Just Buy It

Sweet Water Trust saves wildlands in New England

by Emily Bateson and Nancy Smith

Out of the wooded swamp, hip boots filled with water, we move with caution into the open. On a floating bog mat, pitcher plants and dwarf trees quaver with every step we take. (Just how deep is the water under here, anyway? Answer: deep.) Another day, we trek through a small patch of old growth. Damp and bouldery, with mounds of gnarly roots and slick fallen trees, the going is as tough as the quaking bog had been. Some weeks later, on a hilltop, we bask on smooth weathered rock. We lounge for awhile in the sun, surrounded by delicate mosses and wind-dwarfed pitch pines.

From out of the clench of New England winter, spring breaks out in profusion. And so do we. Away from the din of computers and traffic at Sweet Water Trust's Boston office, we bushwhack, paddle, and muck our way through potential conservation sites from Maine coastal islands to the Adirondack wilds in the company of dedicated ecologists, landowners, and local conservationists.

Pool in the Woods *(1875) by Francis Hopkinson Smith*

Before these trips are over, we have usually struck a pact for wilderness: Sweet Water Trust will fund a portion of the acquisition, and the grantee will keep the land wild, protecting it—forever—from timbering, mining, gravel extraction, or other activities that would rob it of its ecological wealth.

Sweet Water Trust (SWT), a charitable foundation that disburses grants of over $1 million annually for land aquisition, is notable for its clear focus: *We are dedicated to the conservation of wild Nature.* To qualify for SWT assistance, a project must conserve a wild area of at least 2000 acres (recently upped from a minimum of 1000 acres). In the past five years we have protected, through 60 highly leveraged grants and outright acquisition, more than 36,000 acres of "forever wild" forests, mountains, wetlands, lakeshores, and coastlines, thereby expanding or connecting roughly 750,000 acres of existing public and private conservation lands.[1]

While we are proud of this effort, we realize it is not enough. Not nearly enough.

Species and natural communities are vanishing at an alarming and unprecedented rate. Research from scientists studying island biogeography suggests that existing parks, refuges, and "postage stamp" preserves will not ensure a healthy, functioning natural world.

It is clear that a fundamental shift in land protection priorities must occur, with ecological values becoming our preeminent focus. And, we need to think much, much bigger if we are going to restore and protect adequate habitat for all native species in our region and on our planet. As Dr. Reed Noss has said, if we are going to halt a mass extinction, we must think on a truly grand scale.[2]

And there are tremendous opportunities to purchase and protect wildlands on such a grand scale right now in the Northern Forest region of New England and New York. Champion International, SAPPI, and International Paper are placing more than a million acres on the auction block *this year*. These vast lands are cheap, unpeopled, essential for restoring wilderness, and *for sale*.

Northern New England is 90–95% private land. With 10 million acres owned by a forest products industry that is bailing out of the region, and southern New England development pressures gobbling up land, the alternative to conservation is the end of New England as we know it. Once this narrow window of opportunity closes, the chance to save the region's wildlands at this scale and price will be gone. Conservationists—and philanthropists—are now faced with an unprecedented opportunity to protect the Northern Forest.

WHY PROTECT BIODIVERSITY* AND WILDLANDS?

The following principles help guide Sweet Water Trust's ecological compass:

We are in a period of ecological crisis and mass extinction.

The human population is now six billion and growing, and our species has rendered the world into pieces, plummeting many native species and natural communities into precarious decline. E.O. Wilson and others state that the habitat loss and fragmentation resulting from human activity has initiated the sixth great extinction crisis in Earth history (and the first caused by one species out of balance). Considering that evolution took 20 to 30 million years to repair the damage following the previous contractions in the diversity of life, Wilson cautions: "These figures should give pause to anyone who believes that what *Homo sapiens* destroys, Nature will redeem."[3]

Ignorance is not ecological bliss.

