



Conflict management and community support for conservation in the Northern Forest: Case studies from Maine

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ABSTRACT

Rapid land ownership changes in the Northern Forest of the eastern United States have spurred development as well as conservation. Local people have experienced differing degrees of participation in land use decisions. We examine two conservation projects from the Northern Forest state of Maine. This paper presents the policy processes from these projects and an assessment of their impact on conflict and support for the project. One project was a top-down approach, and the second was a grassroots, private effort by local citizens to conserve forestland. We gathered data via person interviews, mail surveys, and analysis of legislative testimony. Our findings indicate that early local involvement leads to less conflict and greater acceptance of the project. Important aspects of effective public involvement include shared learning and two-way dialogue. In addition, we found that regardless of the process employed, respondents were generally satisfied with the outcomes of the processes.

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1. Introduction

Conservation has many meanings, ranging from preserving land with little human impact, to sustainable extraction of natural resources. Conflict may surround conservation initiatives when human activities are restricted. However, such restrictions are often inevitable to achieve the goals of conserving land and maintaining resources into the future. Conservation is often juxtaposed against preservation and their meanings may be unclear. Redford and Richter (1999) describe conservation as use without destruction, while preservation implies non-use by humans. Public support for land conservation projects may vary due to the level of land use and access restrictions, but conflict may be managed via the policy process employed. The policy process is defined as a social dynamic, determining who gets what and how (Lasswell, 1970). The process may shape stakeholder perceptions (Wilshusen et al., 2002), and different process designs may yield different levels of satisfaction (Wondollock and Yaffee, 2000). Negative experiences may lead to negative attitudes, which may then influence individual behavior (Manfredo et al., 2004; Vaske and Donnelly, 1999). Satisfaction regarding the process is often linked to early and frequent public involvement (Wondollock and Yaffee, 2000).

Managing conflict around conservation decisions in Maine (USA) has been a prominent component of land use decisions in the state for many years. Maine is renowned for its natural beauty and recreational opportunities, yet many residents rely on the land and natural

resources for their livelihoods. Among recreational users, 'traditional users' typically wish to see the continuation of open access for activities such as hunting, fishing and snowmobiling. Some protection efforts seek to limit these uses. One of the most polarizing debates—ongoing for nearly two decades—has surrounded the proposed creation of a Maine Woods National Park. The creation of this second national park in Maine (the other being Acadia National Park) has been popularized by a wealthy entrepreneur and philanthropist, whose foundation owns and manages over 110,000 acres of land in Maine's North Woods (Eliotville Plantation, Inc. News Release September 28, 2011) and proposes to donate 70,000 acres to the federal government to create the park. The continuing debate surrounding the national park proposal highlights the importance of decision makers understanding people's attitudes about conservation and conservation processes (Flemming, 2011).

Rapid land ownership changes have been occurring across the Northern Forest region of the United States for the past three decades. As forestland changes hands, often so does its use. A shift from using the land primarily for timber production began as suburbanization spread throughout the 1950s, 60s, and 70s; the forest became valued as much for a green backdrop as for a place for jobs and source of raw materials (Ireland, 1999). The land boom of the 1980s led to subdividing of wildland throughout the northeastern U.S., resulting in private owners sub-dividing their land and reducing opportunities for public access (Ireland, 1999; Lilieholm, 2007). Large ownerships have been reduced as many land sales have involved the break-up of parcels over 50,000 acres, which are often further broken-up in subsequent sales (Ireland et al., 2010). Parcelization and subdivision occur most often in small ownerships (less than 500 acres) and often lead

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to forestland conversion and development ([Northern Forest Lands Study, 1994](#)).

Maine is similar to the rest of the Northern Forest, where people are tied to forestland for economic and cultural reasons. In Maine, there has been a long tradition of open public access to private lands for recreation ([Schepps, 1972](#)). Much of this land was traditionally owned by large paper companies and managed for timber production. More recently, an investment-oriented owner type has come to dominate the forest landscape ([McWilliams et al., 2005](#); [Jin and Sader, 2006](#)). These timberland investment management organizations (TIMOs) and real estate investment trusts (REITs) emphasize maximum return on timberland assets ([Yale Forest Forum, 2002](#)) rather than traditional industrial owners' priority of a relatively constant stream of raw materials to mills ([Jin and Sader, 2006](#)).

While there has been public concern over new management styles ([Jin and Sader, 2006](#)), there has also been increased emphasis on forestland protection focusing on private land conservation rather than increasing public holdings ([Clark and Howell, 2007](#)). [Hagan et al. \(2005\)](#) note that as of 2005 non-profit conservation organizations owned over 300,000 acres of Maine forestland. [Cronan et al. \(2010\)](#) identify 17% of the state as conserved (3.67 million acres) in 2006, with 57% being held (by fee acquisition or easement) by non-profit conservation organizations. While conservation has the potential to maintain the traditions of Maine's people, public support may vary depending on the conservation approach and decision making process.

