



SHAPING THE NEXT GENERATION OF LAND CONSERVATION IN MAINE

Final Report from the
Land Conservation Task Force
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY - 2019

On the heels of three decades of unprecedented accomplishments, a group of twenty individuals and organizations came together to form the Maine Land Conservation Task Force with the goal of helping to shape the next generation of land conservation in Maine. In 1987, the Maine Legislature created the Land for Maine's Future Program (LMF) launching a remarkable period of land conservation in Maine during which the acres of permanently conserved land grew four-fold. These land conservation achievements touched all corners of the state and all facets of life for Maine people. It seemed to many that the time was right to assess the accomplishments of this period, as well as its growing challenges, and to lay the groundwork for a new generation of land conservation in Maine.

The composition of the twenty-member task force reflects the many ways land conservation positively impacts Maine people

While often such initiatives arise out of legislative or governmental directives, this Task Force was established independently. Maine Coast Heritage Trust, The Nature Conservancy and the Sportsman's Alliance of Maine provided the initial catalyst for the effort reaching out to diverse interests that reflect the evolving nature of land conservation and how it impacts the state's communities and its economy. The result was a Task Force comprised of students, educators, public health advocates, community organizers, municipal officials, legislators, Maine's tribes, economic development specialists, Maine Guides and others.

THE PAST GENERATION OF LAND CONSERVATION IN MAINE

The past generation of land conservation has been nothing short of remarkable. From less than a million acres of conserved lands in 1987, Maine's conserved landbase, which includes both fee ownership and conservation easements, has grown to over four million acres - from less than 5% to 20% of the state's land area including:

- Some of Maine's most iconic areas;
- Landscape-scale working forest easements that protected 2.4 million acres of Maine's commercial forest lands;
- Over 45,000 acres of productive Maine farmland and associated woodlots;
- Critical wildlife habitat including brook trout streams, deer wintering areas, and unique natural communities;
- Working waterfront wharfs and guaranteed access to clam flats;
- 1700 miles of snowmobile trails, 1200 miles of ATV trails, over 150 miles of rails-to-trails and over 275 boat launches;

At least \$600 million of acquisition funding, approximately half from generous donors and half from public sources, most notably the Land for Maine's Future Program, which spent \$132 million to conserve over 600,000 acres since its inception in 1987.

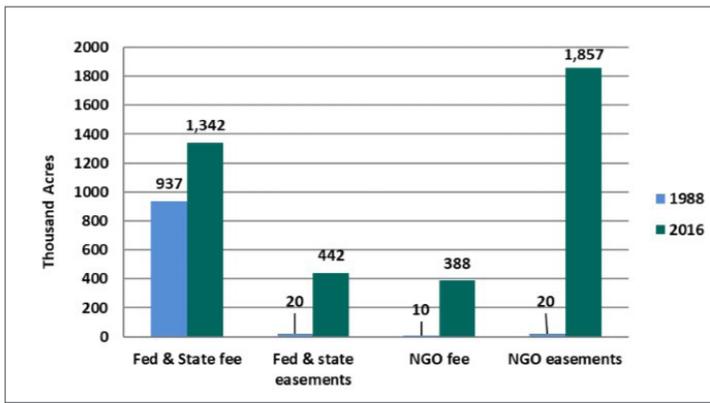


Figure 1. The growth of conservation lands in Maine between 1988 and 2016.

