

SPREADING PROSPERITY BY REVITALIZING MAINE WOODS TOURISM

By David Vail

Maine's rural hinterland, despite its history and natural beauty, shows numerous signs of chronic economic and community distress. Compared to the state's relatively prosperous southern and coastal counties, the six "rim counties" (Oxford, Franklin, Somerset, Piscataquis, Aroostook and Washington) suffer from persistent low incomes, high poverty rates, high unemployment levels, youth out-migration, and rapidly aging populations.

We are not alone: rural Maine shares these adverse trends and conditions with the other northeastern states and, indeed, much of rural America. Absent any coherent national strategy for distressed rural regions, one might expect the State to fill the gap. Yet Maine has never pursued a coherent a rural development strategy of its own. MECEP's response is an initiative we call *Spreading Prosperity to All of Maine*, focusing primarily on the rim counties. One challenge has been to identify and frame strategies for economic sectors that show the greatest potential to lead rural regions toward sustainable prosperity. Tourism has four critical attributes of such a lead sector:

- **Critical Mass:** Tourism is big. It directly generates over ten percent of rim county employment and about eight percent of income. Adding reasonable estimates of tourism's indirect (*multiplier*) effects, it accounts for one in seven rim county jobs.
- **Growth Potential:** With a few exceptions, rural Maine's natural attractions and gateway towns have substantial underutilized supply capacity. On the demand side, our nature, culture and heritage have the potential to attract significantly more visitors, especially high-spending *experiential tourists*. Although the conditions for sustainable tourism growth are promising, however, it will not happen automatically through "the magic of the market."
- **Export Revenues:** Rural tourism is an export sector in the classic sense. Visitors "from away" bring in money that they spend on the region's goods and services. Tourism, of course, is a special kind of export. Instead of producing a commodity, like paper, and shipping it to the world, we encourage "the world" to visit our back yard.



How to create
the "buzz" of
a world-class
destination

• **Influence on Community Vitality:** Large numbers of visitors sharing our backyard affect host communities' vitality and residents' quality of life – for better or for worse. In distressed rural towns, beneficial community impacts include increased variety and quality of commercial services, livelier cultural life, larger school enrollments, and greater government revenues. There are also potential downside effects, such as downtown congestion, loss of affordable housing, restricted access to recreational facilities, and “culture clash.” The strategic challenge is to maximize tourism's benefits while managing growth to minimize downside impacts.

World Class Ambitions – Modest Assets

Interior Maine's tourism tradition extends back beyond H. D. Thoreau's *Maine Woods* sojourns in the mid-19th century. In its heyday at the turn of the 20th century, the Moosehead Lake region alone had twenty resort hotels accessed by three rail lines. Although the Great Depression and automobile touring ended that golden age, the post-WWII decades were marked by renewed tourism growth. The traditional mix of outdoor adventures and hospitality services was supplemented by new attractions, such as alpine skiing, snowmobiling, white water rafting, and fall “leaf peeping.”

In the face of rural Maine's serious economic challenges, Maine's Governor and Legislature have accorded tourism an unprecedented level of priority in the loose collection of programs that pass for a rural development policy. Their ambition is captured in a 2005 Maine State Planning Office statement:

“The goal....is to provide Maine visitors with....opportunities to

experience the state's *world-class* natural, historical and cultural resources.” (Italics added)

In pursuit of “world-class,” the State has recently launched numerous tourism ventures, ranging from the Maine Nature Tourism Initiative (MNTI), to a university Center for Tourism Research and Outreach, increased support for cultural heritage trails, and the addition of 500,000 more acres of protected lands. Maine's five rural tourism regions (numbered 1 to 5 in the map below) have their own development ambitions and plans.

the Piscataquis County Waterfall Trail, the Maine Ice Age Trail, and the fast-growing all-terrain vehicle trail network. Several major resort developments and upgrades are also in the works. Most widely publicized are Plum Creek Timber's proposed Big Moose Mountain and Lily Bay resorts, core features of its Moosehead Lake Concept Plan.

Many of these ventures show promise. However, most are piecemeal, geographically scattered, and too small to create the “buzz” of a world-class destination. As the State's tourism consultants put it,

That holds true for sporting heritage activities like fishing, hunting and camping as well as newer ones like skiing, snowmobiling and rafting.

Second, competing destinations are promoting their own tourism with vigor and sophistication. In this era of Internet bookings and widespread international travel, the Maine Woods competes for visitors not only with nearby rivals, such as the Adirondacks and White Mountains, but also with world-renowned destinations like Canada's Rockies and Norway's fjord country. Further, Maine's cultural and heritage attractions are modest compared with competing Northeast destinations, such as the Hudson and Lake Champlain valleys. In sum, the Maine Woods' attractions *may* have world-class potential, but “we're not there yet.” The region must re-invent itself as tourist destination and re-conceive its brand image to meet 21st century conditions.

A third vulnerability looms. Gasoline above \$4.00 per gallon creates special problems for a comparatively remote “drive-to” destination. Over 90% of Maine Woods tourists travel by personal vehicle; and two important sub-sectors – snowmobiling and ATVing – are becoming costly.

