

Lands Stewardship and Planning Guide

A Decision-Support Tool for
Middlebury College's
Champlain Valley Landholdings
2025

This Guide's development was a collaborative effort between Middlebury College and the Addison County Regional Planning Commission (ACRPC). More information about ACRPC can be found at www.ACRPC.org

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A. Overview of the Guide, the Land Stewardship Initiative, and the Vision for the College Lands

Middlebury College Land Stewardship Advisory Group, in collaboration with Addison County Regional Planning Commission staff, engaged in systematic lands planning for the 3,000 acres of College land in the Champlain Valley and produced the 2025 Lands Stewardship and Planning Guide, along with the College Lands Atlas, an ArcGIS Online tool. “College Lands” include landholdings aside from Main Campus, Bread Loaf Campus, Ralph Myrhe Golf Course, and the Snow Bowl. These acres are upland and wetland, forest and field, developed and undeveloped. The planning activity did not take a detailed look at the in-town developed lands; that is recommended as a future action. Nor did these efforts address the mountain lands in Ripton and East Middlebury, as those are governed by a conservation easement held by Vermont Land Trust (VLT) and are managed in accord with a VLT-approved management plan that is updated every 10 years.

Guidance for College Lands management and decision-making comes from the Land Stewardship Initiative, approved by the Trustees in 2008. At the heart of the Initiative are the seven Guiding Principles listed below and the establishment of the Land Stewardship Advisory Group.

- The College recognizes the importance of applying principles of environmental sustainability to the stewardship of its lands.
- Land stewardship involves fiscally responsible decision making.
- The College recognizes that College Lands are parts of broader ecosystems and promotes practices that improve the biological integrity of those ecosystems.
- The College recognizes the value of the traditional Vermont landscape and historically important land uses to Middlebury College and to the larger Vermont community.
- The College recognizes that appropriate use of lands can help achieve broader sustainability goals, such as reduction of transportation impacts through development of land close to town centers, or reduction of carbon emissions through development of land for alternative energy sources.
- The College recognizes the value of existing teaching and research sites and acknowledges the tremendous opportunities for experiential education across disciplines that exist in its network of landholdings.
- The College embraces the ideal of compatible uses, recognizing that conservation and fiscal prudence are not mutually exclusive objectives, and resolves that responsible stewardship will carefully consider all of these guiding principles.

The Initiative’s third component invokes us to establish closer connections between College lands and the educational mission of the institution. Currently, many of Middlebury’s undergraduate courses utilize the College Lands as a living laboratory, both in the valley and in

the Green Mountains, but there is room for better communications and enhancing place-based educational opportunities. Whether studying natural or social sciences, humanities, languages, or arts, students engage in learning from the land itself. Faculty and students use the lands for research and experiential education across a wide spectrum of the curriculum. Financially, College Lands have not been managed to generate revenue, but rather to support the multiple values of the College, many of which are widely shared societal values.

The impetus for this Guide and Atlas was a two-part question: How do these lands support society, and might there be uses and ownership that are better able to meet the goals of society now and into a future spanning half a century or so? At the heart of this work is the concept that College Lands, with thoughtful and inclusive planning, can contribute to planning for, maintaining, and enhancing ecologically and societally functional landscapes for the present and into the future.

The vision for Middlebury College's land stewardship is to support society and nature to help maintain vibrant, sustainable communities and landscapes. We envision a future where decisions take a long-range view to balance people, planet, place, and prudent financial management. College lands will continue to support the educational mission of Middlebury as well as human needs for beauty, outdoor recreation, connection to nature, and healthy places to live.

The goal of the current effort has been to provide an information-rich, streamlined, integrated, map- and text-based view of the lands to help evaluate and assess choices and potential decisions regarding land ownership, uses, management, and protection, all in the context of a robust set of societal values. To that end, rather than prescribing specific actions, the Guide is designed to provide a flexible framework intended to help decision-makers and land managers balance institutional priorities, ecological health, and community values.

