

EASEMENT-BASED LAND CONSERVATION AND RECREATIONAL ACCESS IN THE NORTHERN FOREST

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Abstract

New England's northern forest is one of the largest continuously forested areas in the United States. Private landowners control approximately 22 million acres and continue the tradition of allowing public access to private lands. Forest residents and visitors fuel an annual recreation and tourism industry worth \$16 billion, and many of these activities take place on private lands. But, with nearly 3 million acres protected by land trusts, conservation efforts may be affecting traditional recreation access of private land – and, conservation efforts may ultimately affect the region's recreation and tourism economy. This research asks the question, "What are the relationships between land conservation, outdoor recreation opportunities, and community support for conservation?" This study will consider how individuals and organizations in three local communities are affected by conservation decisions, particularly as those decisions related to outdoor recreation access, use, and sustainability on conserved lands.

1.0 Introduction

The land conservation movement continues to gain attention around the nation due to its swift growth and impacts on land use. The first land trust in the United States formed in 1891 (Brewer 2003), and today there are more than 1,500 land trusts around the country that have protected nearly 35 million acres (Land Trust Alliance 2004). In regions with limited public lands,

such as New England, recreational needs have often been fulfilled by access to private lands. With the increasing use of conservation easements to protect private lands from development or to preserve specific conservation values, traditional recreational access to these lands – and the region's overall recreation and tourism economy – could be affected.

This project's study area is the 26-million-acre northern forest, which stretches from New York to Maine (Blackmer 1995). Eighty-five percent of the forest is privately owned (Northern Forest Lands Council 1994), and nearly 3 million acres have been conserved (deGooyer & Capen 2004). While 1 million people call the forest home, about 70 million people live within a day's drive of the forest (Klyza & Trombulak 1994). Timber continues to be a main economic activity, but recreation and tourism have become a \$16 billion-a-year industry, and many of these activities take place on private lands (Northern Forest Lands Council 1994).

With considerable lands held in private ownership, an active conservation movement protecting significant acreages, and the dependence on private lands for recreational opportunities, the northern forest presents a unique setting in which to study the relationships among communities, conservation, and recreation. This research seeks to fulfill two goals: 1) examine the extent to which local conservation activities in three parts of the Northern Forest are affecting access to outdoor recreation opportunities on private lands; and 2) broadly assess the influence of land conservation efforts on local communities. While some authors have begun to examine the benefits of land trusts within communities (see LaPointe 2003) and the effects of conservation on land access (see Kies 2004), there remains a need for research into the relationship between conservation and community.

2.0 Literature Review

The majority of information available about land trusts and land conservation is historical, technical,

or organizational in nature. The Land Trust Alliance (2004) reports continuing and substantial increases in the number of active land trusts and the number of acres protected around the country. Land trusts in the U.S. originated more than a century ago as advocates of land conservation but have since evolved into active participants, as evidenced by the 35 million acres directly protected by those organizations (Brewer 2003; Land Trust Alliance 2004). Legal agreements between private landowners and nonprofit land trusts that determine the future uses of land can in turn affect local communities in various ways, including changes in local tax revenue, public access, resource use, and future development patterns.

Missing from this technical literature is a detailed analysis of the social aspects of land conservation. Issues that deserve attention include conservation's relationship with communities and people, stewardship of conserved properties, and the long-term economic, social, environmental impacts of land conservation. Conservation decisions both large and small affect local communities, and as such, it is important to understand the relationship between conservation and communities, particularly community involvement in conservation and changes to historical community land uses. LaPointe's (2003) study of community benefits from local land trusts offers one of the first insights into the relationships between community and conservation, but further research is needed to more clearly understand the complexities between conservation and community.

The notion of community has received extensive attention in the sociology literature. Within the varied definitions, three commonalities present themselves (Hoffer 1931; Hillary 1955): communities consist of (1) social groups (2) with shared experiences (3) in a geographical location. As Reiss (1966) suggests, the definition of community must encompass the social constructs as well as the physical geography of a place. For example, individual actions and decisions, such as conserving land, combine to affect the both the physical and social landscapes (Schein 1997). Small- and large-scale conservation projects result in changes to allowable land uses, possibly including public access and recreation. Allowable land uses may result in a town or

village defining itself as a farming community, recreation destination, resource-based community, and so on.

