

SECTION ONE Executive Summary

LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

It is with gratitude and humility that we acknowledge that we are learning, speaking, working, and gathering on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican, Pocumtuc, Nipmuc, and Abenaki people, who are the Indigenous peoples of this land. We pay honor and respect to their ancestors past and present as we commit to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all.

THE WOODLANDS PARTNERSHIP of Northwest Massachusetts (previously known as the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership, see *Sidebar: The Partnership's new Name* on page 11) is a unique local effort to both conserve our forests and enhance our region's rural, land-based economy across the Northern Berkshire Mountains, hill towns, and riverside villages of northwestern Massachusetts.

In 2013, a group of citizens who live and work in the northwestern corner of the state came together as leaders and representatives from about 30 entities—towns, nonprofit organizations, and business and academic organizations—to work cooperatively with the regional planning agencies in Franklin and Berkshire Counties, the State, and the U.S. Forest Service to create the Woodlands Partnership and further its goals.

SECTION 1: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The legislature of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts passed authorizing legislation¹ in 2018 to establish the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership (MTWP) as a public body, and to create both an operational Woodlands Partnership Fund and an Investment Trust Fund for the region.

In November 2019, the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) and the U.S. Forest Service signed a Shared Stewardship Framework pledging cooperation on outreach and education to the communities, research

1. General Laws: Sections 89–91 Amended, Chapter 209 Acts of 2018. <https://malegislature.gov/laws/sessionlaws/acts/2018/chapter209>

2. Municipalities in the designated region can vote to join the Partnership. Towns that did not join by the 2020 legislative deadline must wait five years

and demonstration of “exemplary sustainable forest management practices,” and technical assistance related to local recreation and tourism.

Municipalities in the defined eligibility area (see Map 1.1) can vote by Select Board, town meeting, or Mayoral decision to join the Partnership and garner its benefits.² The first 11 towns to opt in sparked the creation of the Partnership Board, and, as of October 2022, 17 of 21 eligible towns have voted to join.

from the law’s 2018 passage, until 2023, to become full member towns (i.e., Hawley), but, following their local vote to join, would be eligible to apply for a state grant program in the interim.

