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Ecotourism Potential in Maine's North Woods: A Roundtable Commentary

By Ann Czerwonka

My initial research leading up to this discussion stemmed primarily from my work with the Open Space Institute analyzing the now well-covered development proposal submitted to the Maine Land Use Regulatory Commission by Plum Creek Timber Company for its land holdings in the Moosehead Lake area. I want to step away from the details of that proposal and take a broader look here—beyond the specifics of the Plum Creek proposal and beyond the Moosehead Lake area—to discuss the potential for ecotourism and sustainable resort development in Maine's North Woods as a future source of economic growth.

The background reading I did (Vail 2004; Chafe 2005; Turner and Kasnet 2005; International Ecotourism Society 2006; Mongan et al. 2007; Vora 2007) along with interviews with well-known and respected resort-industry executives suggested that there are several fairly strong trends in the global travel and tourism industry.¹ These include increasing “eco-consciousness,” more “child-free” traveling, and (when that isn't the case) frequent extended-group or “entourage” traveling (e.g., including au pairs, nannies, or other caregivers; friends and their children's caregivers; and

sometimes even other personal service providers, such as personal trainers). There has also reportedly been a shift in the types of resorts these travelers are seeking. Instead of the old-style, looks-the-same-everywhere, “cookie-cutter” branded hotels that were designed as places to stay in or near the ultimate “destinations,” the trend has been toward the development of true “destination resorts”—where the resort itself is the ultimate destination—the “place” to be, and that place needs to be special along many dimensions, including location, amenities and services, and compatibility with the landscape, culture, and history of the site.

Question: My first question for you all, then, is whether based on your industry experience you agree with these conclusions. Are these the major current trends from your perspective and, if so, what is going on?

Steve Barba: I definitely agree. The domestic travel and tourism industry has changed markedly in recent years. The “high season” for destination resorts is no longer characterized by nuclear families on extended vacations—there is greater variety in the traveling population. Families are smaller, divorce rates are still high, and often both adults in a couple work outside the home. At another point on the spectrum, senior and retired citizens are buying into permanent resort communities that have at least nine months' appeal within their chosen lifestyles. They may visit other, more exotic locations for a few short stretches during the most clement times of the year, but they not are investing in “adventure retirement” locations.

Jeff Mongan: At the national and international level, members of the baby boom generation are more widely traveled than

their predecessors and have more disposable income, and they are increasingly looking for resort experiences that combine luxury and authenticity. The market is highly competitive, and a luxury experience is no longer enough: customers are seeking extras such as signature restaurants and high-end spas, more expansive suites, and the opportunity to learn about the place they are visiting. As urbanization increases across the globe, travelers are seeking lower-density resorts to get a break from the pressures of everyday life. At the same time, construction costs are increasing rapidly, land suitable for resort development is growing scarce, and environmental concerns and the pressing need to preserve open space have become more prominent in the public eye. All these factors are changing the luxury resort and hotel market significantly by influencing financing strategies, the design and organization of buildings, and the selection of sites.

Question: So, how do you feel these trends affect the prospects for tourism in the Maine North Woods?

Jeff McIver: The North Woods is an incredibly beautiful part of the world, but it is off the beaten path. The grand hotels that were once part of the landscape have all disappeared. It will take more than a small tourism business to rejuvenate the tourist economy in the area. It will need “flagship” operations that can commit significant resources to promoting their businesses.

Warren Cook: The Maine North Woods is part of the Northern Forest, which runs from Greenville to the Adirondacks. The area is far away from the current market and the recent buzz has been created much more by real estate development potential, especially along lakeshores,

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than by resort prospects. Rural destination tourism, even in wooded Maine areas closer to the market (like Sugarloaf, Rangeley, or Bethel) is a push. The industry is fractured, disorganized, not especially guest friendly, and in many ways not very competitive with other rural or other tourism destinations with which I am familiar. What sets it apart? The raw land, the unspoiled place, all the things that development threatens. The landscape is naturally impressive, especially for those who want to get out into it, but the motivation for traditional activities seems to be decreasing; hunting, fishing, hiking, skiing numbers are flat or down. So, to be in the “new trends” game and draw from our biggest nearby market, southern New England, a lot has to happen.