The new field of conservation biology has grown quickly in the past 15 years, revealing provocative ecological insights, as well as highlighting just how little we actually know about the natural world. Scientists are merely beginning to understand the interrelated complexities of biodiversity and ecosystem function, and uncertainties remain about such critical questions as when a degraded ecosystem will collapse. E.O. Wilson has written: "Because scientists have yet to put names on most kinds of organisms, and because they entertain only the vaguest idea of how ecosystems work, it is reckless to suppose that biodiversity can be diminished indefinitely without threatening humanity itself."[4]

Protecting large expanses of undisturbed habitat is a pivotal component of biodiversity protection.

The scientific literature is clear: "Maintaining wild areas in their natural condition is key to maintaining their ecological integrity."[5] In part because of what we don't yet know, and in part because of what we do, study after study concludes that large blocks of strategic and linked wildlands must be protected in a natural state, in a broader landscape of well-managed buffer lands. In this region, protection efforts will be more effective and less costly if they occur before northern New England is further fragmented by industrial logging, road-building, and development.

*As common as it has become, we are still surprised that so many people misunderstand the word "biodiversity," equating it with the sheer volume of *species* in a given area. As commonly defined by conservation biologists, biodiversity is simply the variety of life on Earth, from the genetic to the landscape level of organization, and the natural processes that create and shape that diversity.

Improved management of manipulated lands is not a substitute for wildlands protection.

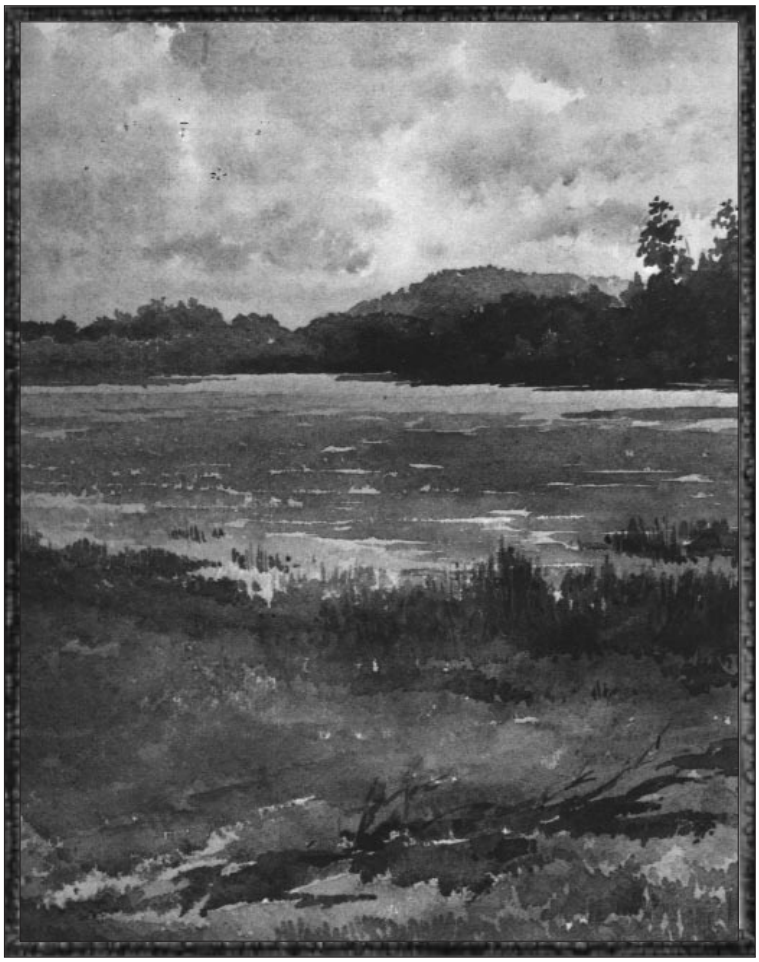
Improving timber harvesting and other practices that mitigate our current impact on managed lands are pieces to the biodiversity puzzle, but by themselves are not the solution to protecting native biodiversity. "[Sustainable use] will almost always lower biological diversity, whether one considers individual species or entire biological communities, and if sustainable use is our only goal, our world will be the poorer for it."[6] "In most regions we should pursue both options in tandem. We need more and bigger reserves and more ecologically sensitive management of other lands."[7]

