

Spring 2019 Community Engaged Practicum
Future of the Northern Forest: Exploring Opportunities for Common Wealth Conservation in One Vermont Ecoregion
Project Statement for collaboration with Vermont Family Forests

Background/Context

About 75% of the land area in New England and northern New York are forest, and Vermont matches this pattern, being 78% forested.^{1,2} Forested areas comprise the majority of Vermont's landscape, but they are under considerable stress. As detailed in the US Forest Service's 2018 Forest Ecosystem Vulnerability Assessment, the predominant stressors include:

- Fragmentation and land-use change
- Fire regime shifts
- Invasion by non-native species
- Overbrowsing
- Extreme weather events

These and other stressors will be further exacerbated by our changing climate, and the fundamental ways in which the various parts of the forest ecosystem interact with each other will also be impacted. How one might think of managing or addressing these changes and challenges will vary by ecosystem, management goals, and ownership type.

These management goals then relate to the spectrum of forest uses, which range from traditional forest products to more intrinsic forest benefits, and all of which have ecological, social, and economic value. Examples of forest uses and services include a) the provisioning of timber, firewood, clean water, and maple sap for syrup; b) recreational opportunities such as hunting & trapping, hiking, and wildlife viewing; c) cultural services such as educational, aesthetic, and cultural heritage values; d) sources of habitat and food for a variety of wildlife species; and e) carbon sequestration and storage.^{3,4}

An additional layer of complexity we need to keep in mind is Vermont's cultural history, ranging from the earliest known human presence in Vermont circa 10,000 years ago, to the woodland agriculture of the Western Abenaki as early as 1100 CE, to intense periods of deforestation culminating in the 1870s, to the official establishment of the Green Mountain National Forest in 1932, and to today, when, for the first time in over a century, Vermont is actually losing forest cover due to parcelization, subdivision, and the subsequent development of land.^{5,6,7}

Partner Introduction

This semester will provide you the opportunity to learn how a range of community organizations and individual actors are interacting with forest ecosystems in light of the above-noted suite of challenges, management goals, and historical context. Further, you will also have the opportunity to contribute to

¹ https://www.fs.fed.us/nrs/pubs/gtr/gtr_nrs173.pdf

² <http://www.vermontwoodlands.org/forestry-facts.asp>

³ https://fpr.vermont.gov/forest/vermonts_forests/importance

⁴ <https://www.uvm.edu/femc/indicators/vt/services>

⁵ Klyza and Trombulak, *The Story of Vermont*, 1999.

⁶ <https://vtforesttrends.vnrc.org/>

⁷ Haviland and Power, *The Original Vermonters*, 1994.

the efforts of our partner organization, Vermont Family Forests, in collaboration with their Executive Director and Conservation Forester David Brynn and their Forest Community Outreach and Rewilding Specialist Sandra Murphy. Vermont Family Forests (VFF), based in Bristol, Vermont, works with a network of almost 200 private family forest owners to offer consulting conservation forestry, ecological research and monitoring, applied forest ecosystem conservation, hands-on learning, and community celebrations. Their efforts are motivated by their mission and vision as detailed below:⁸

Our mission is to:

- **Observe**, understand, and preserve forest ecosystem health;
- **Practice** forest-centered conservation that is holistic and adaptive;
- **Support** careful management of local family forests for ecological, economic, and social benefits; and
- **Foster** forest culture focused on community well-being, ecological resilience, and the quest of an optimal land ethic.

