

Tourism Strategy for the Maine Woods: A Big Push to World Class

by David Vail



Can Maine's North Woods be a "world-class" tourist destination? The short answer is "not yet," according to David Vail in his article and Roger Milliken and Ann Czerwonka in their commentaries that follow. Vail notes that the Northern Forest's current mix of natural, cultural and hospitality assets is not sufficiently unique, outstanding or networked to draw large numbers of new overnight visitors. His article gives examples of some promising new endeavors, and suggests the possible development of a "great Maine woods" recreation area or national heritage area as a possible "big push" strategy. Roger Milliken, drawing on some of his recent experiences outside Maine and his deep knowledge of the issues facing the state's North Woods, gives a number of excellent practical ideas for developing "world-class" experiences for visitors. Ann Czerwonka presents excerpts from a roundtable discussion among a diverse group of resort professionals who considered whether eco-tourism and sustainable resort development might offer a source of economic growth for the North Woods. 

The goal... is to provide Maine visitors with... opportunities to experience the state's world class natural, historical and cultural resources.
(Maine State Planning Office 2005, emphasis added)

Maine's North Woods and Downeast Lakes have a storied history as tourist destinations. A century and a half ago, Henry David Thoreau's travel essays focused a spotlight on the Maine Woods. Fifty years later, railroads led the effort to promote recreation in Maine's hinterland. Over the 20th century, state campaigns and infrastructure investments encouraged tourism in the interior. And today, the Maine's Office of Tourism's director exclaims, "It's an industry that we need to grow and everybody is pumped up about it" (Richardson 2007).

A major reason why "we need to grow" rural tourism is that Maine's rim counties (Oxford, Franklin, Somerset, Piscataquis, Aroostook, and Washington) have not shared coastal Maine's recent prosperity. A few comparative statistics suggest the regional disparity (Table 1).

TABLE 1: Some Socioeconomic Characteristics of Maine's Coastal and Rim Counties

	Rim Counties	Coastal Counties
Unemployment Rate (2005)	6.6%	4.1%
Percentage of Households in Poverty (2003)	13.7%	9.6%
Net Migration 1990–2005	-6,237	+47,061

Source: Cervone (2007)

One reason "everybody is pumped" is the recent blossoming of government, private, and non-profit tourism initiatives. Even though many of these ventures show promise, it seems unlikely they can boost rural Maine's market share in the face of some troubling trends and intense competition. The new ventures are too fragmented and too limited in scope to propel the Northern Forest region to the world-class

level envisioned by the State Planning Office. This essay sketches the "big push" strategy that I believe is our best chance to transform rural Maine into a world-class destination.

The 2003 Blaine House Conference on Maine's Natural Resource-based Industries marked a watershed in recognition of tourism's economic importance and specifically of tourism's potential to revitalize distressed rural communities and regions. Conference background papers underscored rural tourism's economic importance in part by showing that we can no longer bank on traditional mainstays, forest products and agriculture, for sustainable jobs and prosperity (Irland 2004; Smith 2004).

Public-sector tourism initiatives launched since 2003 go well beyond earlier efforts. Following is a sample of recent efforts to bolster rural tourism:

- The state and partnering conservation organizations have purchased prime recreational lands and acquired 1.5 million acres of conservation easements from the West Branch of the Penobscot to the Downeast Lakes. Land for Maine's Future multiplies its limited resources by collaborating with landowners, land trusts, and the federal government.
- Rural tourism regions, with Office of Tourism backing, have framed strategic plans, such as the Downeast region's *Destiny 2010* and Aroostook's *Five Year Tourism Business Plan*.
- The Governor's Steering Committee on Natural Resource-based Industries launched the Maine Nature Tourism Initiative in 2005, with pilot projects in the Western Mountains, Highlands, and Downeast regions.
- The state and tourism industry joined forces to create Center for Tourism Research and Outreach within the University of Maine System (CeNTRO).
- The Department of Environmental Protection's "Green Lodging Certification Program" has designated seven Northern Forest lodgings and sporting camps as *environmental leaders*.

- *People, Place and Prosperity*, the 2007 report of the Governor's Council on Maine's Quality of Place, proposes crucial public investments for rural tourism, including targeted land conservation, downtown revitalization, an off-road trail network, and workforce development.

This flurry of activity is impressive by historical standards, but it is too modest and piecemeal to make rural Maine a world-class tourist destination.

The greatest challenge, I believe, is that the Northern Forest's current mix of natural, cultural, and hospitality assets is not sufficiently unique, outstanding, or networked to draw large numbers of new marketable overnight visitors.

