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## Reshaping Maine Woods Destinations for Twenty-First-Century Tourists

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# Reshaping Maine Woods Destinations for Twenty-First-Century Tourists

by David Vail, Donna Moreland, and Mike Wilson

## Abstract

Maine's rim counties—here called the Maine Woods region—suffer from chronic economic and community distress, marked by declines in several resource-based industries, an ongoing youth exodus, and a rapidly aging population. Nonetheless, many encouraging new ventures are helping to revitalize the Maine Woods economy and communities, and tourism and recreation should play a central role in these efforts. This article focuses on initiatives launched through a partnership between the 16-member Maine Woods Consortium and the Maine Office of Tourism designed to reinvigorate Maine Woods' recreation and hospitality offerings and to enrich amenities in the region's gateway communities.

Maine's *rim counties*, the term we use for the Maine Woods region, suffer from chronic economic distress and community erosion. Rural Maine is not unique, of course. Across rural America, there are similar patterns of low and stagnant incomes, job loss in traditional resource-based industries, heavy dependence on government supports, on-going out-migration of youth, and rapidly aging populations. Analysts stress that these long-evolving conditions have deep structural causes and thus no simple fix (Hendrickson Muro, and Galston 2018; Krugman 2019). Nonetheless, efforts to launch new lead sectors and revitalize rural economies abound, from cross-laminated timber to telemedicine and craft brewing.

In the Maine Woods region, many encouraging tourism initiatives are reshaping the venerable recreation economy to meet twenty-first-century leisure travelers' changing preferences and to tap their spending power. Tourism is a major component of Maine's rural economy, generating \$2.3 billion in visitor spending in 2017 and providing employment for over 39,000 people: it must be an important part of any revitalization strategy.

The Maine Woods—Henry David Thoreau's evocative term for our vast northern forest—has a long and storied history as a tourist destination. For more than a century and a half, *sports* and *rusticators*, mostly from the Northeast, have recreated at interior Maine's special

places including the Mahoosuc Range, Rangeley Lake, Moosehead Lake, Baxter State Park, and Grand Lake Stream. In recent decades, winter sports, cultural events, and fall leaf-peeping excursions have expanded and enriched the menu of attractions in these areas.

Past and present, the fundamental appeal of the Maine Woods has been the same: iconic lake, mountain, and forest landscapes, far from the bustle and bright lights of the city. In the words of tourism

consultants Future iQ, “the region includes a wide range of unique landscapes that create a huge outdoor recreation canvas. From a visitor perspective, this creates an incredibly exciting and enticing nature-based destination” (FiQ 2018a: 5). Maine's long tradition of public access to millions of acres of private lands is a crucial enabler of outdoor recreation. Moreover, since the 1990s, it has been reinforced by extensive public and nonprofit land acquisitions and conservation easements backed by investment in motorized and nonmotorized trail networks.

The Maine Woods tourism economy, however, faces an epochal challenge: adapting to major changes in its prospective customers, the experiences they seek, the ways they seek them, and the quality standards they demand. Compared to a century ago, for example, more of Americans' leisure travel today is squeezed into long weekends and involves multi-activity experiences. Visitor demographics, preferences, and standards have also evolved. Two examples suggest distinct features of growing market segments. First, many baby boomers, with ample discretionary time and income, are experiential tourists seeking low-stress outdoor activities, supplemented by quality dining, lodging, shopping, and cultural amenities. Second, many younger adventurers seek destinations offering outstanding expedition hiking, cross country skiing, and mountain biking, but

## PRINCIPLES OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

The Maine Woods Consortium’s triple-bottom-line mission is to encourage sustainable contributions to the rural economy, communities, and ecosystems. The core values of a sustainable tourism strategy have been well articulated by Travel Oregon:

### Sustainable tourism...

- Is integrated with and respectful of the culture, homeland, heritage, and people of a place
- Provides a unique and authentic experience for the visitor
- Generates localized economic development benefits
- Generates development that has a balanced and beneficial impact on the environment
- Generates revenue that is invested in conserving and enhancing the unique features of the community
- Provides an educational experience for the visitor that leaves them enriched and inspired to create positive change at home
- Encourages diverse parties to work together to create new opportunities and to address common challenges
- Serves target markets that are profitable, with promising long-term viability (Travel Oregon 2016: 4)

they also want cell phone and internet coverage, a great meal, lively night life, and a comfortable bed after their exertions.

