

Town of Simsbury

933 HOPMEADOW STREET ~ SIMSBURY, CONNECTICUT 06070

TOWN OF SIMSBURY
NATURAL AREA STEWARDSHIP POLICY
Adopted by the Board of Selectmen on November 9, 2020
Revised November XX, 2021

1. Purpose

The Town of Simsbury (Town) has many areas of Open Space and is committed to providing a natural forest ecosystem through a Natural Area Stewardship program wherever deemed possible and logical. This policy will ensure that people see what they want and expect in a forested nature preserve. A Natural Area Stewardship Policy allows natural processes, rather than regular active management by people, to shape a forest.

2. Locations of Natural Area Stewardship in Simsbury

The Town has acres of Open Space including meadows, fields and forest among them. While Natural Area Stewardship is possible for all or parts of any forest, this Policy is intended to be for stewardship management of the **forested areas of the** Belden Forest, Onion Mountain, Stratton Brook Forest, ~~the Wegner Meadow in~~ the Ethel Walker Woods (**with the exception of the Wegner Meadow**), approximately 140 acres of Meadowood designated for open space and passive recreation, and the properties listed in Appendix B. The Board of Selectmen can review and edit these locations with advice from the Open Space Committee.

3. Effective Date

This policy shall be effective immediately and shall remain in effect until revised or rescinded.

4. Natural Area Stewardship Guidelines

A. Maintenance

- i. With Natural Area Stewardship nature is in charge of maintenance. For Natural Area Stewardship areas downed, broken and dead trees are also a part of the natural esthetic and should not be maintained or cleared by Town Staff unless adverse conditions exist such as progressive trail erosion, total blockage of trails, threats to public health, etc.

B. Border Management

- i. Town staff and volunteers should continue to monitor borders of Natural Area Stewardship properties to prevent encroachment, illegal dumping, illegal building, etc. Encroachment includes invasive species which can affect the long-term integrity of the forest.

C. Maintaining Ecological Integrity

- i. If invasive species are identified to be removed, a practitioner familiar with Natural Area Stewardship should be consulted to ascertain the best way to do so

with as little impact to the area as possible. Native trees shall not be treated as invasive species.

APPENDIX A

MEMORANDUM

To: Open Space Committee

From: Susan Masino

Date: September 1, 2020

Re: Proposed Natural Stewardship Policy and Background Information

A Natural Forest Ecosystem: Best Practice for Natural Area Stewardship

This is an overview and a “best practice” primer on “Natural Area Stewardship” of a forest. Natural Area Stewardship is what most people want and expect in a forested nature preserve.

The goal of this document is to provide basic information and answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs) on Natural Area Stewardship – what it is, where it can be practiced, what are the benefits, how to monitor a property, and how to determine when and why to intervene.

A curated non-exhaustive list of open-access resources with supporting science, examples, protocols and more detailed plans and background information is provided below.

What is Natural Area Stewardship?

Natural Area Stewardship allows natural processes, rather than regular active management by people, to shape a forest. It is possible on a parcel of any size and any forest type. It is a largely hands-off approach, recognizing that forests evolved millions of years ago, and in the absence of humans. Forests are well-equipped to persist and endure without our help - even in the face of 21st century environmental change. A Natural Stewardship approach understands that ‘threats’ to forests (i.e., wind, insects, disease, fire, drought) are the very disturbances that often enhance their complexity, carbon sequestration, regeneration, and habitat diversity. It is practiced in what is often termed a “wildwood,” “wild forest,” or “wildland.”

Where Should Natural Area Stewardship be Practiced?

Natural Area Stewardship is *possible* for all or part of any forest that is not being managed actively for resources (such as wood), as part of an intervention-based research program, as a specific type of habitat, *unless* it is precluded legally by deed or easement restrictions. In general, Natural Area Stewardship does not prevent interventions as needed for public safety reasons.

Natural Area Stewardship is similar to the stewardship of National Parks in the United States. It may be *required* if a forest is protected by a “Forever Wild” or similar conservation easement; is designated as “wild,” “natural” or “intact;” or fulfills a landowner’s or donor’s intent.

