

Protecting the Coast Over Time: Interview with Four Maine Coast Heritage Trust Staff Members

by Elizabeth Pierson

Since its founding in 1970, Maine Coast Heritage Trust—our only statewide land trust focused on the entire coast—has had an extraordinary impact on coastal protection. Working on hundreds of projects with partners from Kittery to Lubec, MCHT has helped conserve almost 180,000 acres and 335 islands. It holds more than 300 conservation easements and owns and stewards more than 155 public preserves. Protected sites include scenic islands and shorelines, working waterfronts, water-access sites, active farmlands, and community parks, trails, and greenspaces. In addition to its work on individual conservation projects, MCHT was instrumental in establishing the Land Trust Alliance, the nation's leading land conservation advocacy group (1981); Land for Maine's Future program (1987); and many Maine land trusts. My interview with four senior staff members took place in May 2023.

—Elizabeth Pierson

What are the primary pressures on our coastal lands and islands?

Jeremy Gabrielson: Historically, one of the major pressures was industrial use, and we're still dealing with some of those impacts—dams that impede fish passage, for example. More recently, most of the pressure has come from low-density residential development, which fragments the land and leads to dwindling access. I think development will continue to be the main pressure, just because coastal Maine is so lovely and everybody wants a piece of it.

Another major pressure, of course, will be dealing with the impacts of climate change.

Jeff Romano: All of these pressures have repercussions for community cohesion. When increased property values fueled by development force people to move because they can't afford to live where they've always lived, or loss of access affects people's ability to pursue their livelihoods, it puts a strain on communities.

What were some of the early milestones in protecting Maine's coast?

Jeff: One of the earliest milestones was the creation of Acadia National Park,¹ which both brought broader recognition to the natural wonder of Maine's coast and laid the groundwork for more wide-ranging conservation of it. In the early 1970s, coastal protection was strengthened by a flurry of federal policy initiatives, including creation of the Environmental Protection Agency and passage of the Clean Water Act. That same era saw similar changes at the state level, with establishment of the State Planning Office in 1968 and adoption of the Shoreland Zoning Act in 1971.

MCHT uses a variety of strategies and tools to conserve land. Which of these have been most effective along the coast?

Betsy Ham: Conservation easements were the first tool we used, and they're still essential for us. We didn't invent easements, but in 1970 they were clumsy and not very usable. MCHT was part of a national movement to make easements

more accessible and more nimble, and we continue to spearhead efforts to update and improve the legislation around them. Direct acquisition of land is another major tool, even when MCHT isn't the intended owner. Of the almost 180,000 acres MCHT has helped protect, it owns or holds easements on only about 45,000 acres. The rest represent partnership projects we supported.

Jeff: Land for Maine's Future is something we've leaned on big time. LMF has invested over \$130 million in conservation projects, helping acquire more than 600,000 acres throughout the state, including dozens of properties up and down the coast. Another tool is the state's current use programs,² which offer tax relief by assessing property based on its current use rather than its market value. Current use doesn't provide permanent protection, but it's still a very good tool.

Jane Arbuckle: Fund raising is a vital tool. The fact is, you need money to protect land. We work with a variety of partners—federal, state, municipal, and nonprofit—to raise funds. We're fortunate to have a great engagement team, which has become very sophisticated at developing relationships with foundations and also keeps our work in the public eye.

Jeremy: I want to mention the role of the Maine Land Trust Network, an MCHT program started in 1995, in supporting Maine's 80-plus land trusts. The network ensures that all Maine land trusts have access to the information and resources they need, an understanding of changes in the law and land trust standards and practices, and opportunities to connect with and learn from other land conservation organizations in Maine. Unlike many states, Maine doesn't have a lot of public

lands. Our local land trusts have filled that void and have created one of the strongest land trust communities in the country. Maine has conserved almost 4.5 million acres, more than 60 percent of which is owned or managed by land trusts.

What are the public benefits of conserving and caring for our coastal lands and islands?

