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News and Commentary

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Conference Reports: The First Munsungan Conference: Paying to play in the Maine Woods

by Christopher Spruce

Citizens of Maine will have to develop a new perspective on the forests, which moves away from the belief that recreation in the woods is a free good rather than a profit source, participants in a conference this fall on recreation in Maine's forest were told. "What was once given for free may now require payment," observed Dr. William Burch of Yale University, the keynote speaker at the First Munsungan Conference, held October 13, 1992 at the University of Maine's College of Forest Resources.

The First Munsungan Conference was named after a lake in northern Piscataquis County, north of Baxter State Park and near Reed Mountain. Brad Wellman, who helped organize and financially support the conference, said Munsungan Lake is representative of the resources at stake in the future management of Maine's forests.

Burch, who is Hixon Professor of Natural Resources Management at Yale's School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, suggested that policy decisions that affect the north Maine woods reflect "a peculiar culture of forestry" in which if "you talk about land you are only talking about trees." This culture - one that focuses on the forest products industry to the exclusion of other sources of forest income - must change, Burch and other speakers at the day-long conference suggested, if the forests of northern Maine are to be managed pragmatically in response to intensified uses, particularly recreational uses. By only thinking about trees when managing their land holdings, businesses are ignoring other sources of income, Burch claimed. Recreation, he said, is a profit center, not a loss center. He argued for "integrated, value-added eco-management" in which a "variety of profit streams" are developed.

Burch offered one scenario in which the forest was managed so that "income-bearing opportunities" for various kinds of recreation are rotated through the planned cut. That is, at different stages of forest maturity, different recreation opportunities are available - for a fee. For example, at an early stage after a cut, hunting would be appropriate. At another stage, bird watching would be the recreational activity of preference. At a late maturity stage, camping would be the most likely recreational use. Under such a management plan, people would not be denied access to the forests, but they would pay for access to pursue the recreational activity of their choice.

To accomplish such a change, said Burch, requires a willingness by parties interested in the forests to learn and to exercise pragmatism. "The essence of pragmatism is that we have the self confidence to accept compromise" as a way to get things accomplished, he asserted.

Lloyd Irland, forestry consultant and former state economist, discussed the economics of recreation in the north Maine woods. He suggested that land owners and policymakers had to "develop a richer way of measuring and thinking about supply" of recreation. For example, the quality of the recreational experience is an essential feature of supply. Peak use of recreation activities in the Maine woods occurs over nine days around specific holidays. In other words, most campsites are idle most of the time. These factors suggest a need to ask questions about users' needs and their experiences, said Irland. Could we find simple ways to look at crowding and aesthetics?

Recreation policies will have to respond to major trends, according to the former state economist, among which are:

- Privatization of places and utilities
- Polarization in the political system
- Shadow conversions

These and other trends point to "more intolerance, more zero-sum games," said Irland. He identified several issues that will require further discussion among those interested in Maine's forests, including how to accommodate future demands and how to enhance the supply of recreation at the lowest cost.

Maine Bureau of Parks and Recreation director Herbert Hartman said statistics bear out the perception that the use of Maine's forests for recreation is growing. The limited statistics available show that most active users are Maine residents and that most seem satisfied with current recreational opportunities. Further, it appears many users are not "wise in the ways of the woods," that they rely less on knowledge and more on motorized vehicles to make their way through the woods. Echoing Irland's comments, Hartman claimed woods users "want an experience that meets their expectations" of what the Maine woods should be like. With increased commercialization of recreation in the forests, Hartman observed, has come a growing tendency for people to accept fees, particularly if they realize a direct benefit from the fee. But the problem comes in collecting the fees. Gating all the roads that criss-cross through the north woods would be a major problem, Hartman said.

What does the future hold? There are no benchmarks against which to measure change and trends in the usage of Maine's forests, the Parks and Recreation chief noted, because demand data are "spotty" and user profiles do not exist. Availability of this data would allow his bureau to provide a more reliable picture of the future than presently exists. He urged the Northern Forest Lands Council "to fill this void" in its fact-gathering efforts.

Wilbur LePage, director of the New Hampshire Division of Parks and Recreation, offered conference attendees an example of willingness to pay by woods users. New Hampshire state parks are no longer funded by the state's general budget. Instead, the entire Division of Parks and

Recreation that LePage manages is funded by user fees. Although on average users in all states return 38 percent of budgets to state parks, last year in New Hampshire, 112 percent of budget was underwritten by user fees.

The parks situation has been helped, said LePage, by a historic mandate from the state legislature to earn as much of its own budget as possible, by park attractions that are in close proximity to sizable populations, and by "lean and mean" management. He cited public-private partnerships that aid in the operation of the bureau's 121 units. Even as visitations have increasing significantly, these agreements have allowed a reduction in permanent staff, he said.

LePage said that although it may seem inappropriate to compare the fee-based operation of New Hampshire's state park "showcase attractions" to Maine's system of private industrial forest sites, the comparison is legitimate. State parks, LePage claimed, represent nothing more than "museum pieces. In a true outdoor culture," he said, "public parks are just the sample." The real world is represented by private lands put to multiple uses, including recreation.

LePage suggested Maine address the recreational future of its forests through public-private partnerships, as has been done in New Hampshire. He also recommended moving the discussion of these issues "out of academe into the halls of the legislature so the public can debate them."

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