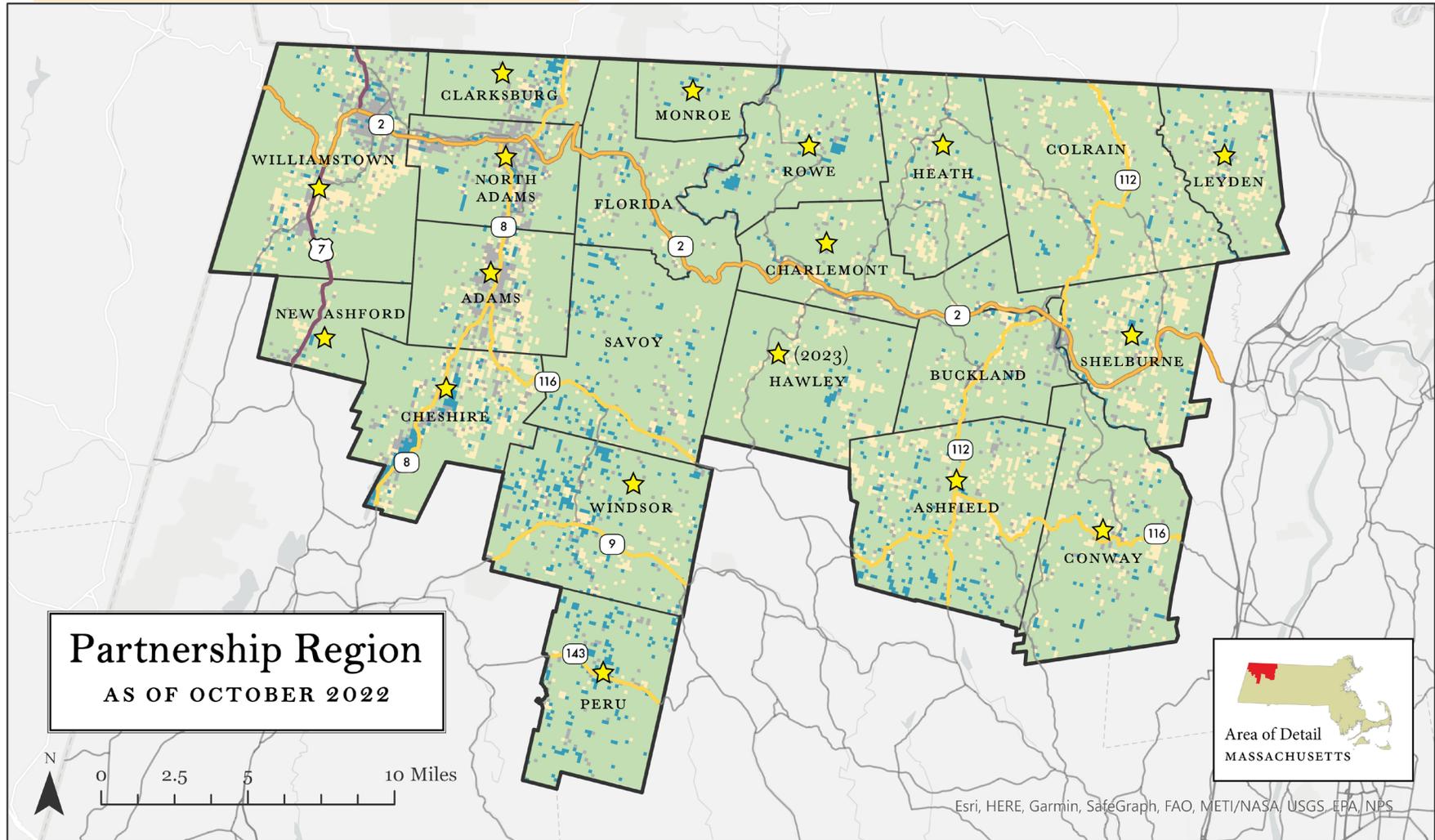


Snowshoer at Chapel Falls, Ashfield. Photo: Emily Johnson

The Place and Its People

The Northern Berkshire Mountains in Massachusetts are rich with natural resources. The Deerfield and Hoosic Rivers flow through expanses of spruce-fir, northern hardwood, and transi-

tion oak-hickory forests among scenic mountains with farms and homes scattered along the rural roads of Western Franklin and Northern Berkshire Counties.



Partnership Region
AS OF OCTOBER 2022



LEGEND Scale: 1:300,000

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------------|
| PARTNERSHIP REGION | MA RTE. 2 / MOHAWK TRAIL | FOREST |
| TOWN BORDER | U.S. ROUTE | WATER OR WETLAND |
| TOWNS THAT HAVE OPTED IN | STATE ROUTE | CULTIVATED |
| | | DEVELOPED |

SECTION 2: PARTNERSHIP REGION IN FOCUS

For thousands of years, Indigenous Peoples thrived in the area³ before Europeans settled on unceded lands⁴ to farm and establish small hamlets along the rivers. The principal tribes in the Berkshire Mountains and foothills were the Mohicans (Mahikans) in what is now Berkshire County, including the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohicans,⁵ the Abenaki⁶ in Franklin County, the Pocumtuc⁷ near Deerfield in areas flanking the Connecticut River, and the Nipmuc⁸ in what is now Central Massachusetts. These tribal nations established a footpath, a corridor between the Connecticut and Hudson Rivers. The Mohawk⁹ people, who utilized the path, lived in the Hudson River Valley in what became New York State. In 1914, MA-Route 2—established largely following the Indigenous footpath—became the state’s first scenic highway, named the Mohawk Trail. Since then, millions of people have traveled to the Northern Berkshires and hill towns of western Franklin County to enjoy the region’s scenery, rural setting, natural resources, and the outdoor activities the mountains provide. These attractions have made tourism a prime economic driver for Main Street businesses and secluded recreation-based enterprises alike. In January 2021, the U.S. Department of Transportation designated the Mohawk Trail a National Scenic Byway.¹⁰ Today, many people, whether farmers or small business owners, make their living off the

