

MAD RIVER VALLEY CONSERVATION AND RECREATION VISIONING



Community Forum
June 15, 2023

Summary

S T I N E T H I N G S C O M E

01.

Introduction

02.

Panel Q&A

03.

Discussion Questions

04.

Wrap-Up

NON C U D O R T N

The Mad River Valley is renowned for its outdoor recreation assets: trails, multi-use pathways, backcountry glades, fishing and hunting areas, and more. The beautiful settings in which these activities take place are also key to the environmental resiliency of our region and provide essential habitat for Vermont wildlife and plants.

As the outdoor recreation economy in the Valley expands, we are faced with vital questions, namely: *How do we balance state-of-the-art outdoor recreation and trails with protection and enhancement of our priceless natural assets?*

Since the summer of 2022, the effort to find that balance has been championed under the umbrella of the MRV Conservation and Recreation Visioning Project (CRV). CRV is funded by a substantial grant from VOREC (Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative). Over the past year, representatives from 15 different local recreation and conservation groups have been meeting on a regular basis to lay a foundation for collaboration.

The ultimate goal is to develop, through an inclusive community process, a set of maps, shared goals, guiding principles, and best practices that together will provide a well-supported vision for balancing ecological integrity with recreation and trails across the Valley.

On June 15th, 2023, CRV was thrilled to host its first Community Forum at the Pavilion at Lareau Farm. The event began with an informal potluck at 5 pm. At 6 pm, the evening transitioned to an informational and participatory forum. The meeting began with a panel Q&A, wherein a moderator posed a series of pre-written questions to members of the CRV Steering Committee. The panel then transitioned to a public Q&A. After the Q&A, participants had an opportunity to share perspectives and ideas in small groups.

This report attempts to summarize key information and significant themes from the meeting. However, given the breadth and depth of discussion, we recognize the inherent challenge of capturing all perspectives. Please allow this to serve as a disclaimer and necessary context for this summary.

We look forward to further engagement with the Valley community in the coming months, as we host additional forums, distribute surveys, and request feedback on our efforts. This forum served as the beginning of a much larger conversation.

PANEL Q&A

Q: How would you describe CRV in two sentences?

Phil Huffman (Waitsfield CC): CRV is an opportunity for the whole community to come together as we chart a course for the future by balancing things we value. This effort builds on a decades-long history of looking forward to ensure the sustainability of our vibrant communities and landscape.

Q: What inspired this project? Was there an event, discussion, or project that illustrated the need for this planning process?

Ira Shadis (Friends of the Mad River): Friends of the Mad River has been attuned to the ecological contexts and concerns of this area for over 30 years and has not been alone in that effort. There has been a consistent interest in connecting with the land, accessing it, and protecting it, but these values haven't always been in the same conversation at the same time. In 2021, FMR and the Conservation Commissions began shopping around an idea of what it would look like to build a system/approach for balancing these different values. The VOREC grant supercharged this process and effort. As it exists today, CRV is a project aimed at establishing a shared vision for balancing values, and exploring the nuts and bolts structures that could enable that balance.

Q: How did this project get off the ground? How is it being funded? What is VOREC?

Laura Arnesen (Mad River Valley Recreation District): The VOREC grant program was established in 2018 and received additional funding during the pandemic. At the same time that program was developing, there was a bubbling up of different community projects from different groups across the Valley. All partners decided to throw their hats in together for an overarching VOREC grant. The application was successful and resulted in the largest grant in the state, thanks to a lot of volunteer labor and effort. Stewardship is one of the stated VOREC priorities as this pressure exists everywhere. VOREC is hoping that some of our work, especially CRV, might function as a template for other communities.

Q: How does this project fit into the overall MRV VOREC package?

Bob Kogut (Mad River Riders): This VOREC package also includes a bike and pedestrian bridge behind the smokehouse, which will provide a link between the trail network and town. The goal is to connect our recreation infrastructure to the village, which will have economic benefits. There is also funding for a connection improvement to the Mad River Path behind the rec hub. The rec hub will house an upgraded/updated Chamber of Commerce. The last element of the VOREC package is this CRV process.

