The following was authored specifically for the Forest Society of Maine by Evan Wishloff. Therefore, it is not for publication without written permission.

As 1999 came to a close - the turn of the millennium - many of us hunkered down, awaiting the possible fallout of Y2K. We wondered if our computers would work in the morning. Some of us worried about more dramatic possibilities, like planes falling out of the sky, or bank accounts disappearing overnight.

Meanwhile, citizens of the State of Maine were worried about something different.

To understand the worry Mainers were feeling, you first have to understand the state's forested history. Maine has a long-standing history of active forest management. National corporations, like Great Northern Paper Company and International Paper Company, owned massive swaths of working forestland across the Maine landscape. These companies were rooted in the culture of the state. Although they needed to harvest trees to feed their papermills, they had a history of long-term forest management. All the way from the community level to the halls of the State House, these companies were as much a part of the fabric of Maine as anything else. They were in it for the long haul, and they managed their lands as if they would need them for hundreds – or maybe even thousands – of years into the future.

The residents of Maine benefited, not only economically, but recreationally too. Massive tracts of forestland that weren't being actively logged remained open to public use. In a state where 90% of the land was privately owned, more than half of it remained open for camping, hiking, fishing, hunting, or other outdoor recreation.


Sally Mountain, overlooking Attean Pond.

It's hard to wrap your head around the vast size and scope of the forestland in the state. The North Woods of Maine occupy approximately 12 million acres. They are the largest unfragmented forest area east of the Mississippi River. Within the North Woods, you could fit all of Yosemite, Yellowstone, Death Valley, Zion, Grand Teton, Arches, and Joshua Tree National Parks, and still have room left for the entire state of Connecticut!

While it's challenging to contextualize the sheer size of uninterrupted forest in Maine's landscape, it's even harder to understand how the majority of the land is privately owned, yet publicly accessible. For many Americans, the idea of

accessing private lands for recreation is a foreign concept, but for Mainers, they have always been able to enjoy the land in a respectful manner.

1990 marked the start of an uncertainty for Maine's forests. Paper companies, long the backbone of not only Maine's economy, but also its culture, started to become less profitable. Competition from overseas was mounting just as demand for paper products began to wane. Pressure to offload 'non-performing assets,' such as slow growing forests, propelled forestry companies into divesting their vast landscapes, selling massive tracts of land for cash.

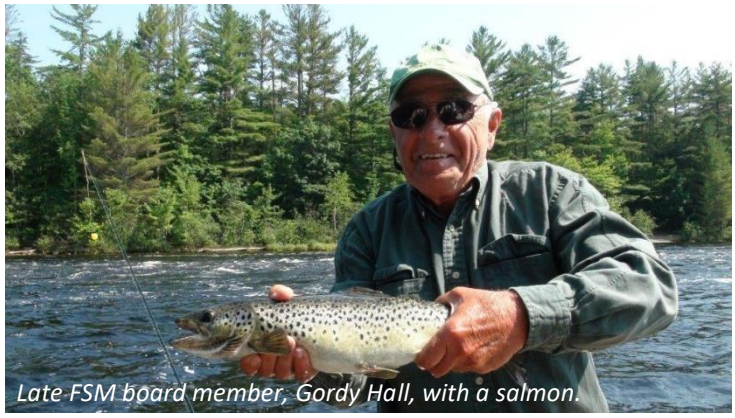
Between 1990 and 1999, over half of the forestland in the entire state was sold to new owners. Many of the new landowners were investors, pooled into Timber Investment Management Organizations (TIMOs) from out of state. This was a concerning trend for those that cared for the long-term conservation of Maine's great landscape because the business model for these investors was based on short term ownership. It was a changing of the guard, and nobody knew what would happen with these new owners looking to make a quick profit.

"Maine people knew what they valued – access to land, managed forests, habitat for fish and wildlife, a tradition of private ownership, and opportunities for outdoor recreation," Karin Tilberg, long-standing Maine resident, outdoors-woman, and current President/CEO of the Forest Society of Maine, tells me. "No one knew the new owners, and there was a great fear that public access would be cut off to hundreds of thousands of acres, and even worse, fear of development in environmentally sensitive areas."

