

Sunset Rock Management Plan Town of Stowe

Adopted by the Stowe Selectboard
April 14, 2014



Table of Contents

Sunset Rock Management Plan Town of Stowe..... 4
A. Background 4
B. Purpose of the Management Plan..... 4
C. Roles and Responsibilities..... 5
II. Current Conditions Description 6
III. Management Guidelines and Practices 6
A. Public Access 6
B. Structures and other like improvements 8
C. Land and vegetation management..... 10
D. Public Uses 12
E. Public Information..... 13

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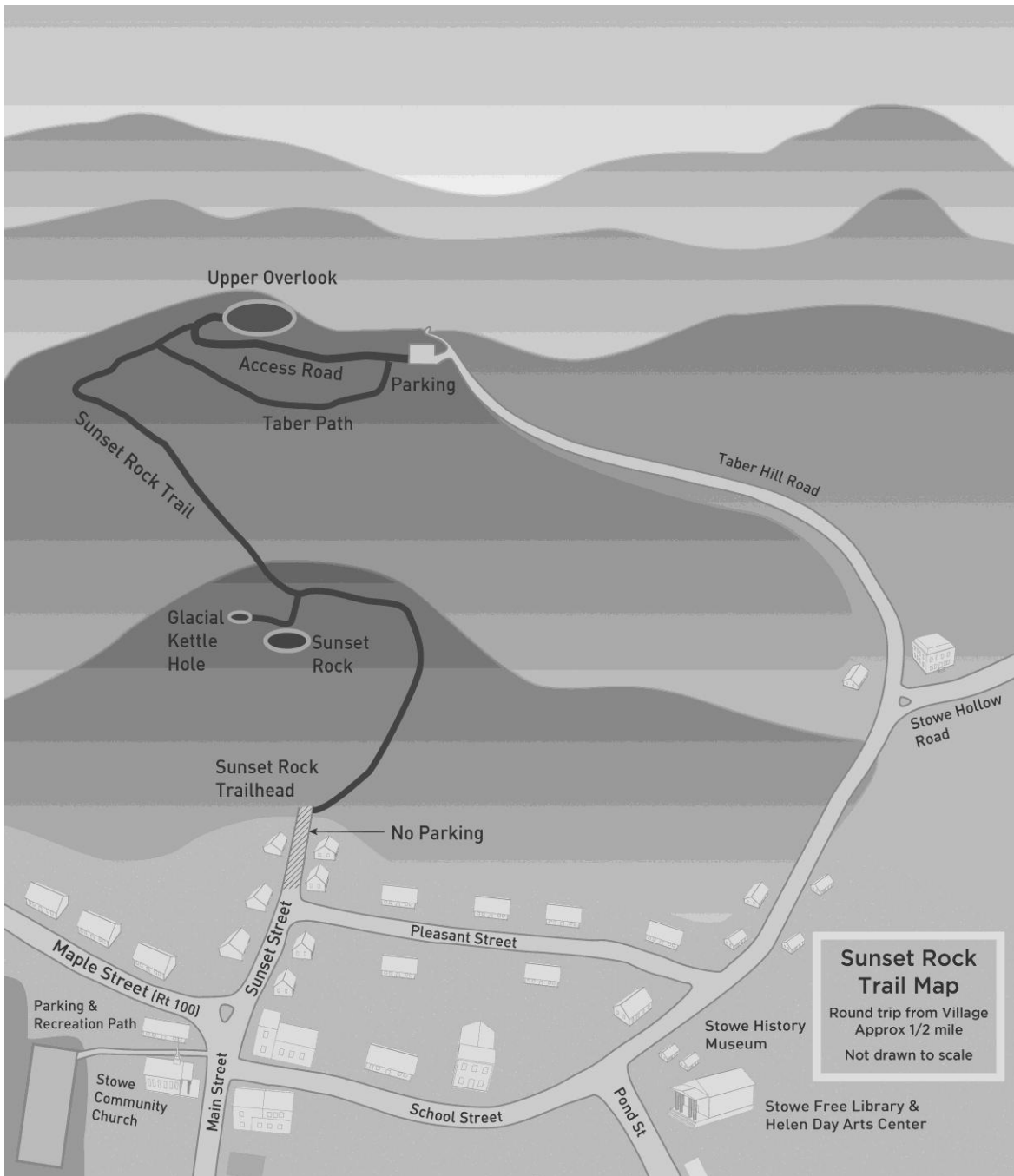
Management Plan text is presented in 12-point Times New Roman.