Q: What goals have been established for CRV? How would you describe the ideal outcome of this process?

Corrie Miller (Fayston Conservation Commission): There are two groups of goals established for CRV: short-term and long-term. In the short-term, we hope to learn together about recreational and ecological resources and how to protect them, in concert and in synergy with each other. We plan to bring in learning from other places. Using this information, we intend to create an articulated vision and a map. We can use this map to figure out what makes sense and where. In the long-term, we want this process to be trust-building. We hope it will help show what coordination and collaboration can look like, with an eye towards how we can institutionalize these processes.

Q: Who is involved in CRV currently and why? How is CRV organized?

Laura Arnesen (Mad River Valley Recreation District): Mad River Valley Recreation District took over administration of the grant. Last summer, we put together a Steering Committee, which represents many diverse groups. That Steering Committee is further divided into two Working Groups: one focused on Ecological Integrity, the other on Recreation and Trails. The Working Groups meet monthly. There is also a community project manager for CRV.

Q: What power, if any, does CRV have to institute regulatory or zoning changes, influence organizational operations, etc.?

Phil Huffman (Waitsfield CC): CRV does not have any formal power. All changes rest with the municipal governments and other land managers.

Q: Absent that formal power, how does CRV plan to effect tangible change?

Phil Huffman (Waitsfield CC): The hope is that information provided and developed by CRV will help inform all SC members and the organizations they represent. Learning will allow for more informed decision-making. This is a “soft power.” Dialogue, communication, and relationships are incredibly important. We intend to strengthen those over time and finds ways to institutionalize this effort with an inclusive voice.

Q: Are there measurable deliverables? When do you anticipate completing this project? Are there any significant milestones you'll be marking over the course of this project?

Bob Kogut (Mad River Riders): There are two major deliverables associated with this project. The first is an actual watershed map that takes into account areas of ecological importance (what's here, how things function) and recreational infrastructure (possibly including future plans and desires). These maps will assimilate information that we can all use in decision-making. We want to go beyond just a landowner's permission towards a more collaborative process, even though that isn't mandated legally. It's important to note that we are all volunteering to talk to each other to create a more balanced future! The second deliverable is a shared vision/shared values/guiding principles document that will put these ideas into text.

Q: How do you plan to engage the community following this forum? Are there ways we can continue to receive updates?

Laura Arnesen (Mad River Valley Recreation District): First, be sure to share your contact info on the sign-in sheet. We have an email list and you can check a box to be added to it. We will also be providing a meeting summary and ongoing updates using the CRV page on the MRVRD website. MRVTV is recording this meeting and that recording will be made available. There will be more community forums (at least 2 more), with the next one slated for Fall 2023/Winter 2024. Beyond community forums, we're also considering opportunities for deep dive sessions with experts regarding specific topics of note. A survey will be issued later this summer. The VOREC works overall will need to be completed by the end of 2024; we've been working for a year and have another year and a half. Ultimately, the heart of this project is community engagement! There is also a Community Project Manager for CRV; her name is Emily Friedman and she can be reached at madrivercrv@gmail.com.

Q: Will there be an open house or other opportunity where CRV will share draft maps related to ecological assets and recreation planning?

Yes! We are planning on at least 2 more forums. As we get deeper into this work, we'll share the information we're gathering and will show our draft maps to the community to get feedback.

Comment: This is such an opportunity to learn with educational value. I hope these stories and the lessons learned will be captured for others across the state to use, integrating that educational component.

Some of the deliverables that have been promised to the state are about sharing our process and its outcomes. In 1.5 years, we'll continue the work of trying to figure out what this process looks like beyond 2024.

Q: As groups look to develop and build, will this group have a role in coordinating those efforts?

This effort builds on the Trails Collaborative, which began more than a decade ago through the MRVRD and MRVPD. Trails groups have already been working together and will continue to do so, although we haven't determined where exactly that collaborative work will take place. Part of this effort is establishing a shared vision and language, which will help with coordination. To be clear though, this effort is a collaboration between existing organizations, not an organization of its own.

