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Schor Conservation Area Master Plan

Red Rock (Town of Canaan),
New York



April 17, 2010

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Purpose and Organization

This Master Plan has been created to guide the development and management of the Schor Conservation Area during the next five years. The Plan's purpose is threefold: to record existing site opportunities and constraints; to document the proposed program and site design; and to establish the management goals for the site.

Columbia Land Conservancy (CLC) Master Plans are also intended to be working documents that respond to changing conditions. The CLC staff and Board of Trustees have established a policy to review and update Management Plans after a maximum five-year period. Thus, this Plan will be reviewed in the year 2015, or as conditions dictate.

This Plan is organized into three parts:

- I. Site Context and Analysis
- II. Site Design
- III. Land Management

I. Site Context and Analysis

See also: *Location Map*, Exhibit I.a

Protected Lands Context Map, Exhibit I.b

Aerial Map, Exhibit I.c

Topography Map, Exhibit I.d

Soils Map, Exhibit I.e

Site Analysis Map, Exhibit I.f

Overall Description

The Schor Conservation Area (Schor) is a 233-acre site owned by the Columbia Land Conservancy and located on Cemetery Road in Red Rock, an area within the town of Canaan in the northeast portion of Columbia County. Schor is located approximately 7 miles east of the Village of Chatham, and nearby the towns of Austerlitz and New Lebanon. It is also within a 15-minute drive of the Massachusetts Border. Both the I-90 corridor and Taconic State Parkway are nearby.

The Schor property is a scenic and varied landscape of fields, water resources and extensive forest land, along with a barn complex and residential buildings. A 1,450 foot

elevation overlook offers impressive views to the Catskill Mountains. The site is managed by CLC for passive, non-motorized public recreation, habitat conservation, and education. Its pastures continue to be farmed under a lease agreement.

Schor is the only publicly accessible land in Canaan, although it is nearby Beebe Hill and Harvey Mountain State Forests in Austerlitz, and appears to be part of that same large forest complex. It is also part of a conservation block consisting of 544 acres, most of which was previously owned by the late Jonathan Schor, a CLC Board member for many years. This includes the Rabe tradeland (79.5 acres) that was donated to CLC by Jon during his lifetime and sold with a conservation easement, and the Carlson tradeland (114 acres), a bequest that will be sold with a conservation easement. The Lane and Schwartz easement properties are also part of this conservation block.

In addition to donating conservation easements on portions of his land, Jon was a major advocate for publicly accessible lands, outdoor education and recreation programs. He died in 2004, having bequeathed 146.3 acres of easement-protected lands, known as Quailwood Two, to the Columbia Land Conservancy, and an additional 86.7 acres -- known as the Schor Home Farm and protected with a conservation easement -- to his farm manager. CLC purchased the latter property in 2006 and those two properties were joined to become the 233-acre Schor Conservation Area. The site was formally opened to the public in 2008.¹

Natural and Scenic Features

See also: *Schor Conservation Area Ecological Description*, Appendix A

Overview

The Schor Conservation Area resembles its surrounding landscape of farm fields, old fields and forests. Its own diverse habitats include extensive upland forests, water resources, meadows, and a large area of crest/ledge/talus habitat down slope from the site's highest point. The varied water resources include a large permanent pond -- "Jon's Pond, a 3+ acre spring-fed, earthen-dam pond -- eight small ponds, vernal pools, a small permanent stream and intermittent streams and seeps, swamp forests, and a small wet meadow. There are also actively grazed pastures, old fields, shrub land and red cedar woodland. The Farmscape Ecology Program has prepared an ecological study of Schor (January 2009) and these notes are largely based upon those observations.

