

Down East

The Magazine of Maine

Grand Lake Dream

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So how come no one noticed?

BY WAYNE CURTIS PHOTOGRAPHY BY BENJAMIN MAGRO



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WET AND WILD

Inland Washington County is terra incognita even to many Mainers, which may be one reason the unparalleled achievement of the Downeast Lakes Forestry Partnership has received so little media attention.

GRAND LAKE DREAM

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**2006
DOWN EAST
ENVIRONMENTAL
AWARD**

Starting with thirty people meeting in the basement of a town hall in 1999, the Downeast Lakes Land Trust sparked a \$30 million conservation effort that has resulted in the protection of 342,000 acres of woodlands, 60 lakes with 445 miles of lakeshore, and 1,500 miles of riverfront. The trust's work filled in the gaps to create more than a million contiguous acres of forestland in eastern Maine and western New Brunswick that will now remain forever free of development. For these accomplishments, the editors of DOWN EAST magazine are proud to name the Downeast Lakes Land Trust as the recipient of the 2006 DOWN EAST Environmental Award.



WAYNE CURTIS

This is a Grand Laker Canoe. It's a twenty-foot

square-stern boat typically made of northern white cedar ribs and planking and ash thwarts and an oak transom and fitted out with a ten-horse outboard. The boat was first built around 1923 by Grand Lake Stream guide Herbert "Beaver" Bacon, and it quickly caught on among other guides on this chain of lakes around this part of eastern Maine, not far from the Canadian border. The Grand Lakers are crafted such that they can slice through the swells that often roil these long lakes, yet can be paddled into shallow coves by simply flipping up the outboard.

The canoes are still used by many of the region's guides, and keeping them in good repair remains a cottage industry in Grand Lake Stream, population 150. If you're up early enough, guides are often spotted piloting Grand Lakers up West Grand Lake through the mists of early summer, the weight of their clients and gear keeping the bows low to the water. Grand Lake Stream has to date resisted the invasive species that have spread through much of Maine, like the metallic tangerine-flecked bass boats equipped with sonar. It's a town that keeps one paddle in the past.

But here's the thing about these canoes: like the moose, loon, and eagles who live here, Grand Lakers require unbroken wildlands to survive. These lakes are ringed by hundreds of miles of undeveloped shorefront, and they attract the anglers who hire the guides who pilot the Grand Lakers. Without the wildlands, the Grand Lakers would soon become dusty cultural artifacts. "Nobody pays a guide to sit off the end of someone's private dock," is how one guide sums it up.



A SPORTSMAN'S PARADISE

Famed for its fishing, camping, and boating, the region around Grand Lake Stream is said to have the highest per capita concentration of Registered Maine Guides in the state – guides who recognized that they would lose their livelihood if the area was overdeveloped.

Just a few years ago, an outbreak of private docks appeared in the region's prognosis. In the mid-1990s, timber companies throughout Maine decided to get out of the timber-owning business in order to concentrate on the timber-processing business. Along the way they sold off hundreds of thousands of acres, and in just a few years the ownership of one-quarter of Maine changed hands. The people who were buying — family trusts and pension funds and foreign investors — arrived with a mindset more like corporate raiders than long-term timber managers. Some cut the forest hard and fast, producing as much value from their investment as was feasible without violating environmental laws. Some also set about platting the land for camp lots to ensure further returns down the road.

Grand Lake Stream, long accustomed to being too far away to even hear the distant rumble of such trends, suddenly found itself standing in the crossroads with the big-rig headlights of progress barreling down. In 1998 Georgia-Pacific sold nearly a half-million acres surrounding the village to a holding company that declined to identify its actual owners. (The owners were later revealed to include the Yale University pension fund.) The forest management firm hired to bolster returns from this asset stepped up operations. The two or three logging trucks that once passed through the village each day en route to the paper and strandboard mills in Baileyville became a dozen or more. Within months of the ownership change, some residents noticed the "logging roads" heading north up one peninsula to potential lakefront lots had grown suspiciously solid and wide, as if designed more for Subarus than skidders. A plan for wholesale lakeshore development seemed imminent.

So one day in November 1999 about thirty local residents descended into the slightly musty basement of the town hall, where a bingo machine stood in one corner, to swap notes on what was going on in the woods.

Few would have guessed as they headed down the stairs that evening that a new land trust would one day emerge. Nor that in just five years that fledgling organization would become the largest local land trust in Maine in terms of acres owned outright.

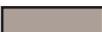
And no one was anticipating that this project to conserve the land around the village would merge, like streams flowing into a river, with other conservation projects in the region. Almost without notice, this unaffiliated assortment of



COURTESY OF DOWNEAST LAKES LAND TRUST



Downeast Lakes Forestry Partnership

-  Farm Cove Purchase
-  Conservation Easement
-  Spednic/St. Croix Conservation Corridor
-  Native American Tribal Lands
-  Ecological Reserves New Brunswick
-  Conserved Lands Maine/New Brunswick



WAYNE CURTIS

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private and public groups — both American and Canadian — have independently carved out more than a million contiguous acres of forestland in eastern Maine and western New Brunswick that will now remain free of development.

