

Moosehead region's future depends on its wild character

Maine's iconic natural features—Katahdin, the Allagash, and Moosehead Lake among them—help define the state's wild character to such an extent that even those who may never have visited the state have a feel for it. The greater Moosehead region is a shining example. Here are pristine trout ponds, deep, productive forests, and miles and miles of woods and water to explore on foot, on skis, or afloat. It's a region whose economy and culture are dependent upon the integrity of its landscape.

The Moosehead region is recognized for its remote and unspoiled wildness—a key attribute that draws new residents and tourists alike. But this may not always be so.

What happens in the very near future will determine if the region's cherished natural values will be here for generations to come, or lost forever. One view of the future sees landowners selling off lakefronts, trout streams and mountain vistas for high-priced second homes. Another view is more hopeful: a future where landowners balance local economic needs with permanent protection of those lands that help define the region's wild character.

Last spring, Plum Creek, a Seattle-based company, proposed a development plan for more than 400,000 acres near Moosehead Lake. Before formally accepting the plan for review, the Land Use Regulation Commission (LURC) scheduled a series of public scoping sessions in the region.

I had the chance to attend one of the sessions held in Greenville this past summer. Many people acknowledged that new development—in the right places and at an appropriate scale—could benefit the region's economy. Yet, person after person stood up and talked about fear and loss. Loss of wildlife habitat. Loss of undeveloped lakefronts and mountainsides. Loss of the region's heritage. Since those scoping sessions, concerned voices continue to be heard in the region and around the state, and such community-based groups as the Moosehead Futures Committee are helping to keep this important dialogue going. Only with the full engagement of everyone who has a stake in the future of the Maine Woods—and I don't know who doesn't—will this critical opportunity to help shape that future be realized.

Plum Creek should be commended for putting forward a long-range plan for public review. I'm hopeful they will consider the public's concerns when they submit their revised plan in the next few weeks. A sound plan that balances the needs of the region should recognize a few key concepts:

- The remote and undeveloped character of the region is its key asset and must be maintained. The Maine Woods is the last large, unbroken forest in the eastern United States, with Moosehead Lake as one of its crown jewels. Any development must be at a

scale and location that does not damage the rare, special qualities that draw residents and visitors to this region. To help conserve those special qualities, new development should be contiguous to existing development.

- Public access to wild places must be maintained. Maine has a long history of public access to private timberlands for recreation, and I thank Plum Creek for continuing this access to date. Under Plum Creek's initial plan, though, the impacts of such a large increase in private and commercial shorefront and riverfront development could hinder that access and damage the region's remote, wild character, which serves as an important economic resource for local businesses as well as an enticement to the new land owners Plum Creek would like to attract.

- Conservation needs to be permanent. There must be recognition that since development will be permanent, whether on shorelines or elsewhere, corresponding land protection measures should also be permanent. Permanency also is critical to maintaining the natural resource-based economy by ensuring that timberlands will be protected in perpetuity.

The Appalachian Mountain Club's work in Maine dates back to 1876. AMC members were the first to map Katahdin, and AMC trail crews built and maintained many early trails in Baxter State Park. Most recently, we launched the Maine Woods Initiative, which includes ownership and management of 37,000 acres of forestland in the region.

Based on our experience in Maine and elsewhere, we believe the greater Moosehead region is best served by maintaining its unfragmented landscape, which supports natural resource-based industry and nature-based tourism. This unbroken landscape is increasingly a rarity, and while we recognize that the region is in transition, it is critical that the long-term benefits of maintaining its essential, remote character not be forgotten. This goal should be at the forefront of Plum Creek's revised plan.

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