

Mad River Matters

Friends of the Mad River



Redefining Stewardship

Friends often uses the word *stewardship* to describe our work planting trees, helping landowners and property managers 'spongify' the Valley with resilient Storm Smart practices, and collaborating with partners to build an ethic of care for and connection with the natural ecosystems in which we exist. But the idea of stewardship has a deeper history than our work alone. We understand that how people think about stewardship is informed by an environmental movement that is all-too-often grounded in the limited perspective of a small group of people. Recognizing this complicated history offers us an opportunity to redefine stewardship in more equitable ways.

The environmentalist and author, Wendell Berry, wrote about the

"good work" of environmental stewardship as something rooted in, "the real names of the environment...the names of rivers and river valleys; creeks, ridges, and mountains; towns and cities; lakes, woodlands, lanes, roads, creatures, and people." He wrote those words in response to what he called the "juiceless, abstract intellectuality of the universities." As an environmental organization, Friends of the Mad River is more inclined to see the concepts of ecology as full of life. But the point is well taken, that it is our connection to the place as we know it and as we live within it that drives us to do the "good work" of caring for it. Another famed environmentalist of the 20th century, Aldo Leopold, wrote that,

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Redefining Stewardship

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"we can only be ethical in relation to something we can see, understand, feel, love, or otherwise have faith in." These close connections work as regular reminders that nature is not something 'out there' as much as it is something found and cared for within and between all of us.

While the insights of Berry and Leopold are valuable, it is important to recognize that the environmental movement in this country has often fallen short of these ideals. Too often the conservation community has kept a narrow view of just which connections are worthwhile. If the personal names we use each day are where we find the meaning that lets us do good work, then the role conservationists have played in silencing indigenous voices who called these rivers and mountains by other names for thousands of years is all the more tragic.

Stewardship, unfortunately, can have the ring of arrogance about it; that what is before us is an estate to be managed or an account to be balanced, that it is a supervisory arrangement, and that the steward is master of their domain. Stewardship risks becoming the work of a few experts who know 'what is best.'

"Know the ways of the ones who take care of you, so that you may take care of them. Introduce yourself. Be accountable as the one who comes asking for life. Ask permission before taking. Abide by the answer.

Never take the first. Never take the last. Take only what you need.

Take only that which is given.

Never take more than half. Leave some for others. Harvest in a way that minimizes harm. Use it respectfully. Never waste what you have taken. Share.

Give thanks for what you have been given. Give a gift, in reciprocity for what you have taken.

Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever."

– Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*

There is danger here – that the environmental movement overlooks the knowledge of those outside the expert inner circle, and that the experts become so alienated from the world as it is lived day to day that the public doesn't give them credence where it is due.

We can be more forgiving of our definition of stewardship if we move away from dominion and turn towards the personal connections, the pride in place, our responsibility for ourselves, and reciprocity with others and the planet. If we lean into exploring our connections with each other and place, and how we are not separate from our wild neighbors but part of an unfolding story of curiosity, discovery, and care for the world around us, stewardship can be a more honest reflection of each person's limitations around knowing what is best and more accurate in describing the deeply personal and contextual way that stewardship is actually done.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass; Indigenous*

Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants, writes that, "We need acts of restoration, not only for polluted waters and degraded lands, but also for our relationship to the world. We need to restore honor to the way we live, so that when we walk through the world we don't have to avert our eyes with shame, so that we can hold our heads up high and receive the respectful acknowledgment of the rest of the earth's beings." Here, Kimmerer offers us an avenue

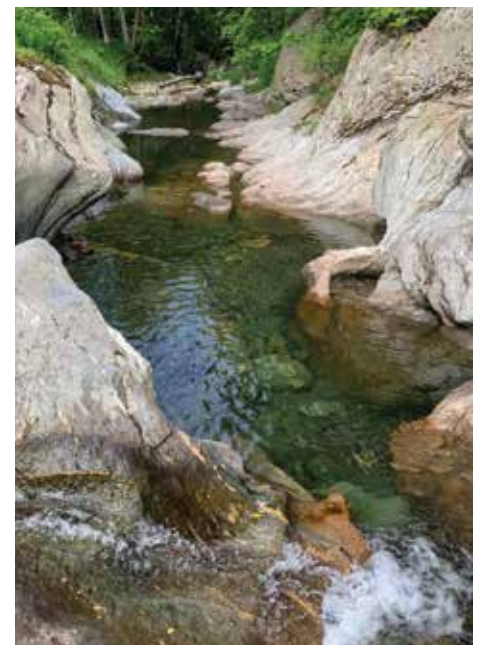
Friends of the Mad River



A mother and daughter team plant a tree along the Mad River in Waitsfield

Front top: GMVS students and community volunteers planted trees in late October

Front right: Ira Shadis, Stewardship Manager, and Rick Hungerford, volunteer, after a planting along the Mad River in Moretown



