

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Marbletown is a community that is defined by its natural heritage. The forested mountains, contrasting river valleys, and historic farms give form to the town. These mountains and valleys and distinct agricultural landscapes have shaped the settlement of the area throughout time. The mountains provided a source of fuel and building materials; the valleys provided rich soils and abundant waters for drinking, power, and transportation; and the farms speak to a sense of ecological and cultural balance dating back to the first Native American settlers and their colonial counterparts. In these ways, our natural heritage is also a distinct part of our cultural heritage.

This plan is about preserving our natural heritage –the forests, rivers and farms – for future generations.

The goal of this plan is to determine significant natural resources within Marbletown and develop recommendations for preservation of these resources.

GOAL OF THE NATURAL HERITAGE PLAN

The goal of this plan is to determine resources of natural heritage significance within Marbletown and develop recommendations for preservation of these resources.

Preserving our natural heritage helps to maintain a diverse range of plant and animal species, including humans. It is easy to forget that we depend on our natural resources to support our basic needs, such as drinking water, building materials and food. Natural

resources also provide scenic, recreational and economic benefits to the community. These resources also provide “green services.” For example, wetlands help to filter our drinking water and forests help to remove (or sequester) carbon dioxide (and other heat-trapping gases that contribute to global warming) from the atmosphere by storing it in their



Esopus Creek

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trunks, leaves, branches and roots. By preserving our natural heritage, we are investing in our own well-being, protecting the character of the community and ensuring that these resources continue to benefit future generations in Marbletown.

However, preserving the town's natural heritage is not without its challenges. The town's scenic and rural character attracts potential residents who want to live or own a second home in the town. Individually, each new home might have little impact on the town. Collectively, however, as more homes are added, more of the town's resources will become fragmented, compromised and diminished. Balancing growth with preservation of natural heritage is a major goal for Marbletown. If planned smartly, development can be an economic asset for the town.

This plan identifies and discusses the elements that compose the town's natural heritage – such as its forests, aquifers, rivers and farms. It discusses opportunities and concerns brought forth through the planning process that are shared across a broad spectrum of the town's population and interests, such as concerns about taxes and the need for well-planned economic development. It identifies priority resources and areas for conservation efforts. And, lastly, the plan provides strategies for the town to advance its goal of balancing development and economic growth with the preservation of natural heritage.

This plan was developed using the best available data and sound principles of science and resource management. It is not meant to be a static document; rather, it is a framework that will need to be updated and re-evaluated as new data become available, as science and technology advance our understanding of species needs and resource management, and as the community's values and priorities change through time.

Social and Economic Context

The many planning activities occurring in the town and region are a reflection of the current pressures of development. They are an expression of how much people care about their social, economic, and environmental surroundings, and how important they are to our quality of life.

Like so many other communities in the region, Marbletown is undergoing a transition. The resources that have long been maintained by landowners are now attracting other residents to the area. This, in turn, is raising property values in the town, forcing many residents to wonder if they can continue to hold on to their land. This is not only an economic frustration for landowners – it is an emotional frustration as they try to come to terms with the possibility of selling land that has been in their family for generations. Intuitively, landowners want to preserve their land and resources. But, in doing so, they don't want to lose their land assets.

Many of the larger-acreage landowners feel that they bear the financial burden of this responsibility, while other community residents have much to gain from their conservation efforts.

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The town administration is faced with the challenge of balancing the concerns of all residents. In doing so, all parties will need to compromise. Creative economic development endeavors are needed. The community will need to come together to agree on where and how to accommodate future development. Natural heritage preservation is necessary if the community wants to maintain its resources, and quality of life, for current and future residents. Critical aquifers and drinking water will have to be preserved to support additional growth. Healthy forests and streams are needed to support wildlife and human needs. Farmlands are needed to continue to supply the townspeople with food and ensure food security.

To be truly effective, natural heritage preservation must be a cooperative community effort, and it must be linked with land use patterns and economic development efforts. The costs and benefits of conservation should be equitably distributed through the town. Conservation activities that benefit the entire community should be considered an investment in the town's economic future; an investment in "green infrastructure." Large-acreage landowners should have options that help them to retain and steward large land holdings and current residents should be able to afford to live in the town.

Local and Regional Planning Context

This report is part of a continuum of studies and actions initiated by the town in recent years towards achieving the community's land use, development and conservation goals. The report was called for in the most recent update of the town's comprehensive plan. A sub-committee of the town's Environmental Conservation Commission (ECC) was formed to spearhead the development of a resource index (inventory) and this natural heritage plan.

The *Marbletown Index on Natural Cultural and Historical Resources* (the index) was completed in 2005 by the Conway School of Landscape Design. The index includes maps and a summary of the natural resources in Marbletown. The town also completed an *Aquifer Protection Study* in 2005, which was prepared by Dr. Katherine Beinkafner of Mid-Hudson Geosciences. The town is currently working with the New York Rural Water Association towards advancing its goals of aquifer and water protection.

