

The Lower Connecticut River and Coastal Region Land Trust Exchange

Chester Land Trust

Clinton Land Conservation Trust

Connecticut River Land Trust

Deep River Land Trust

East Haddam Land Trust

Essex Land Trust

Haddam Land Trust

Lyme Land Conservation Trust

Lynde Point Land Trust

Middlesex Land Trust

Old Lyme Land Trust

Old Saybrook Land Trust

Salem Land Trust

Westbrook Land Conservation
Trust



The Lower CT River and Coastal Region Land Trust Exchange (LTE) is an informal collaboration of 14 land trusts representing the 17 communities of its coordinating organization the Lower CT River Valley Council of Governments (LCRVCOG), formerly the CT River Estuary Regional Planning Agency and Mid State Regional Planning Agency, consecutive CT River centered regional planning organizations just merged in large part to conserve and protect the unique character and environment of the communities of the lower CT River and Coastal Region. The creation of the LTE was an outcome of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, 2006 funded *Lower CT River Ground-Truthing Project*.

That project sought to engage citizens in eight towns of the Lower Connecticut River Watershed to develop maps and plans designed to protect open space across town boundaries through creation of greenways, and to engage citizens in the lower Connecticut River watershed in a collaborative effort to identify and act on opportunities to protect open space across town boundaries. This project built on an

existing long lived conservation ethic in the lower River Region, and engaged individuals in a more encompassing regional vision of pride and protection of its extraordinary natural assets.

The Region surrounds the lower 36 miles of the CT River from the River's mouth at Long Island Sound to the northern borders of the municipalities of Cromwell and Portland and over 20 miles of Long Island Sound coast line from the western border of the Town of Clinton, to the eastern border of the Town of Old Lyme. It is home to portions of 2 Refuges, the Menunketesuck/Duck Island complex and the Salt Meadow Unit of the Stewart B. McKinney National Wildlife Refuge and the southernmost 354 sq. miles of the CT River watershed based Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge; the Wild and Scenic Eightmile River; 5 Ct State designated greenways – the Menunketesuck – Cockaponset Regional Greenway, the Connecticut River Gateway Zone Greenway, the Eight Mile River Greenway, the Old Lyme Greenway, and parts of the Blue Blazed Trail System Greenway. The estuary of the lower River was designated as a Ramsar Estuary of Global Importance (1994), has been proclaimed by The Nature Conservancy to be one of the World's Last Great Places, and listed as a Long Island Sound Stewardship Site (2005) by the Long Island Sound Stewardship Initiative. In 1998 the Connecticut was designated as an American Heritage



River, one of 14 in the Country. Running through the region is part of the Metacombet, Monadnock, Mattabesett Trail System designated in 2009 as a National Scenic Trail that strives to extend over 200 miles from Massachusetts to Long Island Sound; the region, as previously mentioned, also surrounds the Connecticut River Gateway Conservation Zone, a 30,000 acre area surrounding the lower 30 miles of the Connecticut River. Since 1974 the Connecticut River Gateway Commission has been charged with protecting the scenic and ecological properties of this unique landscape. Most recently the CT River Watershed was named the Nation's first National Blueway as part of the Dept. of the Interior's Americas Great Outdoors Initiative.

Since its first meeting in Sept. 2009, the LTE has worked internally, locally, regionally, State, and New England wide to promote landscape scale conservation for both wild and working lands and for habitat and wildlife protection through working with private landowners, State land managers, educators, US Fish and Wildlife, the nonprofit community, and through the municipal, regional, and State land use planning process. It has been a tenet of the Regional Planning Organization since the inception of the LTE, with strong support and funding from Eastern CT Resource, Conservation, and Development (RC&D), that only through community outreach and the practice of strong business principals by each of the member land trust will we be able to maintain and increase the pace of conservation and stewardship of our

undeveloped and working lands to benefit both wildlife and people.

The mission of the LCRVCOG in regards to the LTE is to create a stronger connection between the local, regional conservation community, and the Regional, State, and Federal land use planning process; further their ability to provide an educational and planning opportunity for environmental and landscape protection for members of their region's land trusts and conservation commissions to promote landscape linkages, tool creation, data acquisition, and sharing to enable effective collaboration and cooperation, in a regional manner, towards the creation of trails and greenways, and protection of existing habitat, water quality, and scenic and cultural landscape corridors; and identify possible collaboration mechanisms and business structures that will not take away from an individual land trust's unique and important relationship and place in its own community, but enable them to practice best management and business principles. We believe this will allow each to operate to its greatest potential concerning long term planning goals, future land acquisition, and the sustainable stewardship of their already existing protected open space. Business structures and collaboration mechanisms could include shared staff to help with record keeping, membership mailings, newsletter production, record keeping, fund raising, and grant writing as well as office space to provide a place for meetings, and where members could share computer hardware and software.

