

WORKING LANDS

A MILESTONE *for* MILLSTONE HILL

Reviving a New England tradition of town forests, a Vermont town works to protect a mountain biking mecca on historic quarry lands.

by Joshua Brown

A century ago, on Millstone Hill in Barre Town, Vermont, men cut blocks of granite from dozens of small independent quarries. Supplying stone for public buildings and the always-lively market for gravestones, granite mining made the nearby city of Barre prosperous—and left behind dramatic pits, chiseled gray cliffs, and unearthly mounds of waste rock. Old photos show not a single tree in sight.

But by the 1940s, the granite industry had consolidated and declined, and the small quarries on Millstone Hill were abandoned. “Left alone, nature eventually reclaims everything,” says Pierre Couture, 56, on the porch of his restored general store on the flank of Millstone Hill. As the forests returned, Couture grew up on a nearby farm with the slumbering quarry land as his backyard and playground.

Today this landscape is dense with stands of sugar maple shading 30-foot-high granite-block walls; birch groves grow out of sloping rubble fields. Many of the pits are now shaded, ebony pools filled with fish. Wrist-thick, rusting steel cables—a reminder of the quarry enterprise—emerge from the ground beneath cool green hemlocks. The hill is coming to life with birds, moose, bears, and other wildlife, and also with cross-country skiers, snowmobilers from the local Thunder Chickens snowmobile club, kids with fishing poles—and especially mountain bikers bewitched by the vertiginous cliff-edge views and gnarly singletrack.

Two of them, Mike Fraysier and Cindy Lindemann, stop their bikes to consider my fate. We've been riding for about an hour since leaving the Millstone Hill Trails and Touring Center, housed at Pierre Couture's store. Fraysier, a Barre City resident, is president of the non-profit Millstone Trails Association, which manages 70 miles of trails on and around Millstone Hill—trails with names like Screaming Demon. "Should we take him to



COURTESY OF VERMONT GRANITE MUSEUM

In the late 1800s, the granite quarries on Millstone Hill fueled the growth of central Vermont. Previous page: Mountain bikers admire a former quarry, now filled with water.

Roller Coaster?" Lindemann asks. "It's not super crazy-ass wild," Fraysier reassures me with a smile.

I've seen pictures of this trail in several biking magazines: its twisting ramps swoop down over a huge jumble of boulders, just like an old-fashioned wooden roller coaster. I've already made up my mind to walk that stretch. But I can see why mountain bikers from across the Northeast make pilgrimages to Millstone Hill. It's one reason why the blue-collar town, working with The Trust for Public Land, has formed a plan to create a town forest on the former quarry lands. Making the land public will guarantee the future of a trail system that is loved by locals and an important source of revenue from out-of-town visitors—while providing income from timber and protecting drinking water.

"This truly is a great piece of property with an important history," says Barre Town selectboard member Jeff Blow. He also points out that the recreational benefits go far beyond mountain biking. "From the point of view of the municipality, this project is to support recreation of all kinds—to give all our residents, as well as visitors, access to open space."

If it succeeds in creating its town forest, Barre Town will be applying an 18th-century tool to meet a 21st-century goal and joining a growing movement of communities nationwide that have decided that the best way to benefit from and control the fate of nearby forestlands is to own them.

FORESTS FOR COMMUNITIES

Town forests are a New England tradition dating back to colonial days. Towns once owned forests to supply firewood for public buildings and timber for local mills. By the end of the First World War, both Vermont and New Hampshire had passed "enabling laws" to help towns establish timberlands. The Great Depression created a new crop of town forests, when property owners failed to pay taxes on their lands and a town would assume ownership. Today more than 160 towns in Vermont have town forests, which are also common in New Hampshire and Maine.

Often these forests are little known and little used. But in the last decade, communities across the region have begun to show how locally owned, locally controlled forestland can be more than a sleepy woodlot on the edge of town. It can be a tool to contain sprawl, maintain open space for



RYAN THIBAUT

The Millstone Trails Association operates 70 miles of trails, including the notorious Roller Coaster, on the former quarry land. A proposed community forest would protect the trails while guaranteeing close-to-home access to recreation for Barre Town residents and visitors.

recreation, protect water supplies and wildlife, and generate revenue from timber sales. Interest in community forests has risen along with a sense of urgency about preserving the region's forested character. For the first time since forests began to reclaim farm fields in 19th century, forest cover is declining in all six New England states. This time it's pavement and houses that are replacing the trees.

In response, villages and cities across New England are at the vanguard of a national movement to protect community-owned forests—or create new ones, as in Barre Town. More than 3,000 communities in the United States now own nearly 5 million acres of forestland, as residents recognize the multiple benefits forest ownership can confer. (On the proposed Barre Town Forest, the county forester has identified nearly a million board feet of high-value trees, worth an estimated \$143,000.)