3. Native Land Digital. 2021. Our Home on Native Land. <https://native-land.ca/>

4. Many First Nations people never ceded or legally signed away their lands. See: Guide to Indigenous Land and Territorial Acknowledgments for Cultural Institutions. <https://as.nyu.edu/research-centers/npf/Land0.html>

5. Stockbridge Munsee Community. <https://www.mohican.com/brief-history/>

6. Nulhegan Band of the Coosuk Abenaki Nation. <https://abenakitribe.org/>

region’s woodlands by running recreation-based businesses, selling firewood from their woodlots, making and selling fine crafts and woodland products like maple syrup, harvesting timber for furniture, flooring, and housing, or working as foresters. During the Industrial Revolution, historic downtowns and close-knit residential neighborhoods developed into larger employment centers along the region’s rivers.

The region’s mountain landscape, rivers, diverse wildlife and plant life, woodlands, and farms provide a scenic and beautiful place to live, work, and play. More importantly, these landscape features provide environmental functions and health benefits. Forests in the region provide Massachusetts, and more broadly, New England, with critical ecological services including water supply recharge, flood mitigation, wildlife habitat, oxygen production, water and air purification, and carbon storage—all of which are crucial to sustain life in this era of rapid climate change.

The Woodlands Partnership Landscape

The forests and watersheds of the Northern Berkshire Mountains and foothills are the focus of the Woodlands Partnership.¹¹ Often described as the most rural and heavily forested corner of the

7. Pocumtuc History. <http://www.dickshovel.com/pocu.html>

8. Tribal Government of the Nipmuc Nation. <https://www.nipmucnation.org/>

9. Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe. <https://www.srmt-nsn.gov/about-the-tribe>

10. National Scenic Byways Program. https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/hep/scenic_byways/designations/2021_designated_byways.cfm

11. The Northern Berkshires include 11 towns in western Franklin and 10 towns Northern Berkshire Counties.

Partnership Board Votes to Approve New Name: Woodlands Partnership of Northwest Massachusetts

At its October 2022 meeting, the Board of the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership voted unanimously (19–0) to change its name from the “Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership” to the “Woodlands Partnership of Northwest Massachusetts,” for the purposes of regular business. The Board vote acknowledged that this change likely requires state legislative action in order to be established legally, and includes a request for the Commonwealth to endorse the new name.

The name change discussion recognized that while the use of the Mohawk Trail highway in the original Partnership name may have been chosen as a way to connect Berkshire and Franklin Counties, there are a number of reasons why the name change makes sense at this phase of the Partnership. Motivation for the name change includes the following reasons discussed by the Board:

1. The Partnership has received feedback from some local Indigenous Peoples representatives who would prefer the Partnership not use the appropriated name of an Indigenous group.
2. The Mohawk tribe—unlike the Mohican, Pocumtuck, Abenaki, and Nipmuc tribes—did not live for long periods in the Partnership’s geographic boundaries, although they moved through the region on a footpath. Thus, the former Partnership name may have contributed to masking or making more invisible the presence of Mohican, Pocumtuck, Abenaki, and Nipmuc Peoples who still live in the area.
3. The highway that uses the name Mohawk Trail (MA-Route 2) is situated in only a third of the municipalities in the current Partnership boundaries.
4. In the future, the Partnership may wish to extend its boundaries further south and east to include more municipalities that are located even further away from the MA-Route 2 corridor.
5. A woodlands partnership devoted to forest conservation and sustainable natural resource-based economic development may want to distance itself from association with a State highway, with which it might be confused to have a relationship.

Below is the text of the Board resolution approved on October 11, 2022:

“The Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership,” a public body established by Massachusetts House Bill No. 4835 filed on 26 July 2018 and signed into law on 31 October 2018, will conduct its work known as “The Woodlands Partnership of Northwest Massachusetts,” and change its bylaws to reflect said change in name ... We furthermore request that the legislature of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the U.S Department of Agriculture–U.S. Forest Service officially establish and recognize the name of the public body formerly known as “The Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership” as being henceforth the “Woodlands Partnership of Northwest Massachusetts.”