As in most of New England, much of the work being done to preserve open space in the LTE region, and

Connecticut, is through the efforts of our small land trusts organized and incorporated at the town level. With a few exceptions, these local land trusts have no paid staff and are run solely by dedicated volunteers who struggle with the myriad of legal, environmental, regulatory, fiduciary, accounting and other details involved in acquiring and stewarding land in protected preserves. Experience has shown that those towns in Connecticut with the most open space under preservation have the strongest grassroots support, which is the result of a sustained community communication and education effort by the local land trust, and often results in the ability of the land trust to begin to afford to hire staff. However despite its importance, the task of developing community support and maintaining a sustained effort for broad-based local support for preserving open space goals is very difficult to achieve and one of the biggest barriers to preserving quickly-disappearing farms, forests and wildlife habitat. Without grassroots support for open space preservation, over time the natural course of economic development in most communities inevitably leads to the gradualism of subdivisions and zoning changes that permit creeping commercial development. Effective communications programs are essential to the long-term sustainability of small local land trusts because community outreach is key to recruiting new, younger volunteers who are needed to step into the next generation of leadership for the local trusts.

Although working at the community level is critical to the sustainability of local organizations it is also important for the preservation of wildlife habitat and ecosystem

maintenance to work beyond local boundaries and include in local perceptions of conservation the importance of regional, large landscape, and even global connections and conservation goals. To this end the LTE has been meeting on a regular basis for the past 3 years.

Working in partnership with the Land Trust Alliance (LTA), Connecticut Land Conservation Council (CLCC), New England Forestry Foundation (NEFF), Wildlands and Woodlands, University of Connecticut Extension (UConn), CT DEEP, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and local community leaders land conservation meetings have included workshops concerning: Land trust collaboration, their various structures and roles in accelerating the pace and quality of land conservation; implementation of LTA Standards and Practices; Geospatial Information Systems (GIS) and information technology (IT) resources; fund raising; land owner outreach; Connecticut coastal and estuarine land conservation; habitat based management plans; conservation finance; maintaining diverse forest ecosystems across the region through planning and collaboration; funding opportunities through US Fish and Wildlife, the Natural Resource Conservation Service, and the LTA; New England Conservation Aggregation Project; listening sessions with LTA concerning needs assessments; Insurance Issues of Land Trusts; Form 8283 issues, gift acknowledgment letters, and notice letter on review of appraisals; regional conservation issues; yearly legislative participation opportunities and updates; US Fish and Wildlife Conservation Partners Program; The Nature Conservancy's

(TNC) future intentions within the Lower Ct River and Coastal Region; and communication programming. (<http://www.lcrclandtrustexchange.org/Pages/meetingsummaries.html>)

The LTE is currently working on 5 projects that seek to mitigate threats to the State's wildlife and coincide with the strategies and actions needed to protect and maintain wildlife habitat as outlined in the *State of Connecticut's Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy*. The Plan states "*the most significant threats to Connecticut's land and waterscapes include habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation from development; changes in land use; and competition from non-native, invasive species. Other threats include insufficient scientific knowledge regarding wildlife and their habitats (distribution, abundance and condition); the lack of landscape-level conservation; insufficient resources to maintain or enhance wildlife habitat; and public indifference toward conservation.*"

The Plan focuses on species of greatest concern (GCN) and developed conservation actions / opportunities to mitigate these threats. They include: "1. *determine the distribution, abundance, condition and limiting factors for GCN species and key habitats; 2. assess and minimize the impact of invasive plant and animal species on GCN species and their habitats; 3. develop and implement applicable management strategies; 4. develop statewide guidelines and best management practices to address the impacts of development on GCN species; 5. continue efforts to participate in regional conservation efforts for GCN species; 6. implement current recovery and management plans and; 7. enhance efforts to provide information and guidance on GCN species and key habitats to land use planners, decision-makers and the public at the local, regional and statewide scale.*"

Community outreach projects include the *Lower CT River and Coastal Region Forest Stewardship Initiative (LCR&CR)*, *The Menunketesuck – Cockaponset Regional Greenway, Preservation of the Habitat of the American Cottontail*, and *Where Have All the Bats Gone?*, (<http://www.lcrclandtrustexchange.org/Pages/projects.html>)