The Need for a Big Push

We are convinced that a “big push” is imperative if tourism is to play a lead role in revitalizing Maine's rural economy and communities. Given stagnation in many traditional recreation activities, changing tourist demographics and demand patterns, sophisticated initiatives by competing destinations, and escalating fuel prices, the piecemeal initiatives are not likely to reverse the region's declining market share. They are even less likely to capture the imagination of affluent, discriminating tourists from



The private and non-profit sectors, often have also been innovating. Theme-based recreational trails have proliferated in rural Maine. A sampling illustrates their range: the four-state Northern Forest Canoe Trail, the Kennebec-Chaudière International Heritage Corridor, the Maine Birding Trail, the 180-mile Maine Huts and Trails, the Maine Fiber Arts Trail,

“The nature-based and cultural and historic offerings in the [MNTI] pilot regions do not function as any sort of thematic group and are largely just a disconnected collection of sites.”

Moreover, the state's world-class tourism ambition confronts three sobering realities. First, several mainstays of outdoor recreation face stagnant or declining trends.

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far afield, as the “world-class” designation implies.

The big push strategy we propose has three core components. First, the Maine Woods’ widely dispersed mountains, lakes, wild rivers, trails and other natural attractions must be more effectively woven together into a region-wide whole, renowned for outstanding and varied recreational experiences. Second, cultural amenities, broadly defined, must be upgraded, networked and integrated with outdoor recreation to shape compelling itineraries. Third, tourism service quality needs to reach a standard of excellence that is widely recognized by quality-conscious tour arrangers and travelers. That is also the key to creating more livable-wage tourism jobs.

The ten million-acre Maine Woods is the largest contiguous forest east of the Mississippi. In addition to scores of lesser attractions treasured by Mainers, it contains several regionally and nationally recognized destinations: the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail on Mt. Katahdin, the Allagash Wilderness Waterway, Moosehead Lake and the 1500 mile ITS snowmobile trail network. Recent public and NGO purchases of land and conservation easements have brought the total area of protected lands to more than 1.5 million acres. Building on these assets, we believe it is possible to shape a world-class Maine Woods destination, where the whole is greater than the sum of many not-quite world-class parts.

A strategy for creating a Great Maine Woods Recreation Area is described in detail in MECEP’s 2007 report. Here we set out some core components:

- Create an “emerald necklace” of prime recreation lands by making several additional key acquisitions.

- Expand and upgrade “green infrastructures,” such as scenic byways, visitor centers, trails, signage and parking areas.

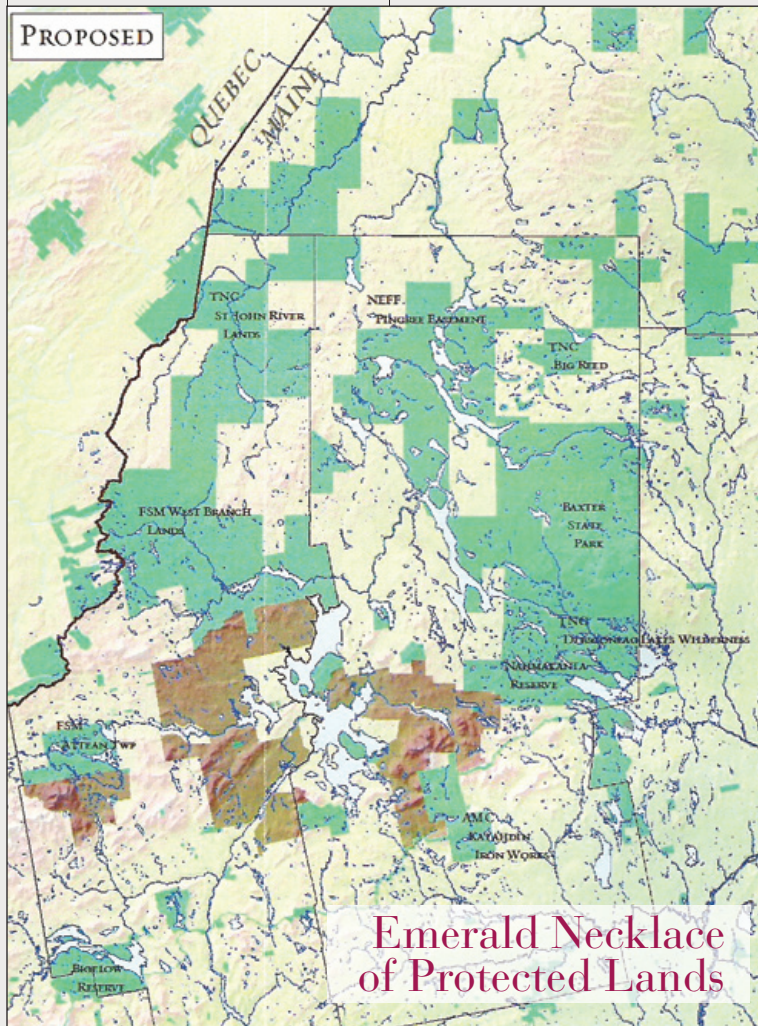
- Develop a “twin destination” brand, with the Great Maine Woods as the inland component and world renowned Acadia National Park (with its 2.2 million annual visitors) as the coastal component. Bangor, with its international airport and rail links to the north, would serve as a hub.

