

Vermont Housing & Conservation Board  
**POLICY POSITION**  
**FUNDING FOR NATURAL AREA PROJECTS**

By establishing the protection of natural areas and wildlife habitat as one of the goals of the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, the Vermont legislature acknowledged the importance of preserving Vermont's biological diversity and natural heritage. In an effort to meet the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board goal of protecting important natural areas, the Board adopts the following policy:

It is the policy of the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board that Vermont Housing & Conservation Trust Fund dollars shall be used to preserve such natural areas which possess one or many of the following attributes:

**Ecological Criteria for Natural Area Projects:**

- A. *Lands that support an ecologically functional and resilient landscape now and as the climate changes, including:*
  - a. Interior forest blocks unfragmented by roads, which provide important habitat for plant and animal species and accommodate species range shifts in a changing climate.
  - b. Connectivity blocks which provide critical pathways for species movement between core habitat areas, such as riparian forests, wetlands, and forest blocks.
  - c. Lands with a high degree of habitat complexity, featuring a variety of microhabitats and climatic gradients such as mountain slopes and wetland complexes, which provide refuge for plants and animals in a changing climate.
  - d. Other lands identified as significant according to Vermont Conservation Design and The Nature Conservancy's Resilient Sites for Terrestrial Conservation, or for which a clear rationale is provided.
- B. *Lands that support diverse and ecologically functional natural communities now and as the climate changes, including:*
  - a. State-significant terrestrial and wetland natural communities, especially if that community is not well represented in protected areas.
  - b. Old forests, which provide structurally complex habitat and are resilient to climate change.
  - c. Wetlands, which provide ecosystem services, including water storage capacity (flood resilience), water quality, and habitat for a wide range of species.
  - d. Aquatic communities, such as those associated with lakes, rivers, and streams.
  - e. Other lands for which a clear rationale is provided.
- C. *Lands that support individual species of conservation need now and as the climate changes, such as:*
  - a. Habitat that is necessary to support the survival, reproduction and recovery of threatened or endangered plants and animals, as defined in Vermont's Endangered Species Law (10 V.S.A. § 5401)
  - b. Habitat that is necessary to sustain and enhance healthy populations of Vermont's Wildlife Species of Greatest Conservation Need as identified in the State's Wildlife Action Plan, or future comparable designation.
  - c. Other wildlife habitat, especially that which is not already well represented within protected areas, such as vernal pools, cliff outcrops, or mast stands, among others.
- D. *Lands having physiographic or geological features of statewide significance, such as:*

- a. Rare or regionally-significant bedrock types, such as serpentine outcrops or calcareous bedrock, respectively.
- b. Rare or regionally-significant surficial geology features, such as clayplains, sandplains, deltas or eskers.
- c. Geologic features with scenic, cultural, or scientific values, such as waterfalls, gorges, caves, fossil beds, islands, or faults, among other features.

### **Other Characteristics of Natural Area Projects:**

#### *Public Access*

Unless public access to the area will jeopardize the natural community or species whose conservation is the goal of the project, some form of public access shall be assured.

#### *Balance with Public Outdoor Recreation*

Projects submitted to VHCB as multiple goal projects with public outdoor recreation merits should contemplate an appropriate balance between outdoor recreation and natural resource protection. Strategies for achieving this balance should be identified in a management plan.

#### *Leverage*

The Vermont Housing and Conservation Board expects applicants to request less than the total cost of funding a particular project. Applicants can leverage funds by landowner donation, private donations or with other public funds used as matching money.

#### *Support*

The applicant should provide documentation of support for the project from municipalities, neighboring landowners, regional planning commission, or other related groups.

#### *Perpetual Protection*

Properties protected with VHCB funds shall be protected by a perpetual conservation easement, have a designated easement steward, and have a management plan reviewed and approved by VHCB staff.

#### *Importance to Protected Lands*

In evaluating natural area projects, the Board places a priority on projects which will protect land that abuts or is otherwise integral to or connect permanently protected land and is related significantly to the protected property.

