Rescuing the Heart of the Maine Woods

By JYM ST. PIERRE

As the boundaries of the Northeastern states became settled in the late 1700s and early 1800s, a tidal wave of aggressive logging swept from the coast into the hinterlands of New England and New York.

By the late 19th century there remained two large wilderness areas in the region that today we call the Northern Forest: the Adirondacks in New York and northwestern Maine. Following the Civil War there were calls for protection of the wildlife, waters, and wilderness in both of these areas. In 1869, for instance, Samuel Bowles wrote, “If fifty miles square of the Adirondacks in New York, and a similar area of Maine lake and forest, could be thus preserved for public use, what a blessing it would be to all visitors, what an honor to the Nation!”

However, the two states took very different paths. New York moved boldly toward public preservation. In Maine, privatization and exploitation prevailed. Looking back on this grand experiment, it is fair to ask which approach has served us better, on balance, and what adjustments might we make.

Maine Woods History

The story of the Adirondacks is well known to readers of this journal. The history of the Maine Woods is probably less familiar.

Timber barons amassed vast forest holdings in northern Maine during the 19th century. They sent virgin logs to hundreds of sawmills on Maine’s mighty rivers, transforming the state, briefly, into the lumber capital of the world. In the 20th century, most of the timber barons were replaced by national and multinational corporations which acquired control of millions of acres of forest. Many of these companies also employed tens of thousands of workers to build and run gigantic pulp and paper mills. By the 1980s, Maine had the largest amount of industrial land ownership of any state in the country. The forest products industry represented the biggest economic and political force in Maine. As a result, absentee paper companies, in particular, exerted enormous influence on Maine’s environment, economy, and government.

In recent years, the Maine Woods has been experiencing a quiet revolution. As with many rural areas, the backbone of Maine’s economy has been shifting away from forestry. The annual timber cut has been up (e.g., sawlog harvest expanded 63 percent from 1985 to 1998) while forestry employment has been in freefall (nearly 6,000 jobs were lost between the late 1980s and late 1990s). Nor is pay keeping pace. The forest industry likes to claim it pays well, but payrolls actually declined about 16 percent during the 1990s when adjusted for inflation. Loggers are the worst off. Hourly wages for loggers dropped 40 percent in real dollars from 1978 to 1998.

Maine is also experiencing an ownership revolution. Great Northern Paper, International Paper, and other corporations exploded onto the scene in the early decades of the 20th century. They built or absorbed into their empires huge mills and vast forestland holdings. By 1993, a handful of industrial owners controlled eight million acres in Maine and heirs of the timber barons controlled millions more.

During the past few years those empires have been crumbling at a stunning pace. Five million acres of forest have been sold over the past four years in a small number of massive deals. That is more land changing hands than at any time in Maine history. Almost none of that land was acquired by public agencies; 99.9 percent went to timber corporations, real estate companies, insurance firms, university endowments, speculators, and “kingdom” buyers. A few areas have been acquired by conservation organizations (notably The Nature Conservancy) and development rights are being extinguished on some tracts through working forest easements acquired largely with public monies. But most of the new owners are so-called institutional owners. They are buying forestland in Maine expecting to get a good rate of return.

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PROPOSED
MAINE WOODS
NATIONAL PARK & PRESERVE

Note: Baxter State Park is not part of the proposed Maine Woods National Park & Preserve.
on their investment through logging, selective development, sale of development rights to conservation interests, income tax breaks, and eventually by cashing out. The Maine Woods has gone from serving as a timber basket to merely being a short-term investment opportunity.

While a few areas have been brought back into the public domain recently, still less than six percent of Maine is in public ownership, one of the lowest proportions in the United States. Even less, just two percent, is permanently protected for ecosystem preservation. In 1990, the Northern Forest Lands Study found this region to be of national significance yet barely nine-tenths of one percent of Maine is national conservation land. Only nine-hundredths of one percent is national Wilderness.

There are other challenges facing the Maine Woods. As the global economy has grown, forest landowners increasingly are driven more by short-term profit than by local concerns or long-term forest health. Unsustainable logging practices have damaged large areas. In just the past few decades, more than 2,000 square miles have been clearcut, 30,000 miles of logging roads have been built, and millions of acres have been sprayed with toxic insecticides and herbicides. Hundreds of thousands of acres have been subdivided and thousands of houses have been built or expanded, especially along remote, unspoiled lakeshores. Moreover, pressures continue to mount for new powerlines, pipelines, dams, energy plants, waste dumps, mines, and other developments that are not compatible with the natural landscape in Maine’s wildlands.

