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## Early Conservation Programs and the Development of the vacation industry in Maine, 1865-1900

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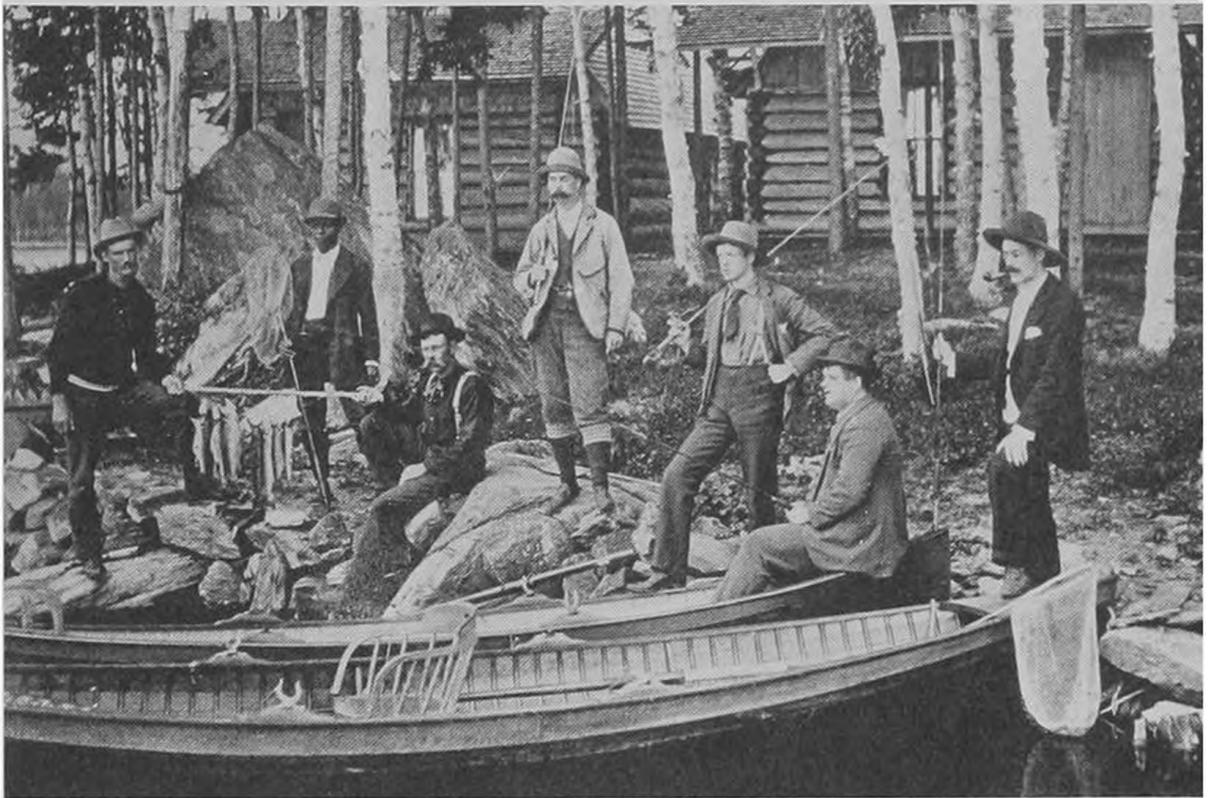
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EARLY CONSERVATION PROGRAMS  
AND  
THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE VACATION INDUSTRY  
IN MAINE, 1865-1900

Historians have traced the roots of the conservation movement in the last half of the nineteenth century in the writings of men such as George Perkins Marsh, John Wesley Powell, Bernhard Fernow, and Gifford Pinchot. They have detailed the beginning of federal conservation efforts in such steps as the establishment of the Yellowstone Park and the creation of the Geological Survey. But with a few exceptions they have neglected early state conservation programs that paralleled and complemented federal measures. Maine's experience with early policies designed to protect resources is typical of many state government programs, and it illustrates the important roles state governments played in establishing foundations for the American conservation movement.<sup>1</sup> This article examines the relationship between the development of the vacation industry and conservation programs of the State of Maine.

By the 1850s Maine's fish, game, and forests were threatened with irreparable destruction by lumbermen, farmers, market hunters, and commercial fishermen who harvested these resources for direct use or sale. Unbridled exploitation of natural resources was as characteristic of Maine's economy as it was of the nation's economy as a whole, and the idea that some restraints ought to be imposed on the exploiters to conserve or sustain the yield of these resources did not begin to take hold until after the Civil War. Popular sentiment for protecting fish, game, and forests in Maine was reinforced in the postwar decades by the development of the vacation industry.



Anglers (left) display one of Maine's best-known tourist attractions: a string of Rangeley Lakes trout. Although game fish were not the earliest concern of state officials, the recreational potential of this resource quickly became the focus of Maine's conservation efforts. (*Maine and its Scenic Gems* [1987])

With the establishment of the Commissioners of Fisheries in 1867, Maine became the sixth state in the nation to set up a special governmental body to supervise the use of its fresh and salt water fisheries.<sup>2</sup> For the first ten years of the commission's existence, it was chiefly interested in protecting the fisheries as a source of food. Maine's lakes and rivers did attract some sport fishermen, but the commission did not regard this as a fact of primary importance. Nevertheless, the commission collected popular opinions regarding the decline of important inland fish species, and gradually its interest was focused on preserving and propagating this resource, which was so important to local subsistence and recreational habits. The need for good management was emphasized by reports that trout and salmon were "rapidly becoming scarce." Trout appeared to have declined in numbers by half in Moosehead Lake since 1857, the

commissioners reported in 1867, and a similar situation existed in most of the other large lakes and rivers in the state. The main causes for the decline were thought to be overfishing, especially during the spawning season, the indiscriminate construction of dams without fishways, and the introduction of sawdust pollution into waterways.<sup>3</sup>

The first report of the commissioners outlined a four-point program to protect Maine's fisheries. It recommended the construction of fishways in strategically located dams, the control of pollution, enactment of laws against excessive fishing, and the establishment of a regular program of fish propagation.<sup>4</sup> All these recommendations were eventually carried out, but the commissioners were seldom completely satisfied with the legislation passed, the monies appropriated to implement programs, or the degree of public compliance with the protective laws.

The most interesting and important aspect of the commission's mission was fish propagation and stocking. Such endeavors were in their infancy in the United States in the late 1860s, yet the commission reported in 1867 that it had collected a "mass of information" on the matter.<sup>5</sup> The commission began experimenting with two batches of whitefish eggs which had been shipped from Detroit. Unfortunately few of the eggs survived the trip. The commission also received several thousand salmon eggs from New Hampshire. Both types of eggs were sent to Manchester, where makeshift facilities were set up to handle them. However, only a few of the eggs hatched.<sup>6</sup>

In the following years, the commission's experiments were supplemented by the efforts of private individuals and groups primarily, if not exclusively concerned with the recreational value of inland fish. The Oquossoc Angling Association, an organization of wealthy out-of-state sportsmen, worked to preserve fishing in the Rangeley Lakes. In 1868 the commission farmed out 800 trout and salmon eggs to David C. Pottle of Alna who had several small spring-fed ponds in which to hatch them.<sup>7</sup> These efforts were imitated in subsequent years by other clubs and persons interested in conserving sport fishing. In its



Unrestricted fishing for markets, subsistence, and recreation in the first half of the nineteenth century reduced fish populations drastically. A propagation effort launched in the late 1860s helped restore certain species and make possible catches like this handsome string of trout, taken on Ragged Stream in 1894. (John W. G. Dunn Collection, Maine Historical Society)

early days the commission included such private help in its planning on the theory that it was “better to give full scope to private and associated effort, and for the State to undertake only that which in the nature of the case cannot be done by individuals or associations.”<sup>8</sup>

**T**he commission's reluctance to see the state deeply involved in propagation and stocking was overcome, to some degree, by the offer of federal aid. The commission had great success in gathering salmon eggs at Bucksport in 1871, and in the following year made arrangements for a permanent facility nearby. The U. S. Commissioner of Fisheries offered financial aid and promised that in the future the federal government would assume all expenses for the eggs, which would be distributed to other states for stocking rivers.<sup>9</sup> In 1873 the Maine

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commission responded to the encouragement offered by the federal government by establishing a hatchery at Sebec similar to the Federal facility, completed the previous year. The Sebec hatchery was built in cooperation with the other New England state fisheries commissions and the United States commission. Maine commissioners hoped that with the new hatchery all six New England states would be assured an adequate supply of good quality stock at moderate expense. Maine's own stocking program was well launched by this time with 300,000 embryos set in the Penobscot and Androscoggin rivers.<sup>10</sup>

By the end of the decade, the commission had received encouraging reports that its stocking efforts were succeeding. A letter from a vacationer, for example, recalled a ten-day journey on the East Branch of the Penobscot in 1857. At that time he had seen few fish and taken none. A farmer, he remembered, had stretched a net across the river and caught one or two salmon a week, but eventually gave up the practice for lack of fish. In contrast, the river at the same time of the year in 1879 was full of salmon, the vacationer reported. "It was a very striking proof to me of the complete success of your progress of restocking our rivers with salmon, as these salmon are all about the same size, and are undoubtedly the same salmon that were hatched artificially and put into the east branch four or five years ago by the Department of Fisheries."<sup>11</sup>