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Sunset Rock Trail Map

Introduction

A. Background

Sunset Rock is a 23-acre parcel of land within Stowe Village. The name Sunset Rock is derived from a protrusion of bedrock approximately 100 feet above the village at the end of Sunset Street. The site is a small clearing that provides views of the village and surrounding area. For the purposes of this management plan, the term “Sunset Rock” will denote the property as a whole. The use of the term to denote the protrusion of bedrock will be italicized.

At the March 1999 Town Meeting, the voters of the Town of Stowe approved a \$350,000 bond to go towards the purchase of the Sunset Rock property. Stowe Land Trust raised \$129,000 and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board contributed \$29,000 to make up a total purchase price of \$500,000 and purchased the parcel. Upon closing, Stowe Land Trust transferred the parcel to the Town of Stowe, and Stowe Land Trust and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board co-hold a Conservation Easement on the property.

There were two primary goals in purchasing the Sunset Rock property.

1. Preservation of scenic values

A primary reason for the purchase of the Sunset Rock property was the preservation of an important scenic resource within Stowe. Sunset Rock is a hillside property, which forms the northeastern boundary to the Stowe Village. Sunset Rock is one of the most, if not the most, visible hillside properties within the village. The property is clearly visible from Main Street looking east and from many other locations within Stowe, including the area around the post office, the Lower Village, Mountain Road, and Mayo Farm. Development of any significant structures on Sunset Rock would have had an adverse impact on the scenic character of the village. The purchase of Sunset Rock by the Town will prevent any development from taking place on it, thus preserving in perpetuity one of the most visible hillsides in Stowe.

2. Public access to the property

Another important reason for the purchase was to provide public access to the property. The view from the Upper Overlook is one of the most spectacular in Stowe, extending from Taber Hill to the south, to the Sterling Range to the north, with a sweeping downward view of the lower Little River Valley and Mount Mansfield in the background. However, since the time of the purchase, the growth of vegetation has obscured the view towards the east and south.

B. Purpose of the Management Plan

The purpose of the Sunset Rock Management Plan is to specify management practices and permitted public uses for the Sunset Rock property.

The plan is consistent with the Conservation Easement on the property, co-held by the Stowe Land Trust and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. All management activities on, and uses of, the Sunset Rock property must comply with the Conservation Easement.

This management plan was originally developed by members of the Stowe Selectboard, Conservation Commission, Recreation Commission, Stowe Land Trust, and with input from members of the Stowe community. It is recommended that the Town of Stowe periodically review the Management Plan.

The following language, taken from the Conservation Easement, is included here to articulate the purposes of the Sunset Rock conservation project:

I. Purposes of the Grant and Management Plan.

A. Statement of Purposes.

Grantor and Grantees acknowledge that the purposes of this grant are as follows (the "Purposes of this Grant"):

1. Consistent with the goals set forth in 10 V.S.A. §6301, the primary purposes of this Grant are to conserve and protect the public outdoor recreational, scenic, natural areas and open space resources of the Protected Property and to prevent the use or development of the Protected Property for any purpose or in any manner that would adversely affect these resources.
2. Secondary purposes are to provide opportunities for educational activities and to conserve significant wildlife habitats associated with the Protected Property for present and future generations.
3. These purposes will be advanced by conserving the Protected Property because it possesses the following attributes:
 - (a) it is considered to be one of the most visually important properties for maintaining the Town of Stowe's beauty and integrity;
 - (b) it is well suited for low impact outdoor recreational and educational uses;
 - (c) it contains approximately two miles of existing trails;
 - (d) it provides access to panoramic views of, and forms a forested, undeveloped backdrop to, the former village of Stowe; and
 - (e) it contains a mix of habitat types that include a range of vegetative age and size classes that provide habitat features that include food and cover for a variety of wildlife species in close proximity to the village of Stowe.

C. Roles and Responsibilities

A number of parties have an interest in the Sunset Rock property. Below is a list of the parties and a description of their roles and responsibilities.

Stowe Selectboard: As the Town's elected public officials, the Selectboard has ultimate responsibility for all decisions regarding management and use of Sunset Rock, including revisions to this plan.

Stowe Conservation Commission: The Conservation Commission acts as an advisor to the Selectboard in the management and use of Sunset Rock. The Conservation Commission is responsible for maintaining the management plan. It is recommended that the Conservation Commission review the management plan every ten years. If revisions are necessary, Stowe Land Trust will be consulted for the purpose of easement compliance. All revisions must have the approval of the Stowe Selectboard.