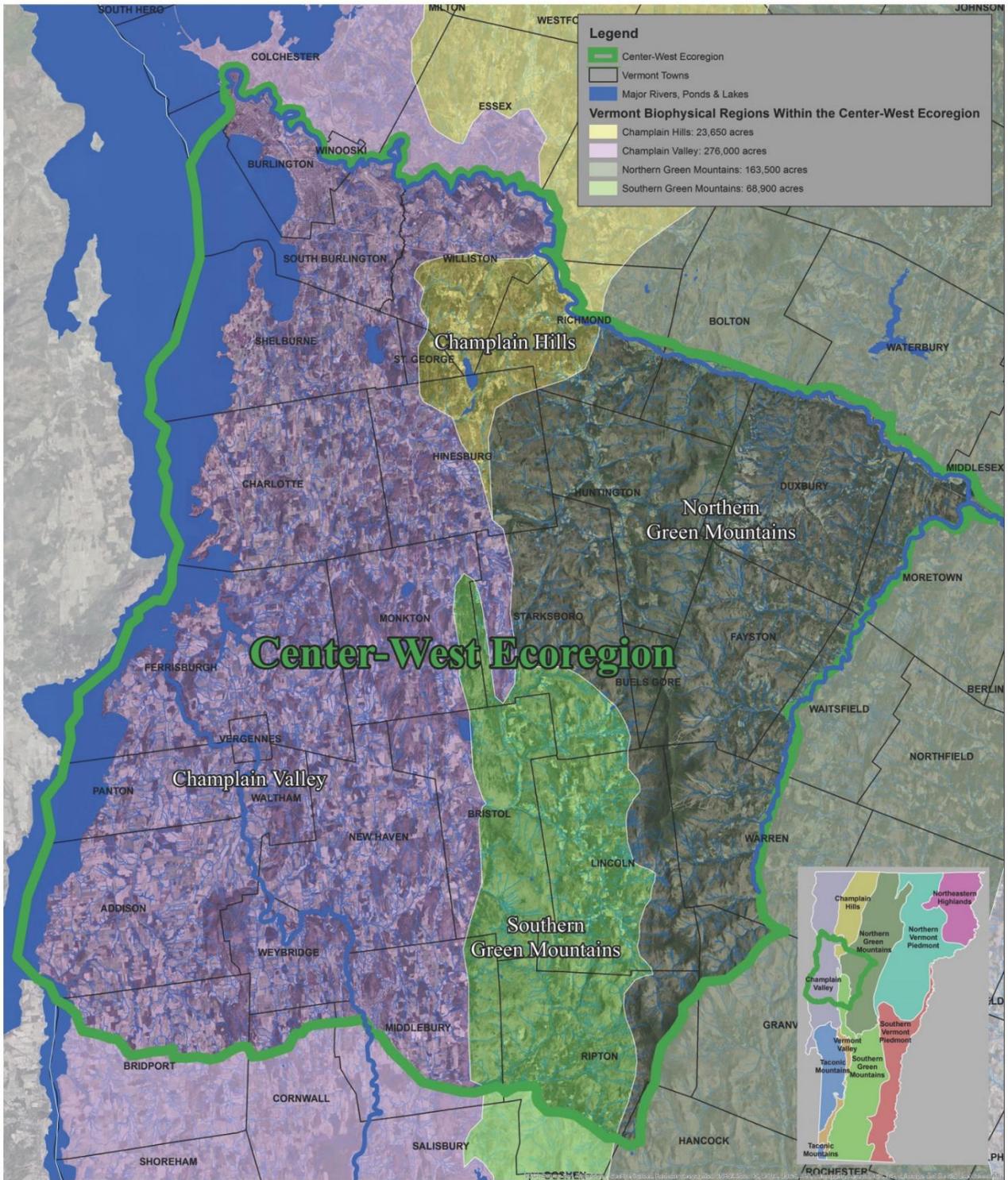
Our vision is mutually beneficial relationship between people and the forest communities in which we live, rooted in gratitude, ingenuity, prudence, compassion, and wholeness. We aim to:

- *Cultivate a more intense consciousness of the forest community.*
- *Raise awareness of the interweaving of forest ecosystem health, flood resilience, and water quality.*
- *Promote clean water as Vermont's premier forest product*

The following words from Gary Snyder's 1975 book Revisiting Turtle Island have inspired VFF: "Find your place on the planet. Dig in and take responsibility from there." VFF has defined their place on the planet as what they are calling Vermont's Center-West Ecoregion, roughly bounded to the west by Lake Champlain, to the north by the Winooski River, to the east by the Mad River, and to the south by the Middlebury River and Rte. 125 (see map below). This region comprises 4 different biophysical regions, represents an important part of the Western Abenaki's ancestral lands, and is marked today by 3 distinct patterns of land ownership or management – privately held forests (individual to industrial), publicly held forests (state & federal), and conserved lands (e.g. those held by a land trust or equivalent).

Further inspiring VFF is the notion of the commons. As they note on their website, there are critical elements within the Center-West Ecoregion (CWE) that are not owned by anyone—they are unenclosed and are shared by all Vermonters. Water, wildlife, and air are all commons. As we will discuss in class through the work of Elinor Ostrom and David Bollier, *groups are capable of avoiding the tragedy of the commons* (contrary to the canonical work of Garrett Hardin), if certain principles and conditions are met. How do we take responsibility for these resources and care for them well, especially in light of a rapidly change climate and culture? This question is the central question for your projects.

