

# Conservation Action Planning for the Natchaug Basin

Ashford, Chaplin, Eastford, Mansfield, Union, Willington, Windham, Woodstock (Connecticut)



The Natchaug River is recognized by federal, state, local and private agencies as a benchmark stream for water quality and its basin contains a rich diversity of aquatic and terrestrial plants and animals. The three mainstem rivers of the Natchaug Basin - the Fenton, Mount Hope, and Natchaug Rivers make up the 114,000-acre Natchaug Basin. The basin supports the largest public surface drinking water supply watershed in Connecticut, supplying 22,000 consumers in Willimantic and Mansfield, the majority of the University of Connecticut water system which supports approximately 25,000 students, faculty and staff and additional consumers in the Storrs area. Approximately 18,000 residents of the basin are dependent on private wells. The Natchaug Basin is largely rural, more than 75% forested with very high water quality valued for drinking water, wildlife habitat, recreation, history and beauty.

Much of the land within the watershed is held by the State of Connecticut, US Army Corps of Engineers flood control facility, private land trusts and large private land owners. The natural ecological condition and the services provided to communities within the Basin depend on its continued high quality. Although the watershed is located in the “Last Green Valley” between Washington and Boston there is significant urban and suburban development pressure from these expanding cities threatening the ecological condition of these high quality streams.

Most of the towns and organizations within Natchaug Basin have a document in some form that addresses water resource protection. However, many municipalities, local agencies and organizations lack the capacity necessary to proactively apply the strategies identified in their documents.

To implement on-the-ground conservation a series of three stakeholder meetings in the Natchaug Basin called “Conservation Action Planning for the Natchaug Basin” were conducted. Meetings addressed the protection of the ecological systems used by plants, animals and people and generated regional strategies and measures for protection of aquatic resources in the Natchaug Basin.

The Nature Conservancy’s Conservation Action Planning (CAP) process includes the following steps:

1. Identify conservation targets and assess their condition or ecological viability.
2. Identify and rank the primary threats affecting the overall condition of the watershed systems
3. Define strategies to specifically address the threats and restoration needs of the conservation targets.
4. Create a document which assigns measurable actions and dates specific to each strategy, to determine if our strategies are working and if not, why.

**Summary:**

**June 27 2008** - Chief elected officials and representatives of eight watershed towns, local conservation organizations, state and local agencies and the University of Connecticut attended the Natchaug Basin Conservation Action Planning (CAP) kick-off meeting at Camp Nahaco on Crystal Pond in Eastford and Woodstock. The enthusiastic response illustrates the continued need for strong partnerships that help balance growth and conservation in the watershed, while minimizing the challenges to the quality and quantity of our water.

**October 29, 2008** - 32 representatives of agencies, academic institutions, conservation organizations and eight municipalities collaborate to identify conservation targets, Key Ecological Attributes (KEAs) and indicators of ecological viability.

1. Main Stem Rivers
2. Headwater Streams and Wetland Complexes
3. Cold Water Fish and Mussels
4. Lakes and Ponds
5. Aquifers and Groundwater Recharge
6. Forests
7. Grasslands
8. Vernal Pools - *deferred*
9. Atlantic White Cedar Swamps - *deferred*

**January 13, 2009** – A team of 28 scientists and stakeholders met to identify and rank key threats to the 9 conservation targets. 22 separate threats were identified across the targets. The 5 highest ranked threats, impacting the greatest number of targets are:

1. Residential and Commercial Development
2. Road Construction and Maintenance
3. Groundwater Withdrawal
4. Dams

**March 30, 2009** - 38 attendees identified key strategies and actions for conservation of Natchaug Basin ecological targets. Highest ranked strategies include:

1. Identify and convene a steering committee to engage stakeholders, elicit endorsement for and adopt the Natchaug Basin Conservation Action Plan. – **June 2009**
2. Inventory and identify opportunities for municipal zoning code improvements for the protection of conservation targets. **August 2009**
3. Implement a watershed wide mechanism for balancing conservation and economic growth in ecologically appropriate segments of the basin.
4. Develop a dashboard manual for town public works staff and CONNDOT outlining environmentally friendly road maintenance practices
5. Inventory storm water infrastructure and needs in each town - beginning with one pilot town (to be identified)