from Maine’s international airports and coastal tourism centers to interior gateways like Bethel, Rangeley, and Greenville. A variety of smaller land- and water-based “people movers” will be needed facilitate convenient, energy-efficient travel among the region’s natural and cultural attractions. And, before long, we will need to re-establish excursion train service to the Maine Woods.

the raw material to shape an appealing cultural heritage destination: Wabanaki lore and crafts, Arnold’s ill-fated Revolutionary War expedition, Thoreau’s wilderness sojourns, stories and places surrounding the forest industry (Paul Bunyan’s birthplace, river drives, logging camps, etc.), and a mingling of Franco- and Anglo-American cultures. The region is dotted with potentially charming 19th-century farm and mill towns. An art, crafts and culinary revival is already well underway.

Despite efforts to weave cultural attractions together into themed trails, like the Maine Fiber Arts Trail and Kennebec Chaudière International Heritage Corridor, sites tend to be isolated and scattered thinly across the vast Northern Forest landscape. Further, in terms of quality and sophistication, many are “not ready for prime time.”

An ambitious proposal is to ratchet up the variety, quality and visibility of cultural and heritage offerings by seeking Congressional designation of a Maine Woods National Heritage Area. Perhaps more important than the technical and financial assistance NHA designation would bring, the National Park Service logo is like “the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval” in tourism marketing. Political obstacles will have to be overcome before a campaign to seek NHA status can be formally launched. Rural Mainers are generally wary about Federal involvement and there is a mistaken conviction among some opponents that NHA designation means Federal land use regulation. A newly formed Maine Woods Consortium is taking first steps toward a coherent heritage tourism strategy – and possibly National Heritage Area designation down the road.



**Emerald Necklace
of Protected Lands**

The Nature Conservancy

Space allows just a brief mention of major transportation investments that are critical if the Great Maine Woods destination is to be sustainable. We do not expect a long-term trend reversal in gas prices. Within the next few years it will be crucial to establish regular luxury motor coach service

Cultural Heritage

Realistically, what the Maine Woods currently offers tourists in the way of historic landmarks, arts, crafts and events pales in comparison to nearby destinations like Vermont’s Champlain region or New York’s Hudson Valley. Nonetheless, the region possesses

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Quality Jobs

Using tourism to help revitalize the rural economy and spread prosperity requires that tourism service providers offer not just more jobs but more livable wage career opportunities. At present, fewer than half of tourism jobs pay a livable wage and even fewer offer health benefits. We know that quality jobs are possible, because many best practice guide services, outfitters, sporting camps, hotels and restaurants already offer them.

Making the Maine Woods a world-class destination requires that hundreds more tourism businesses, most very small, upgrade their service quality. But outstanding customer service requires a high level of employee skill and, just as important, employees' dedication to excellent customer service. The foundation of a win-win strategy is top quality service, leading both to greater profitability and better employee compensation and satisfaction. As a side benefit, more quality jobs would reduce tourism's chronic employee recruitment problem and high labor turnover. MECEP's 2007 report explores several models of small business outreach and

frontline worker training that have had success in Vermont, Minnesota and here in Maine.

A market-vetted quality label can be a powerful tool for branding a destination as world-class. There is growing interest in creating a distinctive Maine quality label, giving highly motivated tourism businesses the economic incentive and the technical assistance they need to move up to best industry practices. Indeed, the Maine Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) recently introduced *Environmental Leader* label for lodgings and restaurants has so far certified over 80 lodgings and twenty restaurants, with easy-to-meet standards. The Maine Office of Tourism's (MOT) 2008 *Strategic Five Year Plan* also calls for "Establishment of a tourism provider rating system." Government support is certainly crucial, however my study of Sweden's ecotourism label – "Nature's Best" – strongly suggests a different approach from those adopted by DEP and MOT. Sweden's process was initiated, led and ultimately "owned" by a coalition of tourism trade associations, exemplary tourism businesses, and conservation organizations.

In Sweden's private-NGO partnership, government agencies play a supportive rather than directive role. This bottom-up approach is being explored in northern Maine by a new organization, Maine Woods Rural Destination Tourism. "Outdoor sporting heritage" is the focus of its quality branding initiative.

Over the past five years an unprecedented and very encouraging array of tourism initiatives has been launched in Maine's Northern Forest region. It may not be realistic to expect the rim county destinations to attain a truly world-class reputation. Nonetheless, we are convinced that – if Maine puts its resources here – tourism has great potential to create quality livelihoods and sustain vital rural communities.

About the Author

David Vail teaches economics and environmental studies at Bowdoin College and is a founding board member of MECEP. He recently advised the Governor's Council on Maine's Quality of Place and serves on the advisory committee to the University of Maine's Center for Tourism Research and Outreach.

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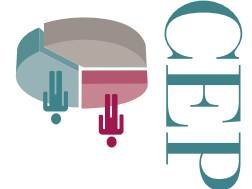
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