In New England, where 90–95% of the land is in private hands, conservationists understandably are working to improve forestry practices and to conserve timberland (in part to counter development threats). However, some conservationists seem to view better forest management as an alternative, rather than a complement, to reserves as a conservation strategy. The critical need for wilderness and ecological reserves must not be lost in the "working forest" shuffle.

Wildlands have multiple values.

Wildlands also provide innumerable benefits to humans, some of which we are only beginning to understand. They provide ecosystem services, such as creating our soil, cleaning our air, filtering our water, absorbing flood waters, and cycling nutrients, among other critical functions that would be either impossible or astronomically expensive to duplicate. A recent article by economists and ecologists estimated these global ecosystem services and natural capital at $33 trillion per year.[8] Protecting natural areas is beginning to look like the ultimate capital investment.

While these rational principles resolutely point the way to the preservation of wilderness, it is usually the heart that compels us to act. While it is not in vogue to speak emotionally about land protection, nevertheless, this is what prompts most land conservationists with whom we have worked. Remembering with quickened spirit the wild creatures we have encountered in an untrammeled landscape, we want our children to witness the wild in their futures, too. Compassion urges us to protect wildlife. Conservation science helps us find the way.



Lakeside Landscape *(ca.1890) by Arnold W. Brunner*

WHY PROTECT WILD NATURE IN NEW ENGLAND?

Although tropical rainforests, with their sheer abundance of diversity, have garnered the most ecological limelight, scientists are increasingly focused on the need not just to protect a few remote islands of biodiversity but also to weave ecosystem protection throughout all regions of the globe.[9]

Northern New England and New York's "Northern Forest" represents the largest remaining contiguous forest in the East, with pristine lakes, scenic rivers, soaring mountains, and diverse native plant and animal species. Forest is the natural vegetative cover for virtually all uplands and most wetlands in the region, and a high percentage of our native plants and animals are forest organisms; forest ecosystems harbor roughly half of our rare native plant species.[10]

At least 400 species of birds, 55 species of mammals, 11 species of reptiles, and 19 species of amphibians are found in the Northern Forest. Twenty-five species of vertebrates are unique to the area. The region is a key part of the Atlantic flyway for migratory waterfowl moving between Canada and the South, and for a number of forest-dwelling birds that spend their winters in tropical forests and breed during the summer in the Northern Forest.[11]

Ecological interrelationships are poorly documented and understood. Groups such as non-vascular plants, fungi, insects, and soil microbes are critical to the fabric of regional biodiversity but in ways that remain all but unknown. Some organisms, like the mycorrhizal fungi, now known to be vitally important to the growth and development of trees and other plants, are not even well-sorted taxonomically.[12]

This lack of scientific knowledge demands environmental prudence. Evidence continues to mount that escalating forest fragmentation from timber harvesting and development relates directly to loss of native species diversity, and seems to encourage hardy, parasitic, and omnivorous species that thrive at the expense of less-adaptable ones.[13] Shy or more sensitive organisms, including interior forest-nesting birds, and mammals such as lynx, bobcat, black bear, and wolverine require large, natural habitats to maintain viable populations.