SECTION 1: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Commonwealth (83% forested),¹² the region has a population density of 87 people per square mile (compared to 884 state-wide). The population of this region is statistically older and less ethnically diverse than the rest of the state, and is also declining in numbers—by almost 5% between 2010 and 2020—with a similar decline anticipated by 2040.

The low population density, with many towns having populations of less than 1,000 people, has created challenges for small-town governments to maintain a tax base to adequately fund some

12. 86% of the approximately 666,000 acres of Protected and Recreational Open Space in the region is privately owned. This includes private for profit, private nonprofit, and land trust properties. MassGIS (Bureau of Geographic

public services and staff positions. Thus, residents identified municipal sustainability as another focus of the Woodlands Partnership, in concert with economic development that recognizes the importance of the forest resources in the region. Nine of the 21 towns in the Partnership region are listed as Environmental Justice communities according to the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, most based on income criteria (see Map 2.1).

Information), Commonwealth of Massachusetts EOTSS. Layers: Land Cover / Land Use (2016); Protected and Recreational Open Space (2021).



*Belding Memorial Library,
Ashfield. Photo: Sophie
Argetsinger.*

Gathering Public Insights on the Partnership and Its Plan

This 2022 Plan revision for the Woodlands Partnership of Northwest Massachusetts is required by the 2018 Massachusetts law that created the Partnership, which called for a revised plan within three years after the formation of the Board.

The first Plan, developed for the Partnership in 2015 and revised in 2016, followed extensive public comment meetings that were held throughout the 21-town Partnership region (see Appendix D for details). As the Board and Administrative Agent began to focus on the Plan update in fall 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic was still underway even as vaccinations became available. Therefore, most meetings of the Partnership during this Plan review period occurred over Zoom, and only began to return to hybrid format as of June 2022 (partial in-person meetings with an option to join remotely).

Drafting of the next 10-year Plan through 2032 got underway in earnest in January 2022. As the Agent staff completed work to update the natural resources inventory and town-by-town and regional statistics in the new plan with the latest Census data and GIS mapping available, the following outreach activity was conducted to allow for public comment on the draft content as well as broader feedback about the Partnership's mission and projects:

- The Board's six Standing Committees (Executive; Finance & Budgeting; Forest Conservation; Natural Resource-Based Economic Development; Municipal Financial Sustainability; Education, Outreach & Research) focused on possible project priorities in summer and fall 2021.
- Board members were invited to comment and make recommendations on a first draft revision of the Plan in spring 2022.
- A full draft of the Plan was posted on the Partnership website for public comment from June to September 2022.
- Two public listening session webinars that were promoted in local media and flyers posted in Town Halls, were held via Zoom on Aug. 24 and Sept. 14, with some specific public feedback incorporated into the final draft.
- Representatives of local Indigenous Peoples were invited to review the draft plan and offer feedback.
- The Agent, Board Chair, and Board members representing towns met with Select Boards of member municipalities from May through September 2022, providing an opportunity to report on Partnership goals and activities and to invite elected officials and residents to comment on the Plan and suggest new programs.
- The Partnership Board voted unanimously to approve the draft Plan posted on the Partnership website at its October 11, 2022 meeting.



View from *The Cobbles, Cheshire*. Photo: Joe Nowak

Partnership Origins

In 2013, the Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG), Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC), Franklin Land Trust (FLT), and an Advisory Board¹³ worked in partnership with the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) to explore the possibility of leveraging the

region’s extensive, mostly privately owned woodlands to obtain a Special Federal Designation (see Section 7). If earned, such a designation, created through federal legislation, would recognize the region’s outstanding forest resources and bring substantial financial and technical assistance to Northwestern Massachusetts to

13. Twelve regional organizations/institutions and 21 towns with representatives from USFS and MA-EOEEA.



help keep woodlands in private ownership and fund sustainable rural economic development along the MA-Route 2 corridor and in the region’s 21 towns.¹⁴ The Woodlands Partnership was conceived as a public body, enabling the channeling of resources from the State and the U.S. Forest Service to the region, in lieu of a federally owned National Forest. Though federal legislation remains a

goal, the Partnership reached a milestone in 2019, when the Chief of the U.S. Forest Service, Victoria Christiansen, visited the region with Secretary of Massachusetts EOEEA Kathleen Theoharides to jointly sign a “Shared Stewardship Framework” outlining mutual benefits and areas of collaboration between federal and state agencies on behalf of the region.