Knowledge of social networks further helps in understanding the role of community in conservation efforts. People function in this world as actors in complex networks, and social network models are a way of demonstrating the relationships that people have with others. While most small-scale conservation decisions are made between individual landowners and land trusts, large conservation projects often involve multiple actors including landowners, land trusts, project funders, government agencies, and others. Because the study towns in this research project are small and rural, it is expected that some people will serve communities in several capacities and that people will share similar networks. Fischer (1982) labels the sharing or overlapping of social networks as density, and he terms the number of ways people within networks as relational density or multistrandedness. It is hypothesized that the respondents will reveal dense and multistranded networks within the three northern forest communities. Residents may serve on local committees together, recreate together, perhaps be related, or are connected in some other fashion.

3.0 Methods

Based on the work of deGooyer and Capen (2004), three communities in the northern forest were chosen for study: Island Pond, Vermont; Pittsburg, New Hampshire; and Rangeley, Maine. These communities were chosen because of their socio-economic and demographic similarities, including comparable population size, race, median age, and median income. They were also chosen because of the traditional use of private lands for outdoor recreation opportunities and proximity to large conservation projects.

Each of the communities is also located near conservation easements greater than 100,000 acres. Island Pond is located near the 132,000-acre Champion Lands project. Pittsburg is near the 171,000-acre Connecticut Lakes Headwaters project, and about 111,000 acres of Pingree family lands were conserved near Rangeley, Maine. The projects are similar in that they involved multiple actors, cost millions of dollars, and included public access and

Table 1.—Socio-economic and demographic characteristics of three study towns

	Island Pond, VT	Pittsburg, NH	Rangeley, ME
Population	849	867	1,052
Males:Females	412:437	446:421	527:525
Race (% white)	94.2%	98.3%	99.2%
Median Age	42.1	46	44.5
Median Household Income	\$25,547	\$38,516	\$33,382

Source: US Census Bureau, 2000

Table 2.—Highlights of three conservation projects

	Island Pond, VT	Pittsburg, NH	Rangeley, ME
Project Name	Champion Lands	International Paper	Pingree*
Conserved Acres	132,000 acres	171,000 acres	111,732 acres
Cost	\$26,535,000	\$42,000,000	\$4,134,084
Land Ownership: Federal	26,000 acres	25,000 acres	
State	22,000 acres		
Private	84,000 acres	146,000 acres	111,732 acres

*figures given for Rangeley region of project only

Sources: Vermont Land Trust (1999), Trust for Public Land (2003a), New England Forestry Foundation (2004)

recreation provisions. One major difference, however, is that only the development rights were purchased in the Pingree family project rather than the lands themselves, resulting in a lower project cost.

Purposive sampling is being used to identify interview candidates in the three towns, including local leaders, business people, and recreation groups. Snowball sampling will identify other potential respondents. Data collection through the interview process is under way, and it is expected that about 45 interviews will be conducted across the three towns. When the interviews are completed and transcribed, content analysis will describe the extent that conservation activities are affecting recreational access of private conserved lands. Social network analysis will reveal the relationships that exist among the interviewed groups associated with and affected by conservation.

Each of the three project towns has a history of recreation on private lands, including the lands protected under easement. Analysis of the conservation easement language

will reveal similarities and differences in public access and outdoor recreation opportunities among the three conservation projects. The language can also be compared with respondents' interview transcriptions to see how interview respondents believe those projects are affecting access and recreation opportunities. The interviews will also reveal respondent involvement in the conservation projects, importance of outdoor recreation to local economies, and ownership patterns of local lands.

4.0 Initial Results

4.1 Recreation Patterns in the Northern Forest

As the nation's population continues to increase, so does the demand on natural resources for outdoor recreation opportunities. The 1962 report of the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission predicted a tripling in demand for recreation lands by the year 2000, but that prediction was fulfilled by 1983 (Teasley et al. 1998). With a large percentage of the nation's population living in the East, far from vast expanses of public lands, outdoor recreation on private lands has become an accepted tradition in the Northeast, and the substantial

demand for outdoor recreation opportunities has strong economic implications. Bergstrom and Cordell (1991) found that “[t]he aggregate total net economic value of outdoor recreation in the U.S., represented by the sum total net economic value for the 37 activities considered [...] is approximately \$122 billion annually – which is approximately nine times the value of timber harvested nationwide” (p. 84). Northern forest communities are realizing the economic benefits of tourism and recreation as well. Residents and visitors spend \$16 billion annually on recreation- and tourism-related goods and services (Northern Forest Lands Council 1994).

