



Open Space Indicator

Watershed Counts

February 23, 2012

9:00 AM – 1:00 PM

Workshop Goals:

- 1) To reach consensus on the 2012 WC assessment for Open Space Indicators
- 2) To agree upon next steps

The workshop sections each began with a presentation by Kevin Ruddock, TNC. He presented some preliminary data on the metric then opened the floor to discussion.

1. Public Access

The goal with this data was to quantify the accessibility of public spaces. Kevin prepared maps looking at protected areas in the state that are within walking distance from home (1 to 2 miles).

Issues with this analysis:

- Some areas are not included in GIS layers for open space (some local playgrounds, parks, etc)
- When GIS says that there is public access, it does not always mean there is an opportunity for recreation
- The analysis used straight lines to measure distance from open space (we'd walk on roads to get there).

Discussion:

Does the phrase "open space" resonate with the public? Or should we use different language?

We need to distinguish between different categories of open space.

Social equity is embedded in our discussion of public access/open space.

These maps and this analysis needs further work before going public with conclusions – but it is a good first step. Some additional points to consider include: scenic areas have public value even if there is not access, parks and playgrounds are important locally, especially in more urbanized areas and need to be included, DEM's SCORP has good information on public attitudes towards parks and recreation.

Can we report on the # acres accessible to the public?

These maps are aggregate, but if you look at it by type of recreation, it would look very different. Other maps (particularly the blueways and greenways maps) give you very different perspectives.

Don't discard the concept of showing accessibility, but it is a difficult challenge. Public use of the land and investing money to protect is key.

The fact that this is difficult to talk about means it is that important and we need to express conservation effectiveness. Being able to walk on the land is just one of the uses.

Metrics to consider:

Acreage of open space statewide (Paul will work on getting data to us)

Also may be important to look at what we are losing over time as well.

2. Agricultural Lands:

Metrics can be developed to look at how much farmland is at risk of development? How much has been lost? How much is protected? And how much more could we protect or create as agricultural land (GIS could look at prime soil, that is not forested, or is currently in agricultural use, or is restricted for agricultural use (URI/DEM/NRCS has developed a map much like this using the Relative Agriculture Value from NRCS).

Discussion:

This information is better represented in numbers than maps.

RIDEM has some numbers (Michelle Sheehan and Paul Jordan)

- ~6300 acres in the Ag Land Portfolio (protected through ALPC - state protected farm land and FRPP – Federal protection)
- Census data shows 67,000 acres in forest and farmland, 40,000 in production, and about a quarter if this is protected.

Make it clear that we are talking about “working farms.” We also need to include the small farms (5 acres and less) there is a lot going on with these small plots

Rick Pace has done some mapping, but it is very location specific and oriented towards specific things (people that are looking for very small plots)

What is the point of the metric? Show relation between agriculture and water quality? There are real water quality concerns related to agricultural practices. URI CE (Alison McCann) has a video and case studies looking at small scale livestock operations and impacts on water quality. The Conservation Districts have also studied this issue.

Looking at trends over time? Can we pull from the language of conservation to express our points?

Metrics to consider:

For 2012, we want to keep the big picture in mind and be sure that our take home message is consistent with the messaging on the open space bond.

TPL/TNC has looked at the economic benefits of past bond issues. Their analysis includes agricultural lands. Study has been completed for MA, but not RI.

3. Flood Plains/ River Buffers:

Kevin can look at the flood zones- based on FEMA maps and river buffers- based on regulatory definitions (200 feet from flowing water larger than 10 feet wide, 100 feet from skinnier rivers, and 50 feet from bogs, swamps, marshes and ponds)

Possible metrics: look at change in development within buffers or flood plains over time by town and sub-watershed.

Look at changes in impervious cover, forested and developed areas within buffers and flood plains.

Discussion:

It is important to distinguish between buffer and flood plain. They serve different purposes – buffers protect water quality, flood plain affects the volume of water during flood events.

Should we use this as an opportunity to tell some of the restoration story?

There is also an economic story – the impacts of building in the flood plain, living in the flood plain. The March 2010 floods had huge economic effects on individuals, businesses, communities.

What is the benchmark? According to Tom Kutchner (and PJ), anything over 2% imperviousness within 1000 feet in the wetland r will begin to degrade water quality.

Watershed Counts should also include changes in wetlands coverage over time.

The Aquidneck Land Trust did study on to evaluate parcels within the island's water supply watersheds and look at their ability to protect water quality. The study has been very helpful to the land trust as it plans for future acquisitions.

4. Conservation Effectiveness:

Kevin did not examine conservation effectiveness, but presented some issues that merit consideration:

- Permanence of protection -- fee vs. easement vs. deed restrictions, and multiple holders
- Intent- habitat, water quality, recreation, cultural, agricultural, scenic vistas
- Viability- well functioning ecosystems, related to size and condition
- Connectivity- ability for species to migrate to that area, on multiple temporal and special scales
- Representation- do these protected areas have a variety of habitats across the landscape?

Not all these parameters are available in the GIS database.

Discussion:

April 24 Communication

We want to communicate the value of open space and the need for protecting it (what is at risk? What does open space mean to the public? What are the trends over time?)

Map land protected and recreational projects funded by past bonds (PJ has data since 1995)
We would want to show this in the context of other protected lands as a catalyst to protecting adjacent lands.

Show the different values protected. Recognize that individual parcels have multiple values.

Show why riparian buffers are important. At a minimum, use this as an opportunity to provide public education this year, and quantify the metric next year. Use the poster to communicate the links to water quality.

Can we highlight areas that do not have permanent protection?

Highlight loss of farmland.

Message – conserving open space can save towns money (cost of community services studies have demonstrated this again and again – some examples include URI, American farmland trusts, National Park Services, Southern NE Forest Consortium, CRC, Washington Country Regional Planning Council and the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission (AIPC).

Give examples of how the metric can be used (like informing the bond issue decision). Highlight accomplishments over time. Provide poll numbers showing that open space is popular and valued.

Show what is left that still needs to be protected (can do this for ag land, river buffers, wetlands, floodplains)

Long Term Goals:

Show one map that has all the protected lands (farmlands to golf courses) and how many people live within 2 miles of them. Then have another map that shows whether the land is protected. And if so, the level of protection.

Show land protected and the intent for which it is protected. (TPL conservation almanac tracks this. They have completed an analysis of MA, not RI).

Track the permanence of protection (conservation intent alone, deed restriction, perpetual protection)

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