Stowe Parks & Recreation Department: The Stowe Parks & Recreation Department is responsible for most of the maintenance activities.

Stowe Land Trust (SLT): SLT co-holds the Conservation Easement on the property. It has a legal responsibility to monitor and enforce the Town's compliance with the easement.

Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB): The VHCB co-holds the Conservation Easement on the property. It also has a legal responsibility to enforce the Town's compliance with the easement, but defers to SLT for the primary responsibility in this role.

Vermont Land Trust (VLT): VLT holds a Grant of Right of Entry on the property.

II. Current Conditions Description

The conditions of the property at the time of purchase are described in the Baseline Documentation Report (BDR). Stowe Land Trust holds the BDR. The BDR is a public document.

III. Management Guidelines and Practices

The purchase of the Sunset Rock property was motivated in part by a desire to maintain the area as a low impact recreation area accessible to the general public. The property is intended to be a peaceful and quiet locale. In light of this vision, it is recommended that the property be developed as minimally as possible with facilities. A carry in and carry out policy is practiced.

A. Public Access

1. Background

There are two points of public access to the property, one at the end of Sunset Street in the Village and the other along Taber Hill Road.

The management of pedestrian and other non-vehicular access to the property is relatively straightforward since it is explicitly permitted within the Conservation Easement.

The Conservation Easement states that the property must be protected from uses that adversely affect the “outdoor recreational, scenic, natural areas and open space resources of the Protected Property.” However, it is also in the public interest to provide some means of vehicular access to the property, which would allow all members of the public opportunities to access it. Simultaneously satisfying these two objectives, protection of the various resources and establishment of an inclusive means of access, can be somewhat at odds with one another. As a result, the language within the Conservation Easement was written to allow some form of vehicular access for mobility-impaired persons yet prohibit unrestricted vehicular access.

The pertinent language as stated in the easement reads:

III. Permitted Uses of the Protected Property.

2. The right to establish and maintain motorized and mechanized access to the summit of the Protected Property on a limited basis in order to accommodate all members of the public regardless of physical ability, provided that such public access and related improvements are permitted by the public access provision of the Management Plans approved by Grantees in accordance with Section I of this Grant. Notwithstanding this paragraph III(2), open, unrestricted automobile access to the summit of the Protected Property is not permitted.

IV. Public Access.

Grantor covenants and agrees that the Protected Property shall be available to the general public for all types of non-motorized dispersed recreational and educational purposes (e.g. bird-watching, walking, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, nature study, etc.) and non-pedestrian access permitted by a public access provision of a Management Plan consistent with the Purposes of this Grant. Notwithstanding the foregoing, Grantor may limit or restrict public access to the Protected Property to assure compliance with the requirements of this Grant, to protect natural habitats, or to protect the public health or safety (including the right to permit, regulate or prohibit hunting and trapping).

2. General Policies

The public access policies herein should be clearly stated in any Sunset Rock and related brochures.

Sunset Rock is open to the public during daylight hours. Sunset Rock is closed to the public one half hour after sunset. Hours will be posted on the signs in the parking lot and by Sunset Street and in any brochure or map.

3. Sunset Street Access

The Sunset Rock property has approximately 42 feet of road frontage onto Sunset Street at the street's end. The Sunset Street access provides pedestrian access to a trailhead onto the property that is convenient from the village. Access to Sunset Rock from Sunset Street is limited to pedestrians only. Motorized vehicles are prohibited from using this access point.

Parking of motor vehicles on Sunset Street by users of Sunset Rock is prohibited, as per Town of Stowe ordinance.

Pedestrian use of the Sunset Street access should be promoted.

Brochures that illustrate the property should identify the Sunset Street access for pedestrian use only and include language regarding parking restrictions.

4. Taber Hill Road Access – Summit Access Road

The Sunset Rock property has approximately 240 feet of frontage along Taber Hill Road. A small parking lot off of Taber Hill Rd. provides parking for about 8 cars.

The existing Summit Access Road is well established and in good condition. The purpose of this access point is to provide easy pedestrian access to the summit, provide vehicular access to the property for maintenance and emergency purposes, and to provide access to an adjacent parking area, and for mobility-impaired persons subject to the conditions outlined in section 5.

5. Vehicular Access to the Upper Overlook

As stated in the Conservation Easement, unrestricted vehicular access is prohibited within Sunset Rock. Apart from maintenance and emergency purposes, vehicular access along the Summit Access Road beyond the parking lot is limited to mobility-impaired persons only. Vehicular access to Sunset Rock is governed as follows.

