

## Conservation Conversion

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Although opposition to some large-scale conservation proposals remains strong, it is encouraging to see that more communities and local groups understand the potential economic benefits of outdoor recreation in the north woods. At the same time, the notion that forestry and recreational activities can co-exist is spreading.

The latest example is the announcement this week by the Appalachian Mountain Club that it has bought nearly 37,000 acres in Maine's fabled 100-Mile Wilderness. The purchase received a lot of attention because it is the largest purchase in the Boston-based organization's 127-year history. Conservation in the area is not new. The National Park Service has owned a small corridor around the Appalachian Trail for decades and the state owns land along Long Pond. What is unusual is that the group, best known for its hut system in New Hampshire's White Mountains, plans to develop recreation opportunities in the area by building trails and, perhaps, additional lodging facilities.

What, after nearly a dozen land preservation deals in recent year, is not unusual is that the AMC intends to continue to cut trees. That is what happened on the land before International Paper sold it for \$14.2 million. That is what is happening on the state's more than 500,000 acres of Public Reserved Land, it is what The Nature Conservancy is doing on some of the 185,000 acres it owns along the St. John River. It is what will happen on the West Branch of the Penobscot River, which is being protected in phases by the Forest Society of Maine.

The key to these deals is that they don't seek to replace forest product jobs, especially those in paper mills, with lower-paying recreation-industry jobs. The AMC purchase is the latest example of the possibility of both promoting and expanding recreational opportunities without losing forest-industry jobs.

Given the recent conservation deals, and Maine's long tradition of public recreational access to its privately owned woodlands, it is surprising that coupling hiking, paddling and snowmobiling with timber harvesting is considered by some to be a novel concept in the conservation realm. The only real difference, Walter Graff of the AMC explained this week, is that recreating on the purchased land, which includes Gulf Hagas and Chairback Mountain, will now be easier. When people want to recreate on industrial timberland generally, they often find it hard to locate someone to ask about trails and rules. Soon, they will be able to get such information about the Katahdin Iron Works area through the AMC, either through an official visitor center or other welcoming location.

This is good for local communities because they will become the bases from which visitors will start their outdoor adventures. While continuing motorized recreation, especially snowmobiling, is important to the local businesses, encouraging more human-powered activities such as hiking and cross-country skiing will also help. Encouraging both types of recreation will help towns like Greenville and Monson.

Even critics of past conservation deals give the AMC high marks for working closely with local groups to find out what they envision for the region, rather than simply saying the area needs to be set aside to protect important physical features.

Coming on the heels of the unveiling of Gov. Baldacci's Maine Woods Legacy, the deal is precisely the type of activity the administration is right to continue to foster.

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