"WORLD-CLASS DESTINATION"— WHAT DOES IT MEAN? ARE WE THERE YET?

The State Planning Office (2005) claims that Maine has "world class natural, historical and cultural resources." Others have made similar "world-class" assertions, as if the claim were uncontested.

In my view, the phrase "world-class destination" accurately describes coastal Maine from Kittery to Acadia. The coast attracts many thousands of international travelers with its rugged coast, national park, quaint (and increasingly gentrified) fishing villages, Portland's buzz, and the "three L's": lobster, light-houses, and L.L. Bean. But it is a stretch—or a self-deception—to label interior Maine's mix of tourist resources world class. Many destinations are of course cherished by Mainers and visitors from away who return repeatedly to favorite places. Indeed, some Northern Forest attractions may stand international

comparison, for instance our 376 rugged miles of Appalachian Trail, the Mount Katahdin massif, the Allagash Wilderness Waterway, Moosehead Lake, and the ITS snowmobile network. Only the Moosehead region and snowmobiling, however, draw large numbers of high-spending "marketable overnight" visitors. It is sobering to note that none of the state's top dozen destinations is in the Northern Forest region (Longwoods 2006).

The strategic challenge is to re-invent the Maine Woods as a 21st century destination: a whole that is greater than the sum of its *not-quite-world-class* parts. Surely, this will be a big marketing challenge and the Office of Tourism's generic tag line, "It Must Be Maine!" will not do the trick. However, I am convinced that *developing the destination* must be first priority. In the words of Longwoods International's Scott Hanson (2004: 1, emphasis added):

A [regional] brand is not a campaign theme, tag line, or slogan. Instead, it's an expression of a compellingly unique experience...In the end, it comes down to the destination experience and *your ability to deliver on the promise*.

Whether a destination is "world class" is largely in the eye of the discriminating traveler, but instead of debating about perceptions, this essay adopts a results-oriented definition. Maine's Northern Forest region will be world class when

- It attracts, say, 300,000 more "marketable overnight" visitors yearly, including a substantial increase in tourists from outside the region's traditional southern New England and Mid-Atlantic "catchment area."
- These tourists spend an additional \$150 to \$220 million, supporting several thousand more full-time equivalent jobs. This is roughly a 20 percent boost to rural Maine's overnight visitor economy.¹ Local indirect spending (multiplier effects) will amplify these magnitudes.
- The Maine Woods draws more tourists year round, but the "big push" centers on the summer season.

CORE CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES

Transforming Maine's Northern Forest region into a world-class destination is not a sure thing. To "deliver on the promise," we must raise tourism service to the high standards expected by affluent, discriminating "experiential tourists." True, our best practice guides, outfitters, restaurants, and lodgings do offer such quality, but there is a big gap between best practice and "average practice." A challenge intimately connected to raising product quality is upgrading job quality. Rural prosperity requires hundreds more highly skilled, well-compensated tourism careers. Another challenge is to recognize and minimize tourism's downside impacts such as congestion, loss of affordable housing, cultural clash, and residents' loss of access to recreational lands and waters. Space does not allow exploration of policy responses to these challenges here (see Vail 2007).

The greatest challenge, I believe, is that the Northern Forest's current mix of natural, cultural, and hospitality assets is not sufficiently unique, outstanding, or networked to draw large numbers of new marketable overnight visitors. The rural tourism economy comprises many sub-groups and distinct markets, of course, ranging from young mountain bikers to middle-aged ATVers and from birdwatchers to bird hunters. We should work to expand each of these market niches. However, Fermata Associates (the state's tourism consultants) identify the key growth opportunity as the growing cadre of *experiential tourists*: travelers who seek out destinations with diverse, high-quality offerings ranging from soft outdoor adventure to heritage, contemporary culture, dining, and lodging. In particular, it is crucial to re-shape destinations and products to satisfy the preferences of baby boomers, with their ample discretionary time and income (Fermata 2005).

My interpretation of the challenge of rural Maine's destination development rests on four factors. First, we face stagnant or declining participation in several traditional recreational activities, including hunting, fishing, camping, whitewater rafting, and alpine skiing. Snowmobiling, a growth industry in the recent past, faces uncertainties regarding fuel prices and climate change (snow cover). Visits to Baxter State Park and the Allagash, the Maine Woods'

"crown jewels," have declined significantly. Complex forces lie behind these troubling trends. Analysts cite Americans' "time poverty," an aging population, and a generational shift in leisure preferences (McIntosh 2006; Nature Conservancy 2006; Murphy 2007). Longwoods' Hanson observes: "They're taking more long weekends and fewer extended vacations. To top it off, they have a 'been there, done that' attitude" (2004: 1). The shift toward more one-time visits is troubling, given the Maine Woods' strong tradition of return visitors.