Livelihoods in the state rely on Maine's unique tradition of public access. Danny Legere has been running a fishing and guiding business in one form or another for over 40 years in the state.

During the recessions of the 70s, jobs were hard to come by, so Legere decided to try to turn his passion into a job. He started guiding fishing trips in northern Maine.

"That's when I found my calling," he tells me. "I was passionate about the whole thing. I could spend time on the water and share the beautiful untouched landscapes with others."



Late FSM board member, Gordy Hall, with a salmon.

And, of course, the fishing was pretty amazing too.

"Every day, I get to take people to a once-in-a-lifetime spot on the waters here. People make some of the best catches of their lives in these rivers. I have all kinds of clients – doctors, lawyers, mechanics, you name it – and they all love coming back here to fish."

Many of Legere's favorite fishing spots exist in the massive tracts of forestland north of Greenville. In 20 minutes, he can be out on the water fishing in a spot so isolated, you'd never guess civilization was not far away. And who owned that precious land that Legere relied on for his guiding business? Paper companies!

Nature – and vast, uninterrupted landscapes – are a rarity in most of the United States, and it's what keeps Legere's clients coming back.

"When I take people out on the water, it's magical," Legere tells me. "It's not just about the fishing. We get out in the middle of nowhere, and a moose comes out to our right. On the left, you just see forestland, as far as the eye can see. The fishing almost becomes a bonus."

This experience is unique to Maine, and, aside from Legere's charisma and guiding abilities, is a significant reason that clients return to Legere year after year, some for over 30 years!

"I have repeat clients from as far away as Florida or California. They just can't get enough of Maine!"

Legere's passion for the North Woods has seen him working in his free time to ensure long-term conservation and access to the rivers, mountains, and streams in the North Woods. Since he has started guiding, some of his favorite guiding areas have changed ownership four times.

During the fire sale of property leading into the 2000s, Maine's core identity was at risk of being lost. The forestlands within the state played an integral economic, cultural, and environmental role. With new out-of-state owners for vast swaths of land, it was yet to be seen how Maine would change – and what might be lost.

Economically, a case could be made that Maine's forests are the sole reason the state exists in the capacity it does today. Forestry and paper mills were so integral in the economic development of modern-day Maine that the state was once described as a "paper plantation." At one time, almost half of all newspapers in the entire country were printed on paper made in Maine. More wood products for export passed through the Port of Bangor than almost any other port on the planet at its peak.

This economic significance is why local businesses survive to this day – businesses like Viking Lumber, run by David Flanagan. In 1944 his father, Jud, started the company, which has expanded since to operate nine locations across the state.

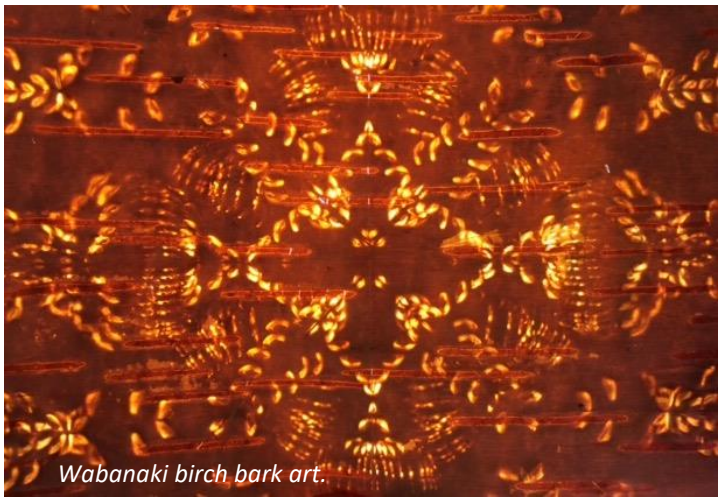
"Maine has a small-town feel, and some might say that means we are stuck in the past. We might be stuck in the past in some ways, but only the right ways!" Flanagan tells me. "We are old fashioned. We care about old fashioned service. We care about supporting our community. We care about treating people the way they should be treated."

Logging operations in Maine's North Woods. Photo by Jerry Monkman.

Flanagan's words are not empty – Viking Lumber supports over 150 community groups and non-profits through financial donations

or volunteer support. This small-town attitude towards how a business should interact with the community is engrained in Maine's economic climate.

