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Editorial

Give safe passage to the region's wildlife

Monitor staff

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It's time for New Hampshire to connect some very big dots. Through a process that began in the 1980s with the creation of the Trust for New Hampshire Lands, the state has acquired or conserved huge tracts of land north of the Notches. The southernmost parcel abuts the White Mountain National Forest, connecting the landscape and forming a corridor through which wildlife can move north and south.

In yesterday's Monitor, reporter Chelsea Conaboy outlined an effort led by The Nature Conservancy to connect seven prime wildlife habitat areas in northern New Hampshire and Vermont, primarily by acquiring conservation easements. The project, still in its infancy, is part of a joint effort on the part of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont and New York that could ultimately allow wildlife to roam from Adirondack Park to the Nash Stream and Lake Umbagog regions of New Hampshire, the Maine Woods and Canada.

All species, humans included, will benefit from this effort, which locally will help keep New Hampshire New Hampshire. The fat times that preceded the current recession brought changes to the North Country. Mini-mansions replaced cabins and camps on the Connecticut Lakes, and Wall Street types bought property for future development. The downturn has lowered real estate values and bought a bit of time for those who hope to preserve the land to act.

Canada lynx and black bear are among the creatures that will be helped most by the conservation effort. Both roam widely in search of food and mates. The lynx is listed as a threatened species nationally and considered endangered in Vermont. Its survival depends heavily on the existence of the young spruce forest and brush habitat that provides a home to its primary food source, snowshoe hares. When that land's trees grow up or when stands are clear-cut or developed, the lynx must leave.

Because some plant species and the creatures that feed on them will change, climate change will also force relocations, as will changed weather patterns. The broad, tufted feet of lynx, for example, are designed for hunting in deep snow. But when snow cover is less of a factor, their smaller cousin, the bobcat, can out-compete them for food.

Many of the state's available large tracts have already been protected. Connecting them means working with the owners of parcels of perhaps 100 to 1,000 acres. The \$1 million federal grant to launch the connectivity effort must be considered seed money used to grow generosity. Some of the most critical property for the effort includes safe passages to undeveloped areas on riverbanks where animals can cross. Such land is expensive.

The Nature Conservancy, which is spearheading the connectivity effort, in collaboration with the New Hampshire Department of Fish and Game and the Audubon Society, has just begun working to create a "connectivity map" that will identify the most critical parcels in need of protection.

The conservancy's website and newsletter will allow people to track the progress of the conservation effort. Eventually, we hope, it will also allow people concerned with the future of the state and its wildlife to contribute to that effort financially.

We also encourage anyone with property that could assist the effort to consider donating a conservation easement. The tax benefits of doing so are considerable and the reward - going to one's grave with the knowledge that the land you love will forever be preserved - is priceless.

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