

# Topsham Natural Areas Plan

Natural resource planning incorporating community values

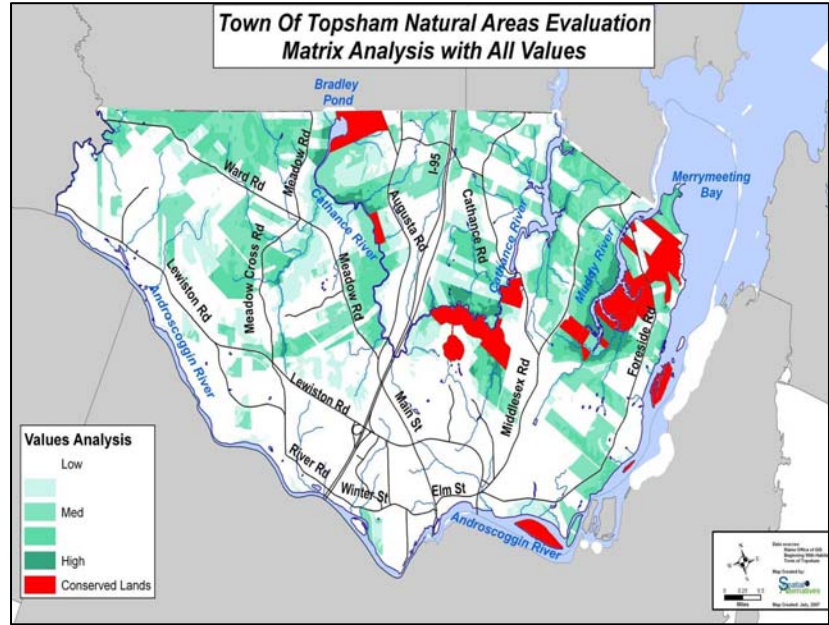
**Location:** Topsham, Maine

**Partners:** Town of Topsham; New England Planning Concepts; Spatial Alternatives

**Context:** The Town of Topsham borders Merrymeeting Bay at the mouth of the Androscoggin River, in the heart of Midcoast Maine. With a population of a little over 9000 people, the community is a mix of historical neighborhoods, suburban residential development, and rural fields and forests. Early development focused on the village of Topsham, while more recent development has taken place on large lots in the Town's rural areas.

Topsham's 2005 Comprehensive Plan noted that while the Town is rich in important natural resources, an inventory of those resources had never been completed.

The Plan recommended that the Town “plan for the protection of important natural and scenic resources” and create “a more formal and comprehensive approach” to protection efforts. In 2006 the Town formed a Natural Areas Planning Committee (NAPC) to engage in a natural resources planning process and develop a plan.



*“CommunityViz really helped to integrate community values into the planning process, and has helped the public to see the value of the Plan itself.”*

—Rod Melanson, Topsham Natural Resource Planner

**Project Description:** As a result of early public input, the NAPC decided to include a focus on community values pertaining to natural areas, in addition to a more traditional focus on physical attributes of the land. To this end, public participation and public input were key components of the planning process. The NAPC retained New England Planning Concepts and Spatial Alternatives to assist with the project. The consultants started with an inventory and detailed GIS mapping of the Town's natural resources, analyzing each resource in relation to its natural resource functions: Environmental/Health and Safety, Habitat, Land Productivity, Recreational, Water Quality, and Wetlands.

Following the inventory work, the NAPC held three public workshops to discern community values about natural areas. “Value voting” was used, in which each participant figuratively “spent” \$100 by allocating it across values like environmental health and safety or habitat protection. This process yielded a weighting of the values. Analysis using CommunityViz® allowed for mapping of the Town's



resources based on both the objective inventory data and the expressed values. A “Matrix Analysis with All Values” showed the combined approaches and also made evident distinct “focus” areas within the Town that rose above others in importance.

The final part of the project was to use the results of the inventory, analysis and public input to develop a set of recommendations. Recommendation #1 was “that the Town directs the majority of its conservation resources, in whatever form (money, staff time, citizen effort, political capital, etc.) towards the focus areas and that the Town continue to use the methodology for identifying priority areas.” Other recommendations related to data needs, policy review, and land conservation efforts.

**Technology and Tools:** CommunityViz 3.3 to analyze citizen values as they relate to natural resources; public workshops using small group discussions and “value voting”; keypads.

**Outcomes:** With the assistance of the consultants, Town staff, and contributors from a multitude of community members and groups, the NAPC prepared the Topsham Natural Areas Plan and

presented it at a public meeting, after which minor revisions were made to the Plan. The Plan will become part of the Town’s Comprehensive Plan after it is voted upon at Town meeting. In the meantime, the priorities expressed in the Plan have already begun to inform discussions and priorities of the Topsham Conservation Commission and the Brunswick Topsham Land Trust.



#### KEY LINKS

- CommunityViz  
<http://www.communityviz.com>
- Town of Topsham  
<http://www.topshammaine.com>
- New England Planning Concepts  
<http://www.newenglandplanning.com>
- Spatial Alternatives  
<http://www.spatialalternatives.com>