Developing and Choosing Options

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Determining the Ecological Context
Step 1. Locate priorities at the landscape scale.
Step 2. Locate priorities at the species and community scale.
Step 3. Identify the components.
Including Community Values
Step 4. Identify areas of high public value.
Step 5. Compare ecological and community values.
Developing and Choosing Options
Step 6. Evaluate status and determine options.
Step 7. Evaluate options and choose strategies.

At this point, you should have a clear geographic idea of the locations of high value to your community, based on both ecological and community values. Now you can think critically about how to best strategize for the protection of some places, and perhaps the development of others, based on real data.

Step 6: Evaluate Status and Determine Options

Before choosing strategies, you'll need to take stock of what you have. You've identified locations of high community value. Now, look at the current protection status of these locations.

Recognizing Conservation

Do any of your priority locations occur on permanently conserved land? To check, compare your map of combined ecological and community values with the protected lands depicted on Map 1, the Conservation Basemap, in Part I of this guide. Remember that a conservation easement limits development but may or may not provide guidelines for management or protection of specific resources.

Are there federal, state, or regional regulations/programs already in place that will protect the resource? If so, how do the goals of these programs line up with what your community would like to achieve? Significant wetlands, for example, are subject to the

Vermont Wetlands Rules, which regulate certain uses and activities, but some towns may want to achieve somewhat different goals for local wetlands. For more information about individual ecological components, see Part I of this guide.

Next, review your **t**own or regional plan and bylaws. Do these currently offer protection for your priority resources? If so, are you satisfied with the level and type of protection offered?

For some resources, it may be helpful to check whether properties located within priority areas are enrolled in the Use Value Appraisal Program (Current Use).[3] This program is one of Vermont's premiere conservation programs and enables private landowners to maintain their property in productive forest rather than subdividing and developing it, thus contributing to Vermont's forest products and working land economies as well as providing all the other benefits to the public and the environment associated with forests. County foresters with the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation are a great source of information about this program. These lands can be seen on Map 1 of the Inventory Theme in BioFinder.

If any of your priority locations are already well protected, your planning efforts in these areas can be minimal, allowing you to focus your energy elsewhere.

Visualizing Change

You may also find it helpful to think about the level of risk faced by priority resources. In Vermont, development generally occurs gradually. In rural areas, it may be on the scale of only a few parcels per town per year, a pace that appears slow but that can have substantial effects over time. Of course, slow growth doesn't mean that your planning work is unimportant. Some would argue that it is precisely because development takes place so slowly in Vermont that every choice matters and contributes to the overall landscape we end up with.

Evaluating Your Town Plan and Bylaws

Vermont Natural Resources Council's Resilient Communities Scorecard will take you through a series of questions to produce a score for how well your community already protects the environment and local natural resources. Based on this score, it lists suggestions for next steps. While based on somewhat different criteria than this guide, it provides a great starting point. Try it out: vnrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/III.pdf.

Resources for Implementation

Because the focus of this guide is on mapping natural heritage features, the detail included in the remainder of this guide is limited. The entire implementation process is described briefly to enable planners to take the information included in Part I's inventory maps and effectively implement conservation strategies.

The same process is described in detail in a course periodically offered by Vermont's Agency of Natural Resources, entitled *Caring for Natural Resources—Taking Action in Your Community*. In addition, you may want to supplement this section with other resources or create your own strategies. For example, the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development's *Planning Manual* can aid you in creating an effective municipal plan that follows state statutes. As mentioned earlier, *Community Strategies for Vermont's Forests and Wildlife* and *Conserving Vermont's Natural Heritage* may also be helpful.

One way to visualize future growth from routine development is to create a build-out model. This advanced computer mapping technique (which requires the aid of a skilled cartographer) is used to envision different development scenarios. A basic build-out model asks, "Based on current zoning, how many new units could be built in your town?" You can also use this method to test proposed regulations to see what the resulting maximum development would look like on a map. You can learn more about build-out models in *Community Strategies for Vermont's Forests and Wildlife*, on page 13.

Buildout can be used to compare the impact of different regulatory proposals. If we added a 50-foot buffer to all streams in town, how many fewer units could be built compared to current zoning?