14. For seven years, FRCOG and BRPC conducted extensive outreach to involve the public in planning the Partnership.



Path through ferns, Ashfield. Photo: Sophie Argetsinger.

2019
Formation of the Partnership Board



2020
January: first full meeting of the Partnership Board



2021
NEFF contracted to be Administrative Agent for Partnership



2020–2022
Over \$1 million in grants awarded to member towns

2022
Revised Woodlands Partnership Plan (2022–2032) is written and approved



2020
Officers elected and Standing Committees formed to conduct Woodlands Partnership work

2021
First educational event: Oaks in New England Forests

2050
Seek to realize the Partnership’s vision of a self-sustaining entity that centers forests in helping to maintain and enhance the region’s ecological and economic prosperity.





Goldie's Wood Fern, Rowe. Photo: Sophie Argetsinger

Meeting the Goals of the Woodlands Partnership 2022–2032

After meeting for five years, the initial Advisory Committee was replaced in fall 2019 by the Partnership Board, whose membership is defined in the 2018 Massachusetts enabling legislation. The Partnership launched a small grant program to participating towns in 2019, and in 2022 is advertising its fourth grant round. Over \$1 million in grants have been distributed by the EOEEA to date, for projects ranging from town forest plans, trail building, and support for small businesses. The Partnership has also received two U.S. Forest Service grants totaling \$120,000 that have helped to leverage two state climate grants totaling over \$1.6 million to develop a new climate forestry program.

The State enabling legislation also called for hiring a non-governmental organization to serve as administrator, and in November 2020, the Board approved a contract between the EOEEA and the New England Forestry Foundation (NEFF) to serve as Administrative Agent for the Partnership, which runs through June 2025. Forming its five Standing Committees over the course of 2021 (when meetings were held virtually due to the COVID-19 pan-

demic), the Woodlands Partnership Board has continued to focus its near- and long-term objectives.

Ultimately, the envisioned federal designation would provide stable Federal and State funding and would also enable private fundraising for the Woodlands Partnership. This funding will be used to conserve forests, increase economic development related to sustainable forestry practices, forest-based business, and recreational tourism, improve the fiscal stability of municipalities, and preserve the quality of life in Northern Berkshire and Western Franklin Counties. The Partnership hopes to further these goals through securing reliable governmental funding, obtaining programmatic grants from government and other funding sources, and being an advocate for improving the fiscal stability of municipalities. We will continue to press our State and Federal legislative delegations to secure a reliable, annual source of funding for the operation of the Woodlands Partnership and its programs, funding that is indicated in the Partnership's enabling legislation.

Listed below are the primary goals of the Woodlands Partnership and programs we are considering in order to progress toward them.

GOAL 1: Conserve forestland while keeping it in private ownership to protect the region's rural character and enhance the role forests play in providing clean water and air, flood control, carbon sequestration and storage, and habitat protection in New England.

- Purchase development rights (conservation restrictions or CRs) from willing landowners committed to long-term sustainable forest management, which helps people to continue to own and care for their land instead of selling it for development or selling timber rights for unsustainable harvests.
- Provide technical assistance to landowners to foster sustainable forest management, wildlife habitat improvement, climate change resilience, woodland preservation, and to address the issue of tree diseases as well as invasive pests and plants.
- Promote research on sustainable forestry practices. Partner to increase research on sustainable /exemplary forestry practices in the region's diverse forests, ways to market and use local forest-based products, and to disseminate the knowledge from applied science that results.
- Enhance the ecological integrity of the region's forests in an era of rapid climate change, including evaluation of carbon credit programs and markets (verified to provide additionality of climate benefit) for private woodland owners.
- Appropriate acknowledgment and valuing of the role that old-growth forests play in carbon sequestration and providing ecosystem services in our forested landscapes.

GOAL 2: Increase economic development and expand employment by nurturing sustainable forest products, outdoor recreation, and natural resource and tourism-based businesses.