Research has found that it is important to incorporate local stakeholders into the decision process because successful management of natural resources at a higher level (e.g. state level) must be supported at the local level and vice versa ([Hanna et al., 1996](#); [Ostrom, 1990](#); [Ruckelshaus, 1998](#)). In contrast, conservation that fails to address local needs and attitudes may result in conflict ([West and Brockington, 2006](#)). As [Kyllonen et al. \(2006\)](#) found in their case studies on forest, lake, and grazing (reindeer) land management in Finland, stakeholder involvement and perceptions of the process contribute to the amount of conflict during the process and the success of the outcome. They found that 'face-to-face' communication in an environment that is comfortable for all parties, and an understanding of each participant's perspective lead to mutual understanding and cooperation ([Kyllonen et al., 2006](#)). [Selin and Chavez \(1995\)](#) contend that conflict can be avoided by transitioning from traditional hierarchical decision making to a collaborative process with all relevant stakeholders. [Germain et al. \(2001\)](#) state that even if a collaborative approach fails to reduce conflict, public perceptions of the process may improve as a result. Conflicts can be effectively managed through collaboration to constructively guide gradual social change ([Kyllonen et al., 2006](#)).

The importance of managing natural resources using participatory decision processes has been emphasized in the literature ([Kyllonen et al., 2006](#); [Webler et al., 1995](#); [Morgan, 1998](#); [Beierle and Cayford, 2002](#); [Germain et al., 2001](#)). Because debates and discussion regarding forest conservation and preservation in Maine are on-going, research on decision processes may inform such processes and make them more effective. We conducted case studies of two conservation processes in Maine, looking at attitudes and conflict management. The cases represent different approaches to forestland conservation in the Northern Forest¹ state of Maine. The Katahdin Lake (KL) acquisition by Baxter State Park (BSP) was top-down and relatively controversial, while the Downeast Lakes Land Trust (DLLT) case was a grassroots, community-based approach. The cases were selected because they occurred during similar time periods (the DLLT was created in 2001 and Katahdin Lake was officially incorporated into Baxter State Park in 2006). In addition, the lead author worked at both organizations so was able to make reliable contacts for data collection and

gain in-depth knowledge of the two organizations and the processes to conserve land in both cases. We were initially interested in comparing the differences in the policy processes and how this affected conflict and support for the processes and outcomes. However, due to the complex and unique contexts associated with the two cases, a comparative case study was deemed inappropriate. However, analysis of both cases provides useful evidence to support collaboration and local involvement in decision-making.

2. Methods

2.1. Case study descriptions

2.1.1. The Downeast Lakes Land Trust

The DLLT is located in Grand Lake Stream, Maine, a town of approximately 150 year-round residents, many of whom work as hunting and fishing guides. The town is a hunting and fishing vacation destination and the local economy relies on access to the region's forests and lakes. Because access to the forest is so vital to the community, local people created the DLLT in response to overcutting and the potential that the land would be sold to developers.

Today the DLLT owns over 33,000 acres of community forest and is involved in a partnership which protects 350,000 acres of forestland. Management decisions are led by the board of directors comprised mostly of community members. No-development restriction easements are held by outside conservation organizations. DLLT practices sustainable forest management and is certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) (Certification #: SW-FM/COC-002682). The DLLT is currently working with the town to conserve more nearby lands, and promote community development ([DLLT Media Release, 2009a, 2009b](#)).

2.1.2. Baxter State Park and the Katahdin Lake acquisition

Located in central Maine, the 200,000-acre Baxter State Park (BSP) is named for the late Governor Percival Baxter, who acquired and donated the park to the state in 28 parcels over his lifetime ([Whitcomb, 2008](#)). The park is administered exclusively by a trust left by Baxter at his death. Governor Baxter left the park for the people of Maine and as "...a sanctuary for wild beasts and birds..." ([P&S Laws, 1931](#)).

Major decisions in the management of the park are made by the BSP Authority, a three member board comprised of the state's Attorney General, the Director of the Bureau of Forestry, and the Commissioner of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife who closely adhere to the Baxter Deeds of Trust when making decisions about the park. The bulk of the park is a preserve, prohibiting hunting, trapping, logging or off-road vehicles, although portions of the park allow hunting.

The Katahdin Lake parcel was part of Baxter's original vision for the park ([Whitcomb, 2008](#)). Prior to acquiring the parcel in 2006, it was owned by Gardner Land Company (GLC). The acquisition involved a complicated deal between the state, the Trust for Public Land (TPL), and GLC. GLC desired other lands (including state-owned lands), rather than payment in exchange for the parcel (later referred to as the land swap). TPL raised funds to purchase these lands to exchange with GLC for the KL parcel, which was then given to BSP. The Maine Legislature passed bill L.D. 2015 with the 2/3 vote needed to allow the sale of state lands.

Despite public opposition and extensive public debate, LD 2015 passed in April 2006 ([Whitcomb, 2008](#)). The swap included 7385 acres of state lands and 14,000 acres of private lands. TPL raised approximately \$12 million of private funds to purchase the lands that were exchanged with GLC for the roughly 4000-acre KL parcel ([Whitcomb, 2008](#)).

2.2. Data collection

Data for the case studies were collected by means of key participant interviews and a mail survey. We interviewed key participants

¹ For the purposes of this research, the Northern Forest encompasses the 26-million-acre forest of the northern US states of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and New York.

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