

## What Makes a Ridge Scenic?

Many towns in northwest Connecticut are exploring ways to protect scenic ridges. They immediately face the problems of legally or objectively defining what is scenic and why ridges should be of particular concern. Ultimately, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and no attempt at scenic protection should be done without some collaboration from residents of the town. However, there are a few objective traits that determine whether something is scenic which can help in the delineation and the protection of scenic resources.

Visibility is a scenic trait that can be objectively measured. High visibility means that a scenic resource can be viewed from many places. This can be determined by selecting a group of viewpoints with panoramic visibility, such as the top of peaks, and finding areas that can be viewed from a high percentage of these viewpoints. For example, a lake that can be viewed from only one peak is not as highly visible as a lake that can be viewed from ten peaks.

Prominence is an objective scenic trait as well, though harder to measure. Prominence is the proportion of a viewshed that a scenic resource occupies. For example, if you are standing on the shore of a large lake, that water body occupies your entire viewshed. However, as viewed from a distant peak that same lake is much less prominent. This means that the prominence of a scenic resource depends from where you are looking.

Over the course of my work with towns in mapping their scenic resources I have identified three types of viewpoints that are important for determining the prominence of a scenic resource. Gateway viewpoints are the entry points into a town, from where local people may want their scenic resources to make a good “first impression.” Character viewpoints are the high volume meeting areas of a town, such as a town center, where people form much of their opinion about the town’s character. Opportunity viewpoints are places that provide enhanced opportunities to pause and look at the scenery, such as rest areas, overlooks or even road intersections. Gateway, character and opportunity viewpoints have an objective basis behind them; in theory, they could be determined “in the office.” However, determining these viewpoints can be the most important and rewarding aspect of collaboration from the town.

Ridges have become a focus of scenic protection because they can combine the two objective traits of a scenic resource. Ridges have the potential to be viewed from many viewpoints up to a large distance away; ridges fill up the view from nearby viewpoints. A good example of a scenic resource combining visibility and prominence is Haystack Mountain in Norfolk. Haystack can be seen from many places, and Haystack fills up the view from Norfolk’s town center.

Combining visibility and prominence focuses on particular areas of ridges. An area too low on a ridge may be prominent from a local viewpoint, but cannot be seen from any distance. On the other hand, high visibility areas right on top of a ridge tend not to be visible from a local viewpoint; what appears to be the top of a ridge from a local viewpoint is often the cusp of the ridge where the topography starts to level off.

One approach to focusing on the “cusp of ridges,” those areas with both high visibility and local prominence, has been to delineate horizon belts. This was the approach taken for mapping what was to be protected with the town of Kent’s

Horizonline Regulations. This narrows the cusp further to those areas where features on the ridge would “break the horizon,” having a backdrop of sky rather than land.

With this understanding of what is scenic, and why ridges are scenic, maps can be created that can assist the town with the inventory and/or protection of scenic ridges.