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Land conservation: still going strong

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Despite the down economy, landowners and the public are still eager to ensure the future of Maine's forest

By Joe Rankin

Forests for Maine's Future writer

Earlier this month state conservation officials gathered in the Hall of Flags at the Maine State House to accept a land donation from Huber Resources Corp., one of the state's major landowners.

Not just any donation, but a 143-acre parcel on Katahdin Lake with a stunning view of the state's tallest mountain; one of the last, and the larger, of only two in-holdings in Maine's iconic wilderness park.

Over the previous few weeks it seems you couldn't scan the headlines without reading about a successful land conservation initiative: purchase of land on Ragged Mountain in Camden, wetlands in York, 27 acres of riverfront in Cushing, an easement on 200 acres of farm and woodland in South Paris.

In December Lyme Timber Co. announced it was buying 3,200 acres of forestland on the Schoodic Peninsula next to Acadia National Park and would work with the Maine Coast Heritage Trust and Friends of Acadia to protect part of the land through conservation easements.

The past few years have been tough economically, no doubt about it. But, land conservation efforts are alive, well and flourishing in spite of the tight economy, and Maine seems to be leading the way.



Huber Resources Katahdin Lake lot includes a sand beach and marvelous views of Maine's highest peak. (Photo: Huber Resources) Every five years the **Land Trust Alliance** does a **census of land conservation efforts in the U.S.** Its latest, released last year, looked at the years from 2005 through 2010, a period that overlapped the bursting of the U.S. housing bubble and the global financial meltdown that came on its heels and siphoned trillions of dollars in wealth from the U.S. economy and put millions out of work.

The trust found that:

- During those five years acreage conserved by U.S. land trusts went up by 10 million acres and was up by 23 million acres over the year 2000
- Land trusts had conserved more than 47 million acres in total, twice the size of all the national parks in the U.S.
- In Maine 88 land trusts had conserved just shy of 1.8 million acres, second only to the 2.3 million conserved in California and tops in the northeast.

The report noted that “land trusts are making these everyday miracles despite the recession and big cuts to government funding,” adding that land trusts nationwide have protected more land and in every region and have more people involved in conservation efforts.

“Overall, land conservation is one of those causes or objectives or goals that Maine folks just have a long-term commitment to,” said Tim Glidden, the executive director of the **Maine Coast Heritage Trust**, one of the state's largest land trusts and one which also acts as a mentor to smaller trusts throughout the state. In all there are nearly 90 working in Maine. “Both landowners and the general public view it as a good thing for Maine. It may cycle up or down, but they view it as valuable and keep doing it, even when it's a little tougher.”

MCHT conserved some 2,300 acres last year, said Glidden, including five coastal islands. Highlights included protecting a 500-acre block of undeveloped forest on Mt. Desert Island and adding a new 100-acre preserve on the shores of Cobscook Bay in Pembroke. In addition, MCHT helped Lyme Timber Co. in their purchase of the Schoodic forestland that had been considered for development. Lyme intends to conserve key parts of the 3,200-acre parcel.

Alan Hutchinson, executive director of the **Forest Society of Maine**, said it's gratifying that in a down economy “the interest in land conservation has held strong, from the perspective of landowners valuing undeveloped property and wanting to keep it that way and in regard to landowner interest in seeking conservation opportunities through easements and donations and in some cases sales.”

The Forest Society is the major player in land conservation in Maine's North Woods.

One of the organization's big projects was the Amherst Community Forest, a project that came together in 2010 to protect nearly 5,000 acres around six ponds north of Route 9. Last year the Society closed on conservation easements totaling around 10,000 acres, with “most of those donated easements or that had a donated component,” he said.

One interesting thing, both men said, is how many people still want to own land. Example: billionaire John Malone, whose purchases of large chunks of Maine forestland helped him nudge aside Ted Turner for title of top land baron in the U.S.

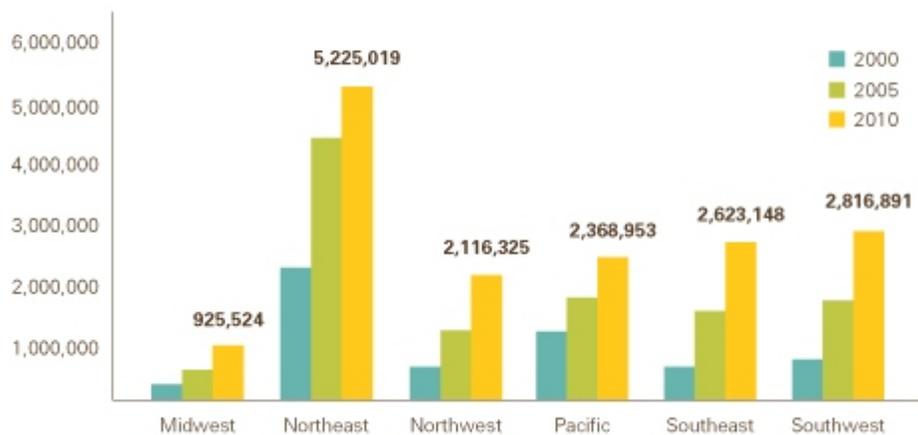
“Undeveloped land, for the resources it contains, for forestry, farming, wildlife, whatever it might be, is something that's valued by people and they want to own it,” said Hutchinson.