The political thunder and lightning has made for great melodrama in the Moosehead Lake and Katahdin regions — with the Plum Creek and Maine Woods National Park proposals loudly clashing amid much heat and noise. But here in little noticed eastern Maine, it was as if a gentle rain produced an almost unimaginable flowering of conservation.

The one-store village of Grand Lake Stream sits on a three-mile river between two large lakes, precisely where ten miles of pavement abruptly runs out. In the mid- to late-nineteenth century, nearly five hundred people lived and worked here, many running the bustling tannery that availed itself of abundant hemlock bark that produced the tannins to cure hides. The tannery staggered after a devastating fire in 1887, then was shuttered forever in 1898 after the owners sold it to the



International Leather Trust. The town population dropped to below two hundred, where it has remained ever since.

After the hemlock bark came fish, and the town soon flourished as a destination for sportsmen hooked by the mania for fishing. Trekking here in search of landlocked salmon and brook trout, tweedy, turn-of-the-century fishermen set up tenting villages along the stream, which soon gave way to log sporting camps near the outlet of West Grand Lake. Guiding visiting fishermen and hunters became a way of life and an economic lifeline for Grand Lake Stream. A salmon hatchery was built where the tannery once stood.



Today, Grand Lake Stream still depends in large part on its reputation as a sporting mecca. It is home to several historic sporting camps, a large salmon hatchery, and nearly three dozen registered Maine guides — said to be the highest per capita concentration in the state. And it was that link to the town's outdoor heritage — and ongoing connection between the economy and the forest — that brought out many of the guides to that basement gathering in late 1999. “I think the biggest concern was fear of change and uncertainty of the future,” says Stephen Keith, a Grand Lake Stream resident who attended that first meeting. “We didn't know who owned the land, but we knew it could be

split up and developed, which would put both guiding and lodging out of business.”

Out of that first meeting a more formal committee was formed, which evolved into the nonprofit Downeast Lakes Land Trust. Soon, a letter was sent off to the Wagner Timberlands, which managed the lands in question, requesting that they meet to address concerns.

In some ways this was all an echo of 1992, when Georgia-Pacific announced plans to build vacation homes on 260 acres along the banks of the river. Town residents recoiled, rallied, and raised enough money to buy the land, ensuring it would remain wild [DOWN EAST, July 1997]. Residents already knew the drill.

A GROUP EFFORT

From the start the campaign has been a true partnership, involving not just the local land trust, but also the New England Forestry Foundation, the Woodie Wheaton Land Trust, and others. Retired forester Roger Milligan (at left, top) and Downeast Lakes Land Trust Executive Director Stephen Keith (bottom, on left) and President Stephen Schaefer (bottom) helped move the deal forward.

So it was no surprise that one of the possible solutions put forth was equally simple if rather more daunting: ask Wagner Timberlands how much would the owners take to sell the lands. The land trust commissioned a study to get a handle on which parcels would make the most sense for an acquisition. Eventually, a delegation met with Wagner, and returned home with a starting figure: for about 27,000 acres just west of the village, including sixty-two miles of lakeshore and riverfront, Wagner said that around \$15 million would probably do the trick.

By 2001, the land trust began raising funds for the acquisition and refined its mission: to buy the land and manage it as an economic engine to keep the village afloat. The forest would be harvested sustainably, the land also managed to benefit wildlife, and the shorelines kept open for public recreation. Keith, who had first visited on a fishing trip in 1972 and had been a summer resident since 1991, became the trust's executive director and set himself up in town year-round.

Wagner suggested that the new nonprofit might want to find a partner that had a little more experience in raising the millions necessary. So the trust connected with the New England Forestry Foundation, which was founded in Massachusetts in 1944 to advocate sound forest management and permanently protect key New England woodlands by acquiring them. NEFF currently owns 128 properties totaling more than 122,000 acres throughout the northeast, and oversees conservation easements on tens of thousands of additional acres.

As it happened, the group had recently concluded a \$28-million fundraising effort to purchase the conservation rights on the 762,192 acres of Pingree family lands in northern Maine. NEFF was scouting for another project that would have significant impact. A handful of NEFF representatives, including Frank Reed and Keith Ross, ventured to Grand Lake Stream and looked around by car, foot, and canoe. After discussions with the land trust and among its own board, NEFF decided to take the project on.

With one caveat: the project needed to be bigger.

