

## **V. Conservation & Development Recommendations / Next Steps**

The following descriptive list of “Next Steps” offers a preliminary set of suggestions to help Meredith guide its future investment in protecting its natural resource base. Most of the suggested tasks have already been initiated, yet some are farther along than others. While there is no priority implied by the order of the tasks, there are some that are complimentary to one another. For example, the placing of land use restrictions on co-occurrence areas would go hand-in-hand with the requirement of performing ecological assessments on development projects that occur wholly or in part within co-occurrence areas. The assignment of land stewards for protected properties would also go hand-in-hand with an “overseer” of land use activities in co-occurrence areas. Municipal bonds for land purchase may be better suited for purchasing conservation easements, especially if the Town passes the amendment to RSA 36-A that allows municipalities to contribute to land protection projects without needing to hold an interest in the project. While some of these suggested tasks may be harder to realize than others, at the very least they may stimulate some lively debate as to how best to proceed with the general goal of protecting Meredith Natural resources for future generations.

### **A. Update the Prime Wetlands Maps of Meredith**

Since the prime wetland maps have been updated to the best of our capability (given landowner access permission), I believe it appropriate to update the prime wetland maps of Meredith as a first step to protecting both the co-occurrence areas that contain them and the wildlife habitat they support. According to the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services Wetlands Bureau, this change should be made by town vote. While minor corrections are administrative and can be done without this, the expansion of the prime wetlands in the Page Pond and Hatch Brook area, as well as the recommended *un*-designation of the Hawkins Brook prime wetlands, is significant enough to warrant town-wide approval. Although the core of the initial prime wetlands are intact (and they cannot be undone unless a specific vote so states this), these new areas are essential components of the prime wetland system and should be formally recognized. The map submitted with this report can be modified to show the affected areas along with the 150-foot buffer setback zone. The map and report should be cited in the Meredith D-9 Water Resources Conservation Overlay District, and submitted to the state Wetlands Bureau upon approval by the Town. Digital copies (and shapefiles) are an acceptable format for the state according to recent conversations with them.

## **B. Land Use Restrictions in Co-occurrence Areas**

There are at least two ways in which this can be implemented: 1) regulatory controls; and 2) education & outreach. For regulatory controls, the author suggests the following mechanisms, some of which have already been considered/implemented:

- 1) Establish larger setbacks for all water bodies in co-occurrence areas** – this applies to shorelands and wetlands, notably, those water bodies that do not currently receive the highest form of setback protection, such as non-designated wetlands and non-designated streams. There are non-designated wetlands in each of the co-occurrence areas and at least one non-designated stream (in the Page Pond CA). Setbacks for these water resource areas in CA's could be set to be equal that of designated water bodies, i.e. 100 feet for wetlands and 75 feet for streams.
- 2) Require Licensed Forester oversight for timber management activities within a CA** – according to statewide statistics, less than one quarter of the logging operations in the state involves a licensed forester. Even less than this has direct supervision of a licensed forester during a timber harvest. Requiring one for any timber management activities within a CA would ensure that each job was done according to BMP's with adequate wetland crossing and/or water quality permits in place. This can be done as a stand-alone ordinance or as an addendum to the enabling legislation that allows Towns to collect timber tax revenues.
- 3) Require Environmental Assessments (EA's) for all development projects in CA's** – environmental assessments (sometimes called ecological assessments) review all impacts of a proposed project relative to the ecological integrity of the land being developed. Typical considerations include, but are not limited to, the following:
  - a. Size of impact footprint
  - b. Forest removal (fragmentation) effects
  - c. Disposition of any surface materials that are removed (stumps, soil, etc.)
  - d. Alteration of hydrology – surface & subsurface
  - e. Impacts from impervious surfaces – stormwater run-off, road salt, toxics
  - f. Effects on rare & endangered species or exemplary natural communities
  - g. Effects on wildlife populations
  - h. Cumulative effects on habitat & water resources beyond co-occurrence area