Second, the Northern Forest region's competitors—including coastal Maine—are pursuing their own strategies to capture tourists through improved product quality, destination branding, and marketing. Prospective tourists to rural Maine encounter a flood of slick media advertisements, brochures, and Web sites. The explosion of Internet information and flight connections means that rural Maine's rivals are no longer just neighbors such as the Adirondacks, White Mountains, and Champlain Valley. We must go head-to-head with true world-class destinations such as the Colorado Rockies and Norwegian fjord country. We must run faster just to stay in place.

Third, an epochal transformation of landownership is underway in the Maine Woods. Considering Maine's long tradition of public access to undeveloped private land, there is a well-founded concern that outdoor recreation opportunities will increasingly be limited by land fragmentation, gated kingdom lots, subdivisions, and other emerging ownership and management patterns. On the bright side, the unprecedented surge of public and NGO acquisitions and easements discussed above has protected large tracts from development and ensured varying degrees of recreational access. In fact, as the mosaic of protected lands nears three million acres, it increasingly looks like the foundation of a world-class destination.

The fourth problem is remoteness. Compared to our Northeast competitors, most Maine Woods natural attractions and gateway towns are farther from major metropolitan centers, interstate highways, and commercial airports. Furthermore, rural Maine offers few convenient alternatives to personal vehicle travel. The national trend to short vacations and the rising price of gasoline reinforce the adverse effect of distance.

Maine Huts & Trails

David Herring, Executive Director, Maine Huts & Trails

For more than a decade, the vision of a backcountry hut and trail system in western Maine has been taking shape. The nonprofit Maine Huts & Trails (www.mainehuts.org) is creating a 180-mile hut-to-hut system from the Mahoosucs to Moosehead. Significant progress towards realizing this vision has been made. More than 110 miles of trail corridor have been acquired, with over 30 miles complete or under construction. More than \$5 million have been raised and the first of 12 huts are well on their way to a winter 2008 opening.

Maine Huts & Trails (MH&T) aspires to be an ecotourism destination providing visitors with high-quality backcountry recreation experiences. The trail corridor traverses some of the most scenic backcountry, riverfront, and lakeshores east of the Mississippi. Great care has gone into trail layout, hut design, and amenities. The entire hut and trail experience is planned to fit into a broader western Maine nature-based tourism initiative.

The trails are designed to provide a wide variety of people-powered experiences to a wide range of outdoor enthusiasts. Paddling, rafting, hiking, groomed cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, mountain biking, fly-fishing, nature photography, birding and more will be available along the MH&T corridor.

The huts will offer guests a comfortable bed, two hearty meals, and an opportunity to share the day's adventures with fellow visitors. Visitors will receive a rich introduction to the culture and heritage of the lands they're traveling through: Native American history and lore, log-drives of the past, and stories of the submerged towns of Flagstaff and Dead River. There will be conversations about the current state of the Northern Forest and the many important initiatives shaping its future.

Huts & Trails users will enjoy an authentic Maine experience and diverse outdoor activities. We hope they will come away with a sense of renewal and a commitment to protect Maine's special places. As the project fosters healthy exercise and environmental education, it also will create skilled jobs and boost rural Maine's economy.

Recent visitor data seem to belie this gloomy outlook. Maine overnight trips jumped 14 percent from 2004 to 2005, following a four-year slump. However, we do not yet know where tourists traveled in 2005, and Maine Tourism Association director Vaughn Stinson is probably correct that the increase brought little benefit to rural interior regions. Plausibly, most of the increase was Canadians returning to Maine's coast with the rising value of the Canadian dollar (Turler 2007b).

RURAL TOURISM INITIATIVES: ENCOURAGING BUT FRAGMENTED

Cataloging all the new tourism ventures that have sprouted in the Maine Woods is beyond the scope of this essay. Instead, it highlights promising efforts under three headings: trails, heritage attractions, and resorts. Sidebars offer a closer look at three promising ventures.

Trails Crisscrossing the Landscape

The Maine Woods brand builds on three iconic trails: the Appalachian Trail, the Allagash Wilderness Waterway, and the ITS snowmobile network. Today, as reporter Tux Turler notes, "Tourism trails are a hot trend in the travel industry. People take shorter vacations these days, and they're more focused on pursuing [specialized] activities, hobbies and interests" (Turler 2007a). He also notes that Maine's present conglomeration of trails did not result from a coherent strategy, but rather "evolved randomly over the last decade."

