Town of Williston Conservation Commission (WCC)
Minutes of Aug 10, 2016
Approved

Members Present:	Carl Runge, Eric Howe, Anthony Jordick, Jean Kissner, Kim Coleman
Members Absent:	Gary Hawley, Jude Hersey
Staff Present:	Melinda Scott, Dan Kelly
Others Present:	Mickey Stone, Steve Fischer (Fellowship of the Wheel), Ethan Tapper (County Forester, VT Dept of Forests, Parks and Recreation), George Weber (resident)

This was a special meeting to conduct a site visit at the Mud Pond Country Park. The purpose of the site visit was to take a close look at the condition of the park and its trails to better inform our update of the Management Plan. County Forester Ethan Tapper attended this site visit and provided input on management strategies for the park from a forest health perspective. Mickey Stone and Steve Fischer attended representing Fellowship of the Wheel.

Ethan gave an overview of the process of drafting management plans. First, we develop documentation of baseline conditions of the park. This involves completing an assessment and mapping the resources. From that we're able to discuss the potential management objectives. It's important for the management plan to incorporate this ecological assessment, looking at wildlife habitat, plant diversity, bird species, etc. Melinda has been in contact with the UVM Field Naturalist/Ecological Planning program to conduct an assessment. Once the ecological assessment is done, the WCC can establish goals and objectives from a social perspective, i.e., how do we want to use the park and what do we hope to get done? Of course, much of that has been established in the previous plan, but now is the time to revisit those goals.

Ethan noted that there were a lot of blowdowns (pine) and asked if that was a result of the 2010 microburst storm. (Yes, it was). Such disturbance events tend to most heavily affect species that are not naturally occurring, such as pine that became established after pasture was abandoned. It is considered a "stand-replacing" disturbance in that it creates a large opening where new trees can begin to establish themselves.

Ethan also noted the prevalence of dead or dying pine trees. Wind events tend to select against the healthiest trees because they have large canopies. One management strategy is to cut some of the larger, heathier pines rather than retroactively salvaging them after a storm.

The response to disturbance events depends on the management objectives. We could choose to remove the trees or to do nothing, and both are good practices that achieve different objectives. Leaving the trees benefits wildlife and may also benefit tree regeneration by protecting from deer browse. Harvesting the trees may look more orderly from a human perspective and may offer some economic benefit.

Melinda asked about the erosion on the trails and what is the best way to manage it. Ethan stated that water diversion is the best management practice for trails. Mickey Stone stated that the trails really need to be considered as multi-use trails rather than mountain biking trails, as walkers, hikers, bikers, skiers all use the trails.

Jean asked Ethan what the impact is of cutting out the tree roots. Ethan stated that most of the tree roots are underneath the soil surface so there is very little impact to the trees. The practice of FOTW has been to de-root the trails for better user experience. Mickey stated that it's best to get down to the subsoil for a rock hard surface, which makes it easier to manage. The only situation in which new material is needed is when the trail goes through a depression or wet area. Ethan stated again that the main impact of mountain biking is erosion, so it's best to employ effective water diversion techniques.

The group walked the trail to the recently acquired Herskowitz parcel. We noted a clear demarcation of forest types to either side of the stone wall boundary, with early successional pine on one side and late successional hardwood on the other side, hinting at different land uses or more recently abandoned farmland. Ethan pointed out a very large oak tree with multiple forked branches, also known as a "wolf tree" because it was a tree that was left alone in a pasture, and now the forest has grown in around it. These trees are extremely valuable for wildlife, and are often used as denning trees for small and medium sized mammals.

Ethan stated that the primary impact to Vermont forests is from human (agricultural) use of the land. He stated that the pines will continue to die off and will eventually be replaced by old successional hardwood forest.

Ethan also noted that the forest has a large number of invasive species including Japanese barberry and honeysuckle. These species will tend to outcompete the native tree species and it might be worth coming up with strategies to deal with them.

Today, the forest is transitioning from a monoculture white pine to a diverse hardwood forest. There are different management strategies such as 1) harvest "high-risk" trees and expand the forest gaps to create more regeneration, or 2) do nothing and let the trees fall, which is good for the forest and for the wildlife. Melinda mentioned the idea of a demonstration project where those different approaches are employed in different areas of the park for educational purposes. Ethan noted that when you harvest trees, we remove carbon from the forest and erosion becomes more likely which can degrade the habitat. It also costs money to harvest the trees, unless the logger takes the trees. Ethan noted that one requirement of a forest management plan on a UVA parcel is to contribute to the forest economy in some way, thus timber management becomes necessary.

Melinda mentioned the idea of invasives removal as demonstration project. Mickey stated that is a great way to engage the public and to re-affirm the principle of a balance of different uses. Melinda mentioned the idea of having a public walk through the park, led by Ethan, as another way to engage the public in the management plan. Kim Coleman mentioned employing citizen science as another way to engage people.

Mickey led the group to the Herskowitz trails and pointed out a vernal pool. We noted that the former Herskowitz parcel looks like it's in a different stage of succession, perhaps older forest than the rest of the park.

Ethan would like to be kept in the loop as we update the management plan, and he offered to lead a public walk of the park.

Minutes Submitted by Melinda Scott: August 17.
Approved by WCC: August 17.