**4) Require Mitigation Plans for all development projects in CA's** – the classic example of this is the placement of a conservation easement on a portion of the land being developed, or on land adjacent to or near the development parcel in order to preserve in perpetuity the functions and values of the ecosystem that are lost due to the development as proposed. Among wetland systems, these functions include a) loss of ecological integrity, b) loss of wildlife habitat, c) loss of aquatic resource value, d) loss of nutrient attenuation or sediment loading potential, e) loss of floodwater storage, f) loss of groundwater recharge/discharge potential, g) loss of educational potential, scenic quality or use by the general public, and h) loss of one or more 'noteworthiness' features such as rare plants or animals. Restoration or creation of habitat, either upland or wetland, that is lost due to the proposed development would be another option. This could include the replacement of a sub-standard culvert or bridge, removal of invasive species, restoration or enhancement of an existing wetland, or the designing and planting of specific native landscapes that are intended to promote wildlife. Preservation, restoration, enhancement, or creation of natural resource features that replace what is being impacted or lost would be informed by the EA and should be specific to the site on a case by case basis.

For **education & outreach** activities, there are also several options to consider. Each co-occurrence area could be identified in an information brochure that highlights the outstanding natural resources of the CA, with the primary intention of informing the landowners who live in the CA, and secondarily those who visit the CA. Over 30% of the CA area includes conservation properties that are available for visitation by the general public, such as Chemung State Forest and Hamlin Recreation Area. Regardless of public access, however, most residents who live in or near a CA are likely well aware of their qualities from a roadside perspective. Enriching this with information from the field data collected during NRI Phase II may promote more of the residents to not only appreciate their "neighborhood" but also think about conserving their land within it.

### **C. Provide Conservation Subdivision Incentives**

The recent Conservation Subdivision Design Ordinance addresses this recommendation that provides developers with an incentive to include public access, open space planning, protection of ridgelines or hilltops within Critical Viewed Areas, or protection of Co-occurrence Areas in their site design. Specifically, this form of cluster development suggests that a 10% density bonus may be awarded "to encourage the protection of High Value, Co-occurrence Areas as described in the town's Natural Resource Inventory latest edition or update." This provision does not describe, however, when this bonus would be applied. It is suggested that this bonus be applied to any preservation, restoration, enhancement, or creation activity within the co-occurrence area that results from the project. For the preservation option, it is suggested that >50% of the permanently protected land lie within an established co-occurrence area.

#### **D. Support Land Protection of Co-Occurrence Areas**

This has already been done in many of the co-occurrence areas, most notably, with the recent purchase of the Page Brook and Page Pond area (CA #3). Land protection deals such as this one can be very complex and take a long period of time to accomplish, yet the rewards are great. Both public and private funding sources can engage a variety of conservation-minded individuals and organizations that, in and of itself, will highlight the value of the natural resources being protected in perpetuity. Fee simple purchase or donation, conservation easement purchase or donation, or some form of covenant restriction can be effective in ensuring the integrity of the natural resources involved as well as the longevity of use. With each protection package comes a responsibility to steward and manage the lands in question, however, and therein lies both an opportunity and a constraint for town personnel. The opportunity for engaging local, volunteer resources to watch over the land is great, as well as the value of public recreation and enjoyment. Yet the costs of stewardship – particularly in the case of any violation of the protective covenant in place – can be exorbitant from a legal perspective. Each parcel must be entail a sound and comprehensive plan for management that enlists the same level of support that was required for the initial purchase or procurement.

#### **E. Create Mechanisms to Help Volunteers Steward Co-Occurrence Areas**

While informal reporting on areas of public interest in Meredith is already taking place, providing a mechanism for formalizing such reporting may be appropriate to the general goals of long-term stewardship and management of Meredith’s natural resources. In co-occurrence areas where existing conservation easements or public lands are already in place, local land stewards have (mostly) been factored into the management of these lands. In places away from protected lands other mechanisms may be appropriate in order to enhance the long-term stewardship of co-occurrence areas. A recent initiative in the Chemung District that is attempting to establish “Sustainable Forestry Farms” is one such example of neighborhood cooperation in protecting jointly used natural resources. In other parts of the state, land management collaboratives have been established with even greater formality to support joint partnerships between private individuals and public agencies. Having a team of individuals who are responsible for and report on the general conditions of these areas would enhance the general care and monitoring activities of the town. Although this may appear to be unnecessary or even intrusive, if it based on voluntary cooperation among neighboring landowners it may be effective. At the very least, it will provide a vehicle for the education & outreach that is required for the proper stewardship of private property over the course of the next century.



**Figure 20. View from Saddle Hill**