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—Rodger Krussman, *The Trust for Public Land*

woods—though some community forests are—but more on a broader set of benefits to a community," says Rodger Krussman, The Trust for Public Land's Vermont and New Hampshire state director. In the last decade, the office has helped create or expand 11 community forests in those states totaling more than 25,000 acres.

The movement began to take shape in 2001, when TPL helped Randolph, New Hampshire (population 350), acquire more than 10,000 acres to create that state's largest town forest and kick off the modern community forest movement in northern New England. In



JERRY AND MARCY MONKMAN/ECO PHOTOGRAPHY.COM

A father and daughter enjoy an autumn day at a former quarry that would be protected in the new Barre Town Community Forest. In the last decade The Trust for Public Land has helped expand or create 11 community forests in Vermont and New Hampshire, totaling more than 25,000 acres.

the years since, the forest has generated 5.5 million board feet of timber for lumber and paper pulp.

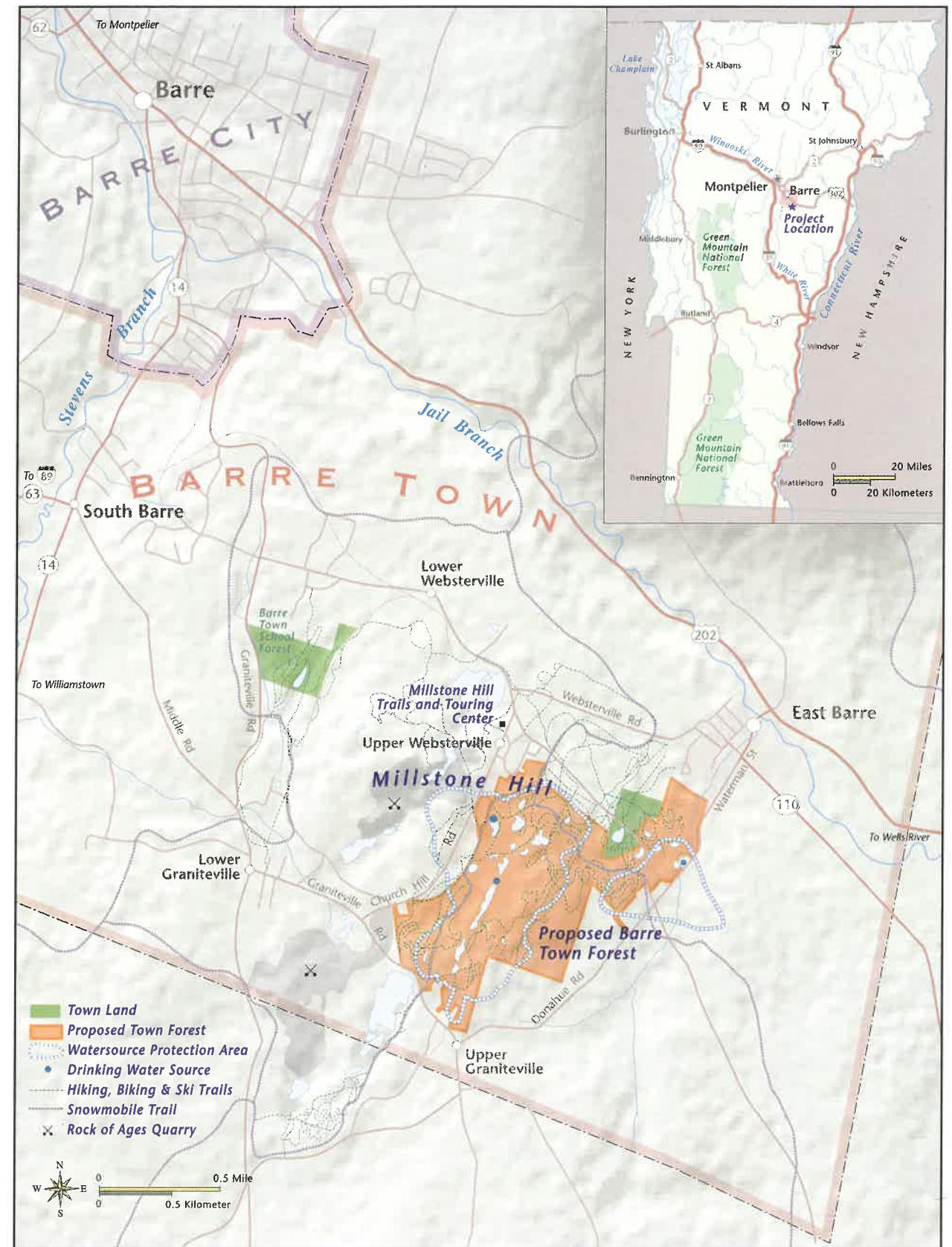
Just as important, the forest protects favorite hiking trails of the Randolph Mountain Club, pockets of old-growth trees, beaver ponds, and vernal pools hopping with frogs. Hunters, backcountry skiers, and three snowmobile clubs share the terrain. Small meadows offering spectacular views of the Presidential Range have been cleared to support breeding woodcock and migrant birds—meadows where houses would likely stand had the land been sold for development. “Recreation and wildlife are our bottom line,” says David Willcox, one of three community members who spearheaded the effort.

