

ABSTRACT

Town forests offer the opportunity for a local community to participate in and benefit from the sustainable management of town-owned forestland for timber harvesting, wildlife habitat, watershed conservation, recreation and education. Despite a long history of town forests in New England, many towns currently underutilize their town forestlands. As communities face the challenges associated with increasing population, shifting economies, and loss of open space, the town forest as a place and the land and community ethic upon which its management is founded can play a positive role in the community by building social capital, promoting community engagement, and fostering sense of place. Informational resources including descriptions of features of individual town forests, institutional arrangements for decision-making, and networks for exchanging information would assist community leaders if they were readily available.

The primary objective of this project was to identify, research, and document six cases of town forests highly utilized by communities for diverse community benefits in Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine to serve as examples for others. These “model” case studies, based on interviews of community leaders, highlight each forest’s biophysical and cultural characteristics, management objectives, institutional arrangements, sources of funding, and outreach events. Local school programs, sustainable multiple-use management with community participation, and community outreach events were characteristics documented in the “model” town forests that may contribute to increasing community engagement and fostering sense of place. At the scale of a single forest, an interpretive guide for the Hinesburg Town Forest in Hinesburg, VT was designed and additional insights into community engagement including the importance of an updated management plan and communication networks between town forest user groups were gained through that process. The results of this inquiry will serve as a valuable resource for selectboards, town forest committees, and other community leaders who wish to actively engage residents in their town forest. They are publicly available on a website at www.uvm.edu/~rscfar/townforests/.

