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Return to the Wild

by John C. Jahoda



In December of 1999 I wrote an article for *Bridgewater Review* called *The Return of the Wild* in which I discussed the Great North Woods of northern New Hampshire and the ecological changes that were taking place, focusing on the resurgence of moose and other wildlife. Since this article was published dramatic developments have taken place that will profoundly influence the status of this unique ecosystem for years to come.

This area has been a “working forest” for many years. Starting with the Connecticut Valley Lumber Company in the 1800s, this forest has been owned by a succession of timber companies including the Brown Company, St Regis Paper Company, Champion International and International Paper. The history has also been one of ecological devastation involving log drives with driver dams that scoured the smaller streams and destroyed life in the stream, massive clear cutting, use of chemical spraying to kill hardwood trees and logging practices that were hard on the land. Perhaps most significantly the forest has been subjected to a boom and bust cycle of over harvesting, followed by a collapse of the timber industry, a period of regrowth of the forest, followed by another cycle of over harvesting. In the late 1800s and early 1900s the timber barons clear-cut most of northern New Hampshire from the White Mountains north and photographs of this era show a denuded landscape. During the 1970s and 1980s the forest was subjected to over cutting that by some estimates was 160 percent of sustained yield. During the latest phase under Champion International and International Paper management things had improved. Champion International and International Paper managed the forest under a forest management plan certified under the American Forest & Paper Association’s Sustainable Forestry Initiative. International Paper also had a voluntary High Elevation Management Agreement with the State of New Hampshire, which restricted timber harvesting above 2,700 feet. International Paper acquired Champion in 2000, primarily to acquire its southern timber lands and immediately announced that it was going to put the northern New Hampshire lands on the market.

Environmental and conservation groups were alarmed. Visions of the land being sold to developers and subdividers spurred concern. The land involved was three percent of the state’s total area and the largest privately owned tract of forestland in New Hampshire. It encompasses almost the entire watershed of the four lakes that form the headwaters of the Connecticut River (First Lake, Second Lake, Third Lake and Lake Francis) and has enormous significance for New Hampshire’s natural environment, timber and tourist economies.

In the ten years between 1982 and 1992, New Hampshire lost more than 150,000 acres of forest habi-



tat to development and the trend was continuing. Conserving the Connecticut Headwaters property was seen as countering the continued loss of valuable habitat by protecting the state’s single largest contiguous tract of privately owned forestland. Conservationists recognized that the sale of the property by International Paper provided the citizens of New Hampshire with a one time chance to guarantee that this land would continue to provide economic, recreation, and ecological benefits. Failure to act might lead



to the kind of development tragedy that had overtaken large tracts of forestland in Maine and other states. There was a crisis mentality to the campaign to save the forest before it was too late.

The effort to save the Connecticut Headwaters area brought together a unique coalition of conservation organizations including the Trust for Public Land (TPL), the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests (SPNHF), and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) of New Hampshire. TPL managed the acquisition from International Paper and future disposition, coordinated federal funding, and facilitating the work of the Connecticut Lakes Headwaters Partnership Task Force. SPNHF supported the Task Force and led the effort to generate support for public funding. TNC provided critical biological data and the scientific underpinnings that helped define the conservation strategy and also worked with the State and other partners to acquire and manage 25,000 acres of land set aside as natural areas. The organizations joined forces to raise the funding needed. A Partnership Task Force was formed which included public officials, residents, and nonprofit organizations to design and implement a conservation plan based on best practices.

The primary goal to which the coalition committed itself was the conservation of the natural resources of the Connecticut Headwaters property. They also established goals of guaranteeing public access, and maintaining the land's central role in the culture and economy of the region.

The project partners each brought their unique strengths, histories and attributes to the project. SPNH is the state's oldest and largest land conservation organization. Since 1901, it has helped protect over a million acres in the state and has also worked to promote sustainable forestry. TPL is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to conserving land for people to improve the quality of life and to protect our natural and historic resources for future generations.

Since 1972, TPL has worked with local groups, government agencies, and other nonprofits to protect more than 1.4 million acres nationwide. TNC is a worldwide conservation organization dedicated to preserving the plants, animals, and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive. The Conservancy has helped to protect more than 70 million acres of ecologically significant land.



The primary strategy was for the State of New Hampshire to purchase a conservation easement over the majority of the land. This easement would prohibit subdivision and development, ensure sustainable timber harvesting, and provide permanent public access. The land was divided into two sections: a working forest of 146,326 acres and natural preserves of 25,000 acres. The remaining 100 acres would be added to the Connecticut Lakes State Forest.

This was a bold conservation strategy, which would have a profound impact on the area. This forest is one of the few remaining undeveloped landscapes in New England. It includes the headwaters of the Connecticut River and more than 840 miles of streams and brooks. The area harbors a rich mix of habitat types, which include mature conifer forest of spruce and fir, mixed northern hardwood forest, boreal peat bogs, beaver flowages and freshwater wetlands. Thirteen rare and endangered animals have been reported in the area including bald eagle, Bicknell's thrush, Canada lynx, common loon, hoary bat, Northern bog lemming, Northern harrier, osprey, pie-billed grebe, pine marten, spruce grouse, three-toed woodpecker, and wood turtle. Fifty four rare plants also occur within the varied habitats. The area has become famous for its moose population and supports the highest density of moose in the state. White tailed deer are also common with several large deer wintering areas. There have also been intriguing reports of both wolves and mountain lions from the region. The brooks and ponds provide habitat for native fish. Many smaller streams and remote beaver ponds harbor native brook trout. These wild trout are a joy to catch and release, as they are much more beautiful than the pale hatchery trout that the state stocks.

