

STAYING CONNECTED



Conserving Jackson Valley, an Ecological Keystone on the Vermont-Quebec Border

Look at a map of the United States and you might imagine that Vermont's Green Mountains abruptly end at the Canadian border. A satellite view or a moose will tell you differently – the Greens enter Canada, sink briefly down into the Mississquoi River Valley, then rise again, continuing north to Quebec's Sutton Mountains just a few miles distant.

Conservation groups interested in wildlife connectivity on both sides of the border made this same important realization in the first decade of the 21st Century. "We understood that truly protecting biodiversity meant also protecting the wide-ranging mammals that freely pass back and forth between our two nations. So that meant creating a U.S.-Canadian coalition to conserve key trans-border habitat," says Louise Gratton, Director of Science for Nature Conservancy Canada, Quebec Region.

One such ecological keystone is Jackson Valley, a privately owned forest parcel in Jay, Vermont abutting the Canadian border. Its 936 acres encompass spruce fir uplands and a north-facing lowland bowl cloaked with Northern hardwoods. In 2008, Jackson Valley was identified by Two Countries One Forest (www.2C1Forest.org), an international alliance of fifty U.S. and Canadian conservation organizations, as an essential "missing link" the 1,158-square miles cross-boundary wildlife corridor connecting Vermont's Green Mountains with Quebec's Sutton Range.



Setting up a critter cam in Jackson Valley © Don Dickson

"Jackson Valley was a high priority for us because it was a key missing puzzle piece in a much larger picture," says Staying Connected partner and The Trust for Public Land's project manager Kate Wanner. If Jackson Valley could be protected, it would link up the conserved Atlas Timberlands to the south, Jay State Forest and the Long Trail to the east, and an adjacent 1,611-acre preserve in Quebec, protected by Nature Conservancy Canada.

"What impressed me most about Jackson Valley was its unfragmented forest, the remoteness of the region, and the free flow of fauna and flora back and forth across the border in an area that was already surrounded by a lot of protected lands," says Jeff Parsons, a biologist and adjunct professor at Sterling College.

"We need people who are thinking of the big picture in maintaining wild spaces. And that's what Staying Connected does. But it is also valuable to know how to bring feelings of warmth and appreciation to local communities. Staying Connected does that too. They have a very positive vision of the future for species, conservation and the natural world."

– **Jeff Parsons, biologist and
adjunct professor at Sterling College**

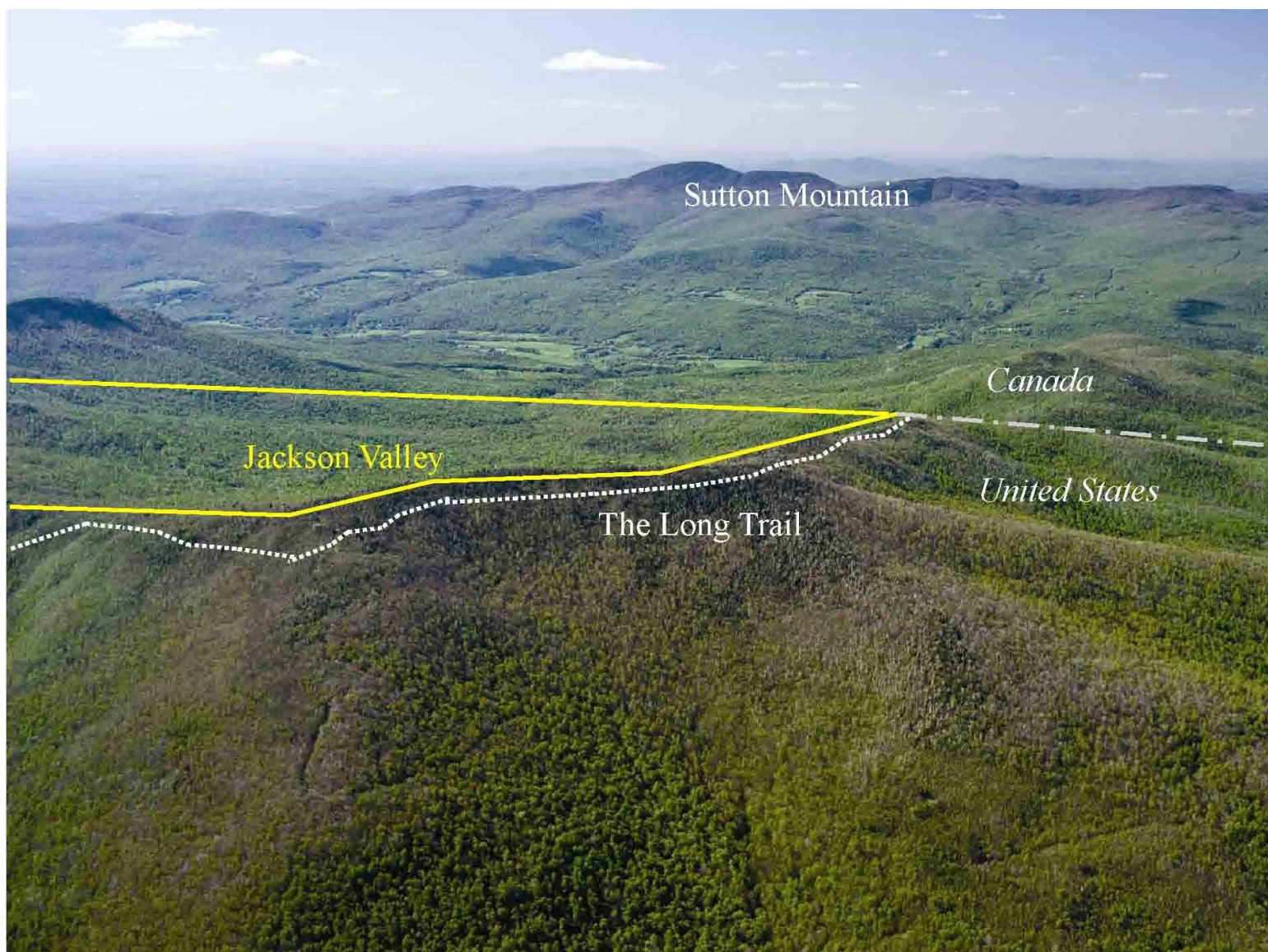
In 2010, Parsons did an environmental review of Jackson Valley, proving what GIS modeling had already suggested, that the parcel served as a key trans-border wildlife corridor. “In our study, we saw signs of fisher, coyote, bobcat and moose moving back and forth between Vermont and Quebec. And we also know that American marten are now living in Quebec’s Sutton Range. There’s no reason to doubt that these animals, should they decide to move south, would be able to utilize prey species and the unfragmented habitat in Jackson Valley.” Its protection, he concluded “would insure the future viability of the broader landscape connectivity for wildlife and natural communities.”