The Farmscape Ecology report documents observations of more than 200 plant species, of which 168 are native. The regionally rare ostrich fern and regionally uncommon ragged-fringed orchid can be found there as well as plant species listed by New York State as exploitably vulnerable. Due to the thin, acidic forest soils, there are relatively few spring

¹ It is noted that as CLC now owns the Quailwood Two and Home Farm properties, those easements must now be conveyed to another holder.

ephemerals, although they become more dense and diverse at the bottom of slopes. A list of all observed plants by habitat is included in the *Ecological Description*, Appendix A.

The meadows support breeding bobolinks, while Eastern bluebirds use the nest boxes installed along hedgerows. Forest species typical of larger forest tracts can also be found, suggesting that Schor is part of a much larger forest complex, probably including the State forests nearby. The forested water sources apparently provide good habitat for breeding salamanders and wood frogs, although these are subject to predation in some circumstances.

Soils

The surficial geology of the Conservation Area is primarily glacial till. The bedrock is mostly Austerlitz Phyllite and Rensselaer Graywacke derived from the Taconics. It is exposed in the crests and ledges found in the sloped southeastern portion of the site. The site soils are mostly acid, stony, channery silt loams that are not well-suited for agriculture due to slope, stoniness, droughtiness or seasonal wetness. An exception to this is a small area in a pasture on the western boundary along Cemetery Road, where there is an area of deep silt loam classified as prime farmland (where drained).

Forested Areas

The site has largely reforested since the 19th century. The youngest forest areas are dominated by sugar maple, sometimes with red oak. Other areas are a mix of white pine and deciduous species, or are dominated by hemlock. The Farmscape Ecology Program has classified several different forest types on site: Oak Maple, Mixed Forest, Sugar Maple Forest, Hemlock Forest, Pine Forest and Swamp Forest.

The Oak-Maple Forest also contains species like white ash and occasional pine, birch, hickories, black cherry and hemlock, as well as understory trees like hop-hornbeam, striped maple and serviceberry. The canopy limits the shrub and herbaceous layers, although weedy species are found along trails and other open areas. The Mixed Pine forest is similar but has a high density of white pine. Both forest types prefer the same thin, rocky, acid soils.

Areas with the greatest concentration of pines, white and red, have been designated Pine Forest, but they also include many of the deciduous species found elsewhere. The Hemlock Forest covers the western and northern slopes and also includes many of the same deciduous species, with Striped maple as the most common understory tree. Blueberry and rosebud azalea can be found there along with herbaceous plants like wintergreen and trailing arbutus.

The Sugar Maple Forest occupies somewhat richer, moist soils and has a very high density of that species. The main difference here is the richer herbaceous layer, with trout lily, spotted jewelweed and white snakeroot, among other species. There is also invasive garlic

mustard. One of the two Swamp Forest areas, described as the most ecologically interesting, has peat moss, high bush blueberry, royal fern, buttonbush and rosebud azalea. It is also likely to be a breeding area for wood frogs and spotted and Jefferson salamanders. The other swamp forest is a more typical red-maple swamp that is also likely to be an amphibian breeding area.

The Crest/Ledge/Talus rocky outcrops show lichens, a diverse tree community, and an uncommon pale corydalis found near the overlook. Other herbaceous plants there include columbine, hepatica, wood violets, a few fragile ferns, and Pennsylvania sedge and native grasses.

Meadows

An old field meadow nearest to the barn complex has mostly non-native species along with native goldenrod and milkweed. Another field south of there has a rich mix of native species including steplebush and three goldenrods. The southernmost old field is more advanced successional and has large numbers of woody plants along with grasses and wildflowers. The wet meadow south of "Jon's Pond" has common wetland plants such as Joe-Pye weed and purple-stemmed aster, as well as ferns -- sensitive, cinnamon and interrupted ferns and the regionally rare ostrich fern -- which can survive there without pressure from grazing cattle.

Birds

The Farmscape Ecology Program observed 35 different bird species, 18 of them within the Oak-Maple Forest. While none of the species are exceedingly rare, it's clear that forest birds are dominant on the site and they include several that are typical of larger forest tracts. As mentioned, the bobolink was found to be nesting in the pastures and its presence there argues for maintaining the current field management practices of extensive rather than intensive rotational grazing, and an appropriate mowing schedule (see III. Land Management, Natural Resource Management Objectives). A complete list of observed bird species is included in the *Ecological Description*, Appendix A.