Conservation biologists grappling with the question of how much undisturbed land should be protected generally agree that bigger is better, connectivity to other protected lands is essential, and protected areas should be wide and rounded rather than narrow and jagged to reduce edge effects.[14]

Scientists also warn against flirting with how far we can push our ecosystems before they collapse. "Records of stressed ecosystems also demonstrate that the descent can be unpredictably abrupt.…The loss of a keystone species is like a drill accidentally striking a powerline. It causes lights to go out all over the place."[15]

The natural heritage of the region is also the living context of the millions of people who call this place home. Clear night skies, pure drinking water, the fragrance and sounds of the deep woods—this natural place—is of huge, if unquantifiable, value to people living here. We share the experience of this place with wild creatures. Aldo Leopold has written:

Like winds and sunsets, wild things were taken for granted until progress began to do away with them. Now we face the question of whether a still higher "standard of living" is worth its costs in things natural, wild, and free.…The opportunity to see geese is more important than television, and the chance to see a pasque flower is a right as inalienable as free speech.

Etched on the landscape are traces of human history, of native peoples and European settlers who hunted, homesteaded, lived, loved, fought battles for freedom and land, and died here. With the increasing consumption of land today, these tangible traces of history will disappear too if we don't act swiftly, with only the work of Thoreau or Winslow Homer to give us a glimpse of what once was.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UNDERFUNDED
Opportunities for Wildlands Conservation

The bad news: Only five percent of New England is public land (and much of that is logged by state or federal agencies for revenue). The future of 95% of the habitat, and much of the biodiversity, is currently up for grabs.

A remarkable ten million acres of northern New England and New York is owned in large tracts by the forest products industry. Unfortunately, the shifting economics of the global economy have taken a serious toll on these vast woods. The industry has systematically increased cutting to keep profits high; clearcutting and herbicide spraying are common management practices.

Timber companies are increasingly trading hands and jettisoning their timberlands to maximize return to stockholders. Vast acreages are going up for sale to the highest bidder. In 1988, Diamond Occidental put 790,000 acres on the auction block, resulting in sales to over 200 new landowners, some of whom liquidated all standing timber to pay off mortgages.[16] The largest landholding in Maine, formerly owned by Great Northern Paper, has changed hands three times in the past few years. As of this writing, Champion International is poised to place 331,000 acres on the open market.

There are limited conservation funds available to take advantage of these major land sales. Forest protection efforts, thwarted by lack of funds or knowledge, have too often focused only on protecting the stuff that no one else wants. We have numerous protected bald mountain tops in New England. And lots of protected boggy open areas. Although alpine zones and wetlands are ecologically important, it is time to move beyond this haphazard "peaks and puddles" conservation approach and work toward comprehensive ecological protection.

The good news: The paradox is that the bad news is also the good news. Despite the ominous economic and ecological trends, industrial forest ownership in the region historically has acted as a serious check to housing development in northern New England. For a long time, the industry has provided a semblance of *de facto*, "multiple use" parks for the most populated region in the country.[17]

Today, these lands are increasingly valuable for recreation, generating more than $1.5 billion each year for the regional economy.[18] As FOR SALE and NO TRESPASSING signs sprout up throughout the region, ecologists, wilderness lovers, hunters, anglers, and recreationists are beginning to realize that something must be done. The land we have long treated as a public resource clearly is neither public nor protected.

HISTORIC EXAMPLES OF WILDLANDS PHILANTHROPY

For more than a century, individuals have led the fight to designate National Parks and Wilderness Areas on lands that otherwise might have been degraded by roads, parking lots, housing developments, malls. These protected lands stand as perhaps the nation's greatest philanthropic legacy. For example, Acadia National Park, Grand Teton National Park, Virgin Islands National Park, and others were created largely through the vision and largesse of the Rockefeller family, most notably John D. Rockefeller Jr. and his son Laurance Rockefeller.

Today there is more money in America than ever, with tens of thousands of individuals who could make an extraordinary difference by investing in land protection—who could use their wealth to leave an enduring legacy of wildlands.

Here in New England, donors have often stepped forward to place important tracts of land into conservation with tangible and enduring results. The burgeoning land trust movement owes much of its growth and vigor to such gifts. A few examples:

• In 1974, Mine Crane gave the Crane Wildlife Refuge in Essex Bay, Massachusetts to the Trustees of Reservations, forever protecting 2000 acres of islands, barrier beaches, salt marshes, and tidal creeks.