Comment: Thanks from MadBush Falls (recreational base camp opening soon)! These efforts started, in part, because of the VOREC Grant and there is substantial energy behind them. MRV MOVES was also a valuable resource.

Q: Why did we decide to divide into 2 groups (Ecological Integrity and Recreation & Trails)? How will these 2 groups come together?

The Steering Committee offers an opportunity for the two groups to come together. The purpose of the different Working Groups is to try to accommodate the different interests of those who are volunteering their time to participate in CRV. We recognize that everyone involved exists on a broad spectrum between conservation and recreation. The feeling continues to be that there's a lot to dig into for both groups and it made sense to structure as two groups to allow for deeper understanding.

Q: About 10 years ago, extensive forest and wildlife mapping was done. Will that be re-utilized?

Yes, absolutely! That body of information is available through the MRV Planning District website. That being said, things have been learned over the past 10 years, so that info can be updated.

Q: Do we have problems in the Valley already? Are we abusing existing resources? I feel that recreation is increasing slowly and well.

That is a common feeling! Growth has been paced and individual experiences are positive. However, forecasts seem to indicate that more people are looking to be here. Each addition will further fragment this landscape, which is a lot of pressure (if you had five houses pop up in your backyard, you'd move!). Towns often act individually to address these concerns, but are now using funds to act together. Now is the time for a vision! One of the opportunities we have now is to think about the cumulative impact of trails across all trail organizations, and not just the individual routes. We can consider the impact across the landscape of all trails, with a mind towards wildlife connectivity and other issues.

Comment: There are two types of MB trails: rake + ride and machine-built. There are differences in environmental impact between the two. It's important to understand how different trails impact the environment differently. We can make changes that are good for the environment and have benefits for us too.

We're very much trying to establish a balance based not only on our opinions and perspectives, but on data, science, and research. We've started to get into this in Working Groups and have already found some surprising and interesting information. We are all volunteers and want to find experts whose knowledge we can build on!

Comment: One interesting aspect of this project is looking at our community values! I hope this comes out in the working groups. We can explore how we want to recreate and what our recreation culture looks like. We don't want to create a culture of antagonism. It's important to note not only what ecology wants, but also what we want. MRV Moves is a valuable resource and began some of that work.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Following the Q&A, the Steering Committee established 7 breakout groups to engage in further discussion. The individual breakout groups comprised 10-12 people with a Steering Committee member facilitating each and another Steering Committee member serving as notetaker.

In advance of the forum, the Steering Committee wrote three different questions for all groups to address. The facilitator posed these questions to the group for discussion, but participants also received color-coded index cards where they could add thoughts and insights. This allowed each attendee to also share their perspective in writing. At the end of the meeting, Steering Committee members collected the index cards and notes for further review; that information has now been compiled and collated. The Steering Committee looks forward to incorporating it into our ongoing efforts to achieve high quality recreation and ecological integrity in the Mad River Valley!

In reflecting on the responses from this forum, we would first like to express our sincere thanks to this community for engaging earnestly and honestly on these vital issues. We deeply appreciate the depth and breadth of your feedback. While we have attempted to synthesize that feedback as part of this document, we recognize the inherent challenge of capturing the nuanced and diverse perspectives of the community in such a summary. Please allow this to serve as a disclaimer and necessary context for this synthesis.

We look forward to further engagement with the Valley community in the coming months, as we host additional forums, distribute surveys, and request feedback on our efforts. These questions represent only the beginning of a much larger conversation.

In considering this question, participants also shared a spectrum of motivations beyond protecting and enhancing ecological assets. First, many attendees recognized the tangible economic or social value of these assets. Examples from index cards include mention of “working landscapes,” the legacy of farming, maintenance of places for rest and relaxation, and the capacity of a resilient ecosystem to offer a level of protection from climate change impacts. At the same time, participants expressed a belief in the inherent value of environmental assets, beyond their ability to support humankind. One index card mentioned the desire to put “our natural world onto equal footing as our human systems/wants/needs,” while another requested that we attend to “non-anthropocentric concerns.”