The LCR&CR Stewardship Initiative (<http://www.cag.uconn.edu/ces/forest/LCRCR.html>) is a collaboration between the University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension Forestry Program and the Lower CT River Valley Council of Governments (formerly the Connecticut River Estuary Planning Agency), and is supported by the US Forest Service, the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service, and the CT-DEEP Forestry Division. The project's long term goal is to stem the tide of forest



fragmentation and parcelization and keep forest as forest through outreach to the Region's private forest land owners, land use commissions and planning professionals, and the Region's community as a whole. Forest land owner outreach includes workshops to introduce and encourage stewardship of existing forest land to manage for wildlife within a working forest while respecting the needs and desires of the private forestland owner, as well as providing information regarding permanent protection through easement and fee. It also seeks to

engage the whole Regional community to raise esteem for the role that forest land owners play in maintaining the Region's quality of life through wildlife and habitat protection, clean water and air, economic and recreational value, and scenic quality.

The CT State designated Menunketesuck – Cockaponset Regional Greenway, a collaborative project of the LTE, CRERPA, US Fish and Wildlife Partners Program, UConn Extension, and CT DEEP www.lcrclandtrustexchange.org/Pages/projects.html begins on Long Island Sound at the Stewart B. McKinney National Wildlife Refuge at the mouth of the Menunketesuck River in the southwest corner of the Town of Westbrook and continues north through the Menunketesuck watershed as it straddles the Town boundary between Westbrook and Clinton. At the Town boundary of Westbrook and Deep River and that of Clinton and Killingworth the greenway broadens to include the many parcels of Cockaponset State Forest and its surrounding privately owned forest land identified through the *Lower Ct River and Coastal (LCRC) Forest Stewardship Initiative*, to the northern boundary of the Towns of Killingworth and Haddam.

This estuarine forested landscape and wildlife corridor includes the Menunketesuck/Duck Island complex and the Salt Meadow Unit of the Stewart B. McKinney National Wildlife Refuge, one of 27 recognized Important Bird Areas in Connecticut by the National Audubon Society. It is recognized in part because of its importance to

nesting forest birds and as a key migratory stopover area for land birds, particularly in fall migration. The tidal marshes support a significant nesting population of Saltmarsh Sparrows, a species considered globally vulnerable to extinction. As the Menunketesuck River flows to Long Island Sound, it is critical to the health of the Menunketesuck/Duck Island complex, a key foraging area for the federally endangered Roseate Tern and nesting area for the federally threatened Piping Plover and a critical stopover habitat for migratory shorebirds and waterfowl. The Greenway acts as a corridor for migrant birds as they approach the coast, Refuge unit, and the interior forest land in fall migration, and is shown as an important core forest area in the CT DEEP *Forest Resource Assessment and Strategy 2010 - 2015*. Salt Meadow Unit is one of the few remaining coastal forest habitats in Connecticut capable of supporting nesting forest interior birds such as Worm-eating Warbler, Wood Thrush and Pileated Woodpecker.



The Greenway connects the coast, and the considerable efforts of the Town of Westbrook and Clinton to preserve and connect their portions of the Greenway, through targeted property acquisition and trail development along the boundary between the two Towns, with the much larger forested landscape, known as the Cockaponset Triangle. This large forested landscape, which intersects with 55

sq. miles of the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge, stretches from Branford to Old Saybrook and north to the Maromas section of Middletown. The Greenway has, and will focus the communities within and around it on the conservation of this key forested landscape, of the Region, and of the State of Connecticut.

Regional Conservation efforts and an effort to help determine the distribution, abundance, condition, and limiting factors for GCN species has been, and will continue to be, a focus of the LTE as part of our community outreach efforts through the *Preservation of the Habitat of the American Cottontail* and *Where Have All the Bats Gone?*.

The LTE held 2 field days with US Fish and Wildlife to assess land trust parcels for American Cottontail habitat and qualification for DNA sampling and has extended considerable effort, and raised funds, to help CT DEEP to help monitor bat populations and raise awareness concerning white nose syndrome. Many of the land trusts have held their own community workshops on both conservation efforts.

The LTE continues to meet most often on the third Wednesday evening at 7pm in September, November, January, March, and May in a continued effort to strengthen their organizations ability to meet the considerable challenges of protecting the Region's open space and natural and wildlife resources in perpetuity – which is a very long time!