

# Conservation Leaders in Action - Enabling Community Engagement in the Northern Forest Landscape

D. Wang & J.W. Hughes

Rubenstein School of Environment & Natural Resources

[Deane.Wang@uvm.edu](mailto:Deane.Wang@uvm.edu), [jwhughes@umv.edu](mailto:jwhughes@umv.edu)

81 Carrigan Drive, University of Vermont

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## Enabling Graduate Student Service Learning Projects in the Northern Forest Region

- Create a land conservation corps (partner with SCA, service for Jericho Underhill Land Trust, Richmond Land Trust, Nature Conservancy, Green Mountain Club, Town of Shelburne)
- Enhance the capacity of RSENR to implement graduate service learning projects
- Conduct an inventory and assessment for the Orange County Headwaters Project
- Deliver community education and enhance engagement for the Town of Williston
- Vermont carbon budget assessment for Vermont Natural Resource Council

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<<http://www.uvm.edu/envnr/nsrc/>>

# Project Summary

- **Rationale:** Given the location of the University of Vermont in the Northern Forest area, matching local community needs with student service-learning research projects will provide both the communities and the University with mutually beneficial opportunities. Community organizations (public and non-profit) will obtain much needed research and implementation capacity. Students will be completing a variety of graduation requirements through this civic engagement program, and will develop skills and experiences complementing their conservation leadership training program.
- **Methods:** This project initially co-funded the development of a position within the Rubenstein School to match communities with graduate students' service learning opportunities. This position helps develop a network of communities and conservation non-profits in the region (e.g., New England Grassroots Environment Fund) with which to match graduate student projects.
- **Findings/outcomes:** Communities in the target region have significant research needs that can be fulfilled by graduate students. Non-thesis graduate programs at the University of Vermont can provide for these needs while preparing students to be conservation leaders.
- **Community engagement** in the Northern Forest region can be enhanced by building social capital in communities that UVM graduate students work in, and by building human capital at the University of Vermont.



# Background and Justification

- Civic engagement and service-learning are both the subject of a great deal of scholarship in recent times, especially in environmental fields (Shutkin 2000, Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000, Checkoway 2001, Garcia and Robinson 2005). The value of working with local communities to solve local environmental problems is particularly relevant to both universities and communities because of the growing realization among researchers of the importance of local knowledge, especially in the context of interdisciplinary issues (Kraft 2001, Fischer 2003).
- Students participating in the Conservation Leadership Curriculum will develop both skills and a strong sense of how programs of civic engagement can proceed to provide enrichment to both communities in need of more formal research and the university, as it develops in capacity to provide community services and increases its understanding of real world issues in complex interdisciplinary contexts.

- The project builds on existing University of Vermont and Rubenstein School efforts to enhance community engagement and service-learning.
- A history of service to Northern Forest communities exists through projects conducted by UVM graduate students, with Field Naturalists and Ecological Planners being good examples of this relationship. The emerging Conservation Leadership Curriculum will provide a stronger focus on developing these kinds of graduate student projects with a more formalized infrastructure.



# Methods

- Develop collaborative arrangements with the New England Grassroots Environmental Fund (<http://www.grassrootsfund.org>) to share information about community technical services needs in environmental fields. Other organizations such as the Northern Forest Center, which administers a Northern Forest Partnership Small-Grants Program, will also be approached.
- Establish a comprehensive database and personal network over the next few years.



- Create a network of partners to provide environmental community service through supporting graduate assistants and promoting specific projects that provide needed environmental/conservation services (i.e., a UVM community service fund which can be used by students doing projects in the Conservation Leadership Curriculum).

# Project outcomes to date

- Built a partnership with the UVM Community-University Partnerships and Service Learning Office for a shared staff and graduate position in the Rubenstein School to enhance capacity for community engagement and service learning.
- Developed a network of community partners to engage graduate student service learning projects.
- Conducted an inventory and assessment for the Orange County Headwaters Project.
- Developed information and other infrastructure for a PLACE Program (Place-based Landscape Assessment and Community Engagement) in the Town of Williston (in collaboration with Shelburne Farms).
- Developed a framework for carbon accounting for the Vermont Natural Resources Council.

- Conducted a pilot program for Land Conservation and Stewardship Training (LANDS) in cooperation with the Student Conservation Association (SCA) - with a Student LANDS Corp that provided research, service, and reports for land conservation organizations such as the Nature Conservancy, the Jericho Underhill Land Trust, the Richmond Land Trust, the Town of Shelburne, and the Green Mountain Club.



# Implications and applications in the Northern Forest region

- Building social capital in Northern Forest communities can enhance community engagement and lead to more sustainable community development.
- Building human capital at the University of Vermont to complement social capital development in communities can be achieved through service-learning projects.
- University outreach efforts in the environment/conservation arena are enhanced through community-level efforts promoted through projects like this one.



# Future directions

- Community engagement and service learning at the Rubenstein School is now institutionalized in an “Office of Experiential Learning.”
- The next class of graduate students looking for community service-learning projects has been admitted to UVM (class of 2009).





- The LANDS program is planning year two of the pilot program and SCA has identified double the number of AmeriCorp Awards for this program. The program has expanded its partnership to include the Land Trust Alliance (national and regional offices).
- An active network of communities and community organizations has been fostered in the Northern Forest Region and new projects will be developed to assist them.

# List of products, completed and anticipated

- M.S. Project Report: Engaging minds, building community - An action plan for facilitating community engagement in the Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources, by Katherine Westdijk (2007). Includes a survey of faculty and their levels of community engagement and service learning activity.
- M.S. Project Report: A curriculum for the LANDS Program to train college interns for land stewardship in service of the land trust movement, by Delia Delongchamp and James Barnes.
- Service-learning project reports to: Jericho Underhill Land Trust, Richmond Land Trust, The Nature Conservancy and the Town of Shelburne.
- LANDS presentation to project sponsors and cooperators (August 4th, 2007).
- LANDS article on UVM View: 29 August 2007  
“Trustworthy LANDS” by Joshua Brown.  
<http://www.uvm.edu/~uvmpr/theview/article.php?id=2394>

# Anticipated

- M.S. Sponsor Report: Vernal Pool and Wetland Inventory and Assessment for the Orange County Headwaters, by Erin Haney and Matt Peters.
- M.S.Sponsor Report: Carbon accounting in Vermont, for the Vermont Natural Resources Council.
- M.S. Report: Development of a Land Stewardship Program (LANDS) at UVM as a national model for assistance to the Land Trust movement, by James Barnes.
- Presentation at the Land Trust Alliance annual “rally” in Denver, Oct. 3-6, 2007 on the LANDS Program (with SCA).