THE NEXT GENERATION OF LAND CONSERVATION IN MAINE

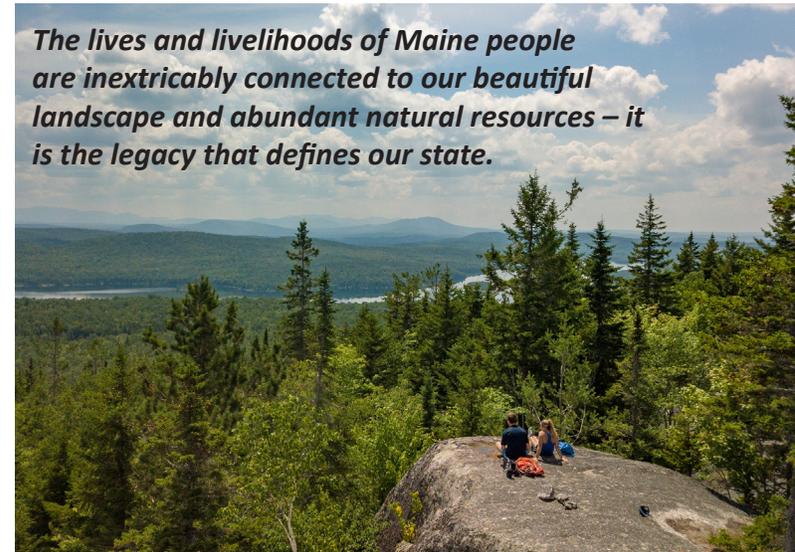
Without question, the story of land conservation over the past thirty years is one of great success resulting from Maine people’s love of the land. They backed land conservation at the ballot box supporting multiple LMF bond proposals; they contributed with their checkbooks supporting projects large and small, and they dedicated their volunteer time to building trails, monitoring easements, collaborating with landowners and much more.

But make no mistake about it, the task is far from done. The reality is that Maine still lags behind the rest of New England in terms of the lands it has conserved. Limited resources over the past eight years resulted in a substantial slow-down in conservation activity. The recent recovery from the real estate downturn of 2008 – 2009 has increased development pressures and land prices, particularly in southern and coastal Maine. Poorly sited development erodes the fabric of the landscapes that define our state and traditional public access to treasured lands and waters continues to vanish. Today we face new challenges unlike those of the past, such as:

- An aging generation of family landowners that will be transitioning long-held farms, woodlots and coastal wharfs in the next decade;
- A changing climate that will likely disrupt Maine’s natural ecosystems and wildlife;
- Towns that find it more-and-more difficult to meet their fiscal obligations while keeping property taxes at reasonable levels;
- An increasingly diverse population of immigrants who have yet to be connected to Maine’s natural resources;
- Forest products, agricultural and commercial fishing industries in transition, and a growing tourism industry that relies upon Maine’s natural wonders to attract visitors;
- Aging and disabled populations that seek access to Maine’s woods and waters;
- The highest obesity rate in New England and youth that spends more time looking at screens and less time outdoors; and
- An increasingly mobile and telecommuting population that can live, work and set up businesses wherever they want.

In each of these challenges, there is a role for land conservation and stewardship. The Task Force has offered six major recommendations

with specific proposed action items for each recommendation. Together, these recommendations provide a blueprint for the next generation of land conservation – a bold vision for the future and a call to action. Now is the time to revitalize the state’s land conservation programs.



The lives and livelihoods of Maine people are inextricably connected to our beautiful landscape and abundant natural resources – it is the legacy that defines our state.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

In 1986, the report of the Governor’s Commission on Outdoor Recreation gave rise to the Land for Maine’s Future Program by the Maine Legislature in 1987 and passage of a \$35 million bond issue to fund the new program. A decade later, the report of the Land Acquisition Priorities Advisory Committee created by Governor King resulted in major improvements to LMF and set the stage for a \$50 million LMF bond that ushered in what is now regarded as the “golden age” of modern land conservation in Maine.

Together, these recommendations provide a blueprint for the next generation of land conservation – a bold vision for the future and a call to action. Now is the time to revitalize the state’s land conservation programs.

The Land Conservation Task Force has worked over the past year with the hope that, like its two predecessors, its findings and recommendations will lead to major new initiatives furthering land conservation in profound ways. A key recommendation is to present Maine voters with a major new LMF bond issue to revive the program and allow it to take on new challenges. It is the Task Force’s hope that a new bond issue will also include much-needed funds to replace aging infrastructure in our State Parks – just one of numerous recommendations focused on improved stewardship of both public and private conservation lands.