Freeman Brook during a Mad River Watch site visit in July

Annie Parsons

forward that ties environmental and social justice together, that recognizes that the historical harms that degrade our environment also degrade our ability to respect one another and, crucially, that our mistreatment of other beings sends us down a dangerous route in which it is all too easy to forget the costs of our way of life. Kimmerer writes that, "Each person, human or no, is bound to every other in a reciprocal relationship. Just as all beings have a duty to me, I have a duty to them. If an animal gives its life to feed me, I am in turn bound to support its life. If I receive a stream's gift of pure water, then I am responsible for returning a gift in kind. An integral part of a human's education is to know those duties and how to perform them."

As Friends seeks to stay rooted in our special relationship with the Mad River, the many tributaries that feed it, and the valley that it has formed, we find meaning in this alternate definition of stewardship. It is the same meaning we find in the joy and curiosity of our Mad River Watch volunteers as they visit their field sites, in the imagining of



Renee Greenlee

A Harwood Middle School student shows off their leaf rubbing created during a Friends hosted watershed exploration

the future floodplain forest at the Austin parcel in Waitsfield, or in the conversations with property owners aimed at a 'spongier,' more resilient Valley. Our role as stewards is defined, not by some master plan of environmental conservation, but by the relationships we have with partners like the Mad River libraries, Mad River Path, Sugarbush Resort, and the towns, to name just a few. And yes, we do keep one foot in the world of environmental science, of

data, and academics. But not because it is some "juiceless, abstract intellectuality," but because these concepts are part of a vital connection to the world beyond our valley walls. By supporting this bridge between the close connections we foster in the Mad River Valley and the wisdom and expertise of those beyond, we are able to find opportunities to act, to do good work, and meet our duty to live in reciprocity head on.

Spotlight on a Friend

A Dynamic Duo

This summer, Julie and Ingrid Westervelt, a mother-daughter Mad River Watch volunteer duo, became interested in the plants they were encountering at their Warren Covered Bridge MRW site. To aid their study and share their observations, they collected and displayed physical examples of plants. Julie noted, "Many are common plants we see along our local roadsides, and we were curious to know more about them. We were pleasantly surprised to find a good mix of native species from flowers such as Common Boneset and St. John's wort to trees such as Balsam Poplar and Sugar Maple and non-natives such as Smooth Brome grass and Chicory to Clematis and Rugosa Rose." Julie and Ingrid visited their field site near the Warren Covered Bridge six times over the course of the summer and contributed valuable information to the program.



Friends of the Mad River

Julie and Ingrid Westervelt and their collected plants

Stewardship in Action

Learning, Conserving, Celebrating

Restoring Forests and Floodplains

The health of the river and the communities of people and wildlife that live along it are intimately tied to the surrounding landscape. A century ago, the Mad River Valley was mostly deforested. The forests that have recovered since that time have become a vital part of life in our community. We expect to see the bursting of color each fall. We find shade and cool mountain streams in the heat of summer. Each spring, the forests soak up runoff and rain that would otherwise lead to costly erosion and flooding. And in winter, thoughts of snow covered pine boughs and maple syrup dance in our heads.

We have choices to make about how we manage our forests in the 21st century. Luckily, we have a lot of history to learn from and don't have to make those choices (or plant those trees) alone!

Thanks to the hard work of some hearty volunteers, we were able to plant a few hundred native trees and shrubs at the end of October. We kicked off the fun on a crisp Saturday morning by partnering with the Waitsfield Conservation Commission and a cadre of well-seasoned volunteers to plant 100 trees at the Austin Parcel in Waitsfield. Later that afternoon, with support from some Green Mountain Valley School students, we planted another 50 trees as part of a riparian buffer project upstream of Waitsfield Village. Then, on Sunday, we put another 100 trees and shrubs in the ground to transition lawn back to forest in the Waitsfield foothills. We closed out our planting season a few days later with the help of a veteran volunteer and an energized Harwood High School student by



Friends of the Mad River

Dozens of new trees at Waitsfield's Austin Parcel this fall

planting 50 trees to restore a riparian buffer in Moretown.

Most of the land in the Valley, and almost all the land where reforestation would prove helpful, is privately held. These projects are based on a sound, scientific understanding of the benefits of

connected forests and healthy riparian buffers. But they can't happen without an investment in a healthy watershed made by individual landowners. A single tree doesn't make a forest and it takes all of us working together across the landscape to realize the benefits these trees are offering.