Currently less than 5% of Southern New England is under Natural Area Stewardship, and only a small fraction (~1%) is legally protected as such. Meanwhile, the crises in biodiversity and species extinction are accelerating, and scientific consensus is that at least 30% of Earth’s land and water need strong protection (“*Protect the Best, Restore the Rest*”). This is an urgent gap in public policy.

What Are the Benefits of Natural Area Stewardship?

1. Maximize cumulative carbon storage above and below ground.
2. Maximize ecological and structural complexity over time.
3. Maximize purification of local air and water.
4. Protect molecular and genetic diversity, and the full spectrum of native biodiversity.
5. Generally minimize invasive plants and therefore their progression or remediation.
6. At broad scales, reduce the rate of species’ extinction.
7. Connect people to nature with an opportunity to escape and experience a sense of awe.
8. Enable people to attach to a place that can be shared within and across generations.
9. Provide needed “control” areas and baselines to compare with managed areas.
10. Save time and money: no regular maintenance is required.

What Are Some Examples of Natural Area Stewardship?

Examples of areas in the United States under Natural Area Stewardship include National Parks, the Adirondack Forest Preserve, forests in the Old Growth Forest Network, some nature preserves, and USDA forest service wilderness areas. See links below for more information.

Globally, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Protected Areas are dedicated to “*long term conservation of nature with its associated ecological services and cultural values.*” Most categories either *require* or *do not preclude* Natural Area Stewardship.

What is Public Opinion on Natural Area Stewardship?

Protecting public land has high bipartisan support (>80% nationally, higher in New England). Protection of public land *as nature preserves* in Southern New England was supported by 90% of respondents in a survey hosted by the Program for Public Values. Protecting old-growth forest was supported by 99% of respondents. Support did not differ among Southern New England states. Each response was validated and anonymous, and respondents matched the median income for the region. The public assumes 20% is under Natural Area Stewardship and want more protected as such (40%). The current area protected is less than 1%.

Summary: A major priority is ***protecting more natural areas*** and ***connecting them***.

Establishing a network of suitable areas for Natural Area Stewardship is urgent: the vast majority of our landscape is developed, managed routinely, and/or has no long-term protection. Natural Area Stewardship is practiced purposefully on less than 4% of New England, yet international scientific consensus recommends protecting at least 30% (or even 50% - "Nature Needs Half"). We to protect need high quality, connected habitat, and fund evidence-based restoration where possible. Connected, intact habitat is the backbone of a healthy landscape and is the foundation for additional areas for research and responsible resource production.

Natural Area Stewardship: Best Practice Guidelines

No routine maintenance is required - nature is in charge. Natural areas are "managed with restraint" and are "intended to be self-willed lands, both philosophically and practically." This is true under both stable conditions and in the aftermath of major disturbances such as tropical storms, tornadoes, insect and pathogen outbreaks, and fire (www.wilderness.net). Downed, broken, and dead trees are all part of a natural forest and should not be cause for concern or result in a shift in management philosophy towards one of intervention.

If adverse conditions develop (progressive trail erosion, threats to public health, etc.) they should be addressed based on a precautionary principle and aligned with interdisciplinary science. For additional guidance, see National Park Service, Adirondack Park, or Wilderness Area guidelines and additional regional stewardship resources linked below. Principles include:

Let nature take its course. Leave dead trees and downed logs in place after a storm where possible, except where they block important trails. Trees may be removed from the trail but left in the forest. Allow insect and pathogen outbreaks to proceed as part of a natural processes. Natural forests thrive on and recover from natural disturbances.

Monitor major trails. If trails are present, regular monitoring (at least annually) can prevent progressive damage, remove hazards, address erosion, etc. Passive recreation is allowed.

Monitor ecological integrity, borders. Monitor borders to prevent encroachment, dumping, building, etc. Note that edges and trails are areas where invasives (especially invasive plants) can gain a foothold. If unchecked, some invasives can affect the regeneration or long-term integrity of the forest or increase the presence of disease vectors like ticks. How, when and if an invasive is removed or addressed should align with the precautionary principle and is a dynamic field of research. It should be considered in consultation with a local practitioner (i.e. forest ecologist, forester, forest scientist, field botanist, land steward, etc.) familiar with Natural Area Stewardship. Native trees, such as American beech, should not be treated as invasives.