- Strengthen the marketing and branding of sustainable local forest products and ecotourism from the Northern Berkshires and Hilltowns.
- Provide assistance to improve sustainable tourism infrastructure and associated outdoor recreation businesses.
- Support research and development of new, innovative wood products.
- Increase sustainable natural resources-related local jobs, especially for younger residents to help invigorate communities for the future.

GOAL 3: Improve the fiscal stability of municipalities.

- Provide funding to participating towns for municipal services related to outdoor recreation and tourism, and to address governmental ownership of lands and forest conservation restriction programs related to local tax bases.
- Provide technical assistance to towns interested in developing carbon credit projects to improve stewardship and receive payments from their town forests.
- Advocate for equitable and sufficient Payment in Lieu of Taxes to compensate municipalities for State ownership, conservation restrictions, ecosystem services, and other impacts of sustainable practices on local tax bases.
- Secure sources of funding to support municipal services and tax bases while recognizing ecosystem services and benefits to the Commonwealth and larger region provided by our forests.

SECTION 1: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

GOAL 4: *Engage in public education and outreach.*

- Develop a collaboration with the Indigenous Peoples of the region to incorporate their participation and knowledge in management of the forests.
- Collaborate with educational institutions (pre-K through graduate) to promote forest conservation and sustainable forest land uses.
- Establish demonstration forests on town and private forests to inform the public about best management practices and how forest stewardship can enhance climate resilience and carbon storage.
- Build a multi-purpose Forest Center, beginning with an online, virtual Forest Center, where residents and visitors can learn about the benefits that forests provide, showcase local wood products, celebrate the Berkshires and Hilltowns, and promote sustainable outdoor recreation and natural resource-based tourism.



*Trail sign to The Cobbles, Cheshire.
Photo: Joseph Nowak.*

First Chair Leads Partnership Board toward a Sustainable Vision



Henry W. Art has brought his perspective as emeritus college professor to his role as the first Board Chair of the Woodlands Partnership. So far, he has recruited three different student teams to apply their intellectual energy and research skills to projects designed to advance goals of this regional consortium.

In fall 2021, two Williams College students interviewed stakeholders and explored potential sites and uses for a Forest Center as a flagship community and education resource for this heavily forested corner of the Commonwealth. In Spring 2022, three Conway School of Landscape Design students identified riparian restoration sites appropriate for climate-adapted tree-plantings in the Deerfield River watershed. And in summer 2022, a student from Williams College studied how much wood residue is produced from towns and utilities in the 21-town region, and how it might be better utilized.

Partnering with academic institutions both benefits the Woodlands Partnership and provides real-life learning opportunities for the students. "It's been an absolute joy to interact with the students," said Art.

One of the goals in forming the Partnership was to relieve burdens on Northwest Massachusetts towns, and to avoid any costs for their participation. "I think we've lived up to that promise," said Art, noting both the investment of \$1 million in state grants over the past three years, and the synergy of bringing together so many non-profits and agencies for common purpose.

The Robert F. Rosenberg Professor of Environmental Studies & Biology at Williams College from 1970 to 2020, Art started to teach right out of graduate school at Yale University. "We feel the Northern Berkshires and Williamstown are really home," said Art, who also serves with his local Conservation Commission and land trust. "I've lived here two-thirds of my life or more ... I came here at the age of 26 and this is really home."

Growing up in Evanston, Ill., Art camped with the Boy Scouts in Michigan and spent time exploring nature preserves in Cook County. He studied the biomass productivity of a sunken forest on the south shore of Fire Island, NY, authored wildflower guides, and later rejuvenated Williamstown's 2600-acre Hopkins Memorial Forest bordering New York and Vermont as a field research site. He is working on an oral history of Hopkins, dating back to its days as a farm in the early 20th century. He has always been interested in successional patterns that result from human impacts to the landscape and how biological communities respond. For Art, the Partnership brings together the people and the forested place where they live, in a vision for sustaining both.

Henry W. Art is a Rosenberg Professor Emeritus of Environmental Studies and Biology at Williams College. His research includes the investigation of long-term changes in successional relationships among species in the college-owned Hopkins Forest, and the distributional ecology of spring flora in Northern Berkshire County.