• Arthur D. Norcross Sr. spent 25 years assembling a 3000-acre reserve in Monson and Wales, Massachusetts, and established the Norcross Wildlife Foundation that continues to expand the reserve as well as give significant grants each year for land acquisition.

• In western Maine, Bessie Phillips gave more than 5000 forever wild acres to protect Rangeley Lake and the Kennebago River, launching a land protection effort by Rangeley Lakes Heritage Trust on a scale that few other land trusts nationwide have equaled.

• Betty Babcock's gift of 3000 acres to the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests (which she modestly named for a friend, Charles Pierce) has led to concerted land protection efforts underscored by extensive conservation science supported by the Forest Society and Sweet Water Trust.

• Vermont's Helen Buckner Memorial Preserve at Bald Mountain was created through a family gift to The Nature Conservancy.

• In eastern New York, the Smiley Brothers sold 5300 acres at a very reduced cost to the Mohonk Preserve, which has become the keystone piece for a 23,000-acre mosaic of lands protected by the Shawangunk Ridge Biodiversity Partnership. The Mohonk Preserve is also the repository of the Dan Smiley Research Center, which holds an extremely valuable body of natural science data spanning 125 years.

• The Lila Wallace/Reader's Digest Fund has quietly helped the Open Space Institute and other organizations spend more than $200 million on land acquisition in the Hudson River Valley region over the past 20 years.

• Other pivotal gifts are dotted throughout New England and New York.

Mount Ktaadn *(1853) by Frederic Edwin Church*

That mountain should belong to the people of Maine.

Of all such gifts in the region, the most legendary may be Baxter State Park, the largest wilderness area in New England. Percival Baxter had a vision that Mt. Katahdin and surrounds should be public land. But when Baxter was governor, the legislature twice voted against purchasing the lands, influenced by the timber industry as well as the Chamber of Commerce (who didn't think anyone would visit). To realize his dream, Baxter patiently and privately purchased land for years after he left public office. Few remember his record as governor, but no one will ever forget Percival Baxter and his extraordinary 200,000-acre gift to the people of Maine.[23]

The opportunity: Across the region, the time is right for large-scale, cost-effective land purchases—tens and even hundreds of thousands of acres at a time—because of the shifting economics of the timber and electric power industries. (Because of electric utility deregulation we expect significant sales of forest land in the watersheds where utilities operate hydroelectric dams.) This represents an unparalleled opportunity for wilderness protection.

Large blocks of forest land in northern New England are currently available for as little as two to three hundred dollars an acre. These vast acreages are generally uninhabited by humans. The land is relatively unfragmented except by logging roads which can be recontoured and revegetated.

Twenty-five years from now we will look back in awe that so much unpopulated land was on the market at so little cost. As E.O. Wilson has said: "One planet, one experiment."[19] The time to act is now.

WHY PRIVATE PHILANTHROPY?

Since Sweet Water Trust formed seven years ago, we have not seen significant positive change in funding trends for land acquisition to protect native species and forever wild lands.

The funds committed to protecting our dwindling natural heritage are grossly inadequate to the present need and opportunity. Few conservation organizations focus on wilderness protection, and those that do have little money to transform their impressive maps into on-the-ground protection.[20] New England's land protection organizations stretch limited resources as best they can but are often forced to make sorry compromises that allow timbering or development on land better conserved as natural areas.[21]

Foundation dollars for land acquisition are scarce. Securing public funds for wilderness protection, at either the state or federal level, is difficult and time consuming.[22] While traditional wilderness campaigns will always be necessary, private conservation initiatives are a key complementary tactic. When important wildlands come on the market, there may not be time to develop a political constituency and pass legislation to secure their protection. Wildlands advocates need to be prepared to—Just Buy It.