Nature-based trail systems—all works in progress—include the Appalachian Mountain Club's Maine Woods Initiative, trails and camps in the 100-Mile Wilderness, the four-state Northern Forest Canoe Trail, the Maine Birding Trail, and the fast growing all-terrain-vehicle (ATV) network. Perhaps most ambitious is Maine Huts and Trails, a ski, hike, and bike trail stretching 180 miles from the Mahoosucs to Moosehead. David Herring describes it in a sidebar.

Nature and heritage blend along the Kennebec-Chaudière Trail, highlighting Maine's Revolutionary War and Franco-American heritage, and the Thoreau-Wabanaki Trail, promoting Native American traditions and wilderness preservation. Cultural creativity is displayed along the Fiber Arts, Garden and Landscape,

and Architecture Trails. To weave these many cultural assets into a high-profile regional destination, the Maine Mountain Heritage Network has proposed a “Maine Woods Consortium,” which Bruce Hazard presents in a sidebar.

Grand Resort Plans

Resorts can be destination makers, especially if a tourist region has several resorts offering high-quality amenities and diverse activities. Resort upgrades and proposed resorts on the drawing board are a promising development. The expansion underway at Saddleback will strengthen the Rangeley Lakes region’s year-round drawing power. In the Forks, Northern Outdoors is expanding beyond its original rustic facilities and narrow rafting and snowmobiling focus. In the shadow of Mt. Katahdin, the New England Outdoor Center (NEOC) is applying eco-resort design principles to transform Twin Pines Camps into Ktaadn Resorts. NEOC’s Matthew Polstein lays out the Ktaadn Resorts vision in a sidebar (p. 110).

Turning to “greenfield” resorts, California-based WHG Development has announced plans for The Reserve at Norton Pond, a 4,000-acre, \$500 million resort in Brownsville. With an 18-hole golf course as centerpiece, it would feature a 550-room hotel and corporate convention center (Meeks 2006). Considering that this is not an area known for upscale tourism and that northern Maine golf courses have a short season and underutilized capacity, it is not clear whether market projections will justify such a massive investment. Most ambitious—and controversial—are the two proposed resorts that are core features of Plum Creek’s 420,000-acre Moosehead Lake Concept Plan. The 4,200-acre, 800-accommodation unit family resort on Big Moose Mountain would be near the Greenville tourist gateway. With its emphasis on winter sports, it would tie into the rundown Squaw Mountain ski area, the ITS snowmobile network, and Maine Huts and Trails expedition ski trail. A smaller, more upscale waterfront resort on Lily Bay would reestablish tourism near the site of the former Lily Bay House hotel and camps. Even though the nearby shoreline has considerable existing development, the re-zoning proposal has generated controversy, partly due to its proximity to Lily Bay State Park and Canada lynx habitat.

Proposal: A Maine Woods Consortium

Bruce Hazard, Director, Mountain Counties Heritage

Over the past seven years, the Maine Mountain Heritage Network (MMHN) (www.mainemountains.org) has achieved modest success in coordinating the efforts of member organizations around a number of regional development strategies. One core strategic idea is weaving natural assets together with heritage attractions and contemporary culture to create and brand a rural tourism destination—a whole that’s greater than the sum of its parts.

As a bold next step, MMHN’s coordinating team propose to “scale up” its initiative—widening geographic inclusion, promoting investment in asset-based development projects, and marketing the resulting products, including tourism products. With respect to tourism, we will emphasize creation of new multi-dimensional, value-added products. For example, imagine an old-style fishing trip expanded to include a gourmet dinner of trout amandine with locally grown garlic-mashed potatoes, a visit to bamboo fly rod maker, a fisheries biologist’s illustrated talk on trout habitat and lifecycle, and participation in a stream restoration project.

MMHN’s proposal to create a new “Maine Woods Consortium” includes three key components:

- **Reconfiguring the MMHN to include new partners in northern and eastern Maine.** We have found the “network” approach to be a dynamic and effective way to gain alignment and impact across many small entities operating in a large landscape and across multiple interests and sectors.
- **Establishing a new capital fund** that can be used to implement projects that the consortium deems to be of regional significance.
- **Creating new marketing capacity** to gain a greater market share for Maine Woods tourism products/enterprises and also to establish more effective distribution channels for other products manufactured and grown in the region, for instance, fine crafts and processed foods.