Regular photopoints and data collection are scientifically valuable. This is optional, but it is important to emphasize that there is little long-term data on natural forests. Forests shaped primarily by natural processes rather than by management by people serve as valuable baselines and reference areas (scientific "controls"). Established monitoring plots and periodic measurements of the trees and other vegetation can

quantify changes over time and provide a valuable reference area for other properties that are being actively managed for different values. It is important to collect more data going forward, but right now forests managed for many decades with Natural Area Stewardship (National Parks, Adirondacks) generally have more diversity, more carbon, and fewer invasive plants than managed areas.

Additional Resources on Natural Area Stewardship

US Forest Service Research Natural Areas

https://www.nrs.fs.fed.us/rna/local-resources/downloads/rna_fs_503.pdf

National Park Service Stewardship and Science Directorate:

<https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1778/whatwedo.htm>

Wildlands and Woodlands Stewardship Science Manual

<https://highstead.net/ecostudies/Stewardship-Science.shtml>

Northeast Wilderness Trust - dedicated to Natural Area Stewardship and Wild Carbon ("Wilderness Partnership") <http://northeastwildernesstrust.org/wilderness-conservation/wp/>

Adirondacks: <https://wildadirondacks.org>

Eastern Wildways Network: <https://wildlandsnetwork.org/wildways/eastern/>

Old-Growth Forest Network: <https://www.oldgrowthforest.net/>

International Union of Conservation of Nature: www.iucn.org

Global Standard for Nature-based Solutions

<https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/2020-020-En.pdf>

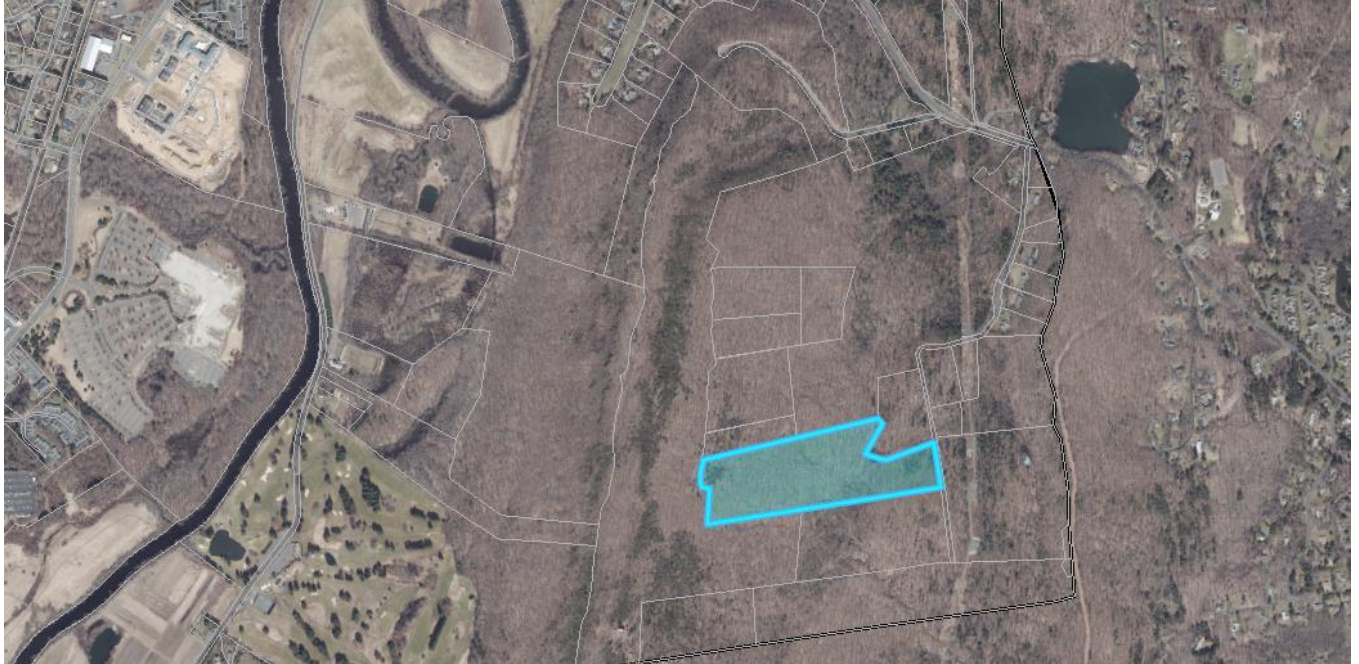
Priority to Protect, then Restore

<https://www.iucn.org/crossroads-blog/202003/primary-forests-a-priority-nature-based-solution>