The dilemma most are up against “is that the value of undeveloped land didn't diminish during the real estate bust. The bubble burst around developed land, but not around undeveloped land. In fact, in some cases it went up slightly.”

One factor in that seeming paradox, Hutchinson said, is that while undeveloped land used to be valued for the timber or other resources that were on it, these days its potential for development is often factored into the price.

“If you own property or want to buy property and then keep it as either forestland or farm it's tougher to do today than ever,” said Hutchinson.

**Total Acres Conserved by State and Local Land Trusts,
By Region, as of 2000, 2005 and 2010**



Note the rate of land

conservation in the northeast compared to other regions in this graphic from The Land Trust Alliance's latest census. **While a tough economy does prompt some owners who need cash to sell, making tracts available that otherwise might not have been, it has also made it harder for land conservation organizations to come up with the money to buy it, said Glidden.**

“At the end of the day, if you have to pay for the land, even if it's available at a good price, you have to have the money. So fund raising is definitely more challenging,” he said.

There is some federal funding available for land conservation projects. But the Land for Maine's Future Program, which helped conserve more than half a million acres since 1987, has allocated the last of its bond funds and has no immediate hope of a substantial new infusion of cash.

One thing that will be more and more important in future of the land conservation efforts is partnerships, said Glidden: Partnerships between large and small land trusts, land trusts and the state, land trusts and municipalities, land trusts and landowners. “I think you'll see that those partnerships will be increasingly locally grounded. They have been for years,” he said.

Perhaps the breadth, and depth, of the land conservation movement these days, as well as the groundswell in partnership building, is best illustrated in the **Keeping Maine's Forests** Initiative. This mega-partnership includes some 28 members, ranging from forest landowners to environmental

advocacy organizations and includes all the major players in forestland conservation, such as The Nature Conservancy, the Forest Society of Maine and the Trust for Public Land. Its goals are to support stewardship on working forest land through such as maintaining and restoring native fish habitat and to support conservation easements with willing landowners on working forestland.

Glidden notes that land conservation deals don't happen overnight. Many are the result of years of talking, and listening, to landowners. Building a relationship.

Many of the landowners who work with conservationists or the state on deals have done so before.

Huber, the donor of the Katahdin Lake parcel known as the Keep Lot, has a history of donations, including the 4,000-acre Crystal Bog Preserve in the towns of Crystal and Sherman; more than 600 acres near Patten, including land along the Seboeis River at Seboeis Gorge; and a 1991 gift of 265 acres of wetlands called Marble Fen, home to diverse vegetation and rare plant species.



Kittredge Brook on Mt. Desert Island, one of Maine Coast Heritage Trust's 2011 successes. (Photo: MCHT) Lyme Timber Co. specializes in managing lands with "unique conservation values." It has been a partner in many conservation land deals in Maine and other states, including the ongoing West Grand Lake initiative in downeast Maine and the Amherst Community Forest project, as well as the Schoodic purchase.

Both Glidden and Hutchinson predict that land conservation activity in the state will continue to hold strong, despite the overall economy, fund raising challenges, and the rise in land values.

“I would expect to see steady continued, exciting good conservation projects that meet community needs. I think that's going to continue for some time,” said Glidden. “Despite the success we've had, there is still a lot of need for land conservation to occur. And as a complement to that, there's also going to be more engagement with communities beyond the deal, on stewardship of the land and making it accessible to the public.”

Land trusts are exploring ways to engage more with their host communities, he said. MCHT, for instance, is looking at converting some of its lands in downeast Maine to organic blueberry production, trying to help boost the economy.

“I expect to see more of that type of thing,” Glidden said. “The real metrics of success are how conserved land becomes an integral part of people's lives in these communities; provides benefit to their lives in ways that people see and value directly.”



Hikers ascend Number 5 Mountain near Jackman. The Forest Society of Maine holds a 10,000-acre easement on Nature Conservancy land as an ecological reserve. (Photo: Forest Society of Maine) **The conservation easement has been a major tool used to ensure that forest land continues to produce lumber and pulp, helping feed local economies and create jobs while protecting the land from development or further subdivision.**

The Forest Society's Hutchinson said Maine “has done a remarkable job figuring out how to approach conservation in a way that also builds economic vitality through this incredibly good balance of approaches we've taken, including easements on private working lands, whether it's farms or forests.”

It has meant developing partnerships with some new players. Maine paper companies are out of the landowning business. New forestland owners have tended to be financial investors such as real estate investment trusts and a new class of individuals that a trio of Yale University researchers in a 2010 report on 25 years of North Woods lands sales labeled the “new land barons,” some of whom have a sincere interest in land conservation.

“It's a tremendous time of transition,” said the Forest Society's Hutchinson. “I think everybody in Maine believes that it's important to try to hold on to the bulk of the great north woods in the state while allowing growth to occur around communities. And there's a growing awareness in society overall and in the conservation world of the importance of a strong forest products industry in the state to help ensure that these lands stay undeveloped and sustained as forest lands.”

Forests for Maine's Future writer Joe Rankin lives in New Sharon, where, in addition to writing on forest topics, he tends his woodlot, keeps 50 hives of honeybees, and does market gardening.