested in managing their woodland for timber. Through the education component of its Working Forests Initiative, the Rensselaer Plateau Alliance encourages and supports sustainable forest management practices by providing information to interested landowners. The RPA website includes links to numerous resources available to assist forest owners.

The natural feature maps can help you to identify different potential management units on your property, as well as sensitive environmental areas, and access management recommendations from the Heritage Program (<http://guides.nynhp.org>).

If you are interested in sustainable forestry management practices, consider:

- Inviting a trained NY Master Forest Owner (MFO) to visit your property and provide a consultation.
- Hiring a consulting forester.
- To schedule a MFO visit or for help in finding a consulting forester, e-mail us at: [forestry@rensselaerplateau.org](mailto:forestry@rensselaerplateau.org)



## **The Decision to Sell Timber, A Case Study**

Dick Gibbs

Mr. and Mrs. McHale own 57 acres where Mr. McHale grew up. Money was tight and they were thinking of how to pass the land on in good shape to their children. They were therefore pleasantly surprised to be offered \$17,000 for their trees 12" diameter and larger. However, Mr. and Mrs. McHale weren't sure if the offer was a fair price or if the harvest would meet all of their goals.

Mr. McHale spoke with a friend who suggested he use a forester. They researched and then hired a Cooperating Consulting Forester who worked with them to implement a Harvest Strategy to meet their goals. This involved cutting half of the trees originally proposed and leaving the high quality trees free to grow. He put the timber out to bid. The high bid was \$48,850, 2.8 times as much for half the trees. The woods were left in good shape allowing increased growth of the high quality trees to pass along to their children with management options and to enjoy hiking, hunting and snowmobiling.

### **Summary**

- Initially offered \$17,000 for all trees over 12" diameter.
- Hired a forester and were paid \$48,850 for half the proposed trees.
- Woods left in good shape to pass along to children.



**Other tools and resources for landowners?**

**Learn More and Stay Informed.**

The Rensselaer Plateau Alliance and its partners regularly hold workshops and programs for landowners on many topics including estate planning, forest stewardship, habitat improvement, and even chainsaw use and safety. To stay informed about these events sign up for our landowners e-mail.



**Consider Creating a Stewardship Plan.**

A Stewardship Plan is tailored to your goals and can help you get the most from your woods. Whether your main goal is to supplement your income with proceeds from timber harvests, to enjoy recreational activities in your woods, to manage your woods for wildlife, or to keep your woods forever wild, a Stewardship Plan can help. By working with a forester and using the many maps provided in the Regional Conservation Plan you can develop a plan that is right for you and a good fit for your land.

**Plan for the future of your land.**

The decisions (or lack of decisions) you make about your land will have financial and personal impacts that last long beyond your passing. You have the opportunity to ensure that your legacy is a positive one by actively planning for the future of your land. Failure to plan can be more expensive and can create conflict in your family. Don't leave the future of your land and your family's relationships to chance.

Successful estate planning can take years to implement. Be patient. Take the first step—any first step—and keep moving forward. An entire section of our Resources for Landowners web page is devoted to Your Land Your Legacy (succession planning).

**Consider a Conservation Easement.**

Some landowners are interested in formally setting aside all or part of their property for conservation purposes. The most commonly used and effective tool for doing so is the conservation easement. A conservation easement allows the landowner to continue owning and using their property, while preserving the conservation values of the property and restricting future development. Easements may also provide tax benefits. Contact your local land trust to learn about the process and the best options for you.



*The RPA web site, [rensselaerplateau.org](http://rensselaerplateau.org) has an extensive array of resources for landowners. From the home page look for the Specifically for Landowners menu.*

## 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 landowners of the Plateau by providing resources and sharing information. Please do not hesitate to contact us; we want to know how we can help you get the most enjoyment and long term benefit from your land.

## 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.

## SOURCES OF ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

NY Forest Owners Association	Rensselaer Plateau Alliance
NY Master Forest Owner Program	Rensselaer Land Trust
Cornell Cooperative Extension	Agricultural Stewardship Association
MassWoods.net	

Forest Stewardship Guide at <http://pubs.cas.psu.edu/FreePubs/pdfs/uh082.pdf>

WCS Adirondack Program (2013) Make Room for Wildlife: A Resource for Landowners in the Northern Forest - <http://www.wcsnorthamerica.org/WildPlaces/Adirondacks.aspx>

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



## Rensselaer Plateau Alliance

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*This Project has been funded in part by a grant from the New York State Environmental Protection Fund through the Hudson River Estuary Program of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.*

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



## 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!*