There has been limited research into the effects of conservation activities on recreational access and use of private lands. Kies’ (2004) study found that a majority of people (76% of respondents, n=52) in the northern forest did not notice a change in recreation opportunities due to conservation efforts. There was, however, a general lack of awareness by respondents about the use of conservation easements in forest protection. The current study will continue to investigate community knowledge of large local conservation easements and recreation behavior on those and other local lands.

In another study, deGooyer and Capen (2004) examined how conservation easements are influencing forest management in the Northern Forest. Their mail survey to randomly selected Northern Forest property owners with easements on their land revealed management objectives, timber operations, and conservation values, among other topics. Sixty-percent of the survey respondents (n=85) indicated recreation as a management priority, and 10 percent indicated recreation as the most important priority. Sixty-seven percent of respondents indicated aesthetics as a management priority, and 12 percent indicated aesthetics as the most important priority. These findings are important to the current study because they demonstrate the importance of recreation and aesthetic values of private property, in particular to landowners, but could possibly be extended to other residents and potential visitors.

Initial interviews in my study have demonstrated that the conserved properties are utilized for their outdoor recreation opportunities. Aside from personal opinions

about which specific activities should or should not be allowed (in particular, motorized recreation), respondents note that traditional use of the lands continues, and they indicate that local communities are economically dependent on recreating visitors to the area.

4.2 Easement Language

Language in the conservation easements shows that the authors acknowledged the importance of recreation and tourism to the social and economic well-being of their region. The easements include specific language regarding public access and use of the properties. Traditional activities such as hunting, trapping, fishing, hiking and wildlife viewing are generally allowed, while use of motorized vehicles is limited or restricted. Snowmobiling is a motorized activity that is generally allowed, while use of ATVs is either restricted to roads or prohibited altogether.

The Champion Lands easement specifies that one of its purposes is “[t]o provide perpetual public, recreational access to the Property for traditional recreational purposes...” (Vermont Land Trust 1999). There is one caveat for activities that utilize corridors, however. For activities including snowmobiling, biking, equestrian use, motor vehicles, and access for disabled persons, corridor managers for each use must be designated prior to the use being allowed for. For example, the statewide snowmobile organization Vermont Association of Snow Travelers has become the designated corridor manager for snowmobile use. According to the easement, the corridor manager assumes “responsibility for maintenance and management” of the corridor open to the public.

In New Hampshire, the Connecticut Lakes Headwaters easement is explicit in describing the importance of public access and recreation: “The Property constitutes the single most important land resource for the tourism and recreational economy of Pittsburg, Coos County, New Hampshire, a community that is dependent on tourism and outdoor recreation for more than half of its economic activity, and the Property is a significant resource for the tourism and recreational economy for the State and region” (Trust for Public Land 2003b). A variety of allowable nonmotorized recreational activities, as well as snowmobiling and motor vehicle use on

designated roads, will continue to provide recreation and tourism opportunities that support the region's economy.

Unlike the other projects, the Pingree lands in Maine are held by the original private owners. However, purchase of the development rights ensures the preservation of the conservation values on the properties. While the easement language does not guarantee public access, one of the project's purposes is to continue the tradition of public recreation opportunities, enjoyed by 90,000 recreationists each year (New England Forestry Foundation 2004).

5.0 Discussion and Conclusions

Interviews are still being conducted to further explore whether or not recreation patterns have been affected by large conservation easements in the three communities. Answers to recreation-related questions posed in initial interviews corroborate background research that describes the historical recreational uses of the properties and the importance of recreation to local economies. Other questions explore respondent participation in local government and community organizations, which locals are involved in recreation issues, and recommendations for other potential interview respondents. Answers to these questions are providing insight into the social networks of community members, particularly how networks are shared and which residents are well-known for their involvement in community issues.

Gaining a greater understanding of how locals with different community roles view conservation activities will be useful for those involved in land conservation projects. This will further the ability of rural planning to account for the possible social impacts of land conservation in addition to the impacts to allowable land uses. The ability of large corporate or family land holdings to continue providing outdoor recreation opportunities is important to residents, visitors, and local economies. The results of this study will be important in understanding the relationships between communities and conservation, including the effects of conservation projects on outdoor recreation, and the networks that exist in rural communities.

Future research could examine the role of land conservation organizations in providing recreation opportunities. Foti and Jacobs (1991) explored this topic during their examination of the role and extent of nonprofit conservation organizations in providing outdoor recreation. They found that conservation organizations provide passive access and use to lands, and they suggest that there is significant potential for other educational and recreational opportunities. With the protection of large properties (greater than 100,000 acres) that have traditionally provided recreational use, the relationship between conservation and community recreation will grow stronger.

6.0 Citations

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