The lives and livelihoods of Maine people are inextricably connected to our beautiful landscape and abundant natural resources – it is the legacy that defines our state. Time and time again, Maine people have demonstrated that conserving its natural treasures should be a top priority in Augusta and in our communities. It is hoped that the following recommendations offer Maine people new opportunities to reaffirm that commitment in ways that will lead to an exciting new generation of land conservation in Maine.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Take proper care of our treasured public and private conservation lands and ensure that they meet the needs of Maine people into the future.

Action Item 1.A

Initiate a planning effort involving the Department of Agriculture Conservation & Forestry, Inland Fisheries & Wildlife, Department of Economic & Community Development, Maine Historic Preservation Commission, land conservation organizations and others to develop a clear vision for the state's conserved lands that includes: defining the different roles for conservation lands and where gaps exist; connecting conservation lands with one another; accommodating changing recreational demands; meeting management challenges; and providing easily accessible information about Maine's conservation lands and promoting their use.

Action Item 1.B

Provide State Parks with necessary resources to replace aging infrastructure and invest in new facilities through passage of a \$20 million bond issue and creating a dedicated source of revenue to address ongoing capital needs such as dedicating a percentage of annual Park fees or a small percentage of the non-dedicated portion of the existing Meals & Lodging Tax (not increasing the tax).

Action Item 1.C

Have the Legislature authorize more recreational management positions for Public Lands (to be paid for through existing dedicated revenues).

Action Item 1.D

The Land for Maine's Future Program should dedicate the maximum amount allowed under statute (5% of appraised value) to Access Improvement Grants to facilitate public access to acquired lands.

Action Item 1.E

Land trusts and philanthropic interests should work together to create a "Stewardship Forever Fund" at the Maine Community Foundation (and possibly elsewhere) which would secure substantial private funding from a range of sources to be granted to match stewardship endowment contributions for land trust and municipal conservation properties.

2. Create land conservation opportunities that connect people with land and water.

Action Item 2.A

Amend the LMF statute or create bond language providing guidance to the Land for Maine's Future Board to fund, in addition to its current programs, "Community Projects" that meet local and regional objectives.

Action Item 2.B

Support opportunities for Wabanaki tribes to conserve areas of particular cultural significance and to utilize conserved lands and waters for traditional uses that support their place-based cultures.

3. Revive funding for land conservation and ensure that LMF can effectively meet the challenges of the next generation.

Action Item 3.A

Put forward a bold new \$75 million Land for Maine's Future Bond Issue that will provide stable funding for the program over the next five years.

Action Item 3.B

Leverage all available land conservation funding sources to the maximum extent possible. In particular, ensure that all funding opportunities available through federal programs such as the Forest Legacy Program, Agricultural Conservation Easement Program and Land & Water Conservation Fund are actively pursued.

Action Item 3.C

Increase LMF Program staffing and legal assistance (at least to previous levels) and provide related state agency support (from DACF, IF&W and DMR) in order to eliminate the backlog of acquisition projects now in the pipeline and adequately handle those to be created through new bond funding.

Action Item 3.D

Have the next LMF Board work with stakeholders to identify opportunities to streamline, clarify, and provide consistency to the LMF process so that applicants can navigate projects forward in a timely manner and effectively coordinate LMF acquisitions with federal acquisition programs that can leverage state dollars.

4. Work cooperatively with landowners to support good stewardship and ensure that Maine's tradition of public access to private lands is maintained.

Action Item 4.A

Strengthen Maine's Landowner Relations Program by providing the program with 5 additional Deputy Wardens, supported by new monies from the General Fund over the next four years.

Action Item 4.B

Using the good work of the Landowner Relations Program as a catalyst, create a new public-private initiative (based upon the concept previously known as Landshare) to promote greater understanding and cooperation between owners and users of land.

