



Figure 1: Winter View of Mount Watatic from Nutting Hill (M. Przybyla)

Executive Summary

Overview

Mount Watatic Reservation is approximately 281 acres in size, located in the towns of Ashby (Middlesex County) and Ashburnham (Worcester County), Massachusetts. The Reservation includes the summit and the northeast slope of Mount Watatic, and is at the heart of nearly 1000 acres of protected open space. Abutting conservation properties include the 150-acre Watatic Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary and the 263-acre Ashby Wildlife Management Area, both administered by the state Department of Fish & Game (DFG), and a 211-acre block of Ashburnham State Forest, managed by the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). A property along Route 119 was recently acquired by the Town of Ashburnham, with DCR holding a conservation restriction, and an abutting 88-acre property that was acquired by DCR early in 2007. The summit of Mount Watatic is one of the premier hiking destinations in the region as part of the Midstate and Wapack Trails. A **Regional Open Space Map** is available in a separate file on the DCR website.

The proposal to develop a telecommunications facility on the summit of Mount Watatic, as well as a residential subdivision at the base, prompted the

formation of a partnership that resulted in the permanent protection of the Reservation. Acquisition would not have been possible without the Campaign for Watatic. Organized by the Ashby Land Trust, this local fundraising effort gathered \$900,000 through donations received from hundreds of individuals, conservation organizations, corporations and foundations. The acquisition was completed in July of 2002, with six partners holding an undivided interest in the property - the Ashby Land Trust, Ashburnham Conservation Trust, Town of Ashby, Town of Ashburnham, DFG, and DCR. Almost one-third of the funds required for acquisition were provided by a Land & Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) grant awarded by the National Park Service. In order to meet the obligations of the LWCF grant agreement, all partners must participate in the organization of a management plan for the property.

Mount Watatic is a classic monadnock, a residual hill or mountain composed of more resistant bedrock than the surrounding landscape, with a peak elevation of 1832 feet above sea level. The summit area is mostly open with herbaceous and shrub vegetation and a few hardy trees. The slopes are steep and forested, and

there is an extensive wetland system at the base of the mountain on the south side. The mountain rises approximately 650 feet above the surrounding landscape. The property is part of the headwaters of the Souhegan River and is located mainly within the greater Merrimack River watershed.

Notable Natural and Cultural Features

Mount Watatic Reservation hosts an exceptionally rich suite of natural and cultural resources. BioMap Core Habitat, a Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program (NHESP) designation, includes the summit, a portion of the slope running northeastward from the summit, and a small patch just below the summit on the southeast side. This designation represents the most viable rare plants, rare animals and natural communities known in Massachusetts. The summit also includes an acidic rocky summit/rock outcrop community, which is a NHESP-designated priority natural community. The Reservation includes a red spruce/fir/northern hardwood forest type, uncommon in eastern and central Massachusetts, characterized by spruce trees of significant size and age. It is also a NHESP priority natural community and a potential habitat for the Boreal Chickadee. Other features include rare dragonfly habitat associated with the summit area, steep ledges with potentially unaltered vegetation, and a steeply sloped late-successional forest which provides excellent interior bird habitat. An early-successional (scrub-shrub) habitat is found within the former ski area. More than ten acres of forest on the north facing lower slope contains an almost pure stand of sugar maples, probably established by adjacent seed sources when an entire stand was blown down by the 1938 hurricane. Wetland ecosystems at the base of the mountain include habitat for sundews, pitcher plants, and a variety of uncommon wildlife such as dragonflies, damselflies, salamanders and turtles. The summit is one of the best spots in the northeast to observe the fall hawk migration. A number of additional rare species occurrences and certified vernal pools are located in abutting state conservation lands. A **Priority Natural Resources Map** is located on page 29 of this plan. The Priority Natural Resources Map indicates areas of important natural communities, rare species habitats, and vernal pools. More detailed information on all maps in this plan can be found in Appendix B.