Ktaadn Resorts

Matthew Polstein

The goal of Ktaadn Resorts is to build and operate a signature resort for Maine and northern New England on Millinocket Lake, adjacent to Baxter State Park. The resort will include an 80-room eco-lodge and outdoor adventure center, a mixed-use agriculturally themed village center and residential neighborhood, as well as two clusters of resort homes. The eco-lodge will be inspired by the great historic lodges found in America's national parks, but it will be built to exacting 21st century environmental standards. It will include two restaurants, a theater, and banquet and conference space for 250 people.

We will build and operate Ktaadn Resorts in a sustainable fashion that honors the spectacular natural beauty of Mount Katahdin and the West Branch region. The resort will exploit and support the connected mosaic of conservation easements and ownerships in the Katahdin region. Although these conservation measures assure the availability of land for recreation and commercial forestry, they offer no plan to guide development in ways that best serve visitors and future residents without eroding those values. The design and operation of Ktaadn Resorts will help to fill that gap. It will also highlight the local culture and heritage of the region, creating a sense of community for guests and residents alike.

Opportunities to increase awareness of the surrounding environment and to strengthen human connections with nature will be ever-present. We will support the resort and the region with an array of traditional and non-traditional amenities that use the area's rugged natural beauty and the resort's community setting to add value to the guest experience and to create quality employment and retail opportunities for area residents and businesses. All of this will be based on the principle of exceptional service, making Ktaadn Resorts a prime destination and a likely model for future development along Maine's forested fringe.

In assessing resort development, god (or the devil) is in the details. At their best, multi-season resorts give a sustainable boost to local economies, generating year-round jobs, many paying livable wages. They use

local suppliers for construction materials, furniture, food, and repairs. They offer a base of operations and a ready-made clientele to local guides, outfitters, craftspeople, and performing artists. They build the customer base for other leisure and hospitality businesses. However, at their worst, new resorts offer mostly low-paying, seasonal jobs, "import" their inputs, compete with existing businesses, and stress environmental and host-community carrying capacities. The Ktaadn Resorts sidebar describes a project explicitly designed to maximize positive community and environmental impacts.

Other Initiatives

Beyond trails, resorts, and heritage initiatives, there is much more going on in Maine Woods tourism. Other initiatives run the gamut from the Maine Winter Sports Centers in Fort Kent and Presque Isle, to the Maine Wilderness Guides Organization, seven certified *Environmental Leader* lodgings, and the swelling ranks of farm bed-and-breakfasts offering fall hay rides, winter skiing, and spring maple syrup events.

Discussion

This host of encouraging initiatives brings several questions to mind. First, with so much uncoordinated activity, is it possible that the Northern Forest region might develop an unsustainable oversupply of some tourism products? This seems possible, for instance, if resort capacity or the supply of recreational trails and lodges outstrips demand growth. Second, could there be too much variety for prospective visitors to choose from? Longwoods International's Hanson warns, "Customers don't absorb laundry lists of features, but embrace focused propositions with a compelling appeal" (Hanson 2004: 1).

A third question arises as nonprofit organizations such as the Western Mountains Foundation and Appalachian Mountain Club develop trail infrastructure, lodgings, and recreational programs. Is it ethical—and economically healthy—for nonprofits to compete with existing private sporting camps, camp grounds, ski centers, and other tourist businesses? Do the nonprofits' tax exemptions and grant funding confer an unfair competitive advantage that could undermine private sector profitability?