The economy of the region was once linked primarily to farming, but as farming declined the timber industry gained precedence as the driving force in the local economy. In recent years, recreation-based tourism has moved to the forefront. In Pittsburg roughly 50 percent of local jobs are supported primarily by tourists and seasonal residents, and vacation homes make up nearly two-thirds of the town's housing. The forest is a destination for many popular outdoor pursuits, including fishing, boating, wildlife observation, snowmobiling, hunting, and hiking. Unfortunately ATVs are also becoming a part of the local scene, and ATV interests are trying to gain access to the forest roads and trails. Hopefully this will not be allowed to occur. Most conservationists and other interest groups are opposed to ATVs in the woods. ATVs are rightly seen as destructive to habitat and a major disturbance to people trying to



enjoy other recreational pursuits. Snowmobile groups know that the ATVs will devastate their carefully groomed trails, requiring major repairs.

The area contains many of New Hampshire's "fly-fishing only" ponds including Scott's Bog, Coon Brook Bog and Big Brook Bog. The trophy section of the upper Connecticut River is one of the most popular trout stream areas in New England. Pittsburg is a major center for snowmobiling, and the Connecticut Headwaters property includes 200 miles of groomed trails. Bird-watching and moose viewing along the Route 3 corridor, known as Moose Alley, are also significant tourist attractions. Moose viewing has become so popular that there is a "Moose Festival" held every year to celebrate this aspect of the local scene.

The timber industry is the third-largest manufacturing industry in New Hampshire and generates \$1.5 billion worth of products annually. Forestry and the forest products industry remain a critical part of the economy in the Connecticut Headwaters region. In Pittsburg approximately 21 percent of local jobs are based on timber-related activities.

TPL, SPNHF, and TNC worked with the Connecticut Lakes Headwaters Partnership Task Force, which was co-chaired by Governor Jeanne Shaheen and U.S. Senator Judd Gregg. The Task Force created a conservation strategy designed to balance the various interests including recreation, the economic needs of the people dependent on the forest, and natural resource protection. The Task Force Steering Committee held regular public meetings to solicit input from North Country and New Hampshire residents through the late summer and fall of 2001, and it released final recommendations in early December of 2001. A Task Force Technical Committee provided information on the property's natural resource attributes, economic and demographic data, and possible methods of protection.



16,070 acres located to the east of Second and Third lake. The Fish and Game Department will manage nearly 15,000 acres of the East Inlet section as a nature preserve, in which there

TPL then purchased the 171,326-acre Connecticut Headwaters property from International Paper. The purchase price was determined by a federally approved appraisal and was approximately \$33 million. The coalition then secured public and private funds to permanently protect the property. The State of New Hampshire used state and federal funds to purchase a conservation easement over 146,326 acres. The easement prohibits development, provides for sustainable forest management, and guarantees permanent public access.

The total cost of this conservation effort is estimated at a minimum of \$40 million, which will cover land acquisition, transaction costs, and stewardship costs. TPL secured loans to purchase the property from International Paper on March 29, 2002 and held the property until multiple permanent funding sources could be secured.

TPL then sold 25,000-acres to TNC with the understanding that TNC would hold and manage the land while the state secured funds. The state was able to purchase the natural area with a portion of the \$10 million bond approved by the NH Legislature in May, \$1 million from the North American Wetlands Conservation Act and \$700,000 from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. TNC sold the land to the state for the appraised value of \$6.5 million. Proceeds from the sale will be used to reimburse TNC for its costs associated with purchasing and holding the land.

This bold conservation vision is now a reality. The new natural area of 25,000 acres is now owned by the State of New Hampshire Fish and Game Department. TNC holds a conservation easement over the entire property, and will work closely with Fish and Game to ensure sound management that protects the property's special natural features in perpetuity. The state has purchased the natural area in three parcels. The parcels include the South Bay Bog area of 3,959 acres located south of First Lake in Pittsburg, the Perry Stream headwaters and ponds of 4,971 acres located to the west of Third Lake, and the East Inlet and Scott's Bog Brook watersheds of

will be no timber harvesting and where ecological processes will follow their own natural courses to shape the landscape over time. In the South Bay Bog and Perry Stream headwaters parcels and a small portion of the East Inlet area along Route 3, Fish and Game will practice a variety of sustainable and adaptive forest management options to optimize wildlife habitats. All 25,000 acres will be open to the public for hunting, fishing, and hiking and snowmobiling on established trails. The state has established an endowment for the long-term management of these lands, toward which TNC will contribute an initial \$450,000.

The remaining 146,326 acres are now owned by the Trust for Public Land, which intends to sell all but 100 acres to Lyme Timber Co., with a conservation easement to be held by the state. The other 100 acres will be transferred to the state for an addition to the Deer Mountain Campground as part of the Connecticut Lakes State Forest. This will keep most of the property on the local tax rolls and maintain the tradition of private timberland ownership. It will remain a working forest, but unlike the over cutting in the past the forest will be managed as a sustained yield forest from now on.

The attention that this conservation effort has created and the realization that buildable land in Pittsburg is now a limited resource has spurred a building boom, primarily in vacation homes and camps. Camp lots are now selling for \$ 90,000. But with 171,326 acres there are still plenty of areas where you can go and never see another human being and where we frequently encounter wildlife such as moose and deer, and if we are lucky we may see the more elusive species such as bear, coyote and foxes, and perhaps if we are very very lucky we may see a wolf, mountain lion or lynx.

—John C. Jahoda is Professor of Biological Sciences