

# KENNEBEC JOURNAL

## Downeast project protects land, livelihoods

*Mark Berry 06/01/2008*

A recent conservation project in Washington County designed to maintain the working rural landscape has the potential to serve as a model for communities throughout Maine and the northeast.

Downeast Lakes Land Trust and the New England Forestry Foundation have announced the completion of a fundraising effort to guarantee that 342,000 acres of eastern Maine forests and wetlands would always be undeveloped, open for public access and available for sustainable timber harvesting.

A conversation that began almost a decade ago around a picnic table has now resulted in one of the largest conservation projects in Maine. If a committed group of volunteers on the easternmost tip of Maine could act to preserve their landscape and livelihood, so too can other communities facing similar challenges.

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For generations, the forests, lakes and streams surrounding the village of Grand Lake Stream have supported the needs of local people. When the forest started changing hands, people here became concerned that the natural resources and public access they depend upon could be at risk.

The first step was the creation of the Downeast Lakes Land Trust, a local non-profit with a mission to conserve the working forest and the jobs and wildlife dependent on it.

The group developed a plan to purchase a large piece of forestland next to the village, but realized they needed help to accomplish the task.

Next, the newly formed land trust reached out to one of the oldest, the New England Forestry Foundation.

The Foundation brought a track record of success in conserving private forestland, educating the public about forestry and assisting landowners in long-term protection and sustainable management of their properties.

It had just completed a massive Maine conservation project, the 763,000-acre Pingree conservation easement.

It owns and manages 14 community forest properties in central and southern Maine (and a total of 130 forests throughout New England). The 700-acre Allen-Whitney Memorial Forest in Manchester is the largest among these properties.

Each of these forests was given or sold to the organization by landowners who wanted to see their land conserved, managed for sustainably produced forest products and open to the

public.

The central piece of the newly conserved landscape in the Grand Lakes region is the 27,000-acre Farm Cove Community Forest, owned and managed by Downeast Lakes Land Trust and located immediately west of Grand Lake Stream. The community forest includes 62 miles of lakeshore -- on six lakes -- and a wealth of forest and wetland wildlife habitats.

These resources are exceptional and they are of critical importance to the residents of Grand Lake Stream and the surrounding area.

\* Sporting camp and lodge owners can depend on guaranteed public access and hundreds of miles of undeveloped lakeshores as they make decisions about investing in their businesses.

\* Guides know there will always be opportunities for them to work, as people will continue to visit the spectacular lakes to fish for landlocked salmon or smallmouth bass.

\* Logging contractors can be confident the land base will continue to support timber harvests.

By purchasing the community forest, local citizens gained the ability to decide how the land would be managed.

How many jobs can be provided by a sustainable timber harvest? How can we plan timber harvests to ensure adequate deer wintering habitat is available in the future?

How should we balance the habitat needs of woodcock, grouse, marten, bear and other wildlife?

Would a few hiking trails and water trail campsites attract more visitors to the region, supporting local businesses? Would they also be enjoyed by local residents? How can we work with the local snowmobile club to provide access for trails?

The answers to these questions will be different everywhere, and the questions will change over time -- but at least in Grand Lake Stream, forests and wildlife habitats will always be there to ask such questions about.

There are many ways a community forest can be managed, including ownership by a town, by a local group like Downeast Lakes Land Trust, a regional group like New England Forestry Foundation or even cooperative ownership by a group of individuals based on shares.

All of these models can provide the opportunity for local control of management decisions, local economic benefits and opportunities for recreation and education.

Mark Berry is executive director of Downeast Lakes Land Trust, a non-profit based in Grand Lake Stream, with a mission to contribute to the long-term economic and environmental well-being of the region through conservation and management of its forests and waters.

## **COMMUNITY FORESTS**

\* The Communities Committee published a guide to community-owned forests in April. It includes an overview of community-owned forests and examples from across the country, including the Farm Cove Community Forest. Visit [www.communitiescommittee.org/](http://www.communitiescommittee.org/).

\* The Community Forest Collaborative is a partnership of the Northern Forest Center, the Trust for Public Land and the Quebec-Labrador Foundation. In August, the group published a report describing how community forests can benefit rural communities in northern New England. The report includes a detailed case study of the Downeast Lakes Land Trust's Farm Cove Community Forest, along with projects in New Hampshire and Vermont. The report is available at [www.northernforest.org](http://www.northernforest.org).

\* To learn more about the Farm Cove Community Forest or Downeast Lakes Land Trust, visit [www.downeastlakes.org](http://www.downeastlakes.org) or call 796-2100.

\* To learn more about the New England Forestry Foundation or its Community Forest properties, visit [www.newenglandforestry.org](http://www.newenglandforestry.org) or call (978) 952-6856.