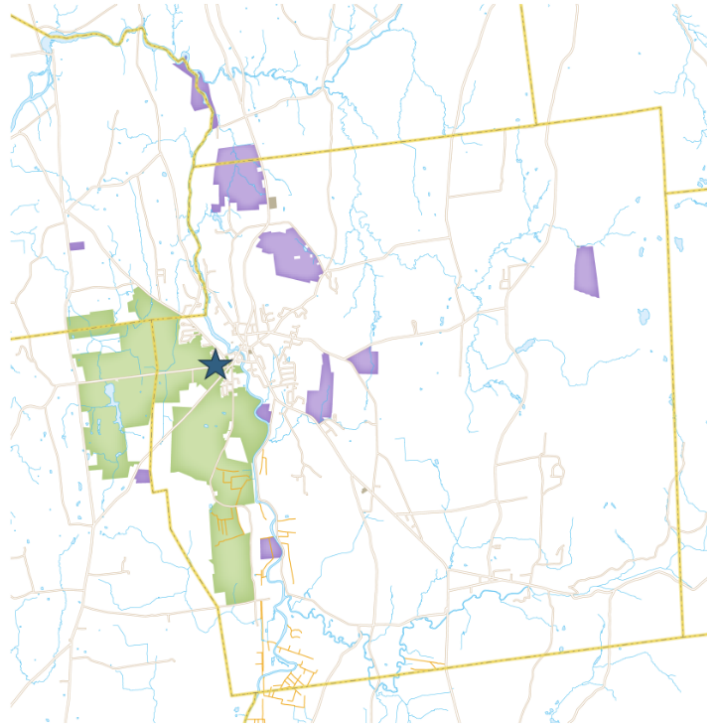
The College's Champlain Valley landholdings grew from an 1821 Samuel Holley gift of 57 forest acres in Bristol to the current 3,000 acres through a series of gifts and acquisitions. Joseph Battell's 1916 gift of 30,000 acres consisted of lands mostly in the mountains, but also included Otter Creek Gorge and a patch of forest on Quarry Road and Foote Street. A significant portion of the College Valley Lands were acquired during the late 1970s and early 1980s in response to a proposed, but never constructed, Route 7 bypass project. To protect the western side of campus and to allow for expansion, the College obtained, through gifts and purchases, numerous parcels in the path of proposed construction. Additional farm parcels near campus were acquired over the latter part of the 1990s into 2001, often with the goal of providing additional flexibility and opportunities for the Main Campus to grow and adapt to changing needs. Parcels to the east of Route 7 were strategically acquired to facilitate a bypass on that side of town. As part of this acquisition project, the College established the Delineation Corporation to hold the lands; that corporation still exists and retains ownership of numerous parcels in the Champlain Valley. One of the most recent additions to the College Valley Lands is the Jackson Lands, donated in 2012 by trustee emeritus Willard T. Jackson, a 1951 graduate of Middlebury. The Jackson Lands consist of 377 acres of land in Cornwall just west of the institution's historic campus.

The College Valley Lands are vital to both Middlebury College's identity and educational mission and to the broader local community and ecosystems. Lands surrounding much of Main Campus maintain the rural character Middlebury has been known for throughout its 225-year history. Access directly from the developed village and campus area to the rural Vermont landscape is vital to the Middlebury character and is rarely found elsewhere. In sum, College lands are significant for agricultural production, biodiversity conservation, flood attenuation, outdoor recreation, spectacular scenery, and much more; these values and others are of widespread concern in the state and region.

Numerous properties, both in-town and dispersed in Middlebury and Cornwall, provide housing (or opportunities to develop housing) for College faculty; this is a vital resource for recruiting and retaining faculty in a region with a severe housing shortage. Some parcels close to campus also provide flexibility for future campus development, allowing the College to adapt to growth without incurring high land acquisition costs.

B. The Lands' Features, Values, and Functions

College Valley Lands are patterned as a nearly contiguous expanse adjacent to the west and south of Main Campus, and a variety of scattered parcels primarily east of Route 7. Because the character of the lands and their relation to campus and to town differs in relation to location (and other land characteristics), the Guide and Atlas discuss the lands in five distinct areas named relative to campus: Western, Southern, Eastern, Northern, and Escarpment areas. The Western and Southern areas are contiguous to Main Campus and the golf course.



Middlebury College Valley Lands. The contiguous expanse of lands west and south of Main Campus (indicated by blue star) is shown in green. Non-contiguous parcels, mostly east of Otter Creek, are shown in purple. One parcel, Clapp Lot on Hogback Mountain east of Bristol Pond, lies 10 miles to the north.

Each area's general character and key values and features are detailed in the full Guide. Key values and features of each area are described in the following categories: Agriculture; Biodiversity and Habitat Connectivity; Campus Buffer; Cultural Significance; Economic Development; Education; Flood Resilience; Health and Wellness; Housing Development; Hydrologic Functions; Recreation; Renewable Energy; Scenic Value; and Water Quality. Additionally, the natural features of the entire land base are briefly described with respect to topography, soils, and geology; water and wetlands; ecosystems, species, habitats, and conservation; and agriculture and forestry. The cultural features are characterized as educational, recreation, scenic, spiritual life and wellness, and archaeological sites and historic landmarks.