APPENDIX B

Stafford Road

The Town of Simsbury owns approximately 23 acres located southwest of Stafford Road. The parcel is surrounded by Talcott Mountain State Park. We also own the two adjoining parcels to the north. Most Norther parcel is called Sponzo



Sponzo Property Owned by Simsbury



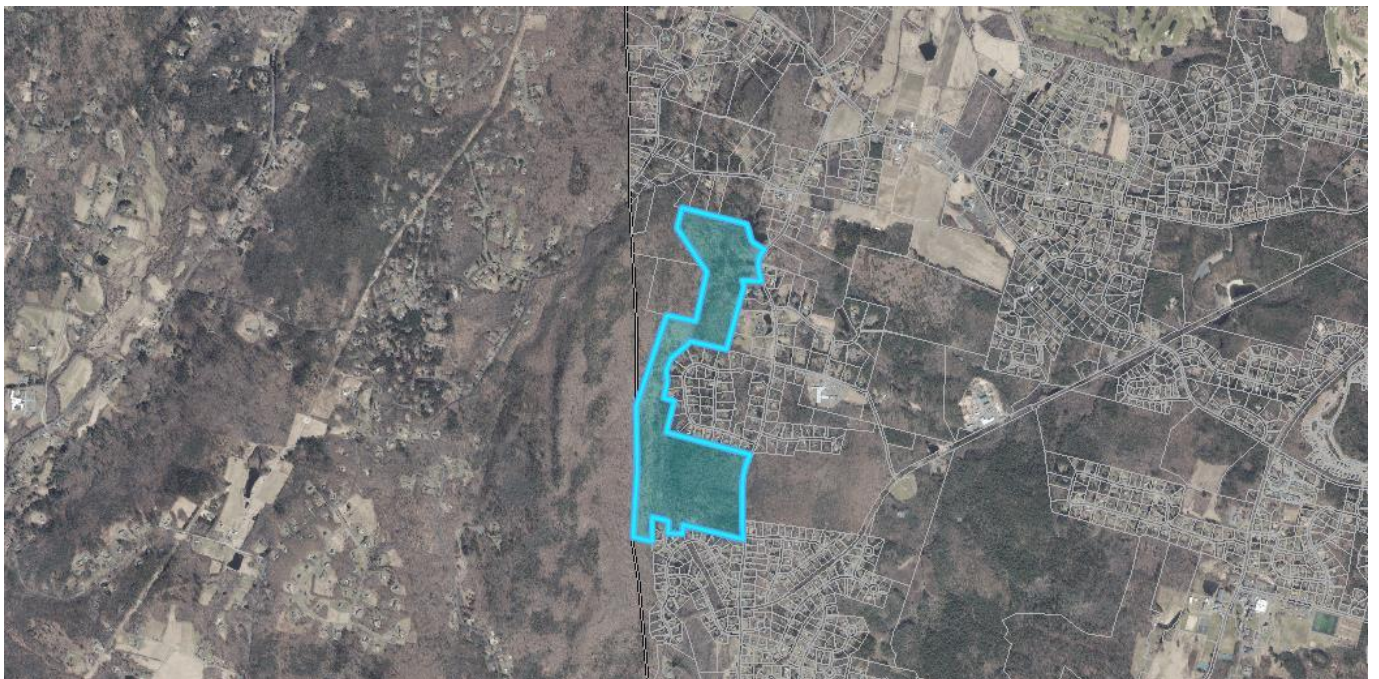
Mountain Road Tariffville

The Town of Simsbury owns the property off Mountain Road in Tariffville. This parcel contains the Tariffville Fire District's water tower. This property is also referenced as the Gersten Property.



Onion Mountain Park

Onion Mountain Park has been a property mentioned as potential for stewardship policy. This is just referenced as Onion Mountain Preserve.



Darling-Hilles Property

This is a property located along the south side of Farms Village Road in the vicinity of Simsbury High School abutting the Stratton Brook State Park



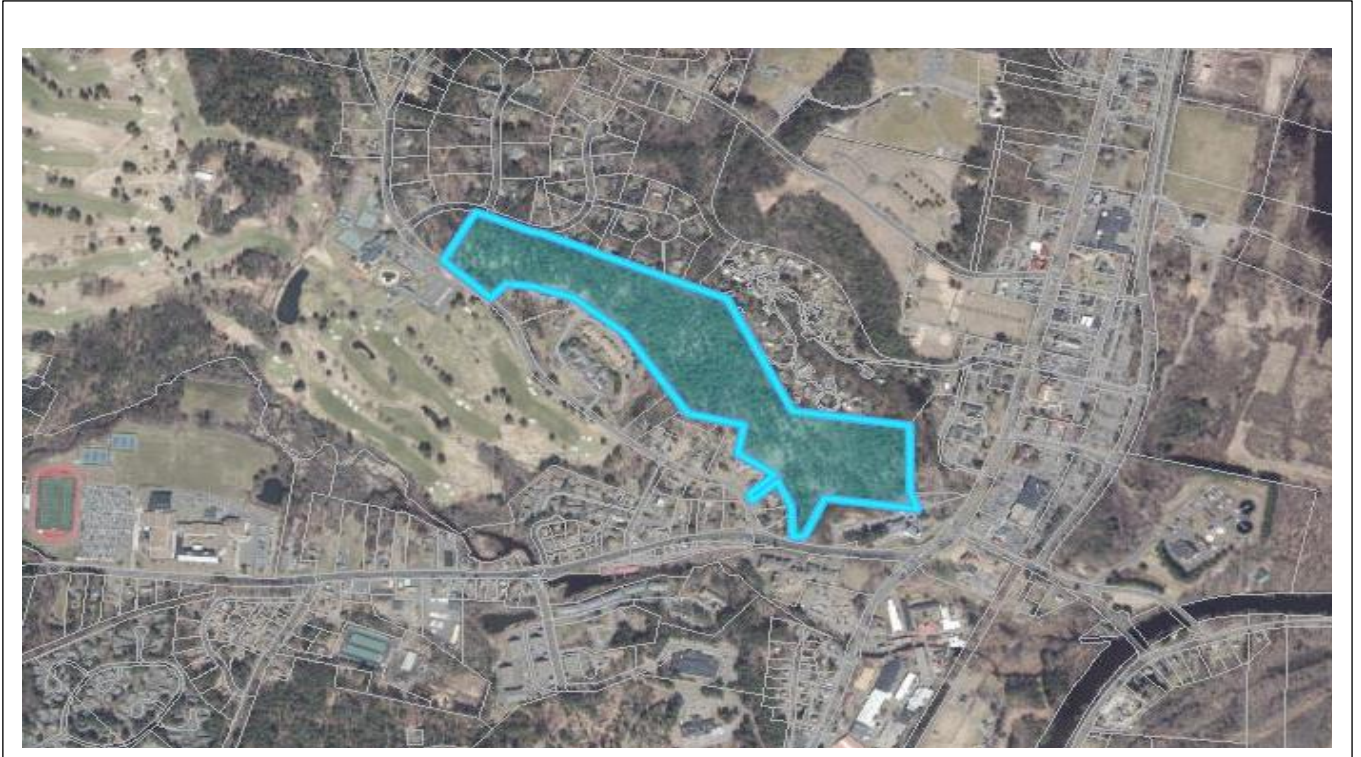
Sugar Loaf Cut

This property is located at 15 Sugar Loaf Cut where the Town of Simsbury owns a rental house. The wooded lot is not separate from the residential house but as it is owned by the town. So, it is preserved until sold or separated from the residential use and preserved alone.



Belden Forest

Located along Firetown Road, stretching from Hopmeadow Street to Beldenwood Road, this parcel is approximately 40 acres in size.



Ethel Walker Woods

There are two abutting properties located behind the west part of the Ethel Walker School along Bushy Hill Road. These two parcels stretch along Town Forest Road and total 347 acres of forested land.