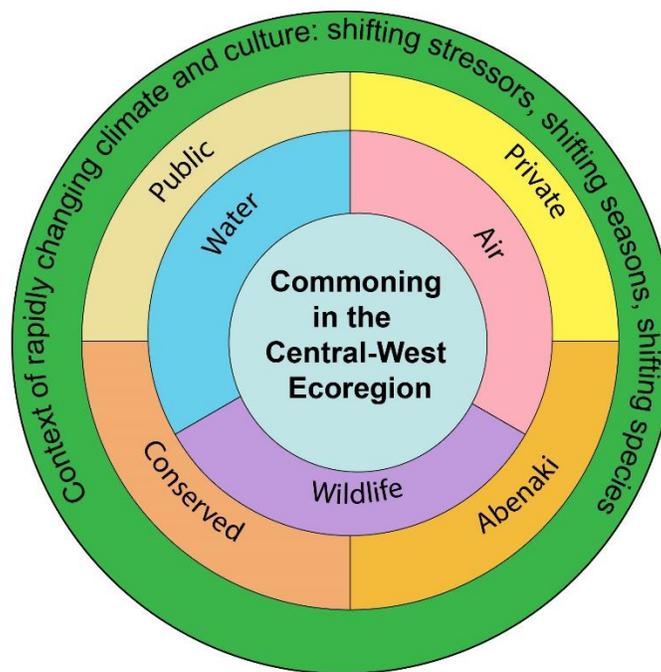
⁸ <http://familyforests.org/>



Project Statement

VFF has just begun to plan for a September 2019 Commons Conservation Congress ("***Caring for Our Home Grounds: A Commons Conservation Congress for Vermont's Center-West Ecoregion***") and they are interested in a range of research, story-gathering, and recommendations that will not only set the stage for this symposium, but which will also inform ways to strengthen "commoning" in the CWE.

We have organized the work requested by VFF into four project teams, illustrated in the diagram below. One team will focus on the past and present relationships of the Western Abenaki peoples to the CWE as the original commoners as well as the history of the commons. The other three teams will respectively be focused on exploring commoning on the 1) public lands (i.e. state and federal forests), 2) private lands (i.e. family and industrial forests), and 3) conserved lands (i.e. Vermont Land Trust, Northeast Wilderness Trust, Middlebury Area Land Trust, Vermont River Conservancy, The Watershed Center, and Addison County Community Trust) in the CWE. All teams will explore commoning in relation to our rapidly changing climate and culture and will also explore the relationships and associated tensions across these patterns of land ownership.



The key goals for the project team focused on the Western Abenaki are to:

- 1) Explore, celebrate, and support the past and present relationships of the Western Abenaki peoples to the unenclosed resources of the CWE. How have these relationships changed over time, inclusive of lived change in relation to climate change?
- 2) Conduct an additional historical exploration into the notion of commons, commoning, and commoners. Where does it come from and how can this history inform us today? As the original commoners of this landscape, the Abenaki are an essential voice of experience and insight in the process of reimagining commoning today.
- 3) Share your findings and insights from both threads of your research with the other teams to help inform their recommendations for the current-day categories of land- owners and managers.

The key goals for the three other teams focusing on public, private, and conserved lands are to:

- 1) Gather examples of how commoning is already occurring – i.e. how are people contributing to stewarding these unenclosed resources through their management practices, monitoring initiatives, and/or behaviors?
- 2) What are people's relationships to water, air, and wildlife? This will help us learn about not only what motivates them, but also what their hopes/wishes are, as well as their constraints.
- 3) Hear peoples' stories of lived change in relation to climate change – what have they observed and how do they feel that commoning can support resiliency and preparedness?
- 4) Based on your learnings and insights from your fellow students' research into the history of the commons (see above), what shortcomings might you identify in some of the current assessment metrics and what would you recommend as improvements (e.g. the parameters of a conservation easement, forest management plan requirements for private owners under the Use Value Appraisal Program, or the guidelines of the federal USDA Natural Resources Conservation Services financial assistance programs)?
- 5) If time allows, it would be great to reflect on opportunities for collaborating across these ownership regimes. While not every acre of forest land can be all things to all people, there is certainly room for more collaborative thinking and planning.

For each project team, VFF will provide you with a list of key actors and resources as starting points for your research and interviews. These will cover the landscape and provide very interesting and different stories to tell. Teasing out how each of these land ownership groups is engaging with the ecological commons will be a fascinating and tangible product. It will allow VFF to not only celebrate the successes and stories of mutually beneficial relationships, but also chart paths for improvement and expanded engagement in these critical times.

VFF is interested in creative visual portrayals for the information that you gather – i.e. digital storytelling, story-mapping, creative writing, posters, etc.—so keep these potential media in mind (as well as your our creative ideas) as you think about how to convey your findings.