A gate is installed at the western end of the parking lot to control vehicular entry onto the access road to the Upper Overlook.

Up until the summer of 2013, the gate had remained open during non-winter months to allow mobility-impaired persons to park at the Upper Overlook.

Due to an increase in the number of people driving to the Upper Overlook, leaving large amounts of litter and vandalizing the property, the Conservation Commission in consultation with the Stowe Parks and Recreation Department decided to permanently close and lock the gate year-round.

Mobility impaired persons who desire to drive a vehicle to the Upper Overlook can contact the Parks and Recreation Department to obtain access.

B. Structures and Other Improvements

The pertinent easement language is as follows: *[this is not inclusive; could use other sections as well, or not use these at all if deemed excessive; could just summarize what these say]*

II. Restricted Uses of Protected Property.

1. The Protected Property shall be used for public outdoor recreation, open space, scenic, and educational purposes in perpetuity. No residential, commercial, industrial or mining

activities shall be permitted. No building or structures shall be constructed, created, erected or moved onto the Protected Property, except as permitted in Section III and the Management Plans.

2. There shall be no signs, billboards, or outdoor advertising of any kind erected or displayed; provided, however, that Grantor may erect and maintain reasonable signs indicating the name of the Protected Property, organizations providing funding or sponsorship, boundary markers, directional signs, signs informing the public about reasonable use, memorial plaques, historical markers, and natural history interpretive signs.

III. Permitted Uses of the Protected Property.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, Grantor shall have the right to make the following uses of the Protected Property:

3. The right to conduct periodic, temporary community and public entertainment events on the Protected Property, including concerts, fairs and celebrations, together with the right to erect tents and other temporary structures for such events.

4. The right to construct, maintain, repair and replace picnic facilities and sanitary facilities for members of the public using the Protected Property, provided that any such improvements shall be consistent with the Purposes of this Grant and permitted by the Management Plans.

Buildings, towers, and other permanent structures are prohibited on the Sunset Rock property.

Picnic tables and benches are permitted on the property. Picnic tables and benches may be placed at various locations on the property as deemed appropriate by the Stowe Parks & Recreation Department or Conservation Commission after appropriate consultation with the Selectboard. No picnic tables will be placed on the actual *Sunset Rock*.

Three open-air structures, such as a picnic bench cover or a gazebo, each with a maximum size of 200ft² are permitted on the upper half of Sunset Rock; thus, excluding the possibility of such a structure on *Sunset Rock* itself. The structures should be made of natural looking materials in order to blend with the natural surroundings. The structures should not be visible from the village or other public vantage points such as roads and public properties. Open-air structures may be erected subject to approval by the Selectboard.

Permanent lighting fixtures and provisions for permanent electrical power or other utility services are prohibited.

Permanent sanitary facilities are prohibited. Temporary portable toilets are permitted for events.

The Town has had a carry in, carry out policy for dealing with trash, so permanent trash receptacles have not been placed on the property. If trash becomes a problem, the Town should consider remedies such as education and signage first, and resort to the use of trash receptacles only after exhausting other reasonable alternatives.

C. Land and Vegetation Management

1. General Considerations

Land and vegetation management addresses the relationships among vegetation, wildlife, trails, meadows, view corridors, and other landscape oriented features and improvements.

2. Vegetation Management

Among the primary intents for conserving Sunset Rock are preservation of the view of the hillside, and views from and public access to the property. Management of the vegetative cover will be conducted to satisfy these intents and not necessarily to exploit the commercial value of timber resources. There may be other important natural resource and habitat values on the property. Vegetation management activities will not necessarily be directed towards enhancing these features. However, overall management will take these resources into consideration.

A prime objective of vegetation management for Sunset Rock is to preserve the views as seen from the property and most importantly at the Upper Overlook, tempered by ensuring that the property itself remains scenic in character. A balance should be struck between maintaining views and promoting a healthy vegetative cover, most importantly in the form of mature trees.

The Stowe Conservation Commission will hold overall responsibility for vegetation management planning.

The following general recommendations are made regarding vegetation management.

- a. Wholesale clearing large swaths of trees to create wide, expansive and unobstructed views should be avoided, except for the primary view from the Upper Overlook. This is especially the case if large patches of ground will be exposed as seen from the village and other significant public properties.
- b. A mixture of framed and keyhole views should be created and maintained as appropriate. Keyhole views are views that are underneath the tree canopy, while framed views are views that are between trees. The creation of keyhole and framed views requires a canopy of mature trees. Because it takes a long time for trees to mature, views from some locations may suffer as the canopy develops.
- c. The actual *Sunset Rock* protrusion should be maintained as a small clearing. There is a small keyhole view of Main Street that should be maintained. Expansive views from this clearing should be discouraged as it would require significant cutting of trees down slope and would impact the view from the village. To the extent possible, views should be established and maintained by cutting limbs off existing trees rather than outright removal of trees.
- d. In the event of a natural disaster that results in significant alteration of the vegetative cover, alternative vegetation management could be considered.