Figure 2: Part of the stone wall network at Mount Watatic (A. Backman)

The network of stone walls indicates that the forested slopes were cleared for wood products and to establish pastureland. The mountain was used as a landmark and a sacred site by the indigenous Algonquins. Given the complex environmental characteristics and favorable site location criteria of much of the Mount Watatic region, the property must be considered to contain exceptionally high archaeological potential, both for numbers of sites yet to be discovered, as well as for sites that retain integrity and research value.

Recreation and Public Access

Hiking is by far the most popular visitor activity. Two long-distance hiking trails, the Midstate Trail and the Wapack Trail, join together at Route 119 and share the same stretch of trail through Mount Watatic Reservation. The summit area provides a dramatic spot for scenic views of the surrounding landscape. Hunting is permitted in the abutting DFG Wildlife Management Areas, the abutting Ashburnham State Forest, and the Mount Watatic Reservation subject to DFG regulations. The management partners have observed a general increase in all public recreation uses of this area. Some of this increase is the result of publicity generated by the successful land protection effort. A **Recreation / Public Access Map** is located on page 17 of this plan. The Recreation / Public Access Map contains detailed information about the location and condition of roads and trails at the facility. The map also has information on many components of property infrastructure including

parking lots, buildings, gates and the locations of the former ski slopes.

The Watatic Management Committee organized a simple visitor survey that was administered in the fall of 2004. Approximately two-thirds of the surveys were administered by volunteers in face-to-face interviews in the Route 119 parking area and the remaining one-third of the surveys were filled out by visitors in a post card format and mailed back to DCR. Nearly half of the survey participants came from Ashby or Ashburnham or towns directly abutting them, and a similar number came from other communities in eastern and central Massachusetts. Approximately 40% of the survey responders had been visiting the site for two years or less, including many first time visitors, indicating a steadily increasing number of people who are becoming aware of the Reservation.

Mission Statement and Overall Management Goals

The mission guiding the long-term stewardship of the Mount Watatic Reservation is to conserve and manage important natural, cultural and recreational resources.

The overall management goals for the Mount Watatic Reservation are:

Maintain and enhance native biodiversity.

Provide for sustainable public access for hiking and other low-impact forms of outdoor recreation, including opportunities for enjoying panoramic views from the summit.

Preserve a place to relish the peace and beauty of nature in the heart of an exceptional, protected landscape.

Priority Findings

- Mount Watatic Reservation contains an exceptionally rich and unique range of natural and cultural resources and contributes substantially to the continuity of lands in Ashby and Ashburnham managed for conservation purposes.
- Mount Watatic Reservation is an important link for Central Massachusetts and New Hampshire long-distance hiking trails, including a junction between the Wapack and Midstate Trails. Mount Watatic is a great ‘small’ mountain for families to climb.
- The summit area is one of the most popular destinations in Central Massachusetts for outdoor enthusiasts. The popularity of the site presents a variety of management challenges and opportunities. The partners expect to continue to receive requests for a variety of special uses and events.
- Subjective observation by partner representatives indicates that the number of visitors has increased over the past several years, probably due in part to the publicity surrounding the Campaign for Watatic that led to the successful land protection. The main trailhead parking area on Route 119, which is actually part of Ashburnham State Forest, is frequently filled to capacity with overflow parking along the margin of the state highway. Visitation is expected to gradually increase, concurrent with increases in regional population and as more people become aware of the Reservation.
- Unauthorized Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) use is common and problematic in the Mount Watatic Reservation, and is increasing statewide.
- The steeply sloping topography adds to management challenges related to summit road maintenance, trail maintenance and forest management activities.
- Undivided ownership by six partners and the lack of on-site staff will require extra effort related to coordination and cooperation to provide for adequate resource stewardship and sustainable public access.

Priority Recommendations and Management Needs

These next sections include an assessment of current and future management activities, responsibilities and capacity, and describe two levels of management capacity – the first level addresses current needs and capacity, and the second level describes management needs to implement priority stewardship responsibilities and strategies.