Future iQ emphasizes that the greatest growth in coming decades will be in a market segment that the Maine Woods has never seriously sought to attract: the “growing global middle class,” especially affluent Asians (FIQ 2018b: 19) Making inroads in that market will be a stretch—not only for the Maine Woods, but for the state as a whole.

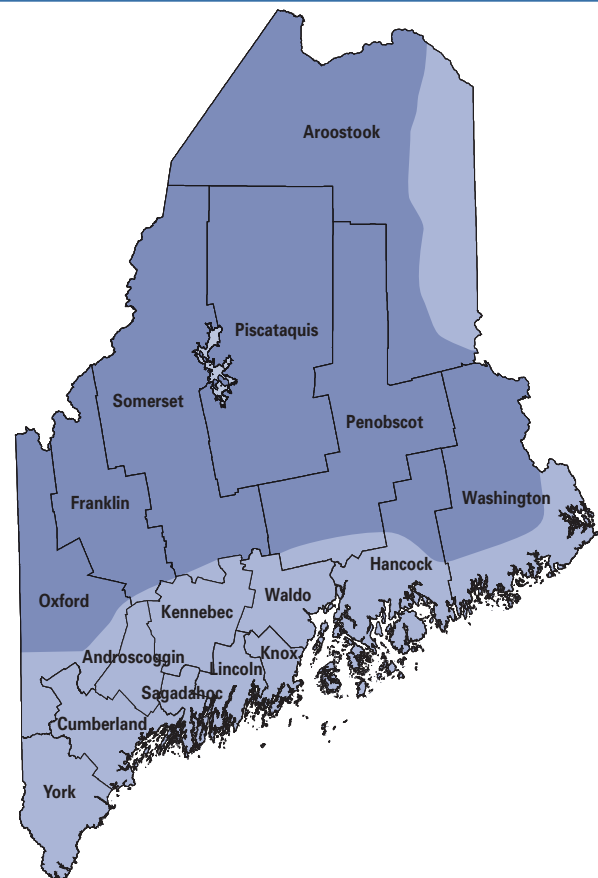
This article describes the evolving tourism landscape and an emerging Maine Woods tourism strategy for the Maine Woods and then focuses on three promising initiatives. The strategy centers on creating, branding, and promoting outstanding four-season visitor experiences in nine high-potential destination areas in the broader Maine Woods region. Strategic elements blend recreational and cultural amenities, events, hospitality services, broadband internet access, transportation infrastructure, and lively downtowns.

The core conviction is that these initiatives can tap the Maine Woods’ potential for sustainable tourism growth—growth that supports quality business and career opportunities and helps revitalize distressed rural communities. The initiative is led by the Maine Woods Consortium and the Maine Office of Tourism (MOT). The consortium is a network of 16 businesses, nonprofit organizations, and state agencies pursuing a *triple-bottom-line* approach to enhance human and environmental well-being in the Maine Woods region.<sup>1</sup> It is led and coordinated by the Northern Forest Center.

## ECONOMIC CHALLENGES AND TOURISM’S POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The Maine Woods covers most or all of seven counties, extending from Oxford County in the west, across the northern crown of Maine, to Washington County in Downeast Maine (see Figure 1). Compared to prospering south coastal Maine, the Maine Woods

FIGURE 1: **Map of Maine Woods**



region suffers from chronic socioeconomic distress, reflected in lower household incomes, higher poverty rates, greater dependence on government assistance, lower labor force participation, higher unemployment, and a higher incidence of opioid addiction.<sup>2</sup> After decades of youth outmigration and an aging resident population, Maine's rim counties constitute the oldest region in America's oldest state. In scores of towns, socioeconomic distress can be seen in closed schools, shuttered storefronts, and empty houses.

