

# Regional Landscape Conservation in Maine Status Report & Interim Summary

## Best Practices for Enhancing Quality of Place

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### Introduction

Maine's sprawling land use patterns threaten to transform many of the state's rural areas into suburbs. Between 1960 and 1990, the percentage of Maine's population living in service centers declined from 59 percent to 44 percent,<sup>1</sup> and between 1970-1990 land development in Maine occurred at four times the rate that population increased.<sup>2</sup> In rough correlation, between 1964 and 1997, Maine lands in agricultural production declined by more than 50 percent,<sup>3</sup> and over 20 million acres of Maine's northern forest have changed ownership since 1980.<sup>4</sup>

These dramatic trends degrade working lands, public access to outdoor recreation resources, scenic vistas and wildlife habitats that, along with Maine's appealing downtowns, define the state's quality of place.

Building on the lessons of the past including those of the Growth Management Program, evolving regional conservation partnerships in Maine are pioneering strategies that facilitate effective collaboration, engage broad community support and integrate landscape-scale open space networks with local economic development. The Land for Maine's Future program is prioritizing conservation projects that link landscape-scale conservation with regional economic development strategies. According to Robin Zinchuk, Executive Director of the Bethel Area Chamber of Commerce, "You cannot have conservation without local prosperity. That is true locally-driven conservation."

The Governor's Council on Maine's Quality of Place identified Maine's natural landscapes and traditional downtowns as unique assets that will attract tourists and skilled professionals to bolster the state's economy. Land conservation has been recognized as an integral component of smart growth approaches and complimentary to municipal land regulation as a tool for controlling sprawling growth patterns.<sup>5</sup> While not a replacement for strong state and town incentives and regulations, landscape conservation can thus be considered an important tool for preserving both Maine's rural landscape and its unique downtowns. The best practices offered in this report represent lessons learned over the last two decades for effective collaboration to preserve and enhance Maine's quality of place.

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<sup>1</sup> Land and Water Resources Council 2002

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Smith 2003

<sup>4</sup> Hagan, J.M., L.C. Irland, and A.A. Whitman. 2005

<sup>5</sup> Daniels and Lapping 2005

**Definition:** *Landscape conservation initiatives in Maine seek to conserve a regional network of open space and shared natural resources for the ecological, economic and cultural values they provide through collaborative partnerships transcending political boundaries and organizational service areas.*

Regional conservation initiatives in Maine span the state from the Mount Agamenticus to the Sea collaboration in southern Maine to the Mahoosuc Initiative straddling the western border with New Hampshire, and eastward to Cobscook Bay and the Downeast Lakes in Washington County.

The varying landscapes identified for conservation in Maine are shaped by the local planning context and linked by interconnected ecological and human systems that “hold the region together.” Ecological qualities used to identify focus regions in Maine include biodiversity or watershed integrity. Economic and transportation networks are human systems tying regional service centers with surrounding rural open space and working lands.

Maine is a “home rule” state with much land use control vested at the local level. Successful landscape conservation initiatives are thus dependent on productive partnerships across municipal jurisdictions and organizational service areas. The cooperative management of natural resources at the regional scale creates shared benefits that motivate regional partners to work together.

## **Findings**

1. Landscape-scale conservation initiatives are shaped by the ecological characteristics, stakeholder priorities, political and socioeconomic conditions, and land tenure and development patterns of the respective region.
2. Successful regional partnerships in Maine recognize the need to engage local residents and decision-makers as key contributors in the formulation of conservation goals and implementation strategies.
3. Diverse partnerships are well positioned to raise public awareness and support, recruit significant human resources and varied organizational expertise, and leverage funding from public and private sources to execute regional strategies.
4. Funders, including the Land for Maine’s Future Program, prioritize collaborative projects when awarding grants, and regional partnerships have an advantage when competing for the existing pool of funds, but additional monies are needed to increase the number and effectiveness of landscape conservation initiatives in Maine.
5. Regional conservation partnerships to date have been weighted toward traditional natural resource stakeholders, including land trusts, statewide non-governmental conservation organizations, and state and federal agencies.
6. Proactive municipal land use planning, regulation and incentives utilized in concert with voluntary conservation will advance broader implementation of landscape conservation.

7. Integrating landscape conservation within broader regional asset-based economic development strategies can expand the constituency and deepen the pool of resources for conservation.
8. The proposed Quality of Place Councils provide an opportunity to facilitate collaborative regional planning processes that link landscape-scale conservation with economic development.

## **Best Practices for Regional Landscape Conservation**

The following best practices are offered as a synthesis of insights and lessons shared by participants of regional landscape conservation initiatives in Maine over the last two decades. Due to the varied ecological, social, political and economic characteristics of each region, the practices are designed to be broad in nature, allowing replication in differing planning contexts.