- e. Vegetation is a major component of wildlife habitat and because conservation of significant wildlife habitats is a stated purpose within the Conservation Easement, all vegetation management activities shall be conducted in a manner that does not cause undue harm to such wildlife habitat.

3. Wildlife Habitat

Sunset Rock contains a mix of forested and recently cut over upland habitat types, which include a range of vegetative age and size classes, from regenerating early successional sapling stands to pole-sized hardwoods and a stand of log-sized white pine. This mix of conditions provides habitat features including food and cover for a variety of associated early successional wildlife species in close proximity to the village of Stowe. No state-mapped significant habitat features or natural heritage sites are known to exist on the property.

Although no specific habitat management activities are recommended at this time, it is recognized that any management or use of the property is likely to influence whatever habitats do exist, however minor, in some way, particularly when those activities significantly alter vegetative patterns on the property. Given that conservation of significant wildlife habitat is a stated purpose of ownership, it is stressed that all management activities on and uses of the property shall be done with due consideration of their implications for wildlife habitat. No undue harm to significant habitats shall result from any management activities on or uses of the property.

4. Trails

The pertinent easement language is as follows:

Permitted Uses of the Protected Property.

7. The right to maintain, repair, improve and replace existing recreational trails, together with the right to clear, construct, repair, improve, and maintain new recreational trails, provided that the location, use and construction of such new trails are consistent with the Purposes of this Grant and permitted by the Management Plans.

8. The right to establish, maintain and use fields for the purpose of maintaining or enhancing scenic vistas or natural resource values on the Protected Property, as well as the right to plant, prune, cut and remove trees and other vegetation to create, maintain, enhance and manage views from and of the Protected Property, provided that forest clearing activity required to establish and maintain views is a component of the Management Plans.

See map below for trail identification.

a. Sunset Rock Trail

The Sunset Rock Trail is a rustic hiking trail that commences at the end of Sunset Street and links to *Sunset Rock* and the Upper Overlook.

b. Glacial Kettle Hole Spur

The Glacial Kettle Hole Spur is a rustic hiking trail that extends from *Sunset Rock* approximately 20 feet NW to a natural glacial kettle hole in the bedrock.

c. Taber Path

The Taber Path is a path leading from the Summit Access Road to the Sunset Rock Trail.

d. Summit Access Road

The Summit Access Road should mainly be used for pedestrians, emergency vehicles and vehicles of mobility-impaired persons. The road should not be widened or paved. Culverts and ditch line should be appropriately maintained.

All other spur trails, skidder roads, and old footpaths have been closed off and allowed to naturally re-vegetate.

D. Public Uses

As necessary and not inconsistent with this Management Plan and the Conservation Easement, all uses of, and activities on the property are permitted for maintenance purposes.

1. Permitted and Prohibited Uses

Among the uses and activities permitted on Sunset Rock are:

- a. Pedestrian use
- b. Picnicking
- c. Dog-walking
- d. Portable charcoal and propane grills
- e. Other low impact activities that are consistent with this Management Plan and the Conservation Easement

The following uses / activities are prohibited on Sunset Rock:

- a. ATVs
- b. Bicycling
- c. Snowmobiles
- d. Motorbikes
- e. Amplified music
- f. Generators

- g. Open fires
- h. Riding of horses, llamas
- i. Hunting & Trapping
- j. Grazing of livestock

2. Events

Social, educational, and recreational gatherings and functions are permitted on the property. Any function or gathering comprised of more than 25 persons requires approval from the Stowe Parks & Recreation Department in consultation with the Conservation Commission. Groups holding events must abide by the Conservation Easement and management plan.

The public shall not be excluded from access to the Sunset Rock property due to the presence of any event.

E. Public Information

1. Signs

A minimum number of trail signs and other informational signs should be installed on the property only as necessary.

2. Guide to Sunset Rock

Information on Sunset Rock property should be made widely available. A small brochure has been developed which contains a trail map and description of the property. The property is also featured in the *Stowe Village Walking Tour Guide* and the *Stowe & Waterbury Recreation Guide*.