

Trail Mix: The Gold Standard for Conservation & Recreation

By Ross Saxton and Phil Huffman

The Mad River Valley is well known for our incredible trails, paths, and outdoor recreation opportunities, and the dozens of organizations and people who manage these resources intend to keep making them better. The beautiful settings in which hiking, skiing, biking, running, hunting, fishing, bird watching and more take place also provide essential habitats for our amazing Vermont wildlife and plants.

We share these natural spaces with diverse flora and fauna, from moose to grouse to brook trout to black bear, and from yellow birch to wild ginseng. But by sharing this space, some human activities put our wild neighbors at risk. As is human nature, we have been exploring and spreading out across the Valley by building new trails and venturing deeper into backcountry terrain on foot, bike, and skis. We are setting out through untracked land at a faster pace in recent years than ever before. This expansion raises an important question; how do we set the Gold Standard for balancing state-of-the-art outdoor recreation and trails with protection of our priceless natural assets and enhancement of the health, economy, and environmental vitality of the region for the long-term future?

In recent years, the MRV Trails Collaborative provided the setting to initiate these collaborative discussions. And now, thanks to efforts by the Friends of the Mad River and several conservation, recreation, and economic focused partners, our community has begun trying to achieve this Gold Standard. With funding from the same VOREC grant that is supporting the new trail hub and welcome center in Waitsfield and related enhancements, and the administrative commitment of the MRV Recreation District, a group of Valley residents has begun to define the structure, resources, information, process, and community engagement needed to determine how we can best balance outdoor recreation and ecological integrity here in the Mad River Valley.

The initiative, entitled MRV Conservation and Recreation Visioning, or CRV for short, began this summer among representatives of 15 different organizations in the Valley. The 15-person CRV Steering Committee (listed below), which is led by a three-person Leadership Team, set the footings for the effort with unanimously adopted founding documents and the formation of two key working groups: one focused on ecological integrity and conservation values, the other focused on outdoor recreation and trails. To help support and facilitate these efforts alongside the Leadership Team and Steering Committee, a well-qualified part-time Community Project Manager has been hired who is starting this week.

Over the next two years, the Steering Committee, two working groups, and the project manager will meet regularly to delve deeply into the issues at hand and orchestrate an inclusive community-wide process to figure out that big question: how do we set the Gold Standard for balancing state-of-the-art outdoor recreation and trails, protecting priceless natural assets, and enhancing the Valley's health, economy, and environmental vitality for the long-term future.

The precise process to answer this question is still being developed, but there will definitely be a range of public participation opportunities through in-person and online forums, surveys, and more. We also expect additional technical expertise will be needed; for example, to create maps and help identify ecological priorities.

Many other communities around Vermont and the country are also wrestling with the interplay between outdoor recreation and ecological integrity, and we expect they will be eager to see what our Gold Standard looks like at the end of the next two years. What we are doing here is, in true MRV fashion, innovative and forward thinking. The task is challenging, but as a community with many skilled, motivated, and caring people who are passionate about both our incredible natural environment and outdoor recreation, we are confident that the end result of the CRV project will be meaningful.

Stay tuned for more information on this important project and opportunities to get involved. We look forward to your input!

CRV Steering Committee Members:

Clark Amadon, MadDog Trout Unlimited

Laura Arnesen, MRV Recreation District

Eric Baruzzi, Mad River Ridge Runners

Joey Carey, Sugarbush Resort

Jim Edgecomb, Warren Conservation Commission

TJ Greenwood, MRV Chamber of Commerce

Phil Huffman (co-chair), Waitsfield Conservation Commission

Akhil Kaplan, Fayston Conservation Commission

Bob Kogut, Mad River Riders

Alan Quackenbush, Duxbury Land Trust/Duxbury Rep

Ross Saxton (co-chair), Mad River Path

Joshua Schwartz, MRV Planning District

Ira Shadis, Friends of the Mad River

Steve Sharp, MRV Backcountry Coalition

Chris Stephenson, Moretown Recreation Committee & Stark Mountain Foundation

Community Project Manager:

Emily Friedman

Ross Saxton is the Executive Director of the Mad River Path Association. Phil Huffman is a longtime volunteer member of the Waitsfield Conservation Commission.