These patterns and trends are common to rural American regions distant from thriving metropolitan areas (Hendrickson, Muro, and Galston 2018; Vail 2010a). In the Maine Woods case, chronic economic and community distress can be traced largely to the changing fortunes and ongoing technological transformation of natural resource-based industries that once supported thriving small towns and generated jobs, consumer purchasing power, tax revenues, and civic vitality. The employment base has eroded in logging, paper making, secondary wood products, bulk commodity agriculture, food processing, and their various support industries. Within the forest products economy alone, more than 5,000 jobs were lost between 2011 and 2016 (MDF 2016). Within Maine Woods tourism itself, food and accommodation jobs dropped from 6,801 in prerecession 2007 to 6,579 in 2015—six years into the economic recovery (<https://www.maine.gov/labor/cwri/qcew1.html>).

Without those businesses and jobs, many communities are losing, or have already lost, the critical mass of population, school-aged children, commerce, and tax revenue needed for sustainability. The long, slow decline does not appear to have bottomed out yet. Future iQ's projections, based on US Census and Maine Department of Labor estimates, indicate that business-as-usual state policies affecting the Maine Woods counties will cause population to decline by a further 10,000 (or 2.5 percent) by 2026. With aging workers retiring and more young people leaving, employment will likely drop even more—by 18,000, or 12 percent (FiQ 2018b: 6).

This bleak trajectory is not inevitable. An ambitious, well-targeted rural economic strategy for the state could strengthen and spread initiatives that are already underway in sectors as diverse as health care, forest products, agriculture, food and beverages, renewable energy, arts and crafts, and

### TOURISM AMENITIES AS CATALYST FOR RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

America's economic growth and dynamism are increasingly concentrated in large metropolitan areas, such as greater Boston. Remote rural regions, such as Maine's interior, have suffered ongoing economic and demographic declines, marked by youth outmigration and aging populations. The rural areas experiencing population rebounds typically benefit from mild climates, ready access to growing metropolitan areas, a critical mass of private and public amenities, and core infrastructures, such as hospitals, airports, and higher education facilities (Vail 2010b).

The odds may seem to be stacked against Maine's most remote, sparsely populated, and chilly rural regions. But research supports a degree of optimism that smart tourism investments can improve the prospects for broader economic and community recovery. Oxford Economics reports encouraging findings in *Destination Promotion: An Engine of Economic Development*:

- Visitor spending helps support a broader and higher quality set of local amenities than an area could otherwise sustain....As an incremental source of business above and beyond what can be supported locally, visitors provide demand for businesses as well as many not-for-profit institutions, such as museums.... The visitor economy [is] not only a source of traditional economic benefits such as jobs and tax revenues, but also a driver supporting local amenities and quality of life.
- Parks and public areas, dining and nightlife in walkable districts....creative arts and cultural institutions—these are just some of the local facilities and services that benefit from the visitor economy but are also valued by residents and—by extension—site locators, investors, and business executives.
- Of course, quality of life factors have different levels of importance depending on the type of business.... In some situations, it makes a tremendous difference....It may be more important for an area to demonstrate the quality of life characteristics that make the area attractive to the company's executives and other relocating employees....Availability of skilled labor is frequently one of the top criteria in business location decisions, and areas with high quality of life are better able to attract and retain such workers. (Oxford Economics 2014: 32–36)

telecommunications. Tourism and recreation are crucial to such a strategy, as they are the region's second largest employer after healthcare services. As sidebar on the previous page demonstrates, the same amenities needed to attract more high-spending leisure travelers are also a key to retaining current residents and attracting desirable immigrants, such as mobile entrepreneurs, highly educated younger people, and affluent retirees (Oxford Economics 2014; Vail 2010b).

### MAINE WOODS TOURISM AFTER THE GREAT RECESSION

Maine's tourism economy reached a prerecession peak in 2007, but then required five years for visitor numbers and spending to recover. Since 2012, the sector has enjoyed continuous growth. Between 2012 and 2017, visitor numbers grew by 32 percent, from just under 28 million to nearly 37 million; tourist spending rose by 22 percent, from \$4.9 billion to \$6.0 billion; and tourism employment grew from 82,000 to 107,000 full-time, part-time, and seasonal jobs (MOT 2012–2017). From 2015 to 2016 in the Maine Woods region, visitor numbers increased by 10.5 percent and spending by 12.5 percent, with another 6.5 percent visitor growth in 2017. Early reports suggest that 2018 was also a record-breaking year (DPA 2018a, 2018b).