Current Management Capacity and Activities (Level 1)

DCR currently is the only Watatic partner with the capacity to provide ongoing management for Mount Watatic Reservation. The Reservation is part of the much larger 9,000-acre Willard Brook State Forest (SF) Management Unit, which includes Willard Brook, Townsend, Ashburnham, and J. Harry Rich State Forests, Pearl Hill State Park, and the Nashua River Rail Trail. Due to intensively used recreation areas at Willard Brook SF (approximately 41,500 visitors in 2005), Pearl Hill State Park (35,500 visitors in 2005) and the Nashua River Rail Trail (304,750 visitors in 2005), less than 5% of the Willard Brook Management Unit budget, staff time, and management resources can be focused on Mount Watatic Reservation.

Current Principal Management Capacity

- *DCR Willard Brook State Forest Management Unit (2006)*
Year-round and seasonal staff – Forest & Park Supervisor III, Forest & Park Supervisor II, year-round Laborer II, and eleven Seasonal Laborer positions.
- *DCR District/Regional Support Staff*
Regional Management Forester, Bureau of Fire Control Districts 8 & 6, Ranger, Carpenter, Heavy Equipment Operator.
- *Ashby Land Trust and the Ashburnham Conservation Trust*
Volunteered a significant number of work hours to raise funds for acquisition, monitor visitor activities, and conduct visitor surveys.

- *Towns of Ashby and Ashburnham*
Provide emergency services and law enforcement on an as-needed basis, with some support from State Environmental Police Officers (EPOs).
- *DFG Division of Fisheries and Wildlife (DFW or MassWildlife)*
Provides informational support related to rare species management, and vegetation management related to wildlife habitat enhancement.

Current Principal Management Activities (Level 1 Capacity)

- Conduct road repairs along the forest road that leads from the Route 119 parking area towards Nutting Hill and the summit trail to address flooding caused by beaver activity. Beaver management actions are important to maintain forest road access and to prevent the alteration of the adjacent rare Odonate habitat.
- Respond to calls and local concerns, including gate and lock maintenance.
- Cleanup illegal dumping.
- Install signs.
- Maintain and regrade the Route 119 parking area, conducted on an annual or as needed basis. (This parking area is technically part of Ashburnham State Forest.)
- Maintain trails.
- Conduct storm water maintenance on the summit road.

Key Strategies to Support Current Management Capacity

A. Partner Communication & Coordination

The partners recommend formation of a **Watatic Stewardship Committee with one representative and one alternate appointed by each of the six partners**. The mandate of this committee would be to oversee and support long-term implementation of the Resource Management Plan, rather than exercising control over the day-to-day management of the facility. The Stewardship Committee would be an advisory group and would not have the authority to direct management activities of any partner(s). The Stewardship Committee can provide an efficient method for partner communication and decision making related to immediate management and maintenance concerns, and related to requests for

group activities or special events. **A partner subcommittee could be formed to develop and implement alternatives for management-related funding, such as establishing endowments and identifying other private and public sources of funding to help improve management capacity.** One example of this activity could be raising the funds needed to hire a seasonal position to provide a presence on the trail system, to assist lost or injured hikers, provide a basic level of interpretive services, and monitor the trails for environmental and maintenance concerns. An account managed by a nonprofit partner could facilitate flexibility and quicker accessibility to funds.

B. Law Enforcement Coordination

The partners have initiated a process that may lead to all Code of Massachusetts Regulations (CMR) violations, irrespective of the issuing agency, being directed to Ayer District Court in order to establish a consistent law enforcement process. There is also potential for the development of a Mutual Aid Agreement between state (EPOs and state police) and municipal police departments, including New Ipswich, NH. The Agreement could include a description of emergency contact protocol, a process to recover costs of negligent behaviors that trigger an emergency response, and the equitable dispersal of fines between responding departments.

Priority Stewardship Recommendations and Management Needs (Level 2)

The Mount Watatic management partners anticipate that pressures from visitor use will gradually increase as local and regional populations grow, as more land is developed, and as more people become aware of this public recreation resource. Conflicts between visitor use and the preservation of sensitive resources such as the acidic rocky summit natural community must be monitored and managed on a long-term basis.