But conserving the parcel was no easy task. The Northeast Wilderness Trust had tried unsuccessfully to negotiate a purchase agreement, and invited The Trust for Public Land to get involved. “Originally we thought it would be a great town forest for the town of Jay, and tried to buy it in fee from the landowner. But the appraisal didn’t agree with the landowner’s value expectations,” recalls Wanner. So The Trust for Public Land and the landowner agreed to protect the land with a conservation easement. But how to secure the \$585,000 needed to make the acquisition?

That’s where the Staying Connected Initiative and the trans-border partnership came vitally into play. The only likely funding source for the easement was the federal Forest Legacy Program (FLP) of the U.S. Forestry Service. But Forest Legacy is a very competitive program. All 50 states annually submit competing project applications, which a Forest Service panel reviews and ranks. Those at, or near, the top of the list get funded; but those down the list, depending on the amount appropriated from Congress, get no money.

“Staying Connected aids conservation by providing large-scale landscape science to help organizations like ours prioritize which lands most need protection. Their outreach efforts are just as useful, helping the public understand that a seemingly ‘plain vanilla’ forest property can have tremendous value in terms of its context in the larger wildlife connectivity picture.”

– Kate Wanner, Project Manager, TPL





The International Border between the USA and Canada forms the northern boundary of Jackson Valley © Don Dickson

“That’s where initiatives like Staying Connected become especially important. They give a project higher prominence and help it move toward the top of the list,” says Kate Willard, Lands Division Section Chief for the Vermont Department of Forests and Parks. “We made a strong case for how the Jackson Valley project supported regional and national goals, including wildlife connectivity between Vermont and other states.” The fact that the property was adjacent to conserved lands in Quebec, improving U.S.- Canada wildlife connectivity, also boosted the project’s Forest Legacy ranking.

Glowing letters of support from stateside and international conservation groups further bolstered Vermont’s Forest Legacy application. Jackson Valley is, “a critical piece of the Northern Forests that connect the United States and Canada. [It] contains two miles of border between the two countries and is a key missing link in the 1,158 square miles targeted wildlife corridor,” wrote Alice Chamberlain, former Executive Director of Two Countries, One Forest. Five years ago, researchers and foundations involved in this international coalition had mapped the landscape linkages stretching from New York to the Canadian Maritime provinces.

“Our two nations way of doing conservation is very different, but our goals are the same. We have a BIG toolbox. That helps us to be very creative and very in tune with the community, which is the only way conservation can ever truly be successful.”

– **Louise Gratton, Director of Science for Nature Conservancy Canada, Quebec Region; board chair of Two Countries, One Forest**

Mélanie Lelièvre, Executive Director of Corridor Appalachen, a major Canadian conservation group wrote that: “Ecologically significant from a landscape perspective, protection of this property will link conservation lands in Quebec and Vermont, preserve cross-border habitat connectivity, and safeguard habitat for species of greatest conservation need, including Bicknell’s thrush, bobcat, northern goshawk, and American marten.”

Jackson Valley’s easement was also enthusiastically supported by the Green Mountain Club: “Conservation of Jackson Valley will further buffer the Long Trail and preserve the viewshed and backcountry experience for hikers as they approach the Long Trail’s northern terminus,” at the Canadian border, wrote Susan Shea, Green Mountain Club Director of Conservation. The conservation of Jackson Valley also enhanced the possibility of eventually linking Vermont’s Long Trail with hiking trails in Quebec.