FIGURE 1: Connecting the Conservation Landscape of Northern Maine

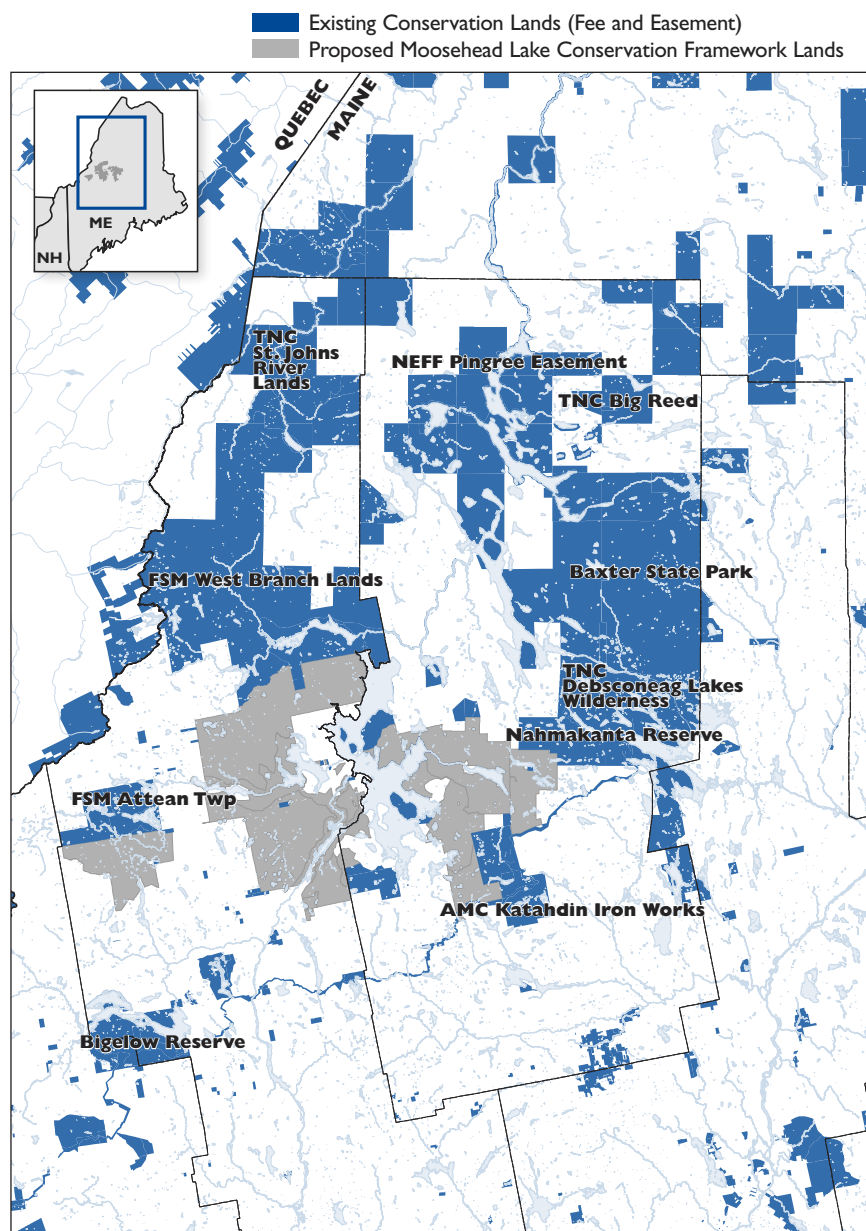
Finally, can this unprecedented mobilization of talent, energy, and investment do more than just maintain market share in the face of worrisome trends and intense competition? Can it transform the Maine Woods into a world-class tourist destination? I believe the answer is “yes”—but only with a big push to get us there.

A BIG PUSH TO WORLD CLASS

Nature in all its beauty and diversity will continue to be the Maine Woods’ prime tourist draw. The core strategic challenge is to weave dispersed natural attractions into a *whole*: a region-wide destination renowned for outstanding recreational experiences. Maximizing the brand attraction of natural assets is necessary but not sufficient, however. The growing cohort of experiential tourists demands much more than rustic adventures. They select destinations offering a menu of high-quality attractions, including a rich heritage, contemporary culture, and excellent dining and lodging. A second task in creating a world-class destination is thus to expand, upgrade, and brand the region’s cultural offerings, broadly defined. These are two cornerstones of the “big push” strategy. The third cornerstone, not addressed in detail here, is achieving a level of excellence in tourism products widely recognized by discriminating tour arrangers and travelers. (This facet of the big push is discussed in Vail 2007.)

A “Great Maine Woods Recreation Area” and the Magnetic Attraction of “Twin Parks”

The foundation of a bold Maine Woods tourism strategy is already in place: several million acres of protected lands stretching from the Mahoosuc Range to the Downeast Lakes. Land for Maine’s Future and conservation organizations, with key federal Forest Legacy contributions, have invested tens of millions of dollars over the past decade to dramatically expand conservation lands under fee ownership or easement. Even though these investments have not been part of a



Source: The Nature Conservancy in Maine

tourism strategy, protected lands encompass most of the region’s top natural attractions: lakes, rivers, mountains, trails, viewsheds, and habitats.

I believe we can fashion a world-class outdoor recreation destination from this mosaic of protected

lands and waters. In particular, if Plum Creek's Moosehead Lake Concept Plan were implemented, we would have all the major jewels for an "emerald necklace" running south from the Allagash to Baxter State Park, through the 100-Mile Wilderness to Moosehead, and then west to the Moose River and north to the upper St. John (see Figure 1). This necklace, with additional gems farther south and west, would constitute "The Great Maine Woods Recreation Area." (Stakeholders and branding experts may come up with a better name.)