As in Randolph and Barre Town, preserving opportunities for recreation is often an important goal of the new community forest projects, Rodger Krussman says. “A New England town forest serves the same purpose as a neighborhood park or community garden does for city dwellers—it’s where we can get outside to exercise and play.”

But the idea of community- and municipal-owned forests long ago escaped New England. Atlanta, Georgia, owns a 10,000-acre forest. Jefferson Memorial Forest—owned by Louisville, Kentucky, and enlarged four times with TPL’s help in recent years—tops 6,200 acres and bills itself as a recreation destination for that city’s residents.

“The movement is really about reconnecting people with their forests,” says Jad Daley, who leads TPL’s community forest policy work in Washington, D.C. “If you live in suburban Atlanta or Louisville, those forests are your Yellowstone National Park. They’re the most important forestlands in the world to you.”

Daley has been helping to lead a national coalition of some 130 organizations in support of the Community Forest Program, a new federal grant program created in 2008 by Vermont’s senior senator, Patrick Leahy, and administered by the U.S. Forest Service. The program will make 50-50 matching grants to towns, Indian tribes, and local land trusts to purchase land for community forests, with a focus on economic and environmental benefits,



Community Forests: Beyond New England

The town-owned forest has been a fixture of northern New England communities since colonial times, but the idea has long since spread to other regions. Here are two communities outside New England that are working to build community forests.



LAWRENCE MARCUS

Arcata, California

In the heart of the redwood belt, the coastal community of Arcata (population 7,200) created California's first city-owned forest in 1955. The Arcata Community Forest along the city's eastern border provides recreational opportunities for hikers and mountain bikers, environmental education for local Humboldt State University, timber for sustainable harvest, and habitat for many sensitive species. More recently The Trust for Public Land has been working with landowners, the city, community groups, and funding agencies to create the Sunny Brae Forest, Arcata's second city-owned forest. Completion of a recent project brought Arcata's community-owned forests to 2,250 acres in total. Near Arcata, TPL is also working with Humboldt County to create a locally owned forest of up to 2,000 acres adjacent to the city of Eureka.



JOANNA SEIBERT

Swan Valley, Montana

The rural Swan Valley in Montana lies at the heart of the groundbreaking, three-phase Montana Legacy Project, in which The Trust for Public Land and The Nature Conservancy acquired more than 300,000 acres from a private timber company for protection as working forests by the U.S. Forest Service and state agencies. In 2009, as the project took shape, the Swan Valley community asked that a few parcels be held back for possible purchase as a community forest. Long active in efforts to protect the forests, the community now wanted a role in their management. TPL is advancing a plan under which a public agency would acquire an easement—paying for the development rights to the land and thereby reducing its price to the community—and is also helping the community apply for project funding from the new federal Community Forest Program.

education, forest stewardship, and recreation. Barre Town's project is among many nationwide hoping to tap into the \$3.5 million available through the program's inaugural grant round. This includes \$2 million that Congress just appropriated for the program in 2012, despite a tough fiscal climate. Supporters hope that these initial grants will build interest in the program and spur greater appropriations in the future.

BARRE TOWN PLANS FOR ITS FOREST

Tom Stuwe believes that the new Barre Town forest has helped extend his life.

"About 20 years ago, I was 250 pounds," recalls the large-animal veterinarian, who lives only a few miles from the trails association headquarters at Pierre Couture's general store. "I saw my uncles, 300, 350 pounds, die young of type 2 diabetes, so I started mountain biking to lose weight."

Stuwe, now 63, and his daughters began riding a series of logging roads and trails near their home, and he

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eventually lost 70 pounds. "But people came, bought land, built houses, and didn't want us riding across it," he says.

This was about 2005, when the Millstone Trails Association was formed, driven by Couture's long-held vision of making the old quarries the centerpiece of a recreational renaissance for Barre Town. The land's owner, Rock of Ages Corporation, which operates the sole remaining granite quarry in Barre, "has always had an open policy about the land," says Couture. "They get it; they've been terrific."