Steve Barba: I agree. The Maine North Woods, as is, has a limited potential to attract tourists. It is remote and hard to access; its natural resources traditionally attract only a limited audience of hardy outdoorsmen and outdoorswomen who like to hunt and fish or snowmobile; its hospitality infrastructure is rustic and designed to accommodate visitors according to local standards of comfort and style. The weather is another major consideration. The seasonality of the Maine North Woods poses special challenges to establishing a critical mass of patrons. Hunters are not necessarily fisherman; golfers are not snowmobilers; skiers are not birders; hikers are not spa-goers; and so forth. Indeed, their friends and families likely would not take their personal recommendations as being worth much. In other words, a snowmobiler will not be able to convince his tennis-playing boss that visiting the North Woods would be worth a special trip. If the North Woods were to be improved with the creation of the usual attrac-

tions and accommodations of so many existing destination resort areas (ski areas, golf courses, casinos, conference centers, deluxe resorts, spas, etc.), one would have to ask, why spend all that venture capital in such a remote region?

Jeff Mongan: While I have not been to Maine, my understanding of the North Woods is that it offers exactly the sort of “place” that has become so scarce. There may be some downsides, however, in the form of seasonality and access. I have not seen the area and I certainly do not know it like you all do, but I am aware that fairly high-profile landowners are making resort-development proposals and they are being supported by well-respected practitioners in the resort-planning industry. I would imagine that they have done their homework. What if someone were to develop a resort that genuinely reflected the aesthetic of the North Woods and captured what is unique about it, and then offer programs that were tailored to the region’s history and culture? My experience has been that resorts are going beyond the traditional definition of luxury toward an emerging “six-star” form, offering an even higher level of service and amenities—such as signature restaurants—to create the market draw. For a long time, the golf course occupied the top spot among resort amenities, but in recent years, spas have surpassed them in popularity among guests at the luxury level. The popularity of the spa is partly attributable to the emphasis baby boomers place on health and wellness, but it also reflects the scarcity of time in modern life: while a game of golf requires a major time commitment, it is possible to have a high-quality spa experience in a just few hours. Resorts are also boosting the number and variety of amenities they offer to encourage year-round patronage,

especially those resorts in mountain areas, where the biggest crowds tend to come in the winter for snow sports.

Question: I understand the notion of a “six-star” resort, but what about the sustainability dimension? There is heavy emphasis on the “ecotourism” aspect of things in this region, and the economics of such an approach seem to be an open question. Is world-class, sustainable destination resort development economically feasible? If so, with an eye on the North Woods of Maine, what do you feel are the necessary components for “eco-resort” success?

Warren Cook: David Vail has written much about this topic and has even proposed that Maine might be able to get any early competitive advantage in the Northeast by establishing its own “quality label” certification for environmental sustainability—similar to the “Nature’s Best” brand now in Sweden. The governor’s office has been focusing on nature-based tourism for several years. Personally, I think ecotourism is part of *all* rural destination tourism, and if one is in the tourism business in any capacity, the “non-ecotourism” cannot be ignored. It all needs to be managed together and marketed and delivered from the guest point of view. Customers all make trade-offs, and there is a lot of competition

Steve Barba: This is an area where I don’t feel like I have any particular expertise. I would emphasize, however, that regardless of resort format, personal safety and a sense of well-being are the essential preconditions for all vacation travelers. Regarding environmentally sustainable “green” resorts, I would suspect that they would be well received so long as the amenities and comfort are not compromised. I do not believe that resort goers will patronize a particular eco-resort

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simply because it makes them feel good to be so responsible—they will continue to demand excellence with more comfort than home.

Question: What do you consider to be the “pros” and “cons” of such destination-resort development from the perspective of the local population, and how should these trade-offs be managed?

Warren Cook: The local residents, for the most part, love the cash flow—direct and indirect—and they are getting better at managing the threats of sprawl and development. My own view is that, managed properly, resort tourism and even real estate development can be done well in the Maine North Woods. It needs to be a thoughtful, collaborative process, but there are good examples of it in this country and around the world. I have always felt there are many similarities in the Canadian Maritimes, where they have it figured out pretty well and they are even further from the major markets.

Steve Barba: If such a development was successfully undertaken, local populations obviously would benefit economically, but I still do not understand what would motivate a visitor to make the trip. The resort facilities would have to be extraordinary in their appeal to compete with all the other places within much easier reach of the market. How would the woods environment add to the appeal? How would the weather add to the appeal? How would the remoteness add to the appeal? If anything, I would say that the local people would bring the greatest difference to the Maine North Woods tourist experience. Their unaffected, honest good-nature; their personal history and regional culture; their sense of ownership and pride; their work ethic; and their appreciation of jobs that enable

them to live where they want to live will all prove to be very positive assets. Visitors to the region would be transformed by the relationships they would be able to form with local citizens. To make that happen, however, the resort operators should hire and train local people for every level of staff and management, and they should welcome local people and their organizations to patronize the resort, and they should buy local whenever possible. If what is created as an attraction is not respectful of local traditions and is not open for local comment and is not a welcomed addition to the local community, it will not succeed.