In addition, Maine is losing many of its forest plants and animals. Already, nearly one out of four native plants and nonmarine mammals in Maine is endangered, threatened, rare, of special concern, or already gone. Meanwhile, more and more nonnative plants and animals are moving in.

A State Solution?

The future for northern Maine could be that of an increasingly impoverished, resource-extractive, third world economy with a landscape dedicated to industrial-strength forestry and misplaced development. In the face of this frightening prospect, New York’s Adirondack Park offers an alternative.

Maine has made a number of choices, especially in recent years, toward what might look superficially like the Adirondack model. The Maine Land Use Regulation Commission was established about thirty years ago to provide public regulation of private development activities in the half of Maine which has no or very limited local government. In the late 1980s, a Maine Forest Practices Act was passed to put the brakes on runaway clearcutting. Third-party “green” certification of forest management now covers five million acres in the state.

A couple of state bond issues have provided funding to match federal and private monies for land acquisition through the Land for Maine’s Future program. Some outstanding areas have been added to the portfolio of conservation lands thanks to the LMF program, the consolidation of scattered state “public lots,” and private land trust initiatives. A system of ecological reserves covering 69,000 acres has been created in state forests and parks. Conservation easements now restrict development on two million acres of forestland in Maine.

Yet, despite these advances, Maine is a long way from having anything close to the conservation benefits of the Adirondack Park and many conservation actions are headed in the wrong direction. Earlier this year, for instance, the Land Use Regulation Commission approved a lake concept plan that supposedly balances conservation and development. The deal resulted in a new, 89-lot development on First Roach Pond, the largest single subdivision authorized in the agency’s history. Now LURC, under pressure from rural legislators, is looking into loosening its zoning rules to encourage roadside subdivision and development at a time when there is widespread recognition of the need to reverse incentives for sprawl.

Many of the conservation easements being acquired in the Maine Woods raise serious questions about whether the public is getting its money’s worth. Tens of millions of taxpayer dollars are being given to private landowners to not develop their lands. People may be shocked to learn our public agencies are paying top dollar for those development rights while private landowners can still log, build roads, spray pesticides, and in many cases kick the public off the property.

Imperiled wildlife species are faring no better. Maine officials have been ferociously antagonistic toward putting Atlantic salmon and Canada lynx on the national endangered species list. When the salmon was listed because it is in danger of being extirpated in the United States, the
A National Park

The Katahdin-Moosehead region is an area of national significance facing challenges from national and multinational forces. It will require a national level solution to provide unified, landscape-scale conservation stewardship. That is why RESTORE: The North Woods has proposed creation of a grand, new Maine Woods National Park & Preserve.

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Within the proposed park are thousands of miles of rivers and streams, including the headwaters of five legendary rivers — the Allagash, Aroostook, Kennebec, Penobscot, and St. John. The park would encompass hundreds of spectacular lakes including Moosehead, the largest in New England and the top-rated lake in the Maine Wildlands Lake Assessment. It would also harbor the greatest concentration of remote wilderness ponds in the eastern United States.

Maine Woods National Park would provide a vast sanctuary for wildlife including habitat for restoration of species that have been driven out or become endangered. The park would offer a chance to interpret an extraordinary array of cultural values such as Native American, Colonial, and logging-era sites and wilderness routes taken by adventurers such as Henry Thoreau, Teddy Roosevelt and William O. Douglas.

The possibilities for recreation in the park would lift the spirits of any outdoors lover. Maine Woods National Park would actually be a combination of national park and national preserve, guaranteeing public access for the full range of recreational uses. Fishing, hiking, camping, canoeing, cross-country skiing, birding, and most other traditional recreational uses would continue throughout. Hunting and snowmobiling, which are important activities in northern Maine, would continue in the national preserve portion.

Already, over two million acres of private lands in Maine are posted against trespassing. The public can expect to lose access to more areas as additional lands are developed and posted. Maine Woods National Park could preserve public access to more than three million acres. The few existing public lands, such as Baxter State Park, much of the Allagash Wilderness Waterway, and the Appalachian Trail, would be buffered by the national park.
In addition to tremendous environmental, recreational, and cultural benefits, there are important economic advantages to a Maine Woods National Park. The economy of northern Maine is in serious trouble. In the past two decades, more than 40 percent of logging jobs and 20 percent of mill jobs have been eliminated due to mechanization, phasing out of inefficient mills, and overcutting of the forest. The forest industry now directly provides only 3.4 percent of the jobs and 4.3 percent of the personal income in Maine.