As Edward Abbey once said: *Wilderness needs no defense, only more defenders*. An infusion of funding from private wildlands philanthropists could fundamentally change the political as well as the ecological landscape, encouraging government agencies, conservation groups, and local communities to renew their own commitments to protect our natural heritage. It is time for philanthropists to step up to the plate and go to bat for wilderness.

DESPERATELY SEEKING WILDLANDS PARTNERS

Today, more than ever, we need bold vision: we need modern-day champions of wilderness. Little by little, wonderful projects are happening in local communities. On a map, however, these protected areas still look like confetti, randomly scattered. These discrete, small conservation "islands" will not support their native biodiversity once they become isolated in a developed landscape.

What we need now is a regional commitment to a new paradigm for land conservation: the creation of a network of large-scale, linked wildlands that would help revitalize existing conservation lands, and protect and restore native biodiversity on a meaningful scale. Above all, we need a renewed commitment from each and every one of us to support ecological protection efforts large and small—with our voices, votes, time, and especially…*dollars*.

Sweet Water Trust is committed to doing its part to help create this new paradigm for land conservation in New England:

- We remain committed to our "forever wild" land protection focus, and to the use of good conservation science to identify acquisition priorities and increase ecological understanding of the region.
- We are increasing our project threshold to 2000 acres, and turning our attention increasingly towards projects of 10,000 acres or more.
- We are in the preliminary stages of creating a partnership of foundations and individuals committed to taking advantage of the tremendous opportunities to purchase wildlands in the region today.
- We have announced a $1.5 million challenge grant to purchase 15,000 acres of beautiful, important wildlands coming on the market in northern New Hampshire.

Let us tell our grandchildren that our generation protected—not destroyed—a natural legacy that took billions of years of organic evolution to create. Let them, too, glimpse the elusive pine marten, hear the trill of warblers, and spot orchids blooming in the wilds. If we wait, and leave this critical task to them, there will be precious little left to save.

Please help. Be a founding member of a new wildlands partnership. Help us close the 15,000-acre deal in New Hampshire, and build a war chest to fund the purchase of the other vast forest lands now on the market. Only together, with dollars, science, and speed, can we take advantage of the unparalleled opportunities to protect biodiversity and wildlands in New England. ❙

Endnotes

[1]These numbers include acquisition of forever wild easements as well as outright acquisition. They do not include: funding for projects in the Pantanol, Brazil; funding for ecological assessments that have subsequently led to land protection; or properly account for additional land protection undertaken by communities after an original SWT grant.

[2]Reed Noss, "The Wildlands Project Land Conservation Strategy," *Wild Earth Special Issue*: Plotting a North American Wilderness Recovery Strategy, 1992.

[3]E.O. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life*, Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 31.

[4]Ibid, p. 348.

[5]Reed Noss, "Maintaining Ecological Integrity in Representative Reserve Networks," World Wildlife Fund, 1995, p. 27. Policymakers have increasingly reflected this body of scientific literature in their recommendations, e.g., "We need permanent preserves in the Northern Forest to protect biodiversity, maintain an ecological baseline…and provide outdoor recreation in a region where the most popular areas are suffering from overuse.…[Purchases] should include a limited number of large tracts—most in the 100,000 acre range, and perhaps one or two somewhat larger. A system of such preserves across the landscape, connected where possible by trail and wildlife corridors, would do much to preserve ecological integrity.…" David Dobbs and Richard Ober, *The Northern Forest*, Chelsea Green Publishers, 1995, p. 326.

[6]Reed Noss, "Maintaining Ecological Integrity in Representative Reserve Networks," World Wildlife Fund, 1995, p. 26, citing Robinson (1993).

[7]Reed Noss and Allen Cooperrider, *Saving Nature's Legacy: Protecting and Restoring Biodiversity*, Defenders of Wildlife, Island Press, 1994, p. XX. See also "Biological Diversity in Maine," (January 1996), a publication of the Maine Forest Biodiversity Project, which concluded: "Maine's biodiversity is sufficiently complex that neither a 'reserves alone' strategy nor a 'working forest alone' strategy is likely to adequately maintain [biodiversity].…By taking provisions now to maintain the full range of natural habitats for the future, we can avoid the extirpations (or extinctions) that are so prevalent elsewhere." p. 72.

