



FOREST CHARACTER AREA

Overview

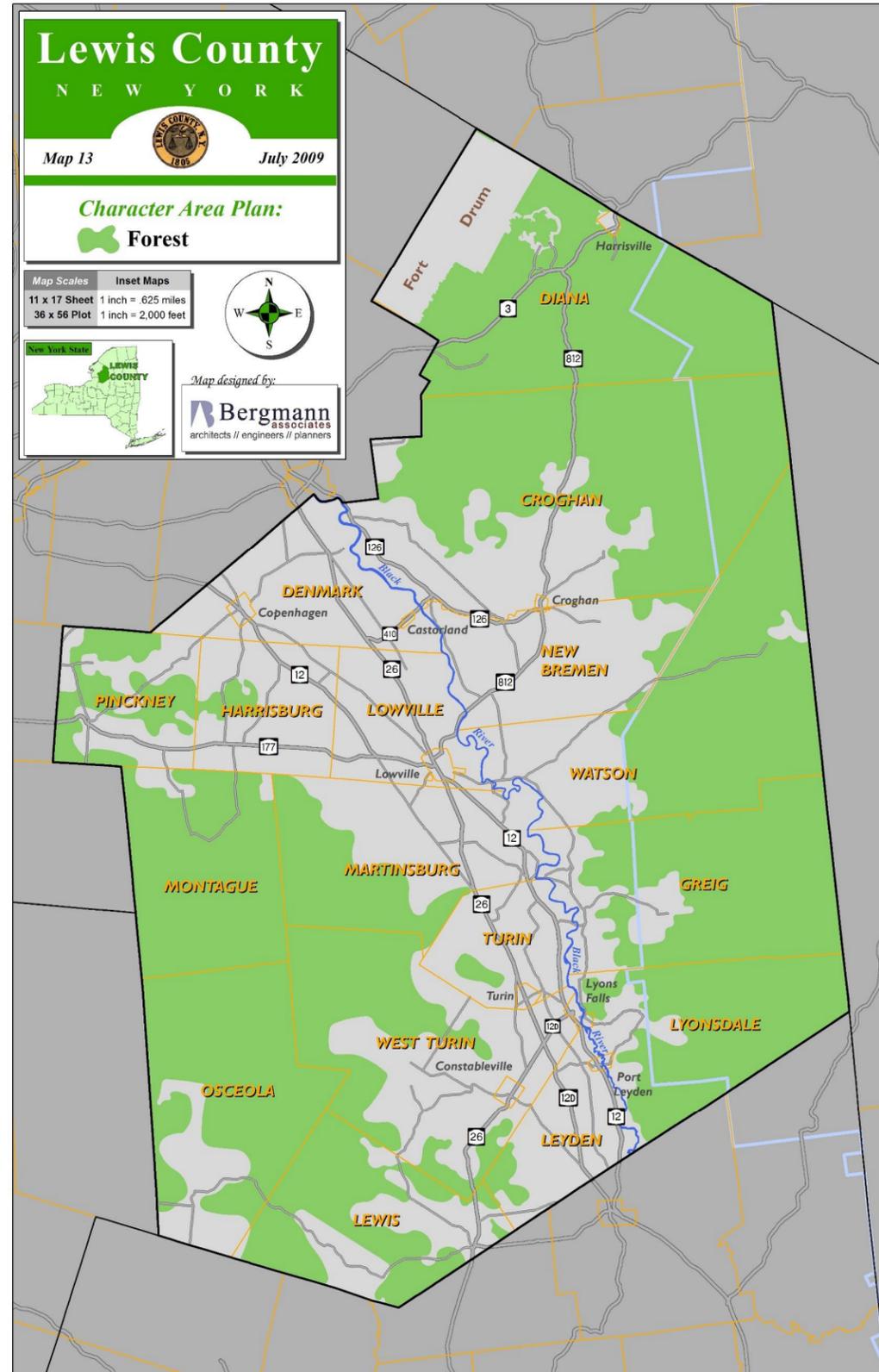
Forest is the largest Character Area within Lewis County, comprising more than half of its land area. The forests are a mix of coniferous and deciduous trees, with coniferous comprising a larger share of the land. Most of the land has a high density of trees, including many areas that demonstrate planting patterns typical of the logging industry. They are abundant with wildlife, which include deer, bears, beavers, moose, and a variety of birdlife. The wealth of species that inhabit the lakes, rivers, and wetlands are also a rich part of the forest's ecosystem. Approximately 95 percent of the area designated as Forest on the Character Area Plan is comprised of some form of conservation designation, including state and county lands and land within the Adirondack Park.