The commission's program had reversed the trend toward the extinction of salmon and trout. When it was established in 1867, the commission had been interested primarily in the production of food and commercial fish; any benefits to sportsmen were only incidental. In 1877, in the earliest reference in any state document to the vacation industry as an important economic asset, the commission reported "that the inland fisheries of Maine have become so valuable a resource of the State, so important an item in the receipts of our routes of travel, our hotels and all places of summer resort, it is time that this crop should be fostered and increased ...."<sup>12</sup> The four-point program of the commission, with emphasis on propagation



By 1877 Maine state officials recognized the economic importance of the growing vacation industry and reported that protection and propagation of game fish was a vital concern for the state. Above, "sports" relax at the turn-of-the-century Sandy Point Camp. (Dunn Collection)

and protection, probably saved sport fishing in Maine, even though that was not its original intention. The program was crucial to Maine's burgeoning tourist industry. Delay in recognizing the need for fish conservation might very well have damaged the lakes and streams severely enough to discourage inland tourism for decades.

**M**aine's moose, deer, caribou, and other forms of game were in even greater danger of extinction than were salmon and trout. Market hunters, pelt hunters, and natives who were accustomed to hunt at will generally ignored the early game laws. Evasion was easy for there was no effective enforcement system. A growing influx of visiting sport hunters only aggravated a bad situation. By the late 1870s the general impression in the state was that most types of game were sharply declining in numbers.

In an effort to save the state's game, the Legislature in 1880 made enforcement of the game laws the responsibility of the commissioner of fisheries.<sup>13</sup> Another major step was taken in 1883 when the old hodge-podge of game laws was revised and a new code passed by the Legislature. These more stringent laws — "they may almost be termed war measures," reported the commission — were enacted "to save the remnant of the game ... both fish, fur and feather, from utter annihilation by poachers and market hunters, from home and abroad."<sup>14</sup> The commission now had a sharper tool with which to work on the problem. The significance attached to the new laws can be seen in one newspaper's assessment that "the last legislature accomplished more towards making this State a grand summer resort than has been done before for many years."<sup>15</sup>

Passing these laws was one thing; enforcing them was another. Although in the long run the commission was successful in preserving the state's game from destruction, it was a difficult, ceaseless struggle. Pot-hunters in some areas of the state were so bold as to intimidate the wardens. At Bangor, poachers boasted that they would "as soon shoot a man as look at him," and wardens in the area were repeatedly assaulted.<sup>16</sup> Washington County in the 1880s was even more dangerous. Wardens were assaulted, had their property burned, and in one celebrated case in 1883, even murdered.<sup>17</sup>

The task of the commission was made even more difficult by unethical guides and by visiting sportsmen who refused to abide by the new regulations. Guides looked upon the commissioners and wardens as their "natural enemies" and clung to earlier less inhibited approaches to taking fish and game. Many guides, the *Kennebec Journal* explained, "fear that the commissioners are working to the harm of their profession, in so restricting the hunting and fishing that the visiting hunters will get dissatisfied."<sup>18</sup> Out-of-state hunters were no less cavalier. When one wealthy nonresident violator was queried about his actions, he replied: "I kill all game that affords me a fair mark. If I am caught I promptly pay up, if not, that is the fault of the State."<sup>19</sup>



"Tom and his Buck, from Blackberry Pond," from the Maine Historical Society's John W. G. Dunn Collection. Wildlife, like fish, was an important underpinning for the vacation industry. Protecting this resource from market hunters and overzealous recreationists was a difficult and endless struggle.



Making camp at "Blackberry Avenue" on Ragged Lake. (Dunn Collection).

Unanticipated opposition to protecting fish and game resources emerged in the 1880s from various agricultural organizations. Farmers, in some cases dissatisfied with the expanding role of the vacation industry, felt it absorbed labor, capital, and governmental resources better used in building Maine's agriculture. They struck at the industry by calling for abolition of the Fish and Game Commission and all related laws.<sup>20</sup> As State Grange Master Obadiah Gardner put it, "If the effect of our game laws is the futherance of what must ever be a sport or pastime ... to the hinderance of progress and the development of our agricultural resources, then the time has come to change the law."<sup>21</sup> Although political battles between farmers' organizations and those interested in fish, game, and tourism continued through the turn of the century, the game codes were not substantially changed, and the last organized opposition from the farmers disappeared after 1910.

