

THE CHANGING CHARACTER OF NATURE-BASED RECREATION IN THE NORTH WOODS – AN OVERVIEW

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PURPOSE OF PANEL DISCUSSION

How do viewpoints expressed by panelists influence Commission's thoughts about jurisdiction's recreational resources and LURC's vision? Are the 1997 CLUP goals and policies related to recreational resources in keeping with changing character of nature-based recreation?

SPEAKERS

- Steve Spencer – Department of Conservation
- Albro Cowperthwaite – North Maine Woods Organization
- Matt Polstein – New England Outdoor Center

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT BACKCOUNTRY RECREATION (Steve Spencer)

- The Commission's current plan establishes a policy of promoting a range of recreation opportunities including, among others, opportunities for primitive recreation without intrusion from more intensive forms of recreation. Steve hopes this policy will be continued in the revised plan.
- The opportunity to observe and interact with nature is a significant factor in most of the recreation opportunities that the Department of Conservation manages.
- There are three large groups of recreationists: Nature consumptive activities (e.g. hunting, fishing), nature appreciation (e.g. bird-watching), and adventure recreation (e.g. rock climbing, white-water rafting). Recreational use patterns appear to be polarizing towards two extremes – backcountry experiences with no accommodations and nature-observation experiences with very high demands for amenities. LURC's jurisdiction is vast enough that it can accommodate all spectrums.
- Demand for high quality backcountry recreation experiences seems to be growing at a greater rate than more accessible front-country areas. It appears that areas that provide mid to long distance hiking and paddling possibilities are seeing a significant growth in visits. Recent public acquisitions such as Tumbledown Mountain are also seeing heavy use. However, use of the Allagash Wilderness Waterway has declined for the last few years. High quality backcountry experiences are extremely sensitive to all varieties of land uses.
- One relatively new influence in the jurisdiction is the protection and management of large tracts of land by non profit conservation organizations through fee or easement. These organizations are important partners to the Department of Conservation in meeting conservation and recreation objectives.
- The Department of Conservation is currently working on several recreation projects, including the Northern Forest Canoe Trail, the 100 Mile Wilderness Project, and public acquisition from Plum Creek of several tracks of land in the Moosehead area.

CHANGING USE PATTERNS IN THE NORTH MAINE WOODS (Albro Cowperthwaite)

- The NMW organization covers an area of 3.7 million acres, which encompasses 150 townships and includes 6% publicly owned land. The nonprofit organization includes multiple diverse owners that have created uniform recreation and visitor use policies and fees. The organization's main goal is to manage public use in concert with timber production. The NMW landowners accommodate, rather than promote, traditional recreational uses. Major functions of the organization include maintenance of 13 checkpoints that welcome and register over 110,000 visitors (more than 250,000 visitor days) annually; maintenance of over 450 campsites; emergency assistance; information and education; and logging road safety.
- The ownership pattern of the North Maine Woods is a combination of family ownerships, private industrial ownerships, institutional investors, private conservation lands (e.g. TNC), and the State of Maine. In last 10 years, much of the land in NMW once owned by "paper companies" has been purchased by conservation organizations such as the Nature Conservancy and Appalachian Mountain Club, investment groups such as

Wagner and LandVest's clients, and individuals including the Gardner and Haynes families. The ownership is changing but the land in NMW remains open to public use.

- Recent land use trends in the North Maine Woods show that use of Maine's forests has been decreasing. NMW visitor days has remained relatively flat from 1985 to 1999 (compared to a 5% increase from 1970-1985). However, the number of visitors has increased, pointing to a trend that more people are visiting the area, but are staying for shorter periods of time. The number of private camps in the Maine Woods has increased, and visitation to camps has tripled in the past 30 years, whereas all other uses (hunting, fishing, etc.) have remained relatively stable or have decreased.
- Future Predictions: The average length of visits will continue to get shorter. Visitors will be seeking creature comforts (for instance, flush toilets, hot showers, cell phones, web access), more stimulation (for instance, access to popular attractions, quality hunting and fishing opportunities), and simplified travel arrangements and convenience (visitors will be seeking a "packaging" ecotourism structure, and cost will be less of a consideration).
- There is an infrastructure of small businesses in place to accommodate more visitors if Maine develops a policy of promoting a realistic picture of nature-based tourism. NMW registers over 100 guides, sporting camp owners and outfitters that can adapt and accommodate new visitors. There is room for everyone, but the challenge is to integrate new visitors with current ones.
- "Following 30 years of cooperation, we need to continue the long term relationship where private landowner and Maine's natural resource agency representatives work together to manage Maine's natural resources and the people attracted to them"

NATURE-BASED TOURISM TRENDS AND NEEDS (Matt Polstein)

- Recreationists are coincidental tourists who seek nature, adventure or learning largely on their own, whereas tourists are willing to pay for a higher level of facilitation and service. There is an opportunity in Maine's marketplace to exploit a trend of increasing numbers of recreationists seeking a higher level of service. The challenge is to facilitate economic activity while protecting Maine's natural resources.
- Travel industry trends around the US and in Maine are pointing to groups of travelers who leave their homes with a general idea of what they want to do, but do not prepare an itinerary of events or even in some cases without securing overnight accommodations. DECD has hired Fermata to study the possibility of creating a packaged high-quality experience for nature tourists which would connect various nature-based activities with local accommodations and other tourism businesses. This strategy is in keeping with the CLUP because these groups of users are generally non-consumptive and thus have less impact on the natural resources.
- Nature-based tourism needs include development of facilities (upscale, larger scale facilities will be needed to accommodate this group of recreationists), development of common infrastructure (such as parking areas on the sides of roads, viewing platforms, etc), and a reinvention of the recreation industry (including provision for real value nature appreciation and learning opportunities, and expansion of the role of guides to public outreach about traditional consumptive uses and the local economy).
- LURC can play a role in supporting nature-based tourism by using prospective zoning to identify sites for upscale facilities and recreation infrastructure. By identifying suitable development sites that are in the fringe of the jurisdiction or that utilize the existing framework of commercial sporting camps, LURC would support nature-based tourism while managing the jurisdiction's natural resources. However, the areas identified for tourism development need to be close enough to the natural resource so that the resource can be appreciated by visitors (for instance, access to the natural resources and beautiful views are critical; these facilities cannot be next to a mall or a mill). This approach would also give LURC a chance to correct development patterns that have occurred over time by accident, rather than through good planning. LURC's adjacency principle tends to propagate the types of development patterns that have occurred by chance. Prospective zoning is not bound by such trends.