Question: Aside from development of destination resorts, what other options do you feel exist for fueling economic growth in the North Woods of Maine? What is the best balance among these options, from your perspective?

Jeff McIver: This part of the world is 100 percent natural. Its history and future economic survival will always be based on natural products and whatever is generated when these products are harvested from the earth. Unfortunately for the residents of this area, these natural products are limited. One would hope that some type of business could relocate to the area and offer jobs, but that seems unlikely for reasons that I do not fully understand. The area holds a great nature-based history dating back to the region's Native Americans' using Mt. Kineo flint for trade all over New England and beyond. The area's logging heritage is second to none, including the last log drive down Moosehead Lake and the Kennebec. In its day, the lake was known for tremendous sport fishing, along with its grand hotels. I think that a “visitor” education center would be a natural amenity for the area. The educational materials could cover not

only the regional history, but also how the area is managing its resources today. They could answer questions like “What is being done to bring back or preserve the quality of fishing in the lake?” or “How are logging operations managed today?” To this day, the North Woods area northwest of Bangor has a gem in Moosehead Lake and other surrounding lakes that other areas of the Northern Forest do not have, and the primary opportunities still point to tourism.

Warren Cook: The second-home and retirement real estate markets are possibilities. If broadband Internet is there, the service sector might also develop. Secondary wood could come back, but my view is that the driver will be lifestyle—increasingly people want to live in these parts. There will be a few more destination resorts over the next 20 years, but the short-term profit will be from real estate development.

Steve Barba: The more the “new and improved” Maine Woods visitor experience ends up as a conscientious enhancement of its traditional hospitality, the better I would like it. Making it a “tourist trap” or a “second-home” community or a “private preserve” or an “exotic resort” without developing other diverse sectors of the economy would be a mistake. There is a culture of ingenuity and entrepreneurialism in the North Woods that we should cherish and support to help the people who live there to be independent and self-reliant. A woodworking factory, a tree farm, a biomass energy plant, a community college, a country store or a local beauty shop—as long as local residents run them—are all tourist attractions that would help to make it worthy of a special trip. 🐾

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ENDNOTE

- I. Key interviews were done with Kevin Kelley, president, Canyon Ranch Resorts, and with Robert J. Holmes, founder/manager THG, LLC; former president/CEO of Harbor Properties; former president/CEO/chairman of Intrawest USA.

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Ann Czerwonka is a special consultant with Industrial Economics, Inc., in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her expertise is in financial and quantitative analysis, with a current focus on the timber sector and sustainable forestry. During the past three years, she has worked with the Open Space Institute analyzing the prospective financial impacts of the Plum Creek Timber Company development proposal in Maine, and has participated in the related recently concluded Maine Land Use Regulatory Commission hearings.



Warren C. Cook is an independent consultant with more than 30 years of business and nonprofit experience in biomedical research, recreation industry management, manufacturing, education, health-care, conservation, social services, and the arts. He has served as president/CEO of several organizations, including the Sugarloaf Mountain Corporation, where he brought the company out of bankruptcy and presided over its sale to the American Skiing Company. He is a long-time friend and advisor to the Northern Forest Center.

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Stephen P. Barba serves as executive director of university relations for Plymouth State University. He previously was one of three managing partners of the BALSAMS resort and co-owner of the operating company for the 15,000-acre resort from 1971 to his retirement in 2005. He sits on the board of directors of the Northern Forest Center in Concord, New Hampshire.



Jeffrey J. Mongan has overseen development activity of major resort properties in California, Colorado, Hawaii, and currently the Montage Resort and Spa at Deer Valley in Utah. From 1983 to 1992, he served in a variety of positions, including senior management, in The Estes Company and its successor The Athens Group and later in the Hualalai Development Company (HDC) in Hawaii. In 1998, he left HDC to rejoin The Athens Group as senior vice president.

Jeff McIver of Holderness, New Hampshire, is vice president of East Coast Resort Management in Sanbornton, New Hampshire.