Another implementation item of the town's comprehensive plan was the recent (2006) revision of the town's zoning law and subdivision regulations to include a conservation design overlay district "to promote conservation of open space and preservation of natural resources while allowing flexibility in lot size and site design." Design standards for conservation subdivisions are included to help guide the design process.

Also related to this planning effort is the town's open space bond initiative which passed in the November 2006 election and provides up to two million dollars in

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funds for the town to create a land conservation program. A committee is currently developing criteria, legislation and outreach materials for this program.

Habitat mapping efforts are also underway in the town. Several volunteers and members of the town's ECC recently completed a biodiversity assessment training course offered by Hudsonia, Inc. This group has subsequently mapped habitats in a 7,500-acre area of town, roughly bound by Vly-Atwood Road on the west, Buck Road/Schoonmaker Road on the south, Route 209 on the east and the southern bank of the Esopus Creek on the north. A report and habitat map are being finalized to summarize this work. Additional habitat surveys conducted by Hudsonia itself under a grant are underway for the western part of town, in the Vly and Kripplebush area, and in the Rondout Creek corridor (excluding High Falls).

Similar land use, zoning, and natural resource planning activities are underway in adjacent communities. The Town of New Paltz adopted an Open Space Plan in May 2006 and voters approved a \$2 million open space bond in November of that same year. The town recently completed a study of the fiscal costs and benefits of its potential build-out. The Town of Rochester adopted a revised comprehensive plan in 2006, as well as completing a *Ground Water Protection Plan* (2006) and a *Natural Resource Inventory* (2006). The town is now in the process of updating its zoning law. The Town of Hurley completed a report on open space (*Open Space Preservation for the Town of Hurley*) and an *Aquifer Protection Study* in 2003. The Town of Rosendale is working on a revised comprehensive plan as well.

Marbletown is also part of the Shawangunk Mountains Regional Partnership, which recently sponsored the successful designation of the Shawangunk Mountains Scenic Byway (a state-designated byway). The partnership is currently developing a regional plan for preservation of the resources of the region, working with the nine towns and two villages containing the byway. Also of note, Ulster County, in partnership with NYSDOT, is sponsoring the Route 209 Sustainable Transportation and Land Use Study along the corridor from Hurley to Ellenville. Ulster County has also recently developed a sustainable economic development plan (*Ulster Tomorrow, 2007*), and the *Ulster County Open Space Plan* (December 2007), with major recommendations of identifying priority conservation areas and priority growth areas. The *Ulster County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan* also provides guidance and shares many of the goals of this plan.

Planning Team and Project Goals

The Marbletown ECC secured funds for this natural heritage plan through two grant programs: New York State Department of Environmental Conservation's (DEC) Hudson River Estuary Grants Program and New York State Department of State's Enhanced Master Planning and Zoning Incentive Award Program. The plan is being guided by a four-person steering committee (a subcommittee of the ECC) and a 14 person advisory panel that represents a diversity of interests including agriculture, business, recreation and conservation.

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The town retained professional planners, Behan Planning Associates, LLC, to work in close consultation with the ECC and Advisory Panel to create the plan and facilitate the public outreach process. The following goals were established for the planning process:

- Synthesize the town's comprehensive plan, index, aquifer study, and habitat reports to identify areas of conservation importance for the town.
- Share information, ideas and findings and seek public feedback and comments throughout the project.
- Work with landowners and other interest groups to identify concerns and find mutually common ground with broad public interest and goals.
- Discuss potential solutions for the protection of natural heritage, including forests, natural areas, water resources, and agricultural resources.
- Create a Natural Heritage Plan that summarizes natural heritage priorities and provides recommendations and a strategy for their preservation.

Public Meetings and Outreach

The following methods of public outreach have been conducted throughout the planning process. Specific dates have been identified where possible. Summaries of the conclusions of the focus group sessions and the Marbletown Landowner Association meeting are located in Appendix A.

- **A town-wide public meeting** was held on September 18, 2006 to introduce the project and review results of resource assessment.
- **Focus group meetings (3)** were conducted to gain an understanding of the issues and opportunities for stakeholder groups in Marbletown:
 - Business owners: September 27, 2006
 - Conservation organizations and land managers: September 27, 2006
 - Forests: May 10, 2007
- **A presentation to the Marbletown Landowner Association** was held at their regular meeting on December 6, 2006.
- **A presentation to the Marbletown Town Board** to review the priority natural heritage areas and discuss preliminary recommendations was held on April 3, 2007 (open to the public).
- **A public review of the draft plan** to present the draft natural heritage plan and its strategies was held on October 1, 2007.

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- **A presentation to the Marbletown Town Board** was held on December 4, 2007 on the strategic action plan.
- **Quarterly advisory panel meetings were conducted** for committee and consultants to receive feedback at significant milestones or decision-making points (these meetings were open to the public).
- **Committee meetings** were held throughout the project and provided general updates on progress between committee and consultants (these meetings were open to the public).