Maine Woods tourism is big business although it is mostly done by small businesses. Estimating tourism's economic contribution for this region is imprecise because the MOT's designated tourism regions and their statistics do not align perfectly with the seven Maine Woods counties. Several of their designated regions, notably Lakes and Mountains, Maine Highlands, and Downeast-Acadia, extend beyond the Maine Woods to include popular destinations such as Sebago Lake, Bangor, and Acadia National Park. Excluding Hancock County and Acadia's 3 million visitors, the Maine Woods (roughly defined) hosted 15.6 million tourists in 2017—one-third of the Maine total. That includes 8.1 million overnight visitors, a key cohort who stay longer and spend more money than day-trippers do. Visitors to the region spent \$2.3 billion, making tourism a major economic sector in the region (FiQ 2018b).

Employment in Maine Woods tourism is estimated at 39,340 full-time, part-time, and seasonal jobs in 2017. Translated to full-time equivalents, that represents more than 10 percent of the region's total employment. The sector's low average yearly earnings, \$18,729, reflect

both the seasonality of most rural tourism jobs and many employers' tight profit margins and limited ability to pay (FiQ 2018b). In tourism-dependent Piscataquis County, for example, the average weekly wage in food and accommodation services, tourism's largest employer, was \$320 in 2018, far below the county's \$595 average across all sectors (<https://www.maine.gov/labor/cwri/qcew1.html>). In contrast, Piscataquis County's best-practice tourism employers, such as the Blair Hill Inn, with its world-renowned hospitality services, and the Appalachian Mountain Club, with its lodges, trail networks, and waterfront facilities, have won international reputations for outstanding quality and can charge rates that support livable wages and substantial benefits. Consortium initiatives aim to create many more high-quality tourism jobs.

The Maine Woods' spectacular natural landscapes are the magnet attracting most tourists, but outdoor recreation is not tourism's big moneymaker. The MOT's 2017 visitor survey (DPA 2018a: 15) asked Maine Woods visitors to rank their top three "interest areas" (Table 1).

TABLE 1: Top Interest Areas of Maine Woods Visitors\*

Interest	Percentage of respondents
Food, beverage, and culinary	53
Shopping	45
General tourism and sight-seeing	44
Active outdoor activities	38
Family and kids' activities	30
History and culture	30
Water-based activities	23

\* Visitors chose their top three activities. Source: DPA (2018a: 15).

Fewer than one-quarter listed active land- or water-based outdoor recreation as their number one interest area, compared with 53 percent for the mix of general touring, food, and shopping. To underscore the change in visitor preferences, participation in several traditional outdoor recreation mainstays, including hunting, white-water rafting, snowmobiling, and alpine skiing, is either essentially flat or declining.



These realities are reflected in tourists' spending patterns. More than three-quarters of overnight-visitors' spending is for three core items: lodging (41 percent), food and beverage (20 percent), and shopping (16 percent). Much outdoor recreation (for instance, trail use and paddle sports) is free of charge, so recreation accounts for just 11 percent of visitor spending (Future iQ 2018a: 20). These trends in visitors' preferences, activities, and spending pose challenges for Maine Woods destinations that hope to appeal to growing market segments.

Some additional Maine Woods' tourism challenges include

- the Northeast's aging and slow-growing population;
- changes in landownership and uncertainties around continued recreational access;
- remoteness from large metropolitan areas compared to competing destinations such as the Adirondacks, White Mountains, and Maine coast;
- strategies pursued by competing destinations to expand their market share;
- gap between premium quality offered by best-practice recreation and hospitality businesses and average service quality; and
- limited high-speed broadband connectivity and cell phone access.