Amphibians

Green frogs and bullfrogs were documented at "Jon's Pond," however, the lack of other species there is no doubt due to the stocked fish. The Farmscape Ecology Program recommends limiting shoreline mowing and permitting emergent vegetation to develop that would shelter amphibians. This is borne out by observations at the most vegetated small permanent pond on the site, where a large concentration of amphibians was found. The pasture ponds show great variability in amphibian populations based upon the specific conditions at each. For example, one that receives run-off from Cemetery Road was covered with algae during their field visit and had no signs of amphibian eggs. A variety of salamanders were located in ditches and the permanent and intermittent streams. The site's

vernal pools showed a lot of evidence of wood frogs and spotted salamanders, the most common vernal pool amphibians.

Cultural History

Much of the Schor site would probably have been cleared for sheep pasture by the early 1800's, with the possible exception of areas of hemlock forest on the steeper slopes. Aerial photography from 1948 shows that the current pastures were already well-established by that time. Other open areas shown have since begun to revert to shrub land and red cedar woodland.

Jon Schor began visiting the area in the 1970's and purchased the original 250-acre farm in 1979, naming it Quailwood Two Farm. It was formerly known as the old "LaMoree Farm," which was a sheep farm until the 1920's. An early stone house foundation and well are still found on what was formerly an early town road (near the present day parking area). The current property entrance and driveway were also part of the "Old Town Road." It continued all the way to County Route 24, although CLC maintains only that portion from the entrance to the present-day pond pavilion. The rest of the road has been abandoned by the town.

Jon formerly lived in a cabin near the old town road until it burned in the late 1970's. He eventually built two houses on the property, one serving as his primary residence and one for a caretaker. Jon also constructed three barns that housed horses, hay, equipment and a workshop. At one point he raised pigs and later focused on Scottish Highland cattle.

"Jon's pond" was constructed in the 1970's for recreation use and wildlife habitat. Jon also built a pavilion there for picnics and small gatherings and encouraged the Red Rock community to use the property, particularly the pond. Over the years it became a favorite visiting spot for neighbors to swim and fish and was the location of Jon's well-known July 4th picnic, complete with fireworks and children's activities and an annual CLC-sponsored Father's Day fishing program that CLC still offers.

When CLC received the property by bequest in 2005, it was necessary to rethink the public swimming use. When a public entity owns a property with public swimming, it is subject to regulation by the County and State as a "public beach." This imposes requirements for having lifeguards, an emergency telephone, public restrooms, as well as slope, depth and water quality standards. CLC obtained an engineering report from the firm Crawford and Associates and worked for two years with the Columbia County Health Department and the New York State Department of Health to obtain the necessary permits.

After extensive study of the water quality and flow, it was determined that a well and aerator would be needed in order to meet State regulations. At that point, CLC's Board of Trustees decided that the necessary improvements and maintenance to meet the requirements of a "public beach" were too costly. Instead, funds would be allocated for public access improvements. CLC staff held a number of gatherings and meetings with

neighbors and community members to explain the State's requirements and why CLC would be unable to continue public swimming at the pond. "No Swimming" signs are posted at the pavilion and the beach area has been reseeded to allow grass to grow along the shore.

Jon also created many trails throughout the property for logging operations and, later, for recreational use with his 4-wheeled vehicles when illness impaired his mobility. These trails form the basis for the present-day trail system.

