

Three trends are threatening sustainability of Maine's forests

As outstanding working forests, recreational landscapes and wilderness

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For centuries, the forests now covering more than nine-tenths of Maine's land have provided goods and services important to residents and visitors — including food, fuel, timber, paper, clean water — and opportunities for recreation and inspiration. Today, our woodlands are a foundation of Maine's two largest economic sectors, forest products and tourism.

They also perform life-sustaining ecological functions by controlling floods and erosion, moderating climate, capturing carbon dioxide and providing habitat for wildlife, from lynx to loons to louseworts.

Our vision for Maine's legendary woodlands incorporates each of the dimensions of sustainability: economy, by managing forests for a sustainable flow of goods and services; community, by building thriving rural communities; and environment, by restoring healthy, resilient forest ecosystems for future generations.

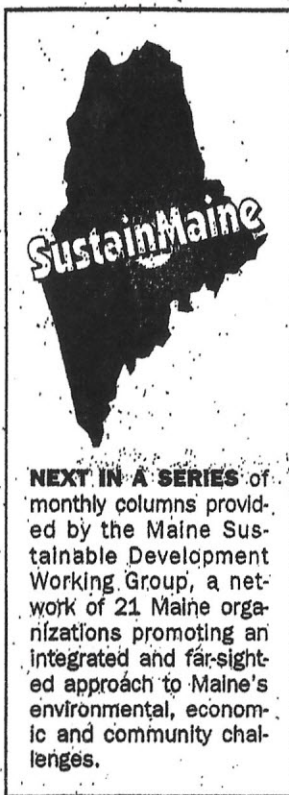
However, three trends threaten sustainability. The first is massive forest land sales, coupled with an increase in speculative real estate development. The second is unsustainable timber harvesting, together

with technological transformation of logging and mill operations. The third is a loss of backcountry wilderness qualities.

Since late 1998, five million acres — roughly half of the lands in Maine's Unorganized Territories — have changed hands in large-scale transactions. These massive land sales are part of global restructuring in the pulp and paper industry. Major purchases by forestry and investment companies — with a reputation for liquidation harvesting, subdivision, and development — compound existing concerns for our forests.

The increase in speculative forest ownership coincides with surging demand for backcountry leisure homes and private "kingdoms." The proposal announced this month to build 89 new homes on a spectacular lake near Moosehead is the latest example. These trends are fragmenting wildlife habitat and diminishing some of our most prized recreational landscapes.

For decades, industrial landowners have over-harvested our woodlands. In the 1970s, a tradition of destructive high-grading — "take the best, leave the rest" — gave way to massive whole tree clearcuts covering thousands of acres. Many



cherished places will take decades or centuries to recover. At the same time, the use of herbicides to kill hardwoods in favor of softwoods has left our forests less resilient.

Although clearcutting and herbiciding have declined, the Maine Forest Service estimates that logging is still well above annual growth for key species. Stump-to-mill mechanization, together with unus-

tainable timber "mining," threatens workers and communities. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, forest products jobs statewide have declined 20 percent since the mid-1980s, with even heavier losses in regions most dependent on woods and mill jobs. Forecasts indicate there will be even fewer forest sector jobs in the future.

Compared with most states, Maine has little public land. However, there is a long tradition of open access to millions of acres of private woodlands for hunting, fishing, birding and canoeing. Historically, access was limited to dedicated outdoorspeople. The very remoteness of the woods preserved their wilderness qualities. That has changed dramatically with construction of 25,000 miles of logging roads.

Motorized recreation and widespread vehicular access are harming the North Woods in unanticipated ways. The multiplication of road access points intensifies congestion on the Allagash Wilderness Waterway. Soil erosion from all-terrain vehicles degrades fragile salmon spawning sites on Washington County streams. Jet skis on our lakes impede loon reproduction. Snowmobiling near and across the Appalachian Trail disrupts backcountry skiing and winter hiking.

Cumulative changes in

Maine's North Woods, although troubling, present opportunities for innovation in the public interest. But a strategy for sustainable stewardship requires bold action. Here, briefly, are five ideas to carry the best of Maine's forest traditions into the 21st century.

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To secure our common forest heritage, we need a dramatic expansion of public forestland ownership. The Maine Economic Growth Council's proposed doubling of public lands by 2020 is on the right track but is not enough. A value-added tax on wood products plus recreational user fees could augment the state's funds for land purchases. And our leaders must press for greater federal support to protect natural treasures of national significance.

To halt forest degradation, Maine needs more effective incentives to limit timber harvesting to sustainable levels. Our framework of taxes and regulations should be redesigned to encourage large owners to seek credible, independent certification that their management practices meet sustainability standards.

To contain cumulative subdivision and development in the North Woods, the Land Use Regulation Commission needs stronger authority to enforce the zoning principles set out in its visionary comprehensive plan. Guiding real estate development away from remote areas and to communities on the edge of the big woods will help protect unspoiled backcountry areas.

A far-sighted management plan for public lands would substantially increase the acreage dedicated to ecological reserves and establish a system of roadless and motorless wilderness areas.

In northern and downeast regions, a cumulative economic transformation has been underway for decades. With greater determination and creativity, we can foster the economic diversification needed to revitalize rural communities.

For centuries, the Maine woods have been one of the world's outstanding working forests, recreational landscapes and wilderness regions. To sustain these three roles in the future, we should heed the lessons from ecological and economic collapse in other times and places, and insist that Maine's leaders restore balance to our forest and rural development policies.

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