[8]Robert Costanza et al., "The Value of the World's Ecosystem Services and Natural Capital," *Nature Magazine*, May 1997.

[9]See, for example, Gretchen C. Daily and Paul R. Ehrlich, "Population Extinction and the Biodiversity Crisis," *Wild Earth*, Winter 1997/98, pp. 37, 43.

[10]Ecological Assessment Report of the New Hampshire Forest Resources Plan, 1996, p. III-4.

[11]Stephen C. Trombulak, "A Natural History of the Northern Forest," in *The Future of the Northern Forest*, Middlebury College Press, 1994, pp. 17-19.

[12]Massachusetts Audubon Society, "Forest Management Policy," 1993.

[13]See, for example, "Habitat Fragmentation," in *Principles of Conservation Biology*, Meffe and Carroll (1994). Or Wilcox and Murphy (1985): "Habitat fragmentation is the most serious threat to biological diversity and is the primary cause of the present extinction crisis."

[14]See, for example, Reed Noss (1995); or "The Design of Conservation Reserves," in *Principles of Conservation Biology*, Meffe and Carroll (1994): "No longer at issue is whether bigger reserves are better; we knew all along that, all else being equal, bigger reserves hold more species, better support wide-ranging species, and have lower extinction rates than small reserves." p. 267.

[15]E.O. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life*, Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 348.

[16]"Cracks in the Timber Empire: Goldsmith's Raid changed forest landowning, perhaps forever," Phyllis Austen, *Maine Times*, March 13, 1997, pp. 4-7.

[17]For more on the multinationals, see Mitch Lansky's article "The Northern Forest," *Wild Earth*, Winter 1993.

[18]The Northern Forest Lands Council Technical Appendix, "The Economic Importance of the Northeastern Forest," Northeastern Forest Alliance, 1994, p. 2.

[19]E. O. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life*, Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 182.

[20]The Nature Conservancy has been a notable leader nationally in buying and protecting land for biodiversity values. Although the organization has long relied on a species-specific/critical areas protection approach, today, the Conservancy is moving toward a more landscape level "eco-regional" strategy. This welcome shift promises to reap larger-scale land protection in New England and elsewhere.

[21]Most such groups come from the local tradition of "open space" protection. Although preserving open space is a traditional and worthwhile goal, the very barrenness of this term suggests a landscape devoid of the rich biodiversity that sustains us all. In general, buyer beware: maps of "protected" land rarely distinguish between commercial farmland, timbered land, and fully protected ecological reserves. Many computer-generated maps demarcate all municipal and state land as "protected," regardless of whether the site is a municipal landfill, or apt to be sold by the town for revenue. (Because in fact there appears to be no accurate map, SWT has commissioned a map that identifies all the permanently protected wildlands in the region.) Funders interested in biodiversity protection should confirm how the land will be managed, and what permanent protection mechanisms (such as "forever wild" easements) will be put in place. See Nancy Smith, "Forever Wild Easements in New England," *Wild Earth*, Fall 1997.

[22]Although Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont have all assembled scientific committees to assess the state's biodiversity and the need for ecological reserves, the jury is still out on whether that science can be translated into political action. For example, the long-awaited bond act for land acquisition now being considered in Maine will apparently (as of this writing) ask for a paltry amount compared to the need, and large-scale wilderness/ecological reserve acquisition is not even a listed state priority.

[23]The long and checkered history of efforts to open up this nationally renowned wilderness area to logging, snowmobiling, hunting, and herbicide spraying illustrates the tremendous recreational and economic pressures on our few existing "preserved" areas. See, e.g., "Forever Wild Meets Politics of the Day," *Maine Times*, April 9, 1998, pp. 18-21.

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