These areas are largely uninhabited, yet do contain pockets of residences and numerous seasonal camps and homes utilized for recreation. This pattern has emerged as a defining characteristic in recent years, with an increase in downstate and out of state investment into camps or second homes. This trend, coupled with a struggling forestry industry looking for alternate income sources, is slowly changing the character of the county's forests. While much of these areas are free of traditional development, not all forest lands are designated conservation areas, as the logging and forest products industries require large amounts of timberland to maintain a viable existence.

The Character Area Plan at right identifies the Forest areas within Lewis County.



Forest and wetland area in Pinckney.



Greenways and connective habitat corridors, such as the one above, create recreation and transportation opportunities for residents and visitors while also acting as riparian buffers.

Greenways: Connecting People with Forest Resources

A greenway is a corridor of protected land that is managed for conservation, transportation and/or recreation. Greenways follow natural land or water features, like ridges or rivers, or infrastructure features like roads, railroads or canals. They link natural reserves, parks, cultural and historic sites with each other and potentially with populated areas.

Greenways come in various shapes and sizes, such as multiple-use recreational trails on abandoned railroad corridors, paddling trails along rivers or shorelines, large-scale natural areas, and motorized and non-motorized trails that connect areas of forest or farmland. There is no predetermined corridor length required to identify a resource corridor as a greenway.

In Lewis County, greenways can be used to protect working landscapes such as farms and private forest lands through the development of conservation easements. Conservation easements across these lands can allow traditional land uses, such as farming and timber harvesting, to continue while providing corridors for people and habitat for native wildlife. See the following page for more information on conservation easements.

Greenways in Lewis County can also protect environmentally-sensitive lands and wildlife, while providing people with access to outdoor recreation and by serving as alternative transportation routes. Alternative forms of transportation help reduce air pollution, road congestion, and energy consumption, and are economical and healthy for communities. Greenways can also share transportation corridors with the logging and farming industries to preserve the viability of these important drivers of Lewis County's economy.

* Adapted from the Florida Community Resource Guide for Greenways Project.

Trail Planning and Design

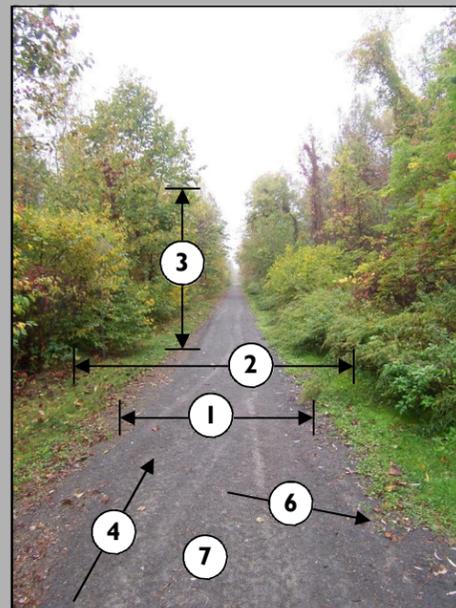
Snowmobiling, ATVing, and hiking are significant activities associated with Lewis County's economy, and the development of an advanced and interconnected network of trails will enhance the county as a four-season recreation destination. The development of a recreational trail system should be done in accordance with industry and NYSDEC standards to limit impacts to the environment and the sensitive ecology of forest areas. The county should encourage municipalities to retain and plan for linkages between existing and potential trail corridors throughout the Forest Character Areas.

Lewis County should create a set of design standards for motorized and non-motorized trails to provide a base-level of continuity and consistency. The following are best-practices for trail design as determined by the National Park Service:

- ensure a consistent look without compromising local control,
- promote a high standard of quality without over-building,
- provide a basic level of safety without removing all risk, and
- foster accessibility, where practicable.