Using BioFinder in Step 6

While you will certainly want to use more resources than just BioFinder for this step, BioFinder does have some useful datasets that might help. For example, conserved lands are located in the **Inventory** theme, under Map 1. Lands enrolled in **Use Value Appraisal (Current Use)** can be found in the same place.
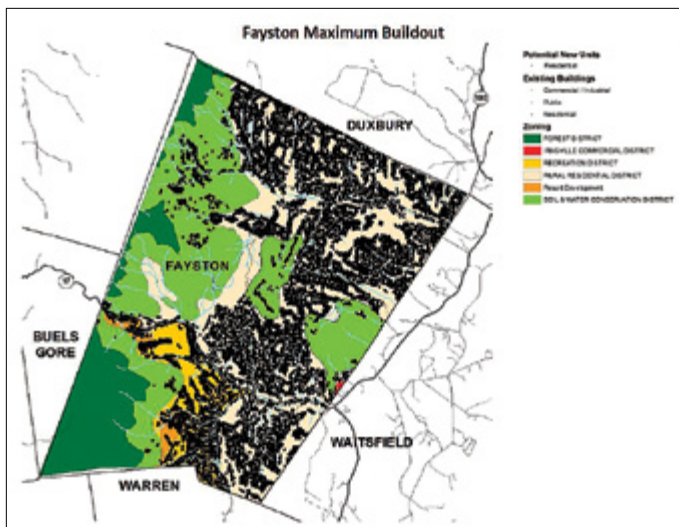
This build-out model of Fayston is from the 2011 Communities, Forest, and Wildlife Project in the Mad River Valley. It shows a 50-year maximum buildout scenario based on current zoning.

What about a 200-foot buffer? Scenarios could include anything from natural resources extraction to the development of energy structures, expansion of industrial activities to global issues like climate change.

For each scenario, evaluate (if possible) potential impacts to the areas of combined ecological and community value. What acreage could be lost to development? As you begin this discussion, keep in mind that some potential threats to areas of high value may be assets to other community or ecological goals. Where this is the case, your community may need to make tough choices between conflicting values. Regardless, recognizing the potential threat to areas of value is the first step toward making informed decisions.

The goal here is to double check your priorities. Highly valued places with existing protections may become lower priorities for action than those places that are unprotected and face high development pressure. You may want to take some time to re-assess your priorities.

At this point, you are ready to develop strategies to protect your special places!

Brainstorm

It's now time to brainstorm action steps you could take to maintain the values of priority areas.

Start with the places that have now emerged as highest priority for conservation. Compare these with your list of ecological components from Step 3. Does your list of components still represent the areas of highest priority?

For each component, create a list of both regulatory and non-regulatory actions that would maintain the values of these lands and waters. To help you with this step, the chart in Appendix A matches possible conservation strategies with ecological components. Part I of this guide has additional information on each component. Of course, these charts are not comprehensive; you may have additional ideas! At this point, consider everything.

Mirroring Step 3, strategies can be divided by scale. First, consider strategies that will protect landscape scale patterns such as maintaining large networks of forest habitat and waterways. Because landscape-scale components cover substantial acreage, these same lands are often used as working forests, recreational areas, scenic vistas, and for other forms human enjoyment. Therefore, the most effective strategies often consider both human and ecological values of this land.

Next, list strategies that will conserve those resources excluded from the landscape patterns above. For example, a vernal pool located in a small patch of forest may not be included in the forest network you considered above, but it remains an important resource. Such community and species–scale elements are generally more ecologically sensitive, and successful strategies often involve encouraging intensive human activities in other locations.

If you have not already done so, we now suggest reading through *Community Strategies for Vermont's Forests and Wildlife* for more information about tools used to protect priority natural resources. The Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development's Planning Manual[4] has information on more general planning strategies and statutes that are not specific to natural resources.

The Community Planning Toolbox

On the Vermont Natural Resources Council website, the **Community Planning Toolbox** provides information about planning, implementation tools, and case studies from within Vermont. Learn more at: vnrc.org/resources/community-planning-toolbox.

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Step 7: Evaluate and Choose Options

After brainstorming possible strategies you could use to maintain the values of priority places, it is time to evaluate your list and choose those options that best match your community's needs, values, and ecological context. Most likely, you will end up choosing not a single solution but a package that works together to address identified needs—even if you take on only one strategy at a time. Below, we offer considerations as you put together this package.

Addressing Needs and Realities

As you begin the evaluation process, the first step is to think carefully about exactly what each option would involve. We recommend maintaining a worksheet in which you document the following. For each potential strategy,

- ► How well does it protect or enhance the natural resource needs you have identified?
- ► How well does it support community values?
- ► How much effort will it take to complete?
- ► How much will it cost?
- ► Are people needed to implement the strategy? If so, are these people available?

Thinking carefully about this information will help you identify which options are realistic in your community. You also want to be sure that the options you choose do, in fact, help the ecological and/or community needs you are trying to address.

The Importance of Communication

Remember to involve your community throughout this process; don't wait until you have chosen a strategy to communicate your efforts with citizens!