### **Other Considerations:**

A variety of tools exist to help conservation organizations identify natural area conservation targets throughout Vermont. VHCB encourages its partners to consider the significance of their proposed project in the context of the latest conservation science. Resources for this assessment could include, but are not limited to: Vermont Conservation Design (2018), The Nature Conservancy's Resilient and Connected Landscapes for Terrestrial Conservation (2016), the current data from the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife Natural Heritage Inventory, and the State of Vermont's Wildlife Action Plan, and other future, as yet unnamed, conservation frameworks.

The Board is willing to fund preservation projects which include direct nonprofit, state or municipal ownership or purchase of conservation easements, as long as the result is the perpetual conservation and/or protection of natural areas. As is the case with all VHCB supported projects, there must be nonprofit, municipal or state agency involvement in the land conservation projects and the applicant for funds must be a nonprofit organization, municipality, or state agency.

Cost will be a limiting factor in the purchase of natural areas or rights therein. Funding priority will be given based on overall evaluation by VHCB staff, including how well the project meets the criteria of the policy considerations for evaluating natural areas projects. The Board will review local and regional plans to see how well the project coincides with the plans. Projects which also meet other goals of the VHCB will receive high priority, provided those other goals do not diminish the natural resource merits of the project.

**Definitions:**

“natural area” is broadly defined as an area in which natural processes (such as succession, natural disturbance, and nutrient cycling) prevail over human influences. Natural areas occur at many scales, from large landscapes to small wetlands like vernal pools. Human presence and management does not preclude an area from being considered a natural area, if natural ecological processes dominate, especially those processes that are most important for maintaining the ecological functions and ecological integrity of the natural area in question. Natural areas will change over time in response to climate and other factors but are expected to continue to provide important ecological functions and habitat.

“wildlife” means any member of a nondomesticated species of the animal kingdom, whether reared in captivity or not, including, without limitation, any mammal, fish, bird, amphibian, reptile, mollusk, crustacean, arthropod, or other invertebrate, and also including any part, product, egg, offspring, dead body, or part of the dead body of any such wildlife (10 V.S.A. § 5401).

“rare” means rare as defined by the Vermont Nongame and Natural Heritage Program and as supported by their data.

“threatened” means a species listed on the state threatened species list (10 V.S.A. § 5402) or is determined to be a “threatened species” under the federal Endangered Species Act, or the habitat in which this species can be found.

“endangered” means a species listed on the state endangered species list (10 V.S.A. § 5402) or determined to be an “endangered species” under the federal Endangered Species Act, or the habitat in which this species can be found. The term generally refers to species whose continued existence as a viable component of the state’s flora or fauna is in jeopardy.

“habitat” in its broadest sense is the environmental factors, distributed across multiple scales, that a species or a suite of species of plants and animals requires to survive and reproduce including, but not limited to, food, water, cover and space.

“natural community” is an interacting assemblage of organisms, their physical environment, and the natural processes that affect them (Thompson and Sorenson 2000).

## **Resources**

Anderson, M., M. Clark, A.O. Sheldon. 2012. Resilient Sites for Terrestrial Conservation in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic Region. Boston, MA: The Nature Conservancy.

Anderson, M., A. Barnett. M. Clark, A.O. Sheldon, J. Prince, B. Vickery. 2016. Resilient and Connected Landscapes for Terrestrial Conservation. Boston, MA: The Nature Conservancy.

Sorenson, E.R., R. Zaino. 2018. Vermont Conservation Design: Maintaining and Enhancing an Ecologically Functional Landscape, Summary Report for Landscapes, Natural Communities, Habitats, and Species. Montpelier, VT: Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Thompson, E.H., E.R. Sorenson. 2000. Wetland, Woodland, Wildland: A Guide to the Natural Communities of Vermont. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.

Vermont Agency of Natural Resources. Biofinder 2016: Mapping Vermont's Biodiversity.  
<<http://anrmaps.vermont.gov/websites/BioFinder2016/>>

Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife. 2015. Draft Wildlife Action Plan. Montpelier, VT.