



Photos courtesy of North Quabbin Regional Landscape Partnership



More than Maps: Climate Data Create Connections

North Quabbin Regional Landscape Partnership Finds New Opportunities

The Greater Quabbin Region is a largely rural area in north-central Massachusetts, punctuated with New England towns and featuring the massive Quabbin Reservoir, which supplies drinking water for Boston. For over 20 years, the North Quabbin Regional Landscape Partnership (NQRLP), a voluntary association of state and local organizations, has been working to protect this area by facilitating landowner and municipal outreach, stewardship, and land protection projects. NQRLP is one of the oldest **regional conservation partnerships (RCPs)** in New England, and the partnership’s priorities have changed over time. When the group began to incorporate climate planning into its work in 2013, new opportunities to connect and conserve land with external partners emerged. Now, NQRLP is focused on sharing information and building trust and capacity with these partners to catalyze more conservation work—especially in climate-resilient areas.

Sarah Wells, conservation director at the Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust, acts as coordinator of the North Quabbin Regional Landscape Partnership. “The single most important aspect of our partnership,” says Wells, “is that we get people talking to one another. In the last two years, NQRLP has created a forum for information sharing. We’ve been deliberate about using that space to talk about climate change.”

PARTNERSHIP’S FOCUS SHIFTS FROM CLIMATE PLANNING TO CLIMATE OUTREACH

In October of 2013, the Highstead Foundation, a New England-based conservation and research nonprofit, convened 30 members of NQRLP to begin a new group endeavor: creating a digital map of the Greater Quabbin Region that would identify climate-resilient sites. Highstead’s facilitation of this process was supported by a grant from the Open Space Institute’s Resilient Landscapes Initiative. NQRLP became one of the first regional conservation partnerships to attempt a climate-inclusive conservation plan on this scale, and the project became a model for other RCPs in New England that climatized their own conservation plans.

Climate planning became a focus for NQRLP in the following years. The partnership created maps and tools to identify climate-resilient sites. Within two years, the state of Massachusetts released statewide maps, based on the same climate datasets from The Nature Conservancy which NQRLP had used, and encouraged organizations to use these maps as part of a new grant system in which projects that included climate change were ranked more competitively.

Once the state prioritized conservation projects that addressed climate change, NQRLP’s function was able to shift its focus. Organizations now had climate data, co-occurrence maps and funding to do localized climate planning and conservation, and the need for regional climate planning had diminished. NQRLP could take on a new role. “I recently heard someone say that each regional conservation partnership has a catalyzing function, and that this function can change over time,” says Wells. “For a while, climate planning was NQRLP’s catalyzing function.”

“Now our focus is sharing information and building trust. The partnership creates space for community engagement around climate change,” says Wells. “We use the meetings to have experts on forest carbon and other topics share their research.” Rather than promote specific tools, NQRLP encourages staff and volunteers of conservation organizations to learn new information and discuss it with their colleagues and neighbors.

KEY TERM

Regional conservation partnership (RCP): A network of individuals from private and public organizations who work together across jurisdictional boundaries to advance a shared conservation vision, aiming to increase the pace and scale of landscape protection.

More than Maps

Climate Data Create Connections in Massachusetts

BALANCING DATA WITH FIELD EXPERTISE

While the partnership's catalyzing function has shifted, the climate tools and mapping process have created a shared language and understanding around climate change. The data and the maps are useful tools for starting conversations, analyzing conservation projects and identifying priorities. However, these tools proved most useful when balanced with on-the-ground knowledge.

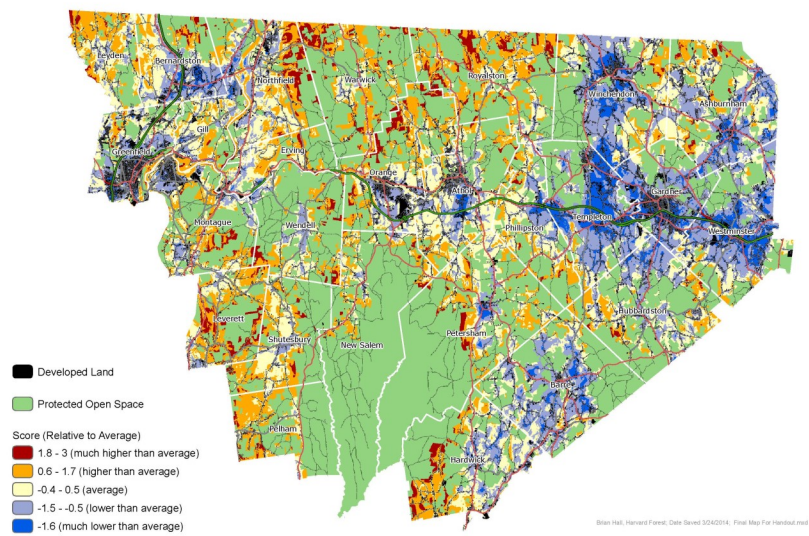
Says Wells, "You need an expert who can do the GIS mapping and the data crunching, but you also need the folks who are familiar with the region." When the maps were first created, NQRLP members conducted a site visit to one of the parcels that showed up as bright red— highly likely to be resilient— on the new map. Wells remembers, "That one trip changed the way I look at our region when I am driving around." She emphasizes that going outside to walk and inspect the topographies that are most resilient will make the climate data "specific and real to your region."

By getting outside, the conservation professionals who knew the Greater Quabbin Region's landscape, flora and fauna were able to connect the climate data shown on maps and screens with their own field experience and expertise. Wells recommends that other organizations visit the sites that show up as resilient, as it makes the data "real and grounded for the people making the map." It also helps partnership members communicate the importance of climate resilient sites to external partners.

LOOKING BACK: HOW TO APPROACH CLIMATE DATA AT A REGIONAL LEVEL

NQRLP was one of the first RCPs in New England to incorporate climate resilience into its conservation planning, and has been influential to other partnerships in the region that have since climatized their work. Looking back on over seven years of climate-inclusive conservation work, Wells shared her thoughts on approaching climate data: "We were more tentative than we needed to be. That tentativeness feels ridiculous now, given the data that has come out and the urgency of the situation."

When asked what advice she would offer other collaboratives starting to incorporate climate data into their planning, Wells shared: "Don't be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of data. At the end of the day, you don't need 15 maps to tell every angle of the story. If you have one map that you feel good about, that your group can coalesce around and that can help you get some good work done, that's important. That's enough to get started."



For the North Quabbin Regional Landscape Partnership, it was the process of creating and using resilience maps that introduced language and context for ongoing conversations with external partners about climate change.

LEARN MORE

Take a look at the website of the [North Quabbin Regional Landscape Partnership](https://climatechange.lta.org).

To learn more about the North Quabbin Regional Landscape Partnership's 2013 climate mapping process, read *Conserving Nature in a Changing Climate: A Guide For Land Trusts in the Northeast*: <https://climatechange.lta.org>.

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LESSONS LEARNED

"You need an expert who can do the mapping and the data crunching, but you also need the folks who are familiar with the region."

"The single most important aspect of our partnership meetings is that we get people talking to one another. We've been deliberate about using that space to talk about climate change."