Friends of the Mad River

Richard Czaplinski, Friends Board Member and no stranger to hard work for river stewardship

Storm Smart

Since 2018, Friends' Storm Smart program has been working with property owners and managers to find opportunities to 'spongify' the landscape, to sink water into the ground where it lands before it can exacerbate erosion and flooding downhill and downstream.

Each property shows a different aspect of the Valley's geology and history. Some are high up on ledges of bedrock, others on sandy banks of ancient glacial lakes, and others in the floodplains of the Mad as it courses today. As a result, each of us has a unique role to play in building a more resilient community.

This July, we teamed up with the Mad River Path to install a rain garden along a new section of the Path in Irasville. This area receives runoff from a nearby field

and parking area, as well as from the Path itself. The rain garden captures and absorbs that runoff before it can lead to further erosion of the steep bank just downhill. The erosion had been sending sediment and other pollutants to a nearby wetland. The new rain garden serves double duty in support of biodiversity by reducing the pollutants reaching the wetland and because it was made using native, pollinator friendly plant species.

#stewardMRV

This summer and spring, Friends joined as a partner in the #stewardMRV initiative to support the direct care of a handful of overburdened recreational access points, while also encouraging a Valley-wide stewardship ethic. Friends played a key role in bringing a conservation perspective to the project led by the MRV Chamber of Commerce. The initiative's early successes included regular trash collection and improved bathroom facilities at several sites, enhanced

collaboration between partner groups' volunteer site stewards, and strong support from local businesses and municipalities. The effort was a good example of the collaboration that lets this community tackle difficult challenges and it laid a strong foundation for sustained conversations about encouraging a valley-wide stewardship ethic among residents and visitors. Partners included the MRV Recreation District, the MRV Planning District, the Mad River Path, the Mad River Riders, and towns.

The New Mad River Watch

The summer of 2021 saw the relaunch of one of our flagship programs. For 30 years the Mad River Watch program has served to inform Friends and the MRV community about the quality of the water that runs down our tributaries and through the main stem of the Mad River itself. In the fall and winter of 2020/21, Friends staff and a team of dedicated board members began the process of updating and expanding Mad River Watch. We worked closely with Becky Tharp, a scientist and expert in water quality monitoring, to ensure the data we collected would answer the questions we were asking and that the program would continue to add value for this community for years to come. Together, we developed a multi-year plan to roll out the new program.

The first phase of the new Mad River Watch began in earnest in May as we trained volunteers in the new fieldwork protocols. During their training and throughout the summer, volunteers learned to use a mobile app to record data, practiced in-the-field techniques for measuring phosphate, nitrate,

.....
**Millbrook is rushing
Too loud to hear any birds
Just water, water**
Haiku, by Ruth Lacey, July, 2021
.....

and nitrite, took hundreds of photos to track change over time, observed the presence of wildlife, invasive species, and human impact, and took action to steward their field sites. Many of our volunteers also connected with their artistic side, drawing pictures, recording videos, capturing audio recordings of bird songs, writing poems, and reflecting on the connections they felt with their field site.

Overall, in 2021, 19 teams of volunteers – ages two to 82 – recorded data and observed nature at 21 river and stream sites across the watershed six times throughout the summer.

Plans for Next Year

As we move into 2022, we will continue to learn right alongside our volunteers while also working with Becky Tharp to make updates to our field protocols that will lead to high quality, useful data. Phase

two of Mad River Watch will feature new "Sentinel Sites" along the main stem of the river where we'll employ a different set of protocols, aimed at learning more in spring and fall and benefiting from high quality laboratory data. These sites will contribute to the deep dataset the last 30 years have established and help paint a picture of a river changing through time.

We are deeply appreciative of the generous sponsorship of Lawson's Finest Liquids as we learn alongside our volunteers and build a robust program for the future.



Annie Parsons

Young Mad River Watch volunteers test Freeman Brook for pollutants

Building a Climate Resilient Valley

For decades, Friends has worked to support the health of the Mad River, its tributaries, and the Valley that holds them. Yet, the work we do locally does not happen in a vacuum. Years of greenhouse gas emissions have inextricably altered the global climate. What this looks like for our community is defined, in part, by the trends expected across the Northeast. Over the last half-century, the average temperature, precipitation, and the number of days of heavy precipitation have all gone up. We have seen changes to how much, where, and how often it rains - leaving the Mad River Valley community vulnerable to super storms like Irene or months of summer drought. However, the changes seen are not limited to the weather alone. Our water quality, forest integrity, wildlife health, agricultural economy, recreational opportunities, public health, and the shape and equity of our communities are also impacted. A changing climate affects everything from the tops of our ridges to the Mad River itself.