Finding Common Ground

In the previous steps, you identified first ecological priorities, then community priorities, eventually combining these into a single map of areas with high public value. As you evaluate strategies, consider options that satisfy diverse interests simultaneously. For example, strategies aimed at maintaining working forests are often effective at conserving forest wildlife habitat, too. Similarly, riparian areas are important not only for the conservation of wildlife habitat but also for water quality and flood resilience. A single conservation strategy could effectively protect multiple values.

Make a Plan

Once you have evaluated your range of options, it is time to choose those that seem most appropriate for your community and turn your decisions into a plan of action.

Your action plan could include the following:

1. **Action Steps:** What strategies do you propose implementing? Again, this probably isn't a single solution but a collection of strategies that work together to achieve your goals.

2. **Rationale:** What needs do these actions satisfy? Why did you choose this group of options over others? What community values are supported by your chosen solutions?

3. **Assign a Leader or Leadership Team:** Who will head up your efforts? The Planning Commission? The Conservation Commission? A watershed association? For each strategy, you can assign a point person and list supporters.

4. **Tasks:** Lay out the specific tasks associated with your chosen strategies.

5. **Timeline:** Identify a likely timeframe for each task

and for the overall project. (Keep in mind that the overall project may take a long time—and that's okay!)

6. **Milestones:** Will there be key accomplishments that you can celebrate along the way?

7. **Resources:** Are there existing financial resources you can put toward the project? People who will be involved? Other resources?

As you get started, you also need to think about funding. Do you already have the needed finances for your project? If not, you might consider:

► Municipal Planning Grants[5]
► Local conservation funds
► Fundraisers (letters to individual donors, public events, etc.)
► Collaboration with a partner with related goals (a land trust, private landowner, foundation, etc.)
► Other grants

For many communities, creating an action plan is not an easy process. However, if you have gone through the rigorous prioritization process above, your decisions will be based on data, and you will be able to provide a solid rationale for your decisions. In the end, you may not be able to accomplish everything that has been set on the table, and there may be places in which you have to choose from among divergent priorities. However, making these tough decisions by taking into account a diversity of information and perspectives is what will give your plan a strong foundation.

Good luck!

Need Help?

The process outlined above was developed by the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department's Community Wildlife Program, and we're happy to provide additional guidance:

► Contact the Community Wildlife Program, Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department. See www.vtfishandwildlife.com/get-involved/partner-in-conservation/community-wildlife-program for more information about the program.

For aid with the development or implementation of planning-related work, Vermont Natural Resources Council may be able to provide assistance. For more information, visit:
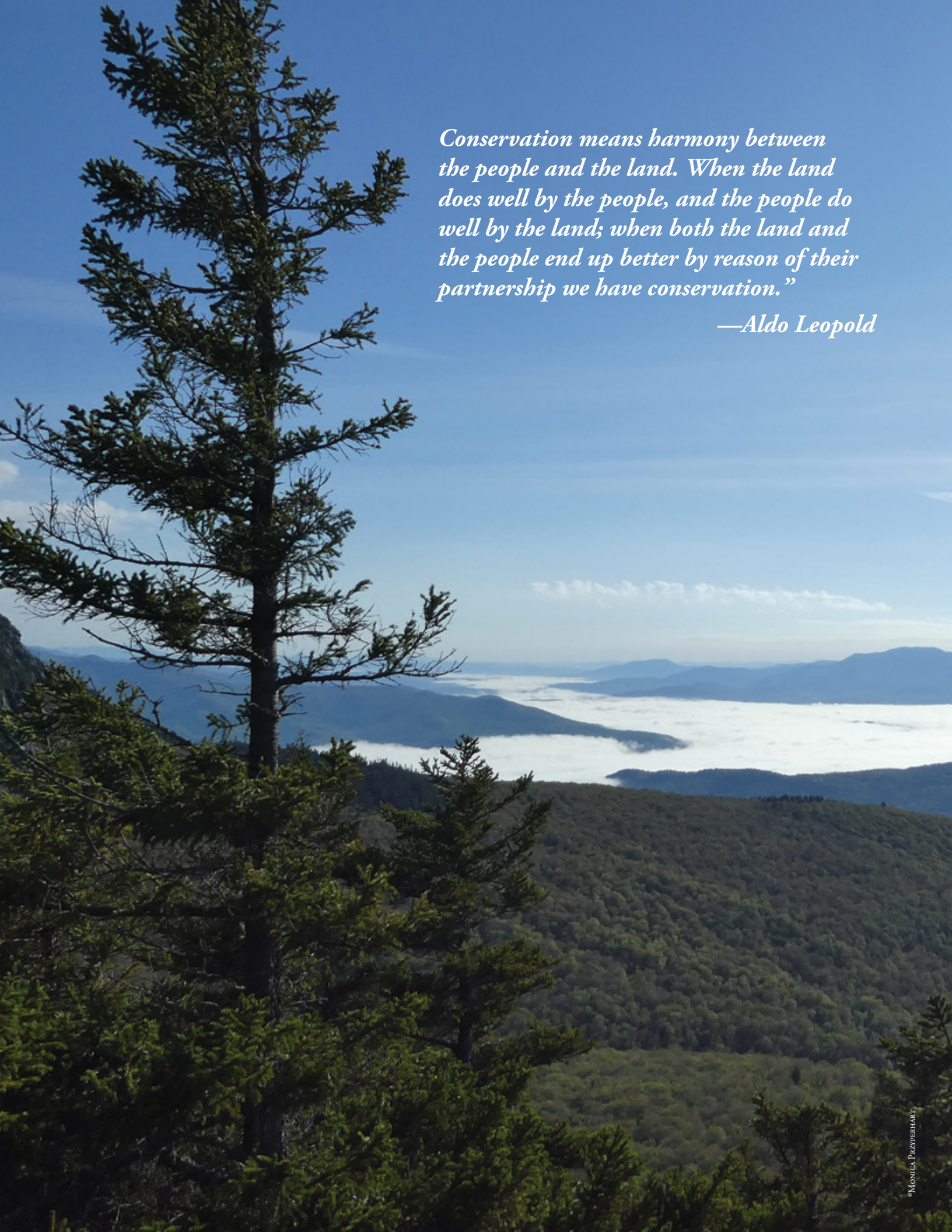
► Forests and Wildlife Program: vnrc.org/programs/forests-wildlife/
► Sustainable Communities Program: vnrc.org/programs/sustainable-communities/