And so the trails association was able to open to the public 1,500 acres, mostly owned by Rock of Ages, and 70 miles of trails—many of them rugged, technical single-track built by the association's bike-loving volunteers.



RYAN THIBAUT

Millstone Hill trails were declared one of Vermont's ten best mountain bike destinations by *Bicycling* magazine. The proposed community forestland is also used for fishing, cross-country skiing, and snowmobiling by local snowmobile clubs.



A mountain bike rider threads a trail at the edge of a former quarry.

RYAN THIBAUT

BY THE NUMBERS: ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF MILLSTONE TRAILS

- Length in miles of the Millstone Trails mountain biking and skiing trail network: 70
- Miles that could be lost if the land were developed rather than protected in a town forest: 20
- Number of out-of-area visitors to the trail network last year: 7,150
- Number of visitors expected in 2015: 10,500
- Current estimated annual expenditures for local goods and services by out-of-area visitors: \$481,000
- Estimated expenditures in 2015: \$640,000
- Projected number of jobs supported by those expenditures in that year: 20
- Estimated funding needed to create the Barre Town Forest: \$1.3 million
- Estimated amount that will be returned to the community between 2012 and 2015 from visitor purchases of goods and services: \$2.3 million

Source: Steve Posner and Marta Ceroni, *Potential Economic Impact of Outdoor Recreation in the Barre Town Forest, Vermont* (Burlington: Gund Institute for Ecological Economics, University of Vermont, 2012).

“These trails came along at a crucial time and had a big impact on my health,” says Stuwe, who was demoralized without an easy place to ride. “I need the getaway for my heart and lungs—but more for my brain. Just the intense cardiovascular workout; really, it’s like Prozac,” the vet says. “It’s a big area with a lot of solitude, and it’s a unique blessing for me and my family.”

In addition to local riders, the trails began to attract out-of-town visitors. Millstone Hill has been praised in the *Boston Globe*, declared one of Vermont’s ten best mountain bike destinations by *Bicycling* magazine, and featured in other biking, ski, and travel magazines and websites. YouTube videos show riders braving Roller Coaster and other challenging trails. Couture opened a small lodge for visiting mountain bikers and cross-country skiers and a one-room museum beside the general store, where visitors can view historic photos and exhibits about the quarry lands.

Then the trails association got some troubling news. Rock of Ages was thinking about selling its land. “We initially saw that as a threat,” Fraysier recalls. “If the land got developed, the heart of our trail network could be closed off. But after talking with TPL, we began to see this as an opportunity to preserve the recreational opportunities at Millstone in perpetuity. And this really is a rich piece of our heritage: the first granite quarries in town, established in 1790.”

“It seemed as though, with right planning and community participation, we could find a way to protect these wonderful trails, and the whole forest, for the good of the town and surrounding region,” says TPL project manager Kate Wanner, who worked with local leaders on the project.

The town formed a forest study committee, which developed a proposal to consolidate the Rock of Ages land with four other private parcels and the land of two village water districts into a town-owned forest. In addition to the hoped-for funding from the federal Community Forest Program, TPL has secured \$310,000 from the state of Vermont and \$255,000 from private foundations. The Millstone Trails Association has committed to raising \$100,000 from private donors. And despite hard times, town residents voted by more than two to one to put \$100,000 toward the \$1.3 million effort.

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—Mike Fraysier, Millstone Trails Association

“The town forest will have an immense positive impact on the economy of the region,” says Darren Winham, who leads Barre Area Development, Inc., a nonprofit economic development group that has supported the project. “Retail and restaurants will spring up, and other employers are already seeing the biking trails as a recruiting tool for attracting new employees.”


A recent study commissioned by TPL supports Winham’s optimism. It estimates that visitor expenditures for goods and services could total \$2.3 million between 2012 and 2015. (See sidebar, page 42.)

Tom Stuwe hopes the deal can be finalized soon. “I’m still working full-time,” the veterinarian says. “My work is very physical, and being able to get out and bike on those trails is an integral part of keeping in shape. This will keep me wrestling cows and horses into my seventies.”

Of course, the health benefits of close-to-home recreation lands are not limited to rural Vermont. As community forests multiply across the nation, they could become important in improving public health in many places.

As for my own visit to Millstone Hill, I made it uninjured over Roller Coaster, even biking a bit of it. I’ll look forward to getting back to the hill’s handsome trees, haunting granite, and twisting trails, hoping that by the time I return, they’ll all belong to Barre Town.

Joshua Brown is a science writer whose work has appeared in the *Boston Globe*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and *Conservation*. He writes and teaches environmental journalism at the University of Vermont.

 To view a gallery of historical images from Vermont granite quarries, visit tpl.org/millstone/gallery.

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