

Leading through Collaboration— The Story of the Maine Coast

by Amy Owsley

Coastal Maine is a place like no other—rugged lands that twist and turn for more than 5,300 miles, making home to a strong tourist industry, a vibrant commercial fishing industry, and a rich array of wildlife refuges, parks and preserves. While it remains a stunningly unique corner of the country, coastal Maine does endure the common symptoms of sprawl. Resulting is a setting for a story that land trusts across the nation know too well: an extraordinary place pressured to become only ordinary.

Maine, however, is also a state characterized by the motto, *Dirigo*, or “I lead.” True to this spirit, in 2004, conservation organizations banded together to form the Maine Coast Protection Initiative (MCPI), a landscape collaborative of 70 member organizations and growing, together focused on increasing the pace and quality of conservation along the state’s coast.

This article describes the new script that is being written for this coast—a script that demonstrates the strength that collaboration brings to advancing conservation.

How It Began

Public and private organizations have long recognized the treasure that is coastal Maine, establishing programs at the federal, state and local levels for its protection. The Maine Land Trust Network, a long-standing program of Maine Coast Heritage Trust, provides a forