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Adding a New Leg to the Economic Stool in Maine's North Woods

By Roger Milliken Jr.

Today in the Maine Woods the pace is accelerating towards an unknown future as mills close and loggers park their machinery. Land has changed hands from long-term owners who routinely provided public benefits as part of the social contract to investors who seek to monetize every asset. When the Northern Forest Lands Council was meeting in the early 1990s, its focus was on preserving the existing pattern of ownership and use. That pattern is increasingly unraveling, and I have been wrestling recently both as a forest manager and as a conservationist with what kind of future we can build for our forest-based communities.

I suggest that our goal should be to create a future in which people can continue their connection to the lands that have supported them for generations, one that builds on existing traditions and also provides new opportunities for forest-based employment.

From my service on the Northern Forest Lands Council and through my friendship with Steve Blackmer, founder of the Northern Forest Center, I understand that these issues permeate the Northern Forest region. However, since my experience is Maine-based, I write from that perspective and invite others elsewhere to consider these ideas based on the lands and traditions they know best.

While not sanguine, I am hopeful that sustainable management of Maine's forests can continue to support a forest products industry with high-paying, skilled jobs. Of course, continuing advances in productivity means there will be fewer of these jobs, but ideally their high wages, good benefits, and year-round employment will continue to provide the foundation for local communities.

Manufacturing jobs in our region and elsewhere are being eroded by globalization's race to the bottom, where market forces are unleashed to produce goods in countries with the lowest wages and the scantest protection of ecological values. We need to do all we can to fight these short-sighted economic policies while we work to develop and protect an economy based on both the sustainable management of resources and living wages. There is no forested area better poised to supply a sustainable industry than northern New England, with its skilled (and increasingly sophisticated—both economically and ecologically) workforce and increasing percentage of green-certified forestlands.

But the forest products economy will no longer be able to offer jobs to the majority of residents of the region. We need an additional economic base, one that does not supplant existing traditions but builds on them. As the manager of 100,000 acres in northern Washington County, I have been pondering what my company can do as a landowner to support local communities, which face the closure of local mills and the reduction through liquidation harvesting of thousands of acres on which timber can be harvested. Also, as a board member of the Maine chapter of The Nature Conservancy, I have been actively involved in discussions of what TNC can do as a new landowner—and economic player—in the Katahdin region.

Fortunately, I have had the opportunity to participate recently in several guided, nature-based trips. These have opened my eyes to the potential for a world-class tourism business in this region. It would draw on the innate qualities of the Maine Woods and its rural inhabitants, and introduce a relatively affluent clientele to the natural beauty and human cultures of the Maine Woods without diminishing either. I believe it can actually enhance both.

Let me first expand on my recent experiences as an eco-tourist.

During a recent summer I spent two weeks rafting the Colorado River with my son in the final days before his enrollment in college. I was deeply impressed by the quality of experience provided by the rafting company (AzRA). The trip involved six guides and 22 "guests." In addition to being master boatmen and women, the guides introduced us to the history, prehistory and natural history of the region, regaling us with information about Anasazi ruins, current Native American uses (such as the collection of ceremonial salt by the Hopi along the river bank), and 1.5 billion years of geological activity—all this while keeping us well fed and safe as we made the exciting 220-mile passage down the river.

The guides also took great care to introduce us to a leave-no-trace camping ethic that protects and enhances the experience. Twenty-two thousand people a year boat through the Canyon, yet when we landed at each camp site, it was if we were the first people to use that sandy beach. There was no trash in evidence—not even a strand of dental floss! Human waste is carried out in a simple but elegant system of portable toilets, called "groovers" to memorialize the days when ammo cans without seats were the standard. No wood fires are kindled anywhere, and when the guides use charcoal, they protect the ground with

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metal fire pans and likewise haul out all coals and ash. The result is an experience of beauty and stewardship, as the guests become partners in protecting this world-class resource.