Existing Structures and Recent Use

The current property includes the following man-made features and structures:

- Driveway, accessed from Cemetery Road
- Parking area, with stone/split-rail fencing, a gate to control vehicular access and a pedestrian portal, installed in the summer of 2008.
- Site sign and Information Kiosk, with a stone bench, installed in 2008.
- "Jon's Pond," a 3+ acre earthen dam pond, and several smaller constructed ponds.
- Pond pavilion, with stone barbecue.
- Trail system and related structures (two bridges). (Two logging roads have been abandoned in areas now managed for wildlife habitat.) Two farm gates remain.
- Barn complex that supports CLC's public conservation area program and provides storage space for the education and outreach programs, consisting of:
 - Large barn used by CLC for equipment and tools, with an attached run-in area that houses supplies;
 - Large heated barn with a woodworking/repair shop, and storage space. This barn also supports a relay antenna that is used by the Chatham Rescue Squad;
 - Trailer barn (which also provides free storage for a training trailer owned by the Columbia County Fire Chief Association);
- Two leased residences, one of them leased to two staff members

There is also livestock fencing associated with the farm pastures, which are leased to a neighbor who works with local farmers. They graze dairy and beef cattle there from spring through autumn.

In 2007, CLC's Board of Trustees approved the installation of an underground utility line at the Schor Conservation Area to provide power to the Thomas Schwarz residence, which will be located on his adjacent property (which is protected with a conservation easement

held by CLC, donated in December 2006). The utility line is located along the western edge of the field south of the barn complex.

II. **Site Design**

See also: *Site Plan*, Exhibit II.a

Overall Design Concepts

1. Maintain and build upon existing features. The Schor site offers a range of outdoor experiences and educational opportunities with its water resources, mild to challenging trails through diverse terrain and forest habitats, a significant viewpoint, opportunities for historic interpretation, and active agriculture. Future improvements will focus on the existing site features while continuing to protect site habitats.
2. Provide for year-round passive recreation opportunities. “Jon’s Pond” is popular as a local fishing spot, and the conservation area is well-suited for year-round hiking as well as snow-shoeing and cross-country skiing, bird watching and nature study.
3. Maintain agricultural use. CLC is enthusiastic to have opportunities to demonstrate agriculture’s compatibility with conservation. This is also a continuation of the historic use of the land including under Jon Schor’s ownership.
4. Provide education programs for all ages and abilities. Jon Schor helped establish and support CLC’s education programs and the site is used frequently by CLC as an outdoor classroom for programs ranging from wildlife observation to water quality testing. Jon, in later years, was partially disabled due to illness. Part of his legacy should be the promotion of access to nature for all abilities.
5. Maintain as home base for PCA Program. While having structures to maintain is a serious undertaking for CLC, the Schor barn complex provides a base of operations for the public conservation area program as well as additional storage for the education and outreach programs. The cost of maintaining the complex is now budgeted across the full public conservation area program.
6. Maintain links to property’s historic community. Jon Schor was a well-loved member of the Red Rock community and many neighbors have strong connections to his land that CLC continues to foster.
7. Manage public access with other uses. The Schor site combines more public and private uses than other CLC conservation areas, including public recreation and education, residential, agriculture, and organizational uses. This combination creates potential additional management issues that may arise from time to time.

Proposed Site Uses

Recreational Uses. Non-motorized recreation, e.g.

- Walking, hiking
- Cross-country skiing
- Snow-shoeing
- Cross-country running
- Birding
- Boating (portable, non-motorized only)
- Fishing
- Hunting (by CLC approved monitors only)

Educational Uses. Small group adult, youth and children's programs, e.g.

- Nature study and wildlife observation
- Access-for-All programs
- Conservation education
- Astronomy
- Water quality testing
- Site history interpretation

Agricultural

- Pasture
- Hay
- Community Supported Agriculture
- Demonstration farm
- Agricultural education

Organizational

- Public Lands Crew storage and staging area, other program storage
- Staff housing
- Income stream from leases

Specific Design Proposals

Site Access & Trailhead

- Driveway: The Schor PCA utilizes the property's existing dirt/stone driveway. For ideal management, the roadway would be re-crowned to improve drainage. In the short-term, CLC will seek funding for repairs to potholes, ditches, etc. It is recommended that the "parking-to-pavilion" section of the driveway be designated for pedestrian use, with appropriate signage and with limited vehicular access only for Access-for-All programs, events and maintenance use.
- Kiosk: Staff will work with volunteers for planting/transplanting around the Kiosk area (2010).