### **Vision**

1. Engage a diversity of stakeholders that represent varied constituencies, perspectives and organizational capacities.
2. Invest necessary time and resources early on to create a clearly defined, consensus-driven vision.

### **Collaboration**

3. Designate a clear organizational structure, including an entity responsible for sustaining coordination and momentum among partners.
4. Create time to have fun and build personal relationships.

### **Planning**

5. Identify the assets and skills of participating organizations and plan to fill capacity gaps with outside consultants where needed.
6. Inventory and analyze ecological and natural resources when determining landscape conservation priorities, taking advantage of existing information and data where available.
7. Solicit public input and include community priorities for cultural, recreation and scenic resources when determining conservation goals.

### **Outreach**

8. Establish a concise identity to clearly and consistently communicate the scope and vision of the project.

9. Utilize existing social relationships and networks within the region to generate awareness.

### **Implementation**

10. Employ a variety of conservation tools including fee acquisition, easements, regulation and public education.
11. Treat landowners with respect.
12. Establish phases and benchmarks during implementation, allowing pauses for evaluation and celebration of successes.

### **Management**

13. Include long-term management and stewardship of conserved lands during the early planning phases and subsequent capital campaigns.
14. Recruit volunteers to expand the capacity of the organization to monitor and enhance conservation lands.

### **Recommendations (*Preliminary*)**

1. The State of Maine should allocate additional funding targeted for regional landscape conservation and investment initiatives.

Regional collaborations are effective at leveraging state funds with additional grant and private dollars, and state conservation allocations are a sound investment. To date, \$72,010,053 in Land for Maine's Future (LMF) funds have been leveraged with matching contributions approximating \$115,929,677, creating a total of \$187,939,730. These funds have protected 444,557 acres, representing a match of \$1.61 for each LMF dollar. One acre of public or working lands has been successfully conserved for the bargain price of \$161.98 in taxpayer funds.

Many regional collaborations are anchored by a state park or a state trail network -- core assets which require capital investments beyond acquisition. Examples include Cobscook Bay State Park (see Cobscook Bay); Popham Beach State Park (see Kennebec Estuary); Grafton Notch State Park (see Mahoosucs). The 2007 State Park Bond and recent MDOT trails bonds have provided an infusion of funds for long-delayed capital investments to "polish the gems" that anchor many regional collaborations. Sustained or increased state and federal capital investments in parks and trails are a necessary component of making best use of conservation lands.

2. The State of Maine should provide resources to regional planning entities to offer technical assistance and meeting facilitation for regional conservation partnerships.

The Executive Order to Create a Maine Quality of Place and Jobs Investment strategy identifies six Councils of Governments (COG) designated as federal economic development districts (EDD) to coordinate Quality of Place Councils in their respective region. The COG / EDDs should facilitate cooperation among regional partners to create landscape-scale networks of conservation lands surrounding and linked to revitalized downtowns. Breaking down barriers between conservation and economic development stakeholders provides opportunities to create comprehensive and coordinated regional strategies.

3. The State of Maine and Quality of Place Councils should make concerted planning efforts and target strategic investments to establish corridors and enhance connectivity within landscape-scale networks of conservation lands.

Permanently conserved corridors facilitate the development of regional trail networks, identified by the Quality of Place Council as a state priority, and migration routes and habitats for wildlife and plant species needed to preserve the diversity of Maine's flora and fauna. Corridors foster an interconnected system of open space that amplify the value of each conserved parcel and enhance regional ecosystem and recreation values.

4. The State of Maine should sustain the Beginning with Habitat program to disseminate natural resource data to town governments and conservation organizations in a user-friendly format, and, in collaboration with federal, non-governmental and local partners, should seek to expand the scope of available data to include prime agricultural soils, productive timber lands, and outdoor recreational, scenic and land-based cultural assets.

Recent research demonstrates that the Beginning with Habitat (BwH) program is creating benefits. Kartez and Casto found that BwH successfully informed resource protection policies during comprehensive planning processes among towns surveyed in 2004. The authors also found that the greater the number of policymakers and stakeholders who have access to BwH data, the greater the influence of the natural resource information on comprehensive plans.<sup>6</sup>

Expanding the scope of spatial data provided by the State of Maine to include priority working lands and natural, recreational and cultural sites will increase the capacity of towns and regional partnerships to preserve Maine's unique brand. The proposed Quality of Place Councils can help disseminate data about ecological, outdoor recreational, scenic and land-based cultural assets to a range of stakeholders to integrate landscape conservation and economic development in comprehensive regional strategies.

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<sup>6</sup> Kartez and Casto 2008

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