## MAINE WOODS TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

The Maine Woods Consortium was organized in 2008 as a successor to the nonprofit Maine Mountain Heritage Network. Three state agencies, the Office of Tourism, Office of Outdoor Recreation, and Department of Transportation, are among the 16 partner organizations (a complete listing can be found in Endnote 1). Since 2010, the consortium's partners have focused on opportunities in tourism and recreation, recognizing its economic importance and its untapped growth potential. In its early years, the consortium honed its organization-building and fundraising capacities through three main activities: the Maine Woods Tourism Training Initiative (MWTTI), Maine Woods Discovery (MWD), and networking and policy advocacy. These activities have been a proving ground for the consortium's current major initiative on destination development.

### *Maine Woods Tourism Training Initiative*

The MWTTI has been a core program since 2010. The underlying conviction is that high-quality tourist services require skilled and motivated employees and that quality service, in turn, is the key to both higher profitability and good jobs. It was launched as a pilot project in three counties and has now delivered training workshops across all seven Maine Woods counties. Lead organizers at the county level contract with experts to offer workshops addressing needs and priorities expressed by local tourism entrepreneurs. Between 2013 and 2017, MWTTI delivered 73 training workshops designed for frontline employees and owner operators, covering topics such as customer service, marketing, social media platforms, financial management, and media relations. Workshops have enrolled 845 participants from 278 tourism businesses.

More recently, the consortium, county leads, and the Northern Forest Center have supplemented training workshops with matching grants of up to \$2,500, which have enabled 40 innovative entrepreneurs to implement lessons from the workshops. In a related initiative, the Northern Forest Center's Tourism Innovation Program makes grants up to \$25,000 to stimulate creative investments in the Moosehead Lake and Katahdin Iron Works areas. Recipients include Northwoods Gourmet Girl, Blair Hill Inn, Northeast Whitewater, and Moosehead Marine Museum.

### *Maine Woods Discovery*

The MWD is a cooperative marketing arrangement among a dozen of the region's premier outdoor recreation providers. The initiative was inspired by successful ecotourism certification and marketing schemes in destinations such as Alaska, Sweden, and Australia. MWD's eight charter members, six private businesses, and two nonprofits, set and met quality standards under six categories:

- providing authentic outdoor and cultural experiences, supported by highly qualified guides, instructors and interpreters
- delivering excellent service in every aspect of the visitor's experience
- supporting local communities
- providing well-maintained facilities and equipment that meet highest industry standards
- following environmentally responsible practices, conservation of the forest landscape, and respect for private landowners

- meeting or exceeding applicable industry safety standards

Four additional applicants joined the founding group by reaching a quality threshold based on the standards.

Over several years, MWD generated roughly \$2 million in earned media exposure and marketing value for the member businesses and the Maine Woods region. Highlights from four years of activity include a social media campaign, anchored by a Facebook site that grew from less than 1,000 followers in 2014 to more than 10,000 in 2018. The Thoreau-Wabanaki 150th Anniversary Tour commemorated the 150th anniversary of the publication of Thoreau's *The Maine Woods* with a 300-mile canoe trip. The tour secured major media coverage including *CBS Sunday Morning* (viewership 5.6 million), *Yankee Magazine's* spring 2015 cover story, and a 2014 cover story in *Dreamscapes*, Canada's leading travel and lifestyle magazine.<sup>3</sup> MWD has also participated in numerous state and regional events promoting tourism, such as the annual Maine Governor's Tourism Conference and Discover New England. Finally, MWD collaborated with the national paddle sport show *Facing Waves* to produce two 30-minute segments on the Maine Woods that continue to run on the Outside TV network. The MWD was recently folded into the consortium's destination development effort.

### **Regional Networking and Policy Development**

Activities focusing on networking and policy development have been grounded by five region-wide, multiday conferences, each engaging 60 to 100 tourism and economic development stakeholders. The consortium's 2013 retreat featured an exercise in destination assessment that helped catalyze the 2014 Moosehead Lake branding initiative. The 2015 retreat included a group exercise to help design Maine's Rural Destination Area program. The 2016 rally introduced stakeholders to the newly staffed Rural Destination Area program and featured a keynote address by Travel Oregon's Harry Dalgaard, highlighting that state's award-winning Rural Tourism Studio program. The consortium's current initiative, described later in this article, incorporates several innovations from Rural Tourism Studio.