Compare this with your typical experience in the Maine Woods: You enter a camping spot. A rickety outhouse offers a less than pleasant experience and a decidedly musty smell. Along trails—and even back from the tent sites—you encounter wads of toilet paper melting into the ground. Trees are scarred by firewood seekers. Rings of charred stones are more numerous than necessary, and more often than not littered with foil, bottles, and cigarette butts. The guides are amiable, highly competent outdoorsmen, but not likely to say much to open your eyes to the rich natural dynamics that surround you.

On the Colorado River, I learned more geology than I did in college. We had conversations about the water-flow regimen created by the Glen Canyon dam: how the dam's control of catastrophic floods also prevents the replenishment of beaches, which are now gradually eroding. Yet, those same flow-taming regulations now provide a dependable corridor of water and plant life for migrating birds. It left one pondering the question, now that nature has adapted to our changes, what are the risks to migration if we were to suddenly return to an unmanaged river? (It reminds me of Stewart Brand's dictum that, since we are now acting like gods, we might as well get good at it. Easier said than done!)

Over the course of two weeks, I was renewed by the rhythm of life on the river, inspired by awesome water-carved rocks and wind-shaped towers, and I also left better informed about ecological function and the trade-offs between human management and wilderness.

In 2003, I traveled to Costa Rica for The Nature Conservancy's annual meeting. I had the privilege of spending two days near the 22-mile beach that serves as laying and incubation grounds for Caribbean green turtles. These huge (175-pound) creatures have been returning to such beaches to lay their eggs since before the time of the dinosaurs. Here too, our guides were engaging and incredibly well informed about the plants, birds, and animals we encountered. One night, as light rain fell, they led us with red-lensed flashlights onto the ancestral beaches, coaching us in low voices on how best to witness a turtle without disrupting her ancient rhythms.

I watched, entranced, as one dropped dozens of shiny, golf-ball-sized eggs into a pail-sized hole she had dug. After depositing nearly a hundred, she dug another turtle-sized pit ahead of her. I jumped back when I felt water splashing onto my calves, but it turned out to be sand hurled by her powerful front flippers as she filled and disguised the nest with fresh sand. She rested then as the mist turned to light rain, then turned and pointed her heavy body seaward. Thus began the final phase. She heaved her body forward once, twice, three times then rested. Her breathing was heavy, her face ancient, unblinking. She rallied for another few heaves, her heavy body scraping across the sand, then rested, then more heaves and more rest until 15 minutes later she reached the shore. There she stopped on the hard, wet sand till a wave washed over her—and she was gone, back to the ocean and her community of turtles waiting just beyond the shore break.

Here in Tortuguero, a single human generation beyond the days of shortsighted exploitation of these ancient ones for meat and eggs, the village had shifted the base of its economy from turtle harvest to turtle protection. The lodges where we stayed catered to ecotourists, and everywhere we turned there was more information about the natural world. Even the taxi driver who took me to the airport in San Jose deepened my understanding of the country's topography and ecology!

Finally, in the fall of 2007, I spent two nights on First Debsconeag Lake, where I and two others were treated to a wonderful, "catered camping" experience. I canoed out late one afternoon into the Debsconeag Deadwater to get a glimpse of Katahdin. As the light dimmed to rose and lavender, a huge moon rose above the forests on the eastern shore. To the north, the mountain filled the sky, mute and powerful. Paddling upstream around an island, we crossed into shallow water where a moose grazed unconcerned. Stillness descended, punctuated by water dripping from our paddles and the muzzle of the moose as he feasted. This moment rivaled the beauty and awe of any experience in either Costa Rica or the Grand Canyon.

And yet, as a whole, the trip paled in comparison. Though the guides were skilled, the food delicious, and the equipment first rate, the experience did nothing to deepen my understanding of the largest intact ecosystem east of the Mississippi.

This lack of context is especially surprising given that these guides—and most Mainers who make their living in the woods—have an innate knowledge of the human and natural dynamics of the forest. Through a life of cutting pulp or hunting, fishing, and snowmobiling, they know first hand the cycles of insects that bedevil our springs and summers and those that cause the trout to rise. As hunters and canoeists they have observed close-up the habits of ducks and partridge, and moose, deer, and bear.

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They may have even tried for a ride on a moose's back. As trappers, snowmobilers, or timber cruisers, they have seen the winter tracks of fisher and snow slides of otters. As pulp cutters, they know which trees pioneer sunlit openings, which prefer the deep shade of older groves. What's more, they know where the trees on the logging trucks go, and how they make their way into the handles of shovels, the 2x6's of houses, the pages of the *New York Times*. All this knowledge is precious, rare—and marketable.

How then do we draw on the resources of the Maine Woods and the resourcefulness of her people to add another leg to northern Maine's economic stool? Perhaps even more important, how can we turn this innate understanding and these rural skills (long degraded as inferior to intellectual, urban knowledge) and employ them for the assets they are?

A Millinocket resident interviewed one summer said of The Nature Conservancy: "These folks speak of nature as something to get back to. For us, it's all we've ever had!" I imagine a somewhat defiant, slightly hang-dog attitude accompanied this wry remark. Yet turned inside out, it contains a key to the future. Nature may be all the old time residents of Dover and Millinocket ever had, but it's also true that thousands to the south and west long to—if not "get back" to—at least taste this way of life. Most Americans, especially those with a conservation bent, hunger for both the experience of nature and knowledge about our place in it. Whether by their choice or not, the residents of northern Maine have never lost that connection, and they have the knowledge, the humor, the stories, and therefore the ability to weave visitors back into the web of life.

And increasing numbers of people long to reconnect to that birthright. Like me, those visitors will return to their lives refreshed, informed, and a little more humble about our place in the scheme of things. They will leave behind money in the pockets and cash registers of rural Maine communities. In their heartfelt appreciation, they will reflect back to local residents the value of an honest life led in contact with the elements. And perhaps, with enough such exchanges over time, the hang-dog attitude will begin to morph into one of quiet pride in a life lived close to the essence, one that embodies our birthright as citizens of the natural world.

So, how do we create a guided experience that vaults a trip to the Maine Woods from its traditional, accommodative approach into a world-class experience? A few ideas follow. I offer them as starting points for consideration.

As hinted above, experienced guides, woodsmen and women could define and embrace our own Maine-specific "leave no trace" camping ethics (e.g., guidelines for fires, protocols for firewood, how best to handle human waste, how much to clear campsites). Outdoor practitioners from other regions (for example, the National Outdoor Leadership School, Grand Canyon Guides Association) could provide additional perspective to local experts such as Chewonki and Hurricane Island Outward Bound.

The Nature Conservancy could use its new lands south of Baxter as an incubator for this ethic, giving preference to outfitters and guides who embrace new guidelines aimed at blending safety, hygiene, aesthetics, and comfort.

A curriculum could be developed and training offered in Maine Woods' lore, and perhaps support a "nature guide" specialty under in the Maine Guide program. I envision some sort of core curriculum with continuing education components. This could be part of the Maine Guide School proposed for Millinocket. Potential elements might include:

Natural history: knowledge of plants and animals, their habitats, needs, and interactions. Judging from my fellow travelers on recent trips, developing knowledge of bird species and songs is a key skill to attract visitors, and, of course, the Maine Woods is home to boreal species not seen in states to the south.

Natural science: be it knowledge of the stars that are so vivid on a cold night to the geologic forces, glacial and otherwise, that create features from Katahdin's Knife Edge to huge boulders on the lakeshore, to the local wetland.

Cycles of the forest: which trees grow where. The legacy of lands cleared for farming. The differences between a natural forest and a managed one. How good forest management can enhance the health and diversity of a forest, how exploitative cutting diminishes it. The history of clearcutting (and its regulation) in Maine.