Trails

The existing trail system, with several loop trails, travels through the forested parts of the property on moderate to challenging slopes. Two featured trails are a Pond Loop trail, and the Red Trail that climbs through hemlock-forested slopes to the 1,450 foot summit where there are excellent views to the Catskill Mountains and surrounding farmland.

- No new trails will be created, in order to provide and protect habitat. There are two abandoned logging roads that should remain off-limit for public use and be allowed to re-vegetate. Trail blockers should be installed if/where needed.
- The Pond Loop trail experiences extreme wetness at times and should be evaluated for the installation of bog bridges. In the long run, some areas may require the installation of coir logs, "burritos," or similar improvements.

Site Elements

The pond pavilion is a valuable amenity for CLC programs and events, particularly the Access-for-All programs, and would benefit from improvements.

- The ground surface will be augmented and compacted to improve accessibility (2010).
- The open sides above the rafters will be closed with barn board, and barn board panels will be built for changing information displays.
- The picnic tables should be replaced with similar lightweight, portable models. This should be marketed as a donor opportunity.

No other new site elements are planned at this time, although new benches can be placed if a donor specifically requests placement at Schor.

Site Interpretation

The site offers several opportunities for site interpretation.

- Placement of interpretive signage at the remains of the old stone house foundation and well (near the parking area) will tie the property to its 19th and 20th century history.
- The location of the agricultural fields, along Cemetery Road, is an opportunity to post signage describing the agricultural uses and how they are managed compatibly with other site uses. Staff also support working with the farmer tenants to develop education programs related to the site agriculture.
- A sign at the summit will interpret those views.
- CLC supports devising ways to honor Jon Schor's life on the site. This might include programs and information on forest management; permanent and temporary displays that explain his contributions to conservation in Columbia County; more program emphasis on health and accessibility; etc.

Structures

- CLC has determined that the barn complex is valuable as a home base for the Public Lands Crew and public conservation area program and it should continue to be reserved for that use.
- All structures require ongoing maintenance. Immediate repairs in 2010 include:
 - Roof repairs on the equipment/workshop barn and the tractor barn.
 - Disposal of oil drums and oil tanks from behind the barns.

Future repairs include, as follows:

- Blocking holes in the tractor barn, replacing its doors, and adding a layer of ground stone for dust management.
- A concrete slab should be installed in the trailer barn for storing salt and sand.

Design Language

The design of site elements is consistent with those at other CLC-owned public conservation areas in order to establish a consistent site and stewardship identity. This includes:

- Locally-harvested, rustic Eastern Red Cedar for pole-mounted signs and the Information Kiosk.
- Cedar construction also for trail bridges and bog bridges.
- Split-rail fencing to demarcate areas such as ditch drop-offs, as well as trail blockers.
- Rustic benches of Cedar with embedded dedication markers.

- Trails are unimproved except for initial clearing and grubbing to a six-foot width and ongoing maintenance to maintain clearance.
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III. Land Management