Jane: About 55 percent of Maine's population lives along the coast, and millions of people visit it every year. Certainly one of the benefits of conserving this land is maintaining its ecological viability, so we can have clean air and water and healthy ecosystems. There are spiritual and recreational benefits and economic benefits. A big part of Maine's economic powerhouse is along the coast, in the fisheries and tourism. Many conserved lands also protect historical and cultural resources.

Betsy: Preserving coastal access is a major public benefit, both for recreationists and those needing access to the water to make a living. Less than 10 percent of Maine's coast is accessible to the public. Maine has a long tradition of permissive trespassing, including for clambers, but as soon as land gets purchased by someone not interested in continuing that access, it can quickly disappear.

MCHT is well known for working in partnership with others. Who have been some of its key partners over the years?

Jeremy: Early on, one of our major partners was Acadia National Park. As a land trust, MCHT can act more quickly on acquisitions than the federal government can, so one of the roles we've played with Acadia has been to prepurchase parcels it's been authorized to buy and hold them until the park can work through the process to acquire them. We've played that role with several other partners, including Maine Coastal Islands National

Wildlife Refuge, Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, and Maine Bureau of Parks and Lands. We also work closely with many other nonprofits, including The Nature Conservancy, Island Institute, Maine Farmland Trust, and Maine Audubon Society.

Jane: For a long time we've partnered on conservation projects with towns and municipalities. Working with select boards, schools, businesses, and other local entities has been part of our work forever.

Betsy: MCHT has also formed great partnerships with the many land trusts it helped start. That was the original idea behind the Maine Land Trust Network, and it's been tremendously successful. We also have less formal partnerships—coalitions of land trusts and other conservation groups—that allow us to think regionally a bit better.

Jeff: The diversity of our partnerships has really evolved over time. In the beginning, a lot of partnerships focused on conserving land for the sake of the land. Over time, we've expanded to working with groups that may not even think of land conservation as a primary part of their work. Affordable housing groups, business groups, New Mainers, for example. Working with a wider diversity of partners has helped us increase the scope of our work and our relevance in the broader community. The legislature is also a key partner. We work with a lot of different constituencies there, including environmental organizations, business associations, and sporting groups.

The scope of coastal conservation has broadened considerably over the past 50 years, from initial efforts focused largely on protecting scenic islands and wildlife habitat to a growing recognition of conservation as a tool for providing economic benefits and addressing a variety of societal

issues. Can you talk about the implications of this broadening scope?

Jeremy: I think it's part of a broader change in the conservation movement nationally. In the early 20th century, the big figures in conservation tended to be well-to-do White people, who viewed land conservation as a way to right the wrongs of industrialization. But we've learned that not everybody sees themselves reflected in that vision. If we want to create a conservation movement that's meaningful to everybody, we have to include more voices from people of different backgrounds, and they have to be involved in decision-making.

Betsy: One way we've been broadening the conversation is by working more deliberately with Maine's Indigenous communities. Many MCHT preserves have a rich Wabanaki history, and we've completed some wonderful partnership projects with the Wabanaki. We're interested in building more capacity for collaboration with the Wabanaki, hoping to enhance our work of community conservation by integrating Indigenous perspectives and knowledge into it.

Jeff: It's not enough just to say that almost all of our conserved land is accessible to the public.³ What does accessibility really mean? How do we become intentionally more inclusive? We don't have all the answers, but we know that being more aware of and responsive to people's differences and learning as much as we can about why land is important to people are key to answering those questions.

Jane: Twenty years ago making trails and buildings ADA-accessible wasn't something most people working in conservation thought about. Now it is. Last year MCHT helped coordinate a statewide accessibility workshop, and we're assessing all our properties to see where we can make them more accessible. Food insecurity is

another issue on our radar now. At Aldermere Farm and Erikson Fields in the midcoast, for example, our programming focuses specifically on working farms and on feeding local communities.

What role can land trusts and land conservation play in responding to climate change?