Culturally, Maine's forests hold a rich history that predates colonization by thousands of years. Indigenous peoples that became know as the Wabanaki, or "People of the Dawn," have lived in Maine for more than 12,000 years. Artifacts from their rich history can be found deep within the untouched forested landscapes.



Wabanaki birch bark art.

Through archaeological research and findings, there are lessons we can learn: lessons about how to live sustainably. Dr. Bonnie Newsom, Assistant Professor in Anthropology and the Climate Change Institute at the University of Maine, has spent most of her research career in the state.

"I know that modern society can't go back to a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, but I think there are values and practices associated from that which we can draw from today - values and practices that will help us all live more sustainably, and better manage what natural resources we have left," she tells me. "But if we don't conserve the lands that may hold archaeological sites of significance, we may lose some of those insights forever."

If development is left unchecked in archaeologically significant sites, we risk losing millennia of lessons from Wabanaki history. There's a cultural treasure trove buried in the North Woods of Maine, worthy of being preserved and protected.

Finally, and perhaps most topical, the significance of Maine's vast forests to the environment and climate change cannot be overstated. Maine's forests sequester an estimated 60% of the annual carbon emissions in the state. Compare that to the national average of 16%, and you start to understand how far ahead of the curve Maine is when it comes to reducing net emissions.

With so much on the line, it's understandable that Mainers had some trepidation on what the future might hold heading into the 21st century.

The Forest Society of Maine was founded in 1984 to help conserve the natural landscapes and protect the economic, cultural, and environmental heritage of Maine's forests. It was given life by Mainers who sought to protect the identity of the state. In the 90s, when the vast quantity of land being sold hit a fever point, the Forest Society of Maine really found its footing. During those uncertain times, they helped pioneer a creative new way of conserving lands on a large scale.

“There weren’t many options to address the concerns at the time,” Tilberg recalls. “The vast amount of land for sale was too expensive to count on outright purchases by the State or conservation organizations.”

Forest landowners and conservation leaders across New England, including the young Forest Society of Maine, racked their collective minds to come up with a seemingly impossible solution. How could land be conserved and maintained - how could development be kept to sustainable levels - and how could public access be maintained while landowners were divesting their holdings?

Photo by Jerry Monkman.

The answer came in the form of something called an easement.

An easement is a voluntary, legally binding transaction with a landowner that permanently transfers certain rights to the holder of the easement in exchange for a fair dollar value. Easements can be written in ways specific to each forest parcel and circumstance, making them a flexible, yet effective, solution to the issue of conservation. The cost of them varies based on the rights assigned in the agreement, but on average the cost of an easement is less than half the cost of purchasing the land itself. The landowner, who retains title to the property, continues to pay taxes on the land.

A common theme of most easements involves protecting land from development and conserving the forests for generations to come. The flexibility allowed when drafting an easement allows landowners' concerns to be addressed during the process: they can continue to use their land as they want, often for forest management, provided it fits within the agreed-upon easement stipulations.

Robbins Lumber Inc. is one of Maine’s oldest and longest-standing family-owned and operated businesses, deeply rooted in the state’s history. It is run by siblings Catherine, Jimmy, and Alden, who count themselves as the fifth-generation Robbins to run the company.

A family doesn’t stick around in the same line of business for 141 years without an ingrained passion for what they do. In the lumber business, it’s more than just a job, especially to the Robbins, who have a longstanding legacy to preserve. The passion for their business spilled over into a passion for the lands they inhabit. The great forested landscapes are integral to not only Robbins Lumber identity, but also to Maine’s.

The first major project that the Forest Society of Maine was involved with was with Robbins Lumber in 1996. Jim and his brother Jenness, the fourth generation owners, had just purchased a 23,000-acre plot of land called Township 40. The large swath of land was filled with the most scenic of lakes, rolling hills, and forestland.

The land was desirable, and the brothers had to compete with developers to purchase the land, driving the price up. Their plan to offset the costs? They'd keep the land they needed for active forest management and parcel out the desirable shore frontage to developers to recoup some of the costs.

"I thought I could sell the shorefront land to some wealthy businessman from New York," Jim told me.