Trail design standards should meet these objectives without compromising the character of the trail or imposing undue hardship upon those who maintain the trail. Design standards for trails within Lewis County should be tailored by landscape setting and intended users. For example, it would not be appropriate to build a trail to urban standards in a forested setting. Consistency can be achieved through signing, logo color, and the continuity between segments. Primary elements in trail design include:

1. **Tread Width** - the actual walking surface of the trail.
2. **Clearing Width** - the area kept free of brush, limbs, and other obstructions.
3. **Clearing Height** - the area cleared above trail objects (e.g. a hiker's backpack). A design consideration of particular concern in Lewis County is allowance for snow pack.
4. **Sustained Slope** - trail slopes should be less than 10 percent, and ideally less than 7 percent.
5. **Maximum Slope** - less than 2-times the sustained slope and less than 100 feet in length.
6. **Cross Slope** - the slope across the trail is typically between 3 and 8 percent.
7. **Trail Surface** - in Lewis County's forests, native surface materials should be utilized; in other landscape settings, surface materials should be provided in conformance with accessibility standards and intended users.



* Adapted from the National Parks Service: Handbook for Trail Design, Construction and Maintenance for the North Country National Scenic Trail, Chapter 4.

Design Considerations

Perhaps the most significant design consideration within the Forest Character Area is the creation of recommended guidelines for site development. County municipalities should encourage limitations on the amount of clearing permitted along road frontages for site development projects to protect the visual and spatial characteristics unique to forest areas, such as the sense of enclosure, restricted viewsheds, and the vertical delineation of space along roadway corridors. Without protections in place, Forest Character Areas could potentially blend with Rural Living Character Areas, resulting in a loss of Lewis County's unique rural identity.

Forest areas provide a source of timber, areas for recreation, and habitat for wildlife. There are several design considerations for future development within Forest Character Areas that impact the viability of this precious resource to sustain many of these activities. Forest fragmentation and the subdivision of viable forestland into smaller parcels is a primary concern in Lewis County. The subdivision of timberland inhibits efficient logging and harvesting of wood resources by increasing the mobilization and labor costs associated with relocating operations between smaller plots of land.

The retention of forest access easements, linkages, and roadways between timber stands is crucial to maintaining a viable timber harvesting industry in Lewis County. Municipalities should consider requirements for access retention during the subdivision process, including easements, access roads, and resource corridors to permit the movement of equipment between areas. The county and NYSDEC should assist municipalities with the development of appropriate standards and guidelines for the legal framework of agreements and the design of physical improvements. The development of greenways and conservation easements can also assist in linking adjacent forest resources (see sidebars at right and left).

Directly linked to the utilization of forest resources by the wood products industry is the status of low-volume roadways. Recommendations for the abandonment of roadways should be made on a case-by-case basis, and changes to public roadway designation should consider forest access requirements of the wood products industry.



The image at left is of an abandoned railroad bed turned into a trail. The width and height clearance on this trail is suitable for motorized and shared-usage with hikers. There are numerous opportunities within Lewis County for rail-to-trail corridors that link villages and hamlets with forest resources. These trails can be formed utilizing a combination of greenways, conservation easements, and access agreements with land owners.

Conservation Easements and Forest Resources

Conservation easements are a significant land use tool utilized across the United States to protect important natural resources and landscape features, such as working forests, agricultural land, wildlife habitats and scenic areas, among others. Conservation easements limit or eliminate future development rights to lands in exchange for reductions in property taxes.

Conservation easements are often utilized by land trusts to protect resources from undesirable land uses, although the purpose and terms of each easement are tailored to the specific characteristics of each property. For example, an easement designed to protect agricultural land is different from an easement designed to protect a scenic area, or one focused on protection of forest resources. Most easements allow traditional uses of the land, such as forestry, agriculture, or recreation, to continue as long as they meet property conservation goals.

In Lewis County, the creation and utilization of conservation easements is a useful tool to help support the preservation of viable timberland. Separate from the state's 480-a Forest Tax Law Program, land owners utilize the tax benefits from the diminished property valuation and continue to harvest timber on their property. As well, the protection of forest resources assists in the development of enhanced tourism and recreation opportunities associated with motorized and non-motorized trails. For additional techniques used in forestland preservation, see page 103.

It should be reiterated that conservation easements reduce a municipalities taxable value, and that the extensive use of this tool in a single community may financially strain its ability to levy taxes and supply services. It is recommended that municipalities undertake a property tax-base analysis to determine the appropriate use of these instruments in their community.

* Adapted from the NYSDEC website.