The new initiatives described in the previous section—trails, heritage sites, resorts—would benefit tremendously by association with this grand-scale, high-visibility destination. Simultaneously, they would contribute to its world-class aura.

Interestingly, the Great Maine Woods Recreation Area sketched here would encompass nearly as large an area as the proposed Maine Woods National Park and Preserve. However, it would not be a contiguous block of land and, crucially, it would not entail federal ownership and management. Economist Thomas Power has made a persuasive case that counties and gateway communities adjacent to large national parks receive a substantial economic boost, not only from tourism but also from in-migration and broad economic revitalization. That is certainly true for Ellsworth, Bar Harbor, and Hancock County in the case of Acadia National Park. Power predicted that a Maine Woods national park would generate one to two million more visitor days/year, roughly the same magnitude as in my description of a world-class destination (Power 2001).

Studies show that rural economies benefit even when they possess multiple large conservation areas (Vail 2007). This leads me to imagine a "twin parks" branding strategy, relying on Acadia National Park's fame to boost the Great Maine Woods, just a few hours drive away. Bangor, with its international airport, its bus and rail facilities, and its own tourism renaissance, would become the hub connecting these two big natural areas. If just five percent of Acadia's visitors (100,000 people) were convinced to spend a few days in the Great Maine Woods, the economies of Penobscot, Piscataquis and Somerset counties would get a major boost.

If people find the Great Maine Woods and twin parks ideas compelling, we still face the "Bert and I" question: how can we get there from here? Here is a brief sketch of some strategic tasks: creating a master plan for the Great Maine Woods, investing in green infrastructure to make conservation lands accessible and attractive, strengthening amenities in gateway towns, and branding the destination. I draw freely on recommendations by the Governor's Council on Maine's Quality of Place (2007).

Developing a master plan for the Great Maine Woods would require unprecedented collaboration among state agencies and the rural tourism regions, as well as extensive stakeholder dialogue to refine the strategy and ensure buy-in. The latter is critical, given past tensions, for instance between motorized and non-motorized recreation, and given some landowners' ambivalence toward recreation on their easement lands (Munding and Daigle 2007). Interagency coordination of the effort should be facilitated by the governor's recent formation of a tourism sub-cabinet. Strategic planning will center on the following tasks:

- *Inventorizing the Maine Woods' prime natural attractions, based on visitation patterns and a quality rating system:*

Prioritize investments in green infrastructure to enhance attractiveness and access (trails, directional and interpretive signage, parking, scenic pullouts, restrooms).

Prioritize additional lands for protection through purchase or easement.

Develop itineraries that connect jewels in the emerald necklace and respond to specific tourist interests such as wildlife watching and fly fishing.

- *Acquiring title or easement on lands needed to complete the mosaic:*

Where necessary, renegotiate existing easements to strengthen landowners' economic incentives to allow and improve recreational access (e.g., underwrite the cost of trails, signage, and parking on private land).

- *Framing a land use master plan, designating the appropriate mix of recreational uses on various protected parcels:*

Assess the carrying capacity of recreational “hot spots” and develop effective visitor management tools.

Include large-scale wilderness areas: road-less tracts for habitat protection and human-powered recreation.

Sponsor a contest to select a name for the Maine Woods recreation area.

Within a longer timeframe, develop a transportation plan to facilitate movement of tourists to and around prime sites in the Great Maine Woods. This will reduce hot-spot congestion, dependence on personal vehicles, and greenhouse gas emissions. (Mount Desert’s Island Explorer and the southern Maine’s Coastal Explorer are obvious models.)

Experiential tourists spend only part of their time in nature. They also seek quality experiences in the built environment. Amenities in most gateway towns to the Great Maine Woods fall short of world class. The Governor’s Council on Maine’s Quality of Place has laid out excellent ideas for delivering technical and financial assistance to projects such as town center beautification, upgrading local parks and boat launches, improving traffic flow, refurbishing historic buildings, and organizing cultural events.

When outstanding nature tour itineraries, amenity-rich gateway communities, and top-quality tour products are in place, the challenge will be to forge an authentic and indelible brand: one that can sell the Great Maine Woods to tourists from New England and beyond. *De facto*, Maine’s rural interior is a promotional stepchild to the coast. Lacking expertise, I cannot detail an effective branding strategy. However, my study of ecotourism quality labeling in Sweden and Australia suggests that ecotourism certification is more than a way to foster environmentally friendly tourism; it also has great potential as a branding and marketing tool. A proven quality label sets certified tourism products and destinations apart from competi-

tors in the marketplace (Vail 2005). Maine should seriously consider creating the Northeast’s first ecotourism quality label.