He hadn't set foot on the sections of land they planned to sell, so when a developer showed interest in purchasing the land, Jim met a realtor to assess the fair value.

They set out on a boat to visit the hard-to-reach shorelines. Jim was left speechless over the untouched beauty before him.

"It was absolutely stunning. Beautiful pine trees were everywhere behind the rocky shoreline. It was calm and peaceful. And suddenly, we saw three bald eagles sitting in a tree…" I could hear the emotion in Jim's voice as he went on. "It was then that I realized we couldn't sell it. We had to find a way to keep this open and accessible for the people of Maine."

There was only one problem for Robbins Lumber: they still needed to recoup some of the money they spent to purchase the large parcel of land.

"We worked with the Forest Society of Maine to sell an easement on a large section of the land," Jim recounts. "We gave up the development rights to 40 miles of shorefront on the lakes. We protected the riparian zones around all the streams and ponds, and restricted the amount of cutting within the first 250 feet of the lakeshore. We even decided to set aside six mature white pines per mile of shore frontage because those were nesting trees for bald eagles."

The first major project for the Forest Society of Maine was a massive success. Robbins Lumber retained the rights to sustainably manage a working forest, made some money on selling away the development rights, critical wildlife habitat was protected, public access was maintained, and the land remained in the tax base of the local economy.

The success of projects, like the Robbins Lumber project, is why easements are often described as a win-win-win.

"Conservation projects that secured central values of public access, conservation of fish and wildlife habitat, and economic sustainability brought along strong public support," Tilberg says. "Available funds, common goals, and conservation easements were a unique recipe that helped bring about an incredible surge of conservation." Conservation efforts in Maine started to take place at an increased pace.

Seizing on that momentum, the Forest Society of Maine now holds easements on over a million acres of forestland in the state - a monumental feat, no doubt. Through the work of the Forest Society of Maine, other land trusts, and state government agency conservation efforts, about 21% of Maine has some form of conservation on the land.

But it might not be enough.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, nobody knew what would happen next, but in the great uncertainty, one thing quickly became clear: development pressures on rural areas were skyrocketing!

Technological advancements met necessity, and remote work became something that was no longer reserved for employees of forward-thinking tech companies. People were trading in their big city condos and townhouses for larger houses in rural landscapes.

The red-hot real estate market spread to Maine, and with housing prices skyrocketing, the value of land continues to rise in lockstep. Pressure on landowners to sell to wealthy developers continues to increase.

Maine is the most densely forested state in all of America - 89.1% of the land in Maine is forested, which has preserved massive numbers of animal and plant life in the region. For comparison, Oregon, well-known for its vast, lush, green forests is only about 48% forested.

Coburn Gore by Jerry Monkman.

You might think that a state with that much forestland to work with could spare some for development. But it's not just the sheer amount of forest land that is ecologically significant, but the contiguous nature of it.

Dr. George Jacobson, a professor at the University of Maine, who specializes in plant ecology and paleoecology, explained the significance to me. "Maine and the surrounding Acadian forest landscape is one of the few remaining places on earth where an uninterrupted forest allows the natural adaptation of plants and animals to change their distribution and abundance in response to the changing climate."

The diverse forest species of Maine have demonstrated an ability to survive thousands of years and multiple ice ages by shifting their position and distribution within the landscapes. They are inherently robust, but only when they can move uninterrupted within the landscapes. Get rid of the interconnected nature of the forestland, and you remove the robustness of the system.

"Conservation strategies should not only allow for change - they should assume change - and assure high biodiversity going forward. Large, uninterrupted landscapes facilitate this, and in Maine, one of the

few remaining places on earth with such large blocks of uninterrupted forests, these natural processes within the ecosystem allow the necessary adaptations to occur," Jacobson tells me.

Developments, no matter how small, that break continuous forestlands threaten the long-term diversity and viability of the many species within the forest ecosystem.

It's why the Forest Society of Maine hasn't stopped working to conserve and protect as much Maine forest as they can. "If we don't act now, the risk to Maine's culture, history, and identity is too great," says Tilberg.

Tilberg and the Forest Society of Maine continue to fight for the forests' future - protecting Maine's culture, climate, environment, and long-term economy in the process.