One last pattern of note was the tendency of participants to share ideas and solutions, alongside discussion of their values. Attendees urged management of invasives, revised zoning ordinances focused on environmental and recreation-centered goals, increased and improved public education, amongst other recommendations. This community uniformly expressed an interest in brainstorming and cultivating solutions.

Overall, this first discussion question illustrated three things most clearly: the familiarity of attendees with the Valley’s ecological values and many of the challenges they face, the spectrum of motivations in addressing those challenges, and the overwhelming desire to generate solutions.



What concerns and hopes do you have related to balancing ecological integrity and recreation in the Valley?

Commonly expressed concerns included:

- Forest fragmentation
- Overdevelopment, overuse or overpopulation
- Off-leash pets and pet waste
- Lack of education around environmental concerns and community standards
- Conflicting values
- Incompatible goals.

Commonly expressed hopes included using this process as a tool to:

- Improve trail connectivity
- Build environmental resilience
- Conduct and compile research
- Provide opportunities for education
- Convene diverse groups
- Engage the wider Valley community.

In expressing concerns, participants shared a range of responses, from recognition of granular issues (likes dogs on leashes) to overarching anxieties (like the overwhelming scale of this work). Those concerns over scale tied into a recognition that this balance between conservation and recreation represents just one piece of the puzzle for the Mad River Valley. Participants also mentioned, “Housing, employment, and inequity,” as key elements to the sustainability of this community. Within that, attendees recognized how many of these other factors also impact ecological integrity; housing developments and driveways were both referenced as other sources of habitat fragmentation.

The causes behind environmental change are expansive and the impacts are similarly understood to be widespread. In sharing their fears for the future, attendees cited, “Loving areas to death,” “Climate change,” and “Exceeding carrying capacity.” Participants shared a belief in the high stakes of this work and the risks of failing to plan comprehensively that have been shown in other areas of the country.

The concern over incompatible goals and/or conflicting values should also be noted. Many attendees posed questions like, “Is the wildlife going to get in the way of us being here too?” Another shared the thought that “Diversity of uses for trails (hiking, biking, birding) - they don't necessarily mix.” Participants seemed to understand the complexity of seeking a balance between conservation and recreation and the specific dynamics that may exist.

While participants shared many concerns, they also acknowledged that some concerns or challenges could simultaneously present opportunities. One example often mentioned was the diversity of partners and land managers within the Valley. This complex network allows for many different types of landscapes managed in different ways. However, it also raises concerns about CRV’s ability to communicate effectively, reach consensus, and effect change. Participants expressed a desire to “Think like a Valley and blur the lines of municipalities,” a worthy goal for this project.

In this space between concerns and hopes, participants also mentioned many tasks that, if executed well, will present as opportunities, but if done poorly, will cause challenges. To this point, attendees most frequently shared a belief in the value of education. Misinformation could lead to “polarization about acceptable uses.” On the other hand, if CRV used this as an opportunity to reach out to and educate the public, we can “create a common language,” build trust and respect, and “connect people to the planet and each other.”

Lastly, participants frequently cited the strength and resilience of this community as a source of hope, an asset apparent from the forum itself. Dozens of community members shared their perspectives, concerns, and hopes with the Steering Committee in an effort to plan for the future. Many attendees expressed a desire to provide for “future generations.” They also mentioned challenges that had been effectively tackled in the past: “Look at how we recovered from the devastation of sheep-oriented agriculture of the 1850s!” Throughout the forum, this belief in the capacity of our community to strike a balance arose again and again, laying a powerful foundation for the future of our Valley.

WRAP-UP

Many thanks to the amazing staff at the Inn at Lareau Farm, the Schenks for donating the use of the Pavilion, and MRV TV for helping make our first Conservation and Recreation Visioning (CRV) Community Forum so successful.

To the 100 people who attended - thank you for participating! Your ideas, opinions and questions are the core of our work. Please stay involved and bring your friends next time (the next forum will be in late 2023 or early 2024).

[Link to the MRVTV Community Forum Recording](#)

[Link to the CRV Website](#)