See also: *Land Management Map*, Exhibit III.a

Overall Management Goals

- Protect habitat while providing for public access. Trails are limited to the existing trail network -- no new trails will be built and two former logging roads have been abandoned and should remain closed. Trail blockers and signage should be used to deter pedestrian off-trail use. At the same time, environmental education offers opportunities to foster a land conservation and stewardship ethic.
- Manage public access with private uses. Signage should be installed as needed to demarcate public and private access areas, including the agricultural uses. Each internal “boundary” represents an opportunity for education and information or interpretation. The public areas should have sufficient access and interest to meet the public’s expectations – trails, gathering places, active and passive activities, educational opportunities.
- Integrate agriculture with public uses. CLC welcomes the opportunity to demonstrate the compatibility of agriculture and conservation. Agriculture should be an integral part of the educational and interpretive programs at the site.
- Honor the site history and Jon Schor legacy. By maintaining the connections between the present and the past, including Jon Schor’s life and contributions to the site, CLC can fulfill its mission to work with the community to make “connections between people and the land.” An especially rich opportunity is offered given Jon’s later illness and disability, which never prevented him from enjoying the property. CLC can honor this through programs that highlight the health and healing properties of nature.

Natural Resource Management Objectives

- Incorporate the specific recommendations in the Farmscape Ecology Program’s *Ecological Description* report, copy attached.
- Monitor and protect fragile habitats:
 - Develop a program to map all vernal pools and rare plant populations, working with partners, volunteers or interns.
 - In particular, look for, map and protect populations of the ragged-fringed orchid.

- Monitor the swamp forest and crest/ledge/talus areas as these are the site's most interesting habitats for plant conservation. Additional signage may be needed to deter off-trail walking.
- Fill tire ruts (from past use) in forest areas to deter egg-laying there where egg development is unlikely due to predation.
- Work with the farm partners on best management practices for ponds and pastures for habitat, nesting and breeding.
 - Determine the optimum mowing schedule that will also be compatible with the agricultural uses. Recommended practice has been to mow fields only after at least the first week of July to protect nesting birds, especially bobolinks, which are declining nationally. However, recent studies also support the safety of one mow before June, followed by mowing in mid-August or later.
 - If possible, maintain the current practice of extensive grazing (throughout the fields) rather than intensive rotational grazing, which uniformly reduces grass height making pastures unsuitable for nesting/breeding.
 - Avoid extensive applications of agro-chemicals around the pasture ponds.
- Allow large areas of the pond shorelines to re-vegetate. This can be accomplished at the pasture ponds by fencing off portions of the shorelines to limit livestock encroachment.
- Maintain vegetative buffers along streams (100' for the perennial stream).
- At "Jon's Pond," maintain limited shoreline fishing access (the existing 50'-60' area), monitor the former beach areas for erosion, and monitor and control re-vegetation on the back side of the earthen dam.
- No fish stocking in small permanent ponds to preserve habitat for amphibian development.
- As possible, control populations of invasive and exotic species including in pond areas.
- Leave snags standing in forest areas where they are no threat, and not within fall distance of trails.

Public Access Management Objectives

- Optimize ADA accessibility as a site objective.
- Expand interpretive features on site to educate the public about its natural resources and history.
- Post signage, install trail blockers or other measures to limit public access to fragile habitats.

- Partner with volunteers for site monitoring and maintenance.
- Reserve house rentals for staff and/or a site caretaker, if possible.
- Explore opportunities for new agricultural uses that will support the CLC mission.

Constructed Features Management Objectives

Entrance and Parking

- Monitor driveway and parking area conditions seasonally.
- Address ongoing drainage and grading needs annually.
- Monitor need for snow fencing along driveway.
- Maintain limited use only of the “parking-to-pavilion” section.
- Seek funding to re-crown the driveway for a more permanent solution to drainage problems.

Trails & Public Areas

- Maintain the current trail layout.
- Monitor and maintain the accessible routes.
- Maintain minimum clearances and remove snags.
- Evaluate and address wet trail locations. Close trails temporarily if needed and evaluate need for permanent repairs.
- Maintain and trim bench and view areas.
- Allow closed trails to re-vegetate.
- Maintain trail log at Information Kiosk.

Structures & Site Elements

- Make repairs per the Site Plan and re-evaluate needs annually.
- Maintain changing display materials at Information Kiosk and Pavilion.
- Reserve barn complex primarily for CLC use.
- Monitor condition of all signs and site elements and repair promptly.
- Market picnic table donor opportunity.