The big push toward a world-class Great Maine Woods destination obviously has a price tag. Elsewhere, I explore financial sources we should consider: general obligation bonds, tourism user fees, and dedicated tax and fee revenues from some mix of lodging, class A restaurant meals, car rentals, and summer airport landings (Vail 2007).

A “Great Maine Woods National Heritage Area”—Capitalizing on the National Park Service Brand

Putting aside our “passions and preferences,” as Scott Hanson urges, we should admit that what the Maine Woods offers in the way of historic events, arts, crafts, and performing arts is modest compared to neighboring destinations such as Acadian New Brunswick and New York’s Hudson Valley. How then can we maximize the drawing power of the Maine Woods’ diverse, dispersed—and modest—cultural assets? How can we best link culture with nature to shape destinations that draw more tourists, encourage longer stays, and induce more spending? How can investments in heritage and contemporary culture simultaneously enhance rural residents’ quality of life?

The most creative proposal in circulation is to seek Congressional designation of a National Heritage Area (NHA)—let’s call it the “Great Maine Woods NHA.” What could NHA itineraries offer tourists? Native American crafts and lore, Benedict Arnold’s Revolutionary War expedition, Thoreau’s wilderness sojourns, the intermingling of Franco- and Anglo-American cultures, and the stories and places surrounding the forest industry (Paul Bunyan mythology, lumber camps, river drives, mill towns carved from the forest). From Norway to New Sweden, the region is also dotted with fascinating 19th century towns. And the heritage area could extend to nearby metropolitan areas: the classic mill towns of Lewiston-Auburn and the world capital of the 19th century lumber industry, Bangor.

What is the economic payoff? The National Park Service’s NHA coordinator calls heritage area designation “the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval—if

the National Park Service is involved, it must be important.” The NPS logo has proven to be a powerful marketing tool (McIntosh 2006). In addition, heritage areas receive technical assistance and typically several million federal dollars to invest in improving, networking, and promoting their attractions.

A campaign to win NHA designation faces two distinct political challenges. The first is widespread reservations and some outright opposition, as encountered by Mountain Counties Heritage when it broached the idea a few years ago. There is a general wariness in rural Maine about federal involvement and, among some, a mistaken belief that NHA designation inevitably means federal land acquisition and regulation. In reality, the National Park Service notes that “local people are making the decisions” (McIntosh 2006). Nonetheless, convincing doubters and opponents will take time and intelligent tactics. Tourism extension advisor and NHA supporter Roger Merchant is convinced that site visits to existing heritage areas would reassure skeptics. Another approach centers on organization building and “learning by doing.” The Maine Woods Consortium proposed by Bruce Hazard in the sidebar here would be the critical first step toward a formal NHA proposal. The consortium’s organizing experience and accomplishments on the ground could pave the way for the second political task: winning Congressional approval. With an effective lead organization, an outstanding proposal, and leadership from the governor and congressional delegation, that effort would have great promise.

CONCLUSION: LITTLE NUDGES AND A BIG PUSH

The variety, energy, and sophistication of tourism initiatives already under way in Augusta and across rural Maine are encouraging. They should enable the Northern Forest region to hold its own in the face of worrisome tourism trends and competing destinations. But if our ultimate goal is a world-class Maine Woods destination that maximizes tourism’s contribution to sustainable prosperity, then these many little nudges need help from a big push. 🐻



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ENDNOTE

1. We lack precise records of spending on marketable overnight trips to the Northern Forest region. Based on reports by Longwoods International, I estimate that roughly 1.5 million such visits are made yearly. This is based on 4.66 million total marketable overnight trips statewide in 2005 combined with 2003 data showing that 27.5 percent to 33 percent of those trips were to Northern Forest tourism regions. (See Longwoods International [2004: 158–159; 2006: 30].) Data from the Center for Tourism Research and Outreach’s 2006 visitor survey supports two different estimates of expenditures per marketable overnight trip. Average daily spending of \$145 per adult and an average stay of five days yield mean trip expenditure of \$725 per person. A different method indicates average spending of \$1,245 per party (CeTRO 2007). Based on the first estimate, 300,000 more visitors would spend \$217.5 million; using the second estimate, 120,000 more parties (averaging 2.5 people) would spend \$149 million.

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