National parks bring economic opportunities to local communities across the United States — upwards of $11 billion a year. Several studies have found that a Maine Woods National Park could support thousands of new jobs in tourism, which is already supplanting forestry as the economic foundation of northern Maine. However, even more jobs would be created in clean service industries which are drawn to lands near national parks because of the high quality of life they offer.

A Maine Woods National Park would help diversify and stabilize the economy of northern Maine. The National Park Service and the State could provide assistance to help the gateway communities manage opportunities for tourism and economic development. Meanwhile, lands providing nearly 90 percent of the fiber for the forest industry in Maine would remain outside the proposed park.

Most of the forest in the proposed park is owned by a few large trusts and corporations. Huge tracts frequently change hands. These lands would be acquired from donors or at fair market value from willing sellers. No land is proposed to be taken by eminent domain. Based on other land sales, the park could be purchased for a few hundred dollars an acre.

Virtually all of the land within the proposed park is in “unorganized territories” where there are no towns. Federal payments-in-lieu-of-taxes from a Maine Woods National Park would be higher than property taxes paid today to the state and communities.

In short, the national park proposal is the only Maine Woods conservation initiative which would:
- assure public access for traditional recreation to more than 3 million acres;
- preserve the headwaters of five rivers of national significance
- protect the largest concentration of remote ponds in the eastern U. S.;
- comprehensively interpret the human history of the Maine Woods;
- significantly help diversify the economy of northern Maine;
- substantially improve the balance of public-private land ownerships;
- provide payments-in-lieu-of-taxes greater than current property taxes;
- restore big wilderness to New England.

That is why hundreds of nonprofit organizations and businesses have endorsed the Maine Woods National Park proposal. That is why tens of thousands of people have signed petitions calling for a full study of the park idea. That is why every statewide public opinion survey on the issue has found that a majority of Mainers favor the park concept. That is why philanthropists have begun to acquire lands that can become part of America’s next great national park.

Conclusion

The similarities and differences between the Adirondacks and the Maine Woods are striking. Maine’s unorganized territories are nearly twice as expansive as the Adirondacks with one-tenth the population. New York has a long history of large-scale public ownership of forever wild areas and of intensive state involvement in guiding growth on private lands in the Adirondack Park.

Maine has experience with state oversight of private land use activities, but a record of antagonism toward Wilderness.

Many people believe that the “working forest” experiment in Maine has been a failure. It seems at times as though Maine operates in a reverse universe, where state policy is the inverse twin of the New York constitutional article that protects the Adirondack forest preserve. The mandate in Maine seems to be: The lands in the unorganized territories shall not constitute a forest preserve. They shall not be forever kept as wild forest lands. They shall be leased, sold or exchanged, or taken by any corporation, and the timber thereon shall be sold, removed or destroyed.

That assessment may be too harsh, but the shortcomings of the working forest experiment in Maine appear to validate the hard-learned lessons of the New York experience. The history of the Adirondack Park has shown that preservation for the long-term good of the many must have priority over exploitation for short-term gain for a few; that legal protections must be made very hard to break because forever wild should
mean wild forever; that sustaining ecosystems for tomorrow requires active and far-sighted stewardship today; that the price of permanent preservation is eternal vigilance.

New York said no to a national park in the Adirondacks in the 1960s, in large part because it could have led to less protection than state ownership and oversight. Maine faces the opposite situation. A Maine Woods National Park would offer stronger protection than anything the State or private sector have ever offered.

Maine is close to where New York was just over a century ago. The familiar patterns of ownership, use, and management in Maine’s working forest are changing rapidly. In many respects, the old ways no longer serve our natural and human communities well. Maine Woods National Park, like the Adirondack Park, would serve as a core preserve area, anchoring a matrix of managed forestlands across the Northern Forest region. Indeed, to safeguard values people cherish deeply, a national park and preserve in northern Maine would be a gift of enormous generosity to ourselves and to posterity.

Four-fifths of the world’s original forests are gone. Ninety-five percent of the original forests in this country are gone. Only in a few special places in America is it still possible to create parks which would join Yellowstone, Denali, and the Adirondacks as world-class landscapes, where we can restore native biodiversity, preserve natural scenic beauty, safeguard clean water and air, protect essential wildlife habitat, maintain public access to large wilderness tracts for backcountry recreation, and help diversify our economy. The Maine Woods is such a place.

References