Anticonservation attitudes, although widespread in the 1880s, slowly gave way before a campaign of education and stricter law enforcement. By the 1930s Maine's fish and big game (with the notable exception of caribou) seemed secure against extinction and in many cases was on the increase. The successful game conservation program saved an important resource for the vacation industry and for Maine people generally.

**M**aine's forests were critical to the survival of its fish and game, and were in themselves an attraction to vacationers in these decades. As in the case of fish and game, however, forest conservation was advocated primarily to maintain a harvestable resource, not to foster the vacation industry. Most lumber operators tended to insist that the forests were inexhaustible, but a few, such as George F. Talbot, urged selective cutting and replanting of cutover areas. The State Grange too, at a State Forestry Convention in 1888, concluded that the forests should be treated as a crop. The Board of Agriculture, which had been advocating forest protection since 1869, proposed, unsuccessfully, that a tax break be given for the planting of trees. It was not until 1891, however, that the Forest Commission was created to oversee the development of a forest policy for Maine.<sup>22</sup>

By that time the vacation industry was so far developed that it could not be ignored in forest use planning. Regardless, there was a great deal of tension between vacationers and forest-land owners. Such hostility was indicated in a letter received by the Forest Commissioner shortly after he took office. The correspondent wrote, in part,

the State controls all the inland waters and owns all the game. It invites all the world to come here and navigate the lakes and streams, catch the fish, to make temporary habitations upon private land, to cut trees for camps and camp-fires and to kill the game. In other words the State pastures its cattle on the land of individuals and protects it for the benefit

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of alien sportsmen, but gives no protection to the owners of the property.<sup>23</sup>

The landowner was worried about forest fires accidentally set by campers. Following the commissioner's recommendation in 1891, the Legislature enacted a law making it illegal to leave a burning campfire unattended, and it established a system of fire wardens. Despite growing numbers of recreationists and occasional tensions between sporting clubs, tourist interests, guides, and sportsmen on one hand, and the timberland owners on the other, the forests continued to serve a dual recreational and commercial purpose, as they had since colonial times. Guides and private sporting parties learned to accommodate by placing greater emphasis on fire prevention measures, and the landowners continued a policy of open access for recreational use. In the years after 1891 the forest commissioner and the commissioners of fish and game cooperated to ensure that the forest remained intact for both uses.<sup>24</sup>

By 1908 when Gifford Pinchot and Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed the conservation movement in Washington, D.C., the State of Maine had forty years of experience in working to conserve and rebuild its fish and game resources, first as a source of foodstuffs and then more importantly as a major base for the vacation industry. It had been practicing what Pinchot preached — the conservation of resources for long-term sustained yield.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), pp. 116-121. The forestry movement has been assessed at the state level. See Ralph O. Widner, *Forests and Forestry in The United States* (Missoula, Montana: National Association of State Foresters, 1968).

<sup>2</sup>Maine, Commissioners of Fisheries and Game, *Annual Report, 1898*, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup>Maine, Commissioners of Fisheries, *Annual Report, 1867*, pp. 85-86, 90.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 73.

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<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 95. There were several earlier private efforts at fish propagation in Maine. See the *Weekly Kennebec Journal*, June 26, 1857; July 24, 1857; July 16, 1858.

<sup>6</sup>Maine, Commissioners of Fisheries, *Annual Report, 1867*, p. 76.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 18-21.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 1872, pp. 5-6.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 1873, pp. 8-10.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 1877, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 1880, p. 33.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 1883, pp. 11-12.

<sup>15</sup>*The Maine Mining and Industrial Journal*, April 20, 1883.

<sup>16</sup>Maine, Commissioner of Fisheries, *Annual Report, 1879*, p. 28.

<sup>17</sup>Maine, Commissioner of Fisheries and Game, *Annual Report, 1886*, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup>*Daily Kennebec Journal*, July 25, 1896.

<sup>19</sup>Maine, Commissioner of Fisheries and Game, *Annual Report, 1892*, p. 13.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 1902, p. 22.

<sup>21</sup>Maine State Grange, *Journal of Proceedings, 1903*, p. 24.

<sup>22</sup>David C. Smith, *A History of Lumbering in Maine, 1861-1960* (Orono, Me.: University of Maine Press, 1972), pp. 333-349.

<sup>23</sup>Maine, Forest Commissioner, *First Annual Report, 1891*, p. 42.

<sup>24</sup>Maine, *Revised Statutes, 1903*, pp. 135-136.

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