The federal Forest Legacy program fully funded the Jackson Valley project in 2011. The Trust for Public Land, which had guided the negotiations from the start, completed the project in spring of 2012, permanently protecting the land with a conservation easement held by the State of Vermont. The easement prevents development and subdivision, and requires that the parcel be managed in a sustainable manner for wildlife, timber, public recreation and soil conservation. It is open to hikers, skiers, and for other forms of non-motorized recreation.

Wildlands Network Eastern Program Director Conrad Reining explains the significance of ongoing wildlife connectivity efforts in the Green Mountains. The work of Staying Connected represents a new direction in conservation, he says, both at the large-scale and at the grassroots.

“In 2007, Wildlands Network did a wildlands network design for the entire Northern Appalachians, finding the highest priority large habitat blocks and wildlife connections between New York and Nova Scotia,” Reining says. “Our study revealed that Vermont’s Green Mountains are a crossroads in those linkages. Zoom in further and you see the Sutton Mt. Massif, with its thousands of acres of intact forest to the north, and the Green Mountains with their thousands of protected acres to the south. But what you also clearly see is the weakest link, in the Mississquoi Valley, a fragmented agricultural area on the border.” This large-scale mapping effort tells conservation partners where they must work on the ground.

“Staying Connected is performing well in the Northern Greens. Our land trust partners have conserved key threatened high priority parcels. And our linkage coordinators – the face of Staying Connected on the ground – have collaborated with local communities on how to pick up the baton and run with the wildlife connectivity message.”

– Conrad Reining, Eastern Program Director
Wildlands Network

“In the future, we need to keep filling in the pieces,” says Reining. “But you can’t buy or get easements on all the land needed to protect linkages, conserve habitats and large mammals. You need other tools. That’s where the multi-pronged approach of the Staying Connected Initiative is so valuable. The partners help protect key pieces, like Jackson Valley. We are also working to with landowners to do a better job of managing their land to make it suitable for a wider range of species. We are getting landowners working together in groups, so they can do forest certification. And maybe most importantly, is building a local rural constituency that is pro-conservation that can influence local conservation commissions and select boards who largely determine local land use. It’s a very social and community-based cooperative approach to conservation.”

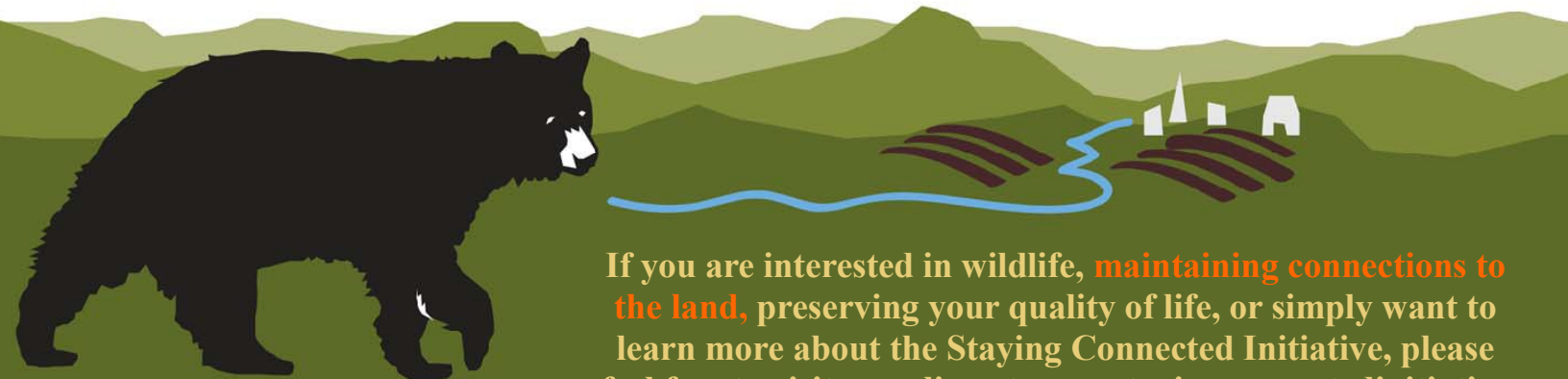
Equally important to kick start the Staying Connected land protection efforts, was the “boots on the ground” work of linkage coordinators like Corrie Miller and Bob Hawk. At the same time that Jackson Valley was being conserved, these coordinators established close ties with a dozen towns at the heart of the Northern Greens, meeting with select boards, planning commissions, conservation commissions, landowners, foresters, and local land trusts to help build awareness and orient local constituencies to connectivity priorities.

Experience in the Northern Greens has clearly demonstrated that the innovative multi-faceted Staying Connected approach – including conservation science, land protection, local land use planning, and technical assistance – offers one of the best toolkits for long-term conservation of landscape connectivity.



Professor Jeff Parson and Sterling College students surveying the natural heritage of Jackson Valley © Don Dickson

STAYING CONNECTED



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