

Cradle of Conservation

by Richard Judd

Conservation history brings to mind epic battles over national parks, free-flowing rivers, and immense wilderness areas in the West. We should not overlook similar accomplishments in the East, however, where citizens and public officials pioneered the conservation movement well before John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, and Theodore Roosevelt coined the term. Maine stands as an example. Not only did it establish its conservation credentials early but it also did so under complicated conditions. Western conservation was guided by university-trained officials backed by the power of the federal government; Maine conservation grew out of an older, more subtle tradition of common-resource management championed by ordinary citizens. Conservation in the West involved federal lands, while Maine conservationists worked with a complex mix of public and private ownerships freighted with decades of prior claims by Native Americans, loggers, hunters, fishers, recreationists, and industrial landowners. Imbued with a powerful sense of place, Mainers rejected public conservation options, beginning with a Katahdin National Park in the 1910s and continuing through the 1950s. Finally, Maine's proximity to the most heavily urbanized region in America generated wildly conflicting conservation expectations. Urban activists, absorbing a century of literary myth-making, objectified Maine landscapes as exotic, eternal, and delicately harmonized and wrote those who worked these lands out of the conservation movement. Rural Mainers, on the other hand, saw these same landscapes as familiar, dynamic, and useful

and remained deeply suspicious of urban outsiders. Their industries were linked to markets around the world, and while this was not unique in rural regions, globalism in Maine seemed at odds with a town-meeting culture and way of life dependent on the illusion of isolation and independence. In short, rural Mainers wore their global burdens uneasily, and for a century or more political rhetoric has been laced with suspicion of outsiders, whether conservationists or exploiters.

Despite this confusing mix of influences, Maine pioneered the conservation tradition. In part this tradition was due to a heightened sensitivity to the common welfare, a Puritan heritage so intense, according to historian Frances Malamy, that "at times it seemed to amount to obsession" (Malamy 2000). In addition, conservation consciousness grew from the thinness of Maine's resource base, which forced early recognition that the bounty of forests, fish, and soils was finite. Finally, Maine's strong sense of place, fortified by a long tradition of regionalist writing and tourist imaging, provided a firm foundation for grassroots conservation politics.

A brief review brings these achievements to light. Maine's Fish Commission, for instance, founded in 1867, was the nation's first public conservation agency, emerging out of decades of conflict between villagers, commercial fishers, and dam owners. Frustrated in their hopes for sustaining both fish and dams, commissioners turned to restocking inland lakes with salmon and trout in some of the nation's earliest experiments with fish propagation, and in 1880, they added game management to their mission. The

Sea and Shore Fisheries Commission, created in 1895, pioneered inshore fish conservation with regulations on weir and net placement and limits on lobster catches (Cumbler 2001; Judd 1988, 1997). A twentieth-century "first" in fish conservation was removing the Edwards Dam in Augusta in 1999. Pressured by Maine environmentalists, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, for the first time in its history, declined to renew the dam's license because its environmental costs outweighed the economic benefits (Crane 2004). Continuing this leadership, Maine's Atlantic Salmon Federation joined with the Penobscot Indian Nation and other organizations in 2005 to improve sea-run fish passage on 2,000 miles of the Penobscot River watershed.

Maine stood at the forefront of forest conservation as well, being the first state in the nation to create a forestry commission in 1869 and among the first to make the commission permanent in 1891. In the 1890s, intensive cutting by the paper industry brought together a loose coalition of farmers, hotel owners, recreationists, women's club members, and mill owners that paved the way for the Maine Forestry District. Created in 1909, the commission established one of the most elaborate wildfire control systems in the country. With its woods protected, the forest industry continued the tradition of public recreational access, a multiple-use approach that underwrote the sporting camps, guide services, and hotels that sustained Maine's inland economy (Judd 1989, 1997).