Products from the woods: timber, certified flooring, dowels, drumsticks, paintbrush handles, Christmas trees and wreaths, maple syrup, newsprint and writing paper, even currency stock. How products visitors use every day start out in the forests of Maine. How logging is part of a cycle that is fueled by their subscription to the local paper (and how, if they live in the Northeast, their recycled paper makes it back to Millinocket), by their use of mouse traps, wooden-handled tools, and wooden cabinets.

Early history: knowledge of Native American place names and their meaning, the ancient network of river systems and portages, ancient myths, and legends. The continuing presence of four tribes in Maine and the renewal of traditions such as the annual trek by Penobscot Indians to

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Katahdin. Early contact with Europeans. Arnold's march to Quebec. Thoreau's visit.

Modern history and the discovery of the Maine Woods by timber barons and "sports": the development of sawmills and papermills (carving Millinocket out of the wilderness, the founding of International Paper). Rerouting Maine rivers to drive pulp and why four-foot logs are still seen on stream bottoms everywhere. The rise of the "Maine sport" tradition and icons such as Fly Rod Crosby and Leon L. Bean. Donny Fendler's ordeal on Katahdin. The rise of rafting and snowmobiling. The end of river driving and the fight over Big A.

Conservation challenges: the role of ecological reserves and well-managed forests. Recent conservation deals. The history of Percival Baxter and the creation of the Baxter State Park. The Allagash Wilderness Waterway. Maine's current pre-eminence in the world of working-forest conservation easements and certified forestry. Issues related to the proposed national park.

Of course, as I mentioned earlier, many residents already know most if not all of this information. We need to train ourselves to take this innate knowledge, augment it if necessary, and learn to communicate it easily and well to those who have never been here before. Or, for repeat visitors, to open their eyes further to the intricate interactions among people, animals, and plants of this place.

Those are the skills I benefited from in the Grand Canyon and at Tortuguero. They offer the opportunity to elevate a camping trip in the Maine Woods to a hugely rewarding and educational experience. It promises to expand the woods-based recreation economy beyond traditional hunting, fishing, snowmobiling, hiking, and rafting with a new offering that would appeal to a different—and sizeable—clientele. It's not either-or, either. This could be an add-on to another trip. A couple might bring their family rafting for a weekend, then tag on a moose-watching trip with a naturalist, for example. And while I have focused on the camping-based experience here, there are related opportunities for lodge and hotel proprietors as well.

Create community centers in key locations (e.g., Jackman, Greenville, Millinocket, Grand Lake Stream). I suggested a curriculum above, but, of course, most of this information has been handed down over the years through stories told around a campfire or over a woodstove: tales of previous hunts, stories of the ordeal of driving logs down ice-swollen rivers, anecdotes of the first settlers. Demonstrate and teach outdoor cooking skills from carving hookaroons to banking a fire. Much of this is at risk of being bulldozed by the great leveler, TV entertainment.

The creation of one, or several, Maine Woods Community Centers dedicated to celebrating this history and lore would be a natural component to the initiative outlined above. For example, Greenville, at one end of the Appalachian's Trail's 100-mile Wilderness, might have a center based on sporting and recreational traditions, while Millinocket at the other, could create one based around woods work, forestry, hydropower, Baxter State Park, and Katahdin, the northern terminus to the trail.

Steve Blackmer's Northern Forest Center with its focus on the human culture in the Northern Forest would be a key ally here. Likely, the most successful effort would grow out of a convening of local residents to identify the stories, skills, and cultural history that is most important to them. Oral history and artifacts could be collected. (Draw on collections such as Great Northern's photos and maps, and the resources of the Maine Folklife Center.) As momentum grows, an actual center could be built (or renovated) for the community, which could then develop into a museum, a resource for local residents and a magnet for visitors. Such centers could encourage hikers or snowmobilers to stay longer, attracted by the ability to see photographs of the river driving days, or detailed pictures of the ruby-crowned kinglets that they had heard daily but never seen up close. Such centers could grow to be destinations along a Northern Forest Auto (Snowmobile) Trail.