So, with the encouragement of Wagner Timberlands, the Downeast Lakes Forestry Partnership was born, which included NEFF, the Downeast Lakes Land Trust, and the nearby Woodie Wheaton Land Trust. The partnership had several lofty goals: to purchase that 27,000-acre parcel west of Grand Lake Stream, to acquire a five-hundred-foot conservation easement along fifty miles of Spednic Lake and the upper St. Croix River (which the Wheaton Land Trust had been working on since the 1990s), and then to buy the development rights on an additional 312,000 acres managed by Wagner between Grand Lake Stream and the Canadian

border. The whole project would protect, through ownership or easement, 342,000 acres of woodlands, 60 lakes with 445 miles of lakeshore, 1,500 miles of riverfront, tens of thousands of acres of wetlands, and the home of about one in ten loons in northern Maine.

The total cost: just shy of \$30 million.

This project had a lot more hurdles than the Pingree project," says Frank Reed, director of development with the New England Forestry Foundation. The land was both harder to reach and less pristine, which tended to make it a tougher sell with prospective donors. And unlike the Pingree project, which was bordered by just one main public road, the Downeast Lakes project touched on nine organized towns and eleven unorganized townships, each of which had a stake in the project.

But the money came in, from private donors, foundations, and public agencies. Elmina B. Sewall of Kennebunk, the largest individual donor, gave about \$7 million before her death last year. The Open Space Conservancy, the Land for Maine's Future program, the Sweet Water Trust, and Wildlife Forever also contributed. The project also got a grant of \$1.15 million from the North Cape Oil Spill Settlement Fund — the result of a 1996 oil spill off Rhode Island, which killed four hundred wintering loons and led to agreements to improve the loon's northern breeding grounds. Of the 27,000 acres eyed by the trust, 3,560 were to be set aside as an ecological reserve, a baseline that in part would help calibrate the health of the remaining forest in future years.

The option on the land purchase was set to expire in May 2005. With the calendar pages flipping by and fundraising about \$6 million short, NEFF took a deep breath last spring and put up one of its forests in Massachusetts for collateral, securing a loan to close the deal before the option ran out. The papers were signed, the land transferred, and fundraising continues, with about \$4 million remaining to retire what's left of the debt.

Another large grant — \$6.4 million — came from an unlikely source: Wal-Mart. In April 2005 Wal-Mart announced its new "Acres for America" program, under which the world's largest retailer, in cooperation with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, would buy and conserve at least one acre for every acre the company planned to develop for its stores.

The Downeast Lakes partnership was the major beneficiary — garnering about three-quarters of Wal-Mart's initial grant — in large part because its goal nicely meshed with Wal-Mart's stated goal. They wanted to identify gaps between existing conservation lands, then plug them. As it turns out, the Downeast Lakes Project was not operating in a vacuum. With

little fanfare, a number of other projects had been under way to ensure land will remain undeveloped throughout the region.

At the time Georgia-Pacific jettisoned its eastern Maine holdings, it also sold off some 394,000 acres in Canada. The province of New Brunswick snapped it up to manage most of it as Crown Lands (much like our National Forests), and set aside nearly 64,000 acres on the east side of Spednic Lake and along the St. Croix corridor as a wildlife reserve.

On the west side of the Downeast Lakes project, attention was turning to other conservation lands. The state had earlier protected 23,750 acres around Duck Lake. This was adjacent to the Nature Conservancy's recent 33,000-acre Machias River project, which conserves an eighty-five-mile-long corridor flanking the longest undammed river in Maine. The Passamaquoddies own another piece of the puzzle: about 77,000 acres, which they manage sustainably as timberlands. And last December, the Conservation Fund announced yet another \$6.8 million acquisition of some 7,700 acres around the upper Machias River.

None of these projects were coordinated with the aim of conserving a single broad swath of eastern Maine and western New Brunswick. But the end result? More than a million contiguous acres — an area larger than the White Mountain National Forest — is now protected against development. For its part, this summer the Downeast Lakes Land Trust is starting to build hiking trails and canoe-access campsites on its land, while seeking green certification for its management plan.

A determined paddler will, for the indefinite future, be able to paddle, pole, and portage from the high lakes of New Brunswick to the waterfalls at Machias River, transiting through two major watersheds and dozens of ponds, streams, and lakes, past floating bogs and wetlands with grasses bending with wild rice, all the while passing only a smattering of bridges, roads, and camps.

The whole of the newly conserved landscape is breathtaking when seen from the air. The defining characteristic of inland Washington County isn't mountains or rushing rivers or even endless forests. It's wetlands — vast and primeval places fringed with pine and hemlock and birch. From above, the international border disappears in a sea of blue and green, pocked with bogs and kettleholes.

But the region will always be most impressive when seen from the water — preferably from a Grand Laker, and preferably with a Maine guide in the stern, on an early summer day, with the boat pounding its way upwind toward coves otherwise never seen. From the bow of a Grand Laker, you can see a whole century behind you and at least a century ahead. ♣