Betsy: Land conservation plays a vital role in carbon sequestration. Maine is heavily forested. Our trees lock up a lot of carbon, and the longer they remain and the bigger they get, the more carbon they'll store. Salt marshes serve the same function. They absorb atmospheric carbon and store it in peat, which is stable for a very long time. Maine has far less marshland than forestland, but on a per-acre basis, marshes are about ten times more effective at storing carbon than forests are.

Jeremy: At MCHT we're thinking in particular about habitats and ecosystems that are notably vulnerable. For example, as sea level rises, salt marshes—which serve as nurseries for fisheries and help reduce erosion and flooding by absorbing storm surges—will have to migrate. We're looking at several strategies to help make that happen, including conserving undeveloped buffer lands that marshes can move into in the future. We're also working to restore damaged marshes. Rivers are another focus. Many Maine rivers are blocked by dams and other barriers, which harm fish populations and riparian habitats. The restoration of free-flowing rivers is an important piece in the work to make coastal watersheds and the people and wildlife that inhabit them more resilient to climate change.

What are the biggest challenges that lie ahead in coastal protection?

Jane: From a stewardship perspective, there's an increasing need to balance our desire to connect people with the land

and our need to protect the land. It's wonderful to see more people connecting with the natural world, but we need to be sure the nature remains there for them to connect with. We've got to speak for the land. It can't speak for itself.

Jeremy: One of the challenges is just that we've got more work to do. The fact is, we've done a lot of the easy work. Additional work is needed to protect important places and enhance ecological and outdoor recreation values. And land prices keep rising. We saw in the pandemic a lot of interest in land in Maine, including people buying property sight unseen, and that will continue. It creates opportunities for land trusts when land goes on the market, but it also creates challenges in prioritizing where we want to work and what we can do. Resources are limited.

Jeff: In other parts of the country, and even other parts of Maine, there are conservation projects measuring in the tens of thousands of acres. We don't have any parcels that size in coastal Maine. We don't have many that are even 1,000 acres. So those of us working on coastal conservation are doing it 10, 20, 40 acres at a time. That's a lot of work. It's a lot of relationships with landowners, and it takes a lot of capacity to do that work. Also, it's not just acquiring the land. It's then caring for it forever, through changing ownerships and futures.

Betsy: I think one of the biggest challenges is just the pace of change along the coast right now. The landscape and ecology are changing rapidly, and so are communities. We need to keep up with those changes—and be in tune with what communities really need and want—so we can be part of the solution. We want to help create communities that aren't just resilient but are prosperous and thriving. The bottom line is there's a lot of good land protection work still to be done.

NOTES

- 1 The park was originally established in 1916, as a national monument. In 1919 President Wilson signed the act establishing it as Lafayette National Park. The name was changed to Acadia National Park in 1929.
- 2 Maine's four Current Land Use Programs are Farmland, Open Space, Tree Growth, and Working Waterfront. For more information see <https://www.maine.gov/revenue/taxes/tax-relief-credits-programs/property-tax-relief-programs>.
- 3 With a few exceptions, all MCHT preserves are free and open to the public, including for hunting. Bird-nesting islands are seasonally restricted, usually from February through August. For more information see <https://www.mcht.org/visit-a-preserve/>.

Jane Arbuckle, Director of Stewardship, oversees 24 year-round staff and more than a dozen seasonal assistants caring for conserved lands from Kittery to Lubec. She has been with MCHT since 1996.

Jeremy Gabrielson, Senior Conservation and Community Planner, has been with MCHT since 2014. He works with MCHT partners to provide and interpret scientific and spatial data that help inform local decision making up and down the coast.

Betsy Ham, Director of Land Protection, has been with MCHT since 2002. She works on land protection coast-wide with an 11-person team.

Jeff Romano, Senior Public Policy Manager, manages MCHT's public policy initiatives in Augusta and Washington, DC. He has been with MCHT since 2004.

Elizabeth Pierson is a freelance writer and editor from Brunswick with a longtime interest in nature and conservation. She's the author of two bird-finding books (*Down East Books*, 1981, 1996) and more than 200 magazine and newspaper articles.