The 2018 destination rally in Greenville highlighted organizational innovations and examples of best practices in the Moosehead Lake region. Future iQ, an international consulting firm contracted by the consortium to assess opportunities for Maine Woods tourism, led participants in a scenario-based exercise to explore

the pros, cons, and long-term implications of strategies to develop alternative destinations.<sup>4</sup> There was a consensus among the six regional groupings that Maine Woods tourism should maintain its historical strengths, but also move to a high-touch and high-service approach, geared to attract more first-time visitors from beyond the Northeast:

This future would see significant investment in product development, especially higher quality accommodation options, associated infrastructure of guided tours and dining options, and experiential packages. Marketing would target affluent global and national travelers looking for an original and 'undiscovered' experience. (FiQ 2018b: 23)

A high point of the consortium's policy advocacy was the establishment of the Maine Office of Tourism's Rural Destination Development program. This was the Department of Community and Economic Development's (DECD) affirmative response to proposed legislation drafted by the consortium, in consultation with tourism businesses, nongovernmental organizations, and landowners. The legislative bill prompted negotiations with DECD and, ultimately, led to the creation of a full-time position of rural destination development specialist, housed in the Maine Office of Tourism.

Major support for the consortium's initiatives has come from private foundations, most notably the Betterment Fund and the Elmina B. Sewall Foundation, and from USDA Rural Development grants secured by the Northern Forest Center.

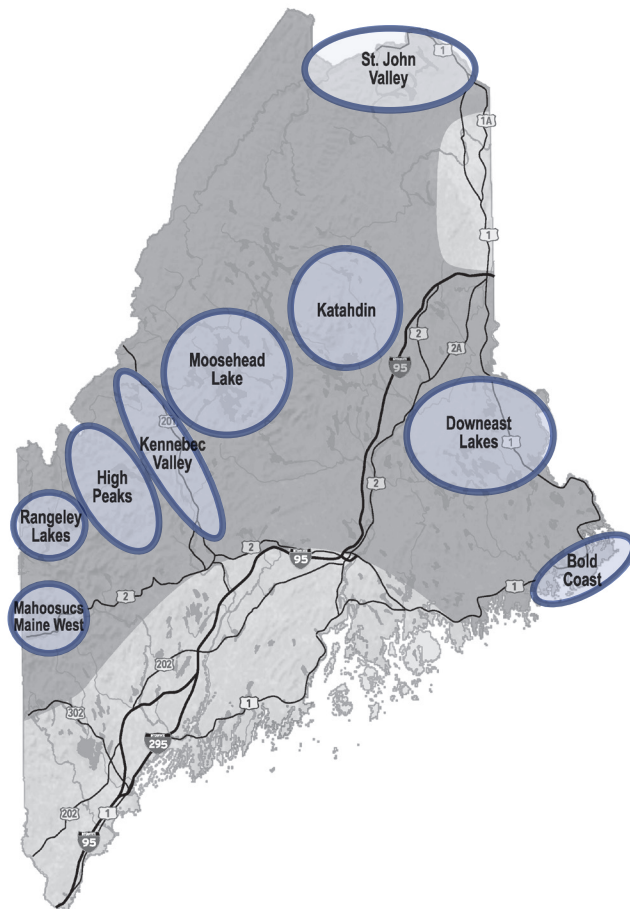
## **DEVELOPING HIGH-POTENTIAL DESTINATIONS**

In recent years, innovations such as Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument, Moosehead Lake's branding initiative, and Carrabassett Valley's mountain bike trail network have garnered media attention and stakeholder excitement. These and other initiatives have real potential to generate new rural economic activity. Limited leadership, organizational, and investment capacities, however, remain serious barriers to sustainable tourism growth. Given the tendency of various subregions to focus inwardly and compete for scarce resources, the Maine Woods region needs coordinated and consistent efforts to position itself as a high-quality destination for twenty-first-century tourists. The

consortium is supporting an emerging network of Rural Destination Areas that combine outdoor recreation with amenity-rich downtowns, arts and cultural events, high-quality hospitality services, and improved transportation and telecommunications infrastructure.

