



SAVING THE LAST GREAT PLACES ON EARTH



# Eastern New York Chapter Land Protection in the Catskill Mountains

*The Nature Conservancy's  
Catskills Land Protection Fund*



The Catskill Mountain region is home to some of the largest blocks of unfragmented forests in the northeast. From an ecological standpoint, large blocks of unbroken forest provide refuge for numerous species both rare and common, and the protection of these blocks of sixty to one hundred thousand acres offers a tremendous conservation benefit. Fortunately, a great deal of conservation is taking place in the Catskills through the efforts of New York State and the City of New York. While these organizations have preserved vast areas, significant opportunities exist to advance the Catskill's conserva-

tion targets by protecting properties that these agencies might otherwise miss.

The Catskill Mountain Program is one of eight landscape-scale programs in the Eastern New York Chapter. Officially opened in 2003, the program has set a goal of protecting, through acquisition, easements and land use planning, the 415,000 acres of remaining interior forest blocks to prevent habitat fragmentation; reducing the impacts of invasive species and promoting and enhancing research and policy development on atmospheric deposition of pollutants.

## The Challenge

Both New York State and the City of New York have the financial resources to protect vast areas, but in some cases regulatory or bureaucratic obstacles impede efforts to protect key parcels. New York State is hampered by a process that may not always meet the needs or expectations of sellers. New York City is limited by watershed rules that prevent the acquisition of properties that include structures, among other limitations. For example, if a landowner is unwilling to subdivide his/her vacant land from the built portion of the property, a conservation sale to the City is impossible. These constraints offer an opportunity and an important role for The Nature Conservancy.

## A Solution: The Catskills Land Protection Fund

By setting up a dedicated fund for protecting Catskill lands, the Eastern New York Chapter is able to act quickly to protect important parcels and recycle the funds into additional projects through the sale of the land to New York State and New York City. This revolving fund will provide immediate liquidity, allowing us to purchase properties that may be deemed "off-limits" by the State and City, complete the acquisition in a timely manner, push for sales below fair market value and offer the seller tax benefits as an incentive. In addition, we are able to act strategically to protect lands that, while have great ecological significance, may not fall under the protection guidelines established by the State or the City.

Monies raised for the Catskills Revolving Fund will be matched dollar for dollar by a challenge grant from a longtime chapter supporter. Up to 15 percent of capital funds raised under this fund will be used to cover chapter annual operations, including fundraisers and other program staff supporting the Catskills staff.

## Lost Clove/Balsam Mountain; Ulster County, NY

The parcel of land known as Lost Clove/Balsam Mountain consists of nearly 1,200 acres of steeply sloping, remote forest land that has been carefully maintained by nearly 150 years of thoughtful stewardship by six generations of the same family. This dedicated forest management has resulted in exceptional stands of red oak and sugar maple as well as old growth hemlock.

The outstanding forest resources on the Lost Clove/Balsam Mountain property are primarily threatened by logging. This property has seen minimal logging over the last hundred years. As such, the forest composition and condition found on the property is of a quality seldom found in the Catskill Mountains. Properties outside the constitutionally protected Catskill Forest Preserve are often aggressively harvested and slow to recover. Large scale extraction on the property would most likely result in compositional change from the predominant sugar maple and red oak community to a red maple dominated forest complex. Climate change, atmospheric deposition of pollutants, forest pests and pathogens and invasive species are likely to further degrade the forest structure and composition following a harvest. The acquisition of this property will likely help reduce impact from some of these system stresses.

Typically, land appraisals in the Catskills have either undervalued or completely ignored the value of timber on properties due to the high value of the land for residential development. In a bold move, the chapter sought out an appraisal on the property that included a valuation of the standing timber as well as the acreage. Without funds from The Nature Conservancy, the owners of this property would likely be forced to sell to a timber company who would very possibly undertake a liquidation harvest rather than a long-term timber investment.

The Eastern New York Chapter is poised to acquire 590 acres of this parcel for \$1,900,000 (with funds coming from the Catskills Land Protection Fund), with the possibility of purchasing and protecting an additional 350 acres in 2008, bringing the total project to more than 900 acres.

This initial protection project involves the fee acquisition of three parcels of steep forested slopes and Balsam high peak, one of the thirty-five high peaks in the Catskills over 3,500 feet. The project is a co-op with both the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and the New York City Department of Environmental Protection; to one of whom the property will eventually be transferred.



*For more than 50 years, The Nature Conservancy has acted on behalf of a clear mission: to preserve the plants, animals, and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive. This mission has never been more important than it is today, when plant and animal species are vanishing at unprecedented rates.*

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