As the climate and landscape change, the community has the opportunity to change too, to reduce our vulnerabilities and build our resilience. How we adapt has become the question of the day, the year, the decade. The recent 2021 Vermont Climate Assessment's headline announced quite clearly that "Climate Change is Here." The necessity of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and adopting renewable energy practices remain critically important for our future. Yet, the complex and interconnected way

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Leahy Staff

A team of MRV community members with Senator and Marcelle Leahy at the 2015 Leahy Environmental Summit where they explored how they could help the Valley become more flood resilient. This team soon became the Ridge to River taskforce.

that climate change impacts our lives will test just how resilient, adaptive, and regenerative the systems we depend on each day really are.

As part of Friends' 30th anniversary, we made a pivot to addressing climate change and its many implications head on. We also happened to be stepping into the start of a global pandemic. While our initial plans to host climate focused community events were put on stand-by, the pandemic gave us a chance to take stock of what's happening in our own backyards.

A key piece of our climate pivot was aimed at fostering conversations about climate change within this community. While we had hoped to host these forums in person, we found opportunities to begin this process digitally. We worked with a researcher to learn more about

the environmental, economic, and demographic realities that climate change is bringing to the Mad River Valley. We built and expanded critical relationships with partners in the Valley's education, conservation, and recreation sectors. We hosted a virtual community-building workshop series to foster expertise in regenerative thinking. The pandemic has given us a crash course in adapting to changing circumstances and we will take those lessons forward as we focus on climate change.

Ridge to River

Since 2015, the Ridge to River Coalition has found success supporting strategic clean water and flood resilience actions in the Mad River Valley. In addition to fostering communication and collaboration across the watershed – among planning commissions, selectboards, road crews, and engaged community members – the 5-town coalition laid the foundation for the Storm Smart program and ongoing stormwater

mitigation planning and construction efforts. This spring and summer, members of the coalition came together to recognize the strong ties between clean water, flood resilience, and the broader picture of how this Valley may be impacted from a changing climate. Seeing an opportunity to use their established 5-town structure and their experience doing excellent flood resilience planning and turning it into action, the group considered broadening their scope. Over the winter, Ridge to River participants will consider next steps as they seek to adapt and craft a vision and plan for climate resilience in the Mad River Valley.

A critical part of this effort is the inclusion of broad and diverse voices and ideas. Are you interested in joining with neighbors across our 5-town watershed as part of the



Julian Washington

A Barred Owl perches on a winter branch

Ridge to River Coalition and working together to build our community's resilience to climate change?

Get Involved!

Fostering conversations about climate change within the MRV community is a key piece of Friends' climate focus. **But, we need your help!** Hearing about how you have

experienced climate and landscape change so far, what concerns you, what you want to learn, and what resilience opportunities most excite you will help Friends frame conversations that are relevant for you and the rest of this community. Change brings questions, but it also reminds us of where we have been and what we cherish most. By sharing your important input with Friends, you help paint a fuller picture of what a changing climate and landscape looks like in the Mad River Valley.

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Share & engage at:
www.friendsofthemadriver.org/CLIMATE

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Welcome, Eve Frankel!

Friends of the Mad River is deeply appreciative of all the supporters who donate, volunteer, engage, and those who become new board members. Just as the Mad River pulses through the heart of our community, the work of caring for our beloved water resource and the lands that surround it, requires the passionate support of our community. We are thrilled to introduce another new board member, one of four new additions this year who have committed to stewarding the Mad River Valley's healthy land and clean water for the community and future generations.

Eve Frankel (Waitsfield) married her husband next to the Mad River nearly 25 years ago and raised their family along its banks and many tributaries, paddling, fishing, and swimming. As a communications professional, who spent six years as part of the *Seven Days* newspaper staff, nearly a decade in the renewable energy industry, and is currently part of The Nature Conservancy team, as their strategic communications director, Eve is passionate about the science of storytelling to advance climate action, and land and water protection. Eve and her family live across the road from a wonderful Mad River swimming hole that shall remain unnamed.



Tom Rogers



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Friends is dedicated to stewarding the Mad River Valley's healthy land and clean water for our community and for future generations. We build diverse partnerships of neighbors, businesses, towns, and other organizations. Together, we learn about the health of the land and water; conserve our natural resources; and celebrate this special place.

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HEALTHY **LAND**. CLEAN **WATER**. VIBRANT **COMMUNITY**.

Nicole Krottinger



Climate Change is Here

How has a changing climate and landscape affected you?

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