Expand existing traditions to add ecotourist features. Raft companies could add a land-based component focused on nearby wildlife habitats. Snowmobile and cross-country-skiing outfitters could offer winter ecology trips, perhaps by offering overnights to camps like those established by Great Northern on its lands. Create opportunities for through hikers to experience a bean hole supper, for a day climber of Katahdin to stay longer for a canoe tour of a local deadwater for moose watching, punctuated by a traditional shore dinner or logging camp breakfast cooked in a huge skillet over an open fire with lumberman's coffee to boot.

Link up forest landowners with local lodging establishments to create programs for guests that highlight the interactions of forestry and wildlife habitat, perhaps offering in-woods lodging (tents, yurts, or cabins) and contact with a forester (or retired woods worker) as part of the experience.

Create, coordinate, and publicize workshops in local crafts, for example, wreath-making, balsam pillow construction, mince-meat cookery, herbal remedies, traditional camping skills, berry collecting and jam or pie making, canoe poling,

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paddle making, moose riding (just kidding!). We could think of this as "everyone's a guide."

Work with local mills to provide opportunities to visit their operations. Scheduling sawmill tours when the machines are shut down for lunch could provide safe opportunities for interested visitors. Papermill tours that take advantage of idled machines to help visitors understand exactly how slurry becomes paper on the wire would go a long way toward making a tour of a mill more user friendly. The companies themselves need not organize these; retired workers could work in concert with local mills to discover a compatible way to create these opportunities.

We have the opportunity to elevate a camping trip in the Maine Woods to a hugely entertaining, inspiring, and educational experience. This would not replace the woods-based recreation economy based on hunting, fishing, snowmobiling, hiking, and rafting. It could, however, open the doors to a new clientele, which would inevitably enrich the traditional experiences as well.

These are just a few ideas to contribute to a conversation that is gathering momentum. A single vision animates them all—growing Maine's woods economy by capitalizing on the connection between rural communities and the lands that have supported them for generations. Adding a new leg to the economic stool, one that celebrates this connection and understanding while protecting the lands and natural features in which they grew. And finally, affirming the wealth we have in our natural heritage, rebuilding a sense of pride and privilege among those living in the rural parts of the state, and changing a little-recognized asset (intimate knowledge of place) into a marketable skill.

The experiences I enjoyed outside of Maine recently had at their core my introduction to a new region by people who knew it intimately, loved it, and could convey that knowledge and enthusiasm to me and other visitors. I found that the time spent camping in a beautiful natural place with its inherent relaxation and renewal is more rewarding when understanding is developed as well. The visitor leaves refreshed, renewed, and with a deeper understanding of nature and our place in it. And the guide, too, turns toward home tired but re-exhilarated by the land she loves, returns to her family knowing more clearly the blessing offered by a life lived in a place unvexed by traffic jams, where you know your neighbors, and together you know your place in a region dominated by timeless natural cycles. And what's more, she and her neighbors have the ability to continue to live there, deepening her own connection as she serves as an ambassador from that special place to people who long to know it better.

That's the vision that I hope we can make manifest. We need to build a region-wide conversation about how best to achieve this potential for our treasured Maine Woods and the people who make their home there.

Roger Milliken Jr. is president of the Baskahegan Company, which owns and manages 100,000 acres of forestland in eastern Maine and is a recognized leader in Maine's forest products industry. He currently serves as a director of The Nature Conservancy and a trustee of the Conservancy's Maine chapter, chairs the advisory board of the Manomet Forest Conservation Program, is an advisor to the Open Space Institute's Northern Forest Protection Fund, a past president of the Maine Forest Products Council, and served on the board of the Land for Maine's Future program for nine years.