In the 1950s, a similarly varied collaboration launched one of the earliest clean-water campaigns in the nation, pressuring the administration of Governor Edmund Muskie to implement some of

the earliest state-level attempts at containing pollution. When Muskie moved to the US Senate, where he sponsored landmark environmental legislation, Maine continued to upgrade its river classifications, reducing river pollution significantly in the years before passage of the federal Clean Waters Act (see article by Courtemanch et al. [2023] for a discussion of this topic). Similar citizen coalitions protected wild rivers as well. Conservationists, recreationists, and paper industry leaders blocked three successive dam proposals on the St. John River, the most pristine watercourse in the eastern United States, saving the entire basin along with 76,000 acres of forestland. In the midst of these controversies, timberland owners and conservationists championed a protective corridor along the nearby Allagash River, one of the premier wilderness canoe routes in the nation. Proponents defended the Allagash as a “working wilderness”: an incongruous combination of Indian, hunter, and logger lore with urban-inspired images of pristine nature. The campaign was effective, and in 1970, the federal government bowed to Maine antifederalism by dedicating the Allagash the nation’s first state-managed Wild and Scenic River (Maine State Legislature 1963; Soutar 1962). In addition to stopping dams on the St. John and Allagash, grassroots environmentalists championed a broad spectrum of environmental laws, including some of the stiffest land development regulations in the nation, one of the country’s most comprehensive bottle bills, and a Land Use Regulation Commission with jurisdiction over the largest tract of predominantly undeveloped land in the eastern United States (Acheson 2000; Irland 1999; Judd and Beach 2003).

Maine fell behind other states in public landholdings due to the tradition

of public access to private timberlands, but three remarkable instances of private philanthropy helped compensate for this shortfall. In the early 1900s, George B. Dorr and other wealthy Mount Desert Island summer residents donated land that in 1919 became Acadia National Park, the first national park in the eastern United States. In 1930, former governor Percival P. Baxter purchased timberland around Katahdin and deeded it to the state. Named Baxter State Park in 1931, the parcel continued to grow until Baxter’s last purchase in 1962, realizing his dream for a 200,000-acre wilderness park. Continuing this tradition, businesswoman Roxanne Quimby purchased land on the East Branch of the Penobscot River in 2000, and 16 years later this became the 87,563-acre Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument. Maine’s own public lands were enlarged when a court battle returned to the state the Public Reserved Lots. This land, set aside in each unorganized township to support schools, had been absorbed into commercial timberland holdings when the towns failed to incorporate. The public domain grew again in 1987 when voters approved funding for the Land for Maine’s Future program, which over the next decades protected a 610,000-acre assortment of mountain forests, lakeshores, coastal islands, marshlands, and working farms and waterfronts (Urquhart 2021).

Maine’s most distinctive conservation achievement was the private, nonprofit land trust, a grassroots tool for protecting open spaces, critical habitats, farms, forests, and other landscape elements important to the state’s identity. With a long tradition of creative grassroots conservation and a relative lack of public ownership, Maine supported more trust lands per capita than any other state in the Union, including nearly a million

acres of land and easements along the upper St. John River. By 2019, trusts had conserved more than 2.5 million acres in Maine. Together with state and federal holdings, this put nearly 20 percent of Maine’s land area in conservation ownership and easement (Pidot 2011).

By western standards, these protected areas are small, but as ecologist Daniel Botkin points out, it is a mistake to assume that “only a big wilderness can provide an experience of the wild” (Botkin 2001). Small, scattered parcels provide access to more people than large, remote wilderness areas, and they offer a more intimate experience of nature. However, this fragmentation complicates wildlife protection. With this fragmentation in mind, in 1994 landowners, conservationists, scientists, and public officials formed the Maine Forest Biodiversity Project, and with counterparts elsewhere in New England and New York they mapped core areas across the region where they could recapture the biological integrity of the original forest. These areas were complemented with lightly managed protective buffers and corridors linking core areas. The latter promoted genetic diversity, expanded the range for large carnivores, and allowed for biotic shifts due to climate change. Working with partners across the region, Maine achieved an ecosystem management plan for a complex land-use pattern of shifting timber harvests, recreational developments, and permanently protected lands (Baldwin 2007; Barton 2012; McMahon 1993).

From suburban trust lands to the northern wilderness, Maine’s conservation record offers important lessons for the movement generally. First, conservation can be effective in a world where nature and culture are no longer binaries but are merely ends of a spectrum that must be preserved in its entirety. As

agrarian activist Wes Jackson (1996: 67) says, “either all the earth is holy or none is.” Second, grassroots support is crucial to sustaining these initiatives. Maine conservation grew from the bottom up as ordinary citizens resisted outside exploitation, industrial and municipal pollution, and unwelcome development. In 1969, Governor Curtis promised that an alert public would help Maine reach its economic goals without “squandering the state’s rich natural resources” (*Maine Times* 1969). To an extraordinary degree this promise has been kept.

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