Action Item 4.C

Connect private forest owners with the tools they need to manage their land sustainably.

Action Item 4.D

Expand privately-funded programs, such as those currently offered by the Maine Mountain Collaborative, Downeast Conservation Network, Maine Woodland Owners, and Maine Farmland Trust, that offer succession planning resources and financial assistance to cover transaction costs for landowners wishing to donate land or a conservation easement.

5. Target land conservation efforts to effectively protect critical natural resources and help Maine combat and adapt to a changing climate.

Action Item 5.A

As part of a broader development of state climate policy, amend the LMF statute and/or create bond language to support projects that promote resiliency and connectivity and will help Maine’s natural ecosystems, wildlife and natural resource-based economies adapt to a changing climate.

Action Item 5.B

Support public-private partnerships that facilitate monitoring, sharing information and developing stewardship strategies for addressing and adapting to a changing climate at local, regional and statewide scales.

Action Item 5.C

Place priority on utilizing available wildlife, aquatic and ecological assessment data to help increase conservation of land and water resources in areas of high biodiversity, seeking representation of all habitat types in each biophysical region of the state.

6. Ensure that land conservation benefits Maine’s economy and communities.

Action Item 6.A

LMF should continue to place a high priority on lands that support Maine’s vibrant forestry, farming, fishing and tourism industries. The State should be aggressive in seeking funds from the Forest Legacy Program, the NRCS Agricultural Conservation Easement Program and other non-state dollars that support working lands and waterfront conservation.

Action Item 6.B

Land Trusts should work closely with communities to plan for future land conservation and community recreational assets and should support policies that help municipalities address their fiscal pressures such as bolstering state revenue sharing and educational funding.

Action Item 6.C

Continue funding for the newly created Office of Outdoor Recreation. Encourage better integration of land conservation

in state and regional planning efforts related to tourism, transportation, energy and economic development.

Action Item 6.D

Initiate a coordinated effort to broaden awareness of the conserved land assets of the state, help the public learn about outdoor recreational opportunities, and ensure promotion is targeted at sites with existing infrastructure.



TASK FORCE MEMBERS

John Banks

Dept. of Natural Resources,
Penobscot Indian Nation

Dennis Keschl

Town Manager - Belgrade
State Representative (R)

Adam Bishop

Maine Farmland Trust

Don Kleiner

Maine Professional
Guides Association

Cathy Breen

State Senator (D)

Alex Koch

Student - Unity College

John Bryant

American Forest
Management

Janet McMahon

Ecologist

Patrick Corey

State Representative (R)

Austin Muir

Chewonki Foundation

Hugh Cowperthwaite

Coastal Enterprises Inc (CEI)

Nancy Smith

GrowSmart Maine

Lee Dassler

Western Foothills Land Trust

Alison Sucusy

Maine Tourism Association

Jim Douglas

Healthy Oxford Hills

Wolfe Tone

Maine Huts & Trails

Tim Glidden, co-chair

Maine Coast Heritage Trust

David Trahan, co-chair

Sportsman's Alliance
of Maine

Julia Harper

Good Food Council of
Lewiston-Auburn /
Androscoggin Land Trust

Chris Winstead

Piscataquis County Economic
Development Council

TASK FORCE CO-COORDINATORS

Jerry Bley

Creative Conservation, LLC

Liz Petruska

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Photos and Figures

- Cover L to R: Jeff Romano, Jenny McNulty for Maine Farmland Trust, SAM, Downeast Lakes Land Trust
- Figure 1: data from *Maine’s Public Estate and Conservation Lands: Brief History and Assessment* (Irland, 2018)
- Page 2 Photo: Ian Patterson

The Task Force received support from:

Elmina B. Sewall Foundation	The Conservation Fund
Maine Coast Heritage Trust	The Nature Conservancy in Maine
Sportsman’s Alliance of Maine	

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