Based on an assessment of local leadership and grassroots commitment, consortium partners have identified nine high-potential Rural Destination Areas for prioritizing development efforts (Mahoosucs/Maine West, Rangeley Lakes, High Peaks, Upper Kennebec Valley, Moosehead Lake, Katahdin, St. John Valley, Downeast Lakes, and Bold Coast). This assessment is backed by informal inventories of assets such as scenic byways, trail networks, outdoor recreation businesses, and fairs and festivals. The nine areas do not have hard and fast boundaries, and the consortium encourages collaboration, especially between adjacent areas (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: **High-Potential Rural Destination Areas in the Maine Woods**



### *From Vision to Action*

To realize this region's potential to support a sustainable tourism economy, the consortium is trying to better coordinate the delivery of technical and financial assistance. Central actors in this effort are the destination development specialist of the Office of Tourism, the senior program director of the Northern Forest Center, and the director of the newly created Maine Office of Outdoor Recreation (OOR). We note, with appreciation—and pride—that the MOT and OOR positions represent a revolution in state support for the tourism economy. The positions go well beyond the Office of Tourism's traditional focus on marketing and reflect awareness of rural Maine's special challenges.

Based on local knowledge and research by Future iQ (2018a, 2018b), Destination International, and others, the consortium has identified five strategic priorities to enhance Maine Woods destinations. The consortium plans to

- develop innovative products that align with changing demographics and travel trends;
- build support among local business, municipal, and nonprofit leaders by demonstrating tourism's current and potential economic contributions;
- catalyze and coordinate regional-scale investments by public and private funders;
- foster cooperation with landowners and the forest products sector; and
- create an overarching Maine Woods marketing strategy to reach visitors beyond the traditional northeastern US market.

### *Community Destination Academy*

In 2018, the consortium and the Maine Office of Tourism launched the community destination academy (CDA) to build local capacities and channel technical and financial assistance to advance these five priorities. The CDA concept is inspired by many sources, especially Oregon's Rural Tourism Studio and Minnesota's *Community Tourism Handbook* (Messer 2012; Travel Oregon 2016). From the consortium's decade of experience with tourism and community development, we know these regions face serious challenges in the areas of skillful leadership; building and sustaining teams; connecting business, municipal, and nonprofit actors; accessing financial and other resources; creating



memorable experiences; and telling compelling stories through effective marketing. The CDA addresses all of those challenges.

A grant from the Elmina B. Sewall Foundation financed a pilot project in the Moosehead Lake region. Significant groundwork had already taken place there, with support from Plum Creek Timber (now Weyerhaeuser). Based on that previous work, the emerging CDA is designed to respond flexibly to the differing priorities and levels of readiness in different destination areas. The pilot project in the Moosehead Lake region is a four-part program to build capacity in a destination area that had already carried out exercises in regional visioning, branding, and developing a master plan. In 2018, up to 30 local participants engaged in the following four activities:

- Organizational consulting—MOT and consortium partners worked with Destination Moosehead Lake and the Moosehead Lake Region Economic Development Corporation to resolve conflicts, align missions, and embrace a shared destination vision.
- Skills development—Three consortium partners, the Northern Forest Center, the Piscataquis County Economic Development Council, and Destination Moosehead Lake, worked with MOT to deliver four day-long training sessions to a core group of 25 business, municipal, and nonprofit leaders. Trainings included “Creating Memorable Visitor Experiences”; “Finding the Money: Financing Investments by NGOs, Towns, and Businesses”; “Selling Your Story: Destination Marketing”; “Getting Things Done: Turning Plans into Action.”
- Hands-on project implementation—The consortium provided financial and technical assistance, enabling CDA participants to design and implement two projects. One project was to rebuild Greenville’s lakeside boardwalk by mobilizing volunteers and partnering with the town. The other project identified and planned new activities to attract visitors, which involved hiring a researcher to assess market potential and organizing needs and securing an additional MOT Enterprise Grant to support marketing of collaborative events. These projects complemented other projects already underway, such as the creation of a lakefront artisan village and grants to refurbish storefronts.
- Reflections and next steps—CDA participants reconvened in early 2019 to reflect on outcomes and map out next steps in destination development. Based on the Moosehead experience, consortium partners and MOT’s destination development specialist have done preliminary work with leaders in several other destination areas. They are creating an application process that will ensure that stakeholders in a destination area have taken preliminary steps and demonstrated organizational capabilities that will allow them to take full advantage of the CDA. The consortium plans to extend the CDA to two more high-potential areas in the coming year and then, it is hoped, to the remaining six in the near future.

## WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED AND WHERE WE ARE HEADED

The consortium’s organizing efforts and on-the-ground projects over the past 10 years have been a valuable exercise in learning by doing, illuminating what works and what doesn’t in developing Maine Woods tourism. In retrospect, much of the learning seems like common sense informed by trial-and-error experiences.

### *Grassroots Leadership and Perseverance*

Consortium members understand better than ever that developing first-class tourism destinations is a long and often conflictful process. It requires buy-in and cooperation across business, municipal, and nonprofit sectors. Organization building is a critical early step, and there is no substitute for an effective mix of grassroots commitment and skilled local leadership. Outside funding and staff support are catalysts, but not a substitute for local mobilization. Special organizing challenges, we have learned, include equitable sharing of workloads and planning for succession as volunteers, especially early-stage, burn out.

### *Adapting to Local Differences*

Realistically, the nine high-potential destination areas are not equal in their potential to become prime tourist destinations or in their levels of readiness to do so. They differ in natural and cultural endowments, organizing capabilities, and private-sector entrepreneurial talent. To compete effectively for market segments, characterized by quality-seeking, high-spending travelers, all

nine destination areas must expand, upgrade, and modernize their blend of recreational opportunities, hospitality services, downtown amenities, and branding. Building local capacity and creating amenities with high appeal should precede major new marketing efforts.

### *Parts of a Larger Whole*

The Maine Woods is greater than the sum of its parts. The consortium's ultimate objective is not to promote nine isolated tourist destinations, but rather to brand and market the larger Maine Woods region as a high-quality destination for new types of vacationers coming from many new places.

### *Embedding Tourism in Rural Development Strategy*

It is especially challenging to move from talk to decisive action in the face of limited state funding for rural development programs. Development of Maine Woods destinations could be greatly strengthened if it were part of a comprehensive, high-priority rural development strategy that also focused on the region's vital forest products industry. Tourism, in turn, could contribute more to overall regional and community revitalization. Until now, rural Maine has never benefited from a coherent or persistent economic strategy (Colgan and Barringer 2007), but the political stars may at last be coming into alignment. 🌊

### ENDNOTES

1. The Maine Woods Consortium members include the Androscoggin Valley Council of Governments, Appalachian Mountain Club, Bethel Area Chamber of Commerce, Coastal Enterprises, Inc., Community Concepts Finance Corporation, Destination Moosehead, Greater Franklin Economic Development, GrowSmart Maine, Katahdin Tourism Partnership, Maine Huts and Trails, Maine Department of Transportation, Maine Development Foundation, Maine Office of Tourism, Maine Office of Outdoor Recreation, Moosehead Lake Region Economic Development Corporation, Northern Forest Center, Northern Maine Development Commission, Piscataquis County Economic Development Council, Seven Islands Land Company, Sunrise County Economic Development, and the University of Maine, School of Forest Resources.
2. More about the socioeconomic status of Maine rim counties can be found on the following websites: <https://www.maine.gov/labor/cwri/index.html>; <https://opioid.amfar.org/ME>.

3. More about the Thoreau-Wabanaki 150th Anniversary Tour may be found on this website: <https://visitmaine.com/quarterly/Thoreau>.
4. Future iQ is an international consulting firm that applies innovative tools and approaches to assist organizations, regions, and industries with shaping their economic and community futures. With nearly two decades of experience, the company has a global clientele spanning three continents. In 2016–2017, Future iQ produced a strategic action plan for leaders in Maine's Moosehead Lake region, and for the past decade, Future iQ has played a key role in developing Oregon's travel and tourism industry. To learn more visit <https://future-iq.com/>.

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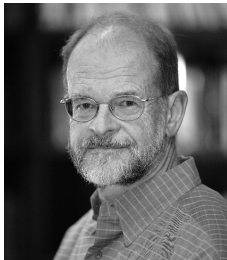
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