C. Recommendations

The Guide provides 20 recommendations for land uses and decisions. These include some general ones that reinforce the Land Stewardship Initiative, such as to continue stewarding lands to support long-term well-being of the College and broader community; basing decisions on evaluation of the whole landscape so as to consider how to best support multiple values and functions; and working with those lands adjacent to campus, the Western and Southern areas, differently from the other areas that are less closely connected to the College but have a plethora of values for the broader communities and ecosystems. Additional land use recommendations relate to sales and acquisitions of land, as well as to the establishment of a land stewardship fund with contributions from any sale of lands.

Among the detailed recommendations are those related to the following: closer integration of the Jackson Lands with the College; pursuing in-fill housing development; collaborating on outdoor recreation planning; ecological conservation and restoration; and agricultural uses. Recommendations are included for education, equity and justice, climate-resilience, and spiritual life and wellness.

The Guide also includes six recommendations that refer to formalizing process of the Land Stewardship Advisory Group, renaming the group a Committee, periodically revisiting and, as necessary, revising the Guiding Principles, and maintaining the College Lands Atlas.

Broad Recommendations

- Continue to steward landholdings to support and advance both the educational mission of the College and the long-term well-being of the College and broader community and region.
- Evaluate the whole landscape in decisions about how to best support and serve multiple values and functions of the area's social and ecological communities.
- Education recommendations relate to promoting research and educational uses through faculty dialogs, further planning for the Knoll, partnering more broadly with the College's engaged learning centers, and maintaining the map and database of these uses.
- Equity and justice recommendations relate to continuing work with state and non-governmental justice groups to help the College consider opportunities in housing, agriculture, and Indigenous relations.
- Climate resilience recommendations relate to targeted energy planning, collaborations with the local foods systems community, flood resilience planning, and ongoing work to enhance habitat connectivity.
- Spiritual life and wellness recommendations relate to collaborating with the College centers and campus groups and keeping wellness in the forefront of lands discussions, especially related to the Western Area.
- Process recommendations relate to more formally codifying the lands committee's operations and membership.

D. Opportunities, Uncertainties, Concerns, and Constraints

Land stewardship and management operate within an environment of partnerships, possibilities, uncertainties and limits. Principle opportunities the Guide discusses relate to the functions and values named above. Current opportunities exist to manage landholdings to better support the educational mission, housing, conservation, recreation, equity and justice, and the other values. Examples always include partnerships, and some have higher financial costs than others. Learning about and evaluating opportunities mentioned in the Guide and deciding which, if any, to pursue will be part of the implementation of the plan. Potential partners include state agencies and private organizations and businesses, including Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, Land Access Opportunity Board, Addison Housing Works, the College's own Scott Center for Religious and Spiritual Life, and the several recreation-related groups in the county.

Lands stewards and decision-makers must be aware of primary uncertainties, concerns, and constraints. Those discussed refer to institutional expansion, agricultural change, new activities on the horizon, flooding, water quality, fragmentation, development, and safety issues. Constraints include legal structures such as regulations, town zoning, and land-use planning laws. Constraints also include issues such as staff and faculty capacity, financial and opportunity costs, demography of an aging population, and perhaps even the spotlight on the College and the expectations and opinions of many.

E. Implementation

The Lands Stewardship and Planning Guide and College Lands Atlas for Middlebury College's Valley Lands provide a framework to guide sustainable land management that reflects the College's mission, values, and long-term vision. Through easily accessed information and actionable recommendations and strategies, the Guide and Atlas offer a pathway to balance institutional priorities, ecological integrity, and community flourishing. These decision-making and stewardship tools are an invitation to engage in a shared mission by contributing expertise, resources, and perspectives to advance sustainable land management and strengthen the ecological and cultural richness of the Champlain Valley. Together through informed and collaborative action Middlebury College and its partners can ensure that the Valley Lands continue to provide educational, ecological, and cultural benefits for the College community and beyond. The Guide and Atlas serve as a call to action to steward these lands responsibly, thus preserving their legacy and ensuring their vitality for the future.

The implementation of this plan is expected to achieve numerous outcomes, including:

- A sustained commitment to stewardship that reflects Middlebury College's mission and values.
- Explicit and systematic emphasis on social-ecological functionality as a guiding principle for decisions related to the Valley Lands.

- Greater integration of the College Lands into Middlebury's educational and community initiatives.
- A lasting resource for future land managers and decision-makers to rely upon to promote the resilience and sustainability of the College Lands for generations to come.
- An interactive and adaptable Atlas to help promote informed decisions concerning future development, management, sale, purchase, and conservation of College Lands.