For technical assistance related to planning and regulatory tools, the Regional Planning Commissions are a valuable resource.

► See www.vapda.org for a list of contact information for all of Vermont's Regional Planning and Development Agencies.

Using BioFinder in Step 7

The maps you've been using in BioFinder may continue to provide guidance in Step 7. However, please remember that many of the data layers available on BioFinder should be field verified before being used for specific implementation strategies. In particular, please be sure that regulatory boundaries are reviewed by a skilled cartographer who can assure that data are being used at an appropriate scale.

Conservation Success Stories

See what other towns have done! The Association of Vermont Conservation Commissions has compiled an online archive of activities completed by Vermont towns that achieve a variety of conservation-related goals. The archive details accomplishments, challenges and keys to success for each project, along with contact information for those involved. Find these stories at vtconservation.com/view-stories

*Conservation means harmony between
the people and the land. When the land
does well by the people, and the people do
well by the land; when both the land and
the people end up better by reason of their
partnership we have conservation."*

—Aldo Leopold

Mapping Vermont's Natural Heritage

This is one chapter of a larger publication called *Mapping Vermont's Natural Heritage: A Mapping and Conservation Guide for Municipal and Regional Planners in Vermont*. Please visit https://anr.vermont.gov/node/986 for additional information or to see the entire guide.
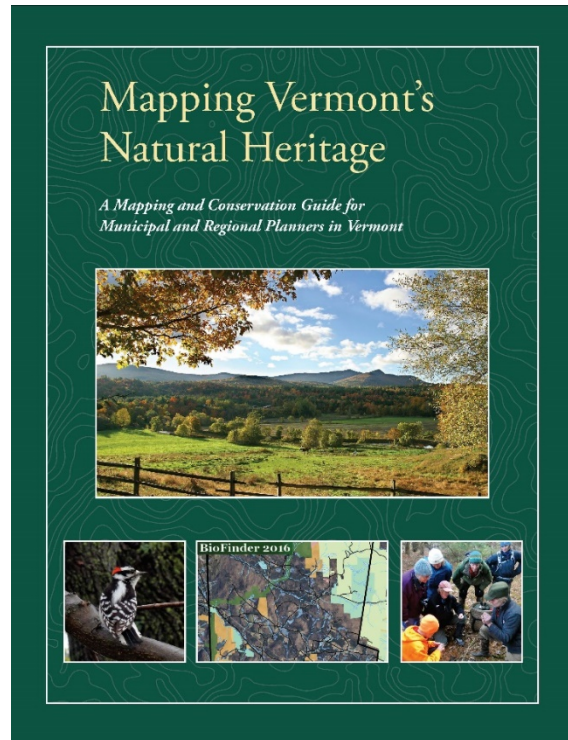
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