The management partners recognize the need to enhance management capacity in order to address priority management responsibilities.

- The first priority is to identify and monitor existing and potential areas of resource stewardship and visitor conflict through baseline inventories, and to increase the capacity to

monitor natural and cultural resources and recreational use and activities on a regular basis.

- Boundary marking, improved environmental education through better signage and public outreach, and partner coordination with local and state law enforcement staff related to illegal OHV activity are important management responsibilities.
- Additional management resources are needed to provide visitor contact, monitor the trailhead area, trails and summit activities, undertake basic trail maintenance, and provide first level emergency services (with a potential for contact and coordination with local Emergency Medical Services).

An increased Level 2 management capacity that could begin to address the partner-identified priorities for management of Mount Watatic Reservation includes:

- The addition of a DCR Seasonal Supervisor and Laborer positions, assigned as necessary to the Willard Brook Management Unit, as a requested addition to the DCR staffing plan if adequate operational funding is available.
- DFG resources to organize and administer the identification and monitoring of existing and potential areas of resource stewardship and visitor conflict through baseline inventories.
- Management partners efforts to identify additional strategies for management support from municipal and nonprofit partners, and to foster partnerships with organized park user groups and organizations that can support environmental research and education.

Land Stewardship Zoning Guidelines

DCR applies a Land Stewardship Zoning Guidelines system to its forests, parks and reservations across the Commonwealth. This system provides a framework for the development of management guidelines intended to protect the particular resources located within the property.

The following zones are recommended for application in the Mount Watatic Reservation. Please refer to Section 6 and the Plan appendices for the full explanation and management guidelines associated with the Land Stewardship Zoning Guidelines.

A **Land Stewardship Zoning Map** is located on page 41 of this plan. The Land Stewardship Zoning Map shows the locations of DCR's Land Stewardship Zones which are described below:

- **Zone 2:** The majority of land within the reservation, including wetlands, forested slopes and the summit area.
- **Zone 3:** The former ski area parking lot on the northeast side of the property. This site might be used for future event parking if management and enforcement capacity can provide for on-site coverage during visitor use.
- **Significance Overlay:** The summit area that is identified by the Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program (NHESP) as BioMap Core Habitat and supports an exemplary acidic rocky summit / rock outcrop community (please see Priority Natural Resources map). Applicable management guidelines include monitoring rare species populations following NHESP guidelines (taking into consideration availability of staff and volunteers), and enforcement of regulations related to authorized and unauthorized summit activities, such as OHV use (taking into consideration availability of staff with enforcement capabilities).

Summary of the Planning Process

The acquisition partners organized an Interim Management Plan in 2002-2003 that included basic guidelines for owner communication, visitor use and resource management. The Watatic Management Committee was formed in May of 2004 with one representative and one alternate from each of the six managing partners. During the summer and fall of 2004 the Management Committee held a series of

open public meetings in the Ashby and Ashburnham Town Halls to discuss various aspects of visitor use and resource management. A Law Enforcement Subcommittee met with local law enforcement officials in 2005. The Management Committee held two additional public planning meetings in 2006. This planning process has resulted in the preparation of a draft Resource Management Plan (RMP) that is intended to meet the obligations of LWCF funding and to establish guidelines for cooperative and sustainable management of the Reservation.

The first draft Resource Management Plan was reviewed by all partners, then revised accordingly. The draft RMP was the subject of a public meeting held on April 25, 2007 in the Ashburnham Town Hall. The public comment period extended to May 9, 2007. Notice regarding the public review process and the draft plan was posted on the DCR website on or about March 21, 2007. Press releases containing this information were distributed to local newspapers in advance of the public meeting. Finally, a public notice regarding the public review process was circulated to town boards and commissions and was included in *The Environmental Monitor*, published by the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs on March 21, 2007.

The Partners Management Committee met on August 29, 2007 to discuss and evaluate comments received and to revise the draft RMP as needed.

Appendix A includes a summary of the public review process, a summary of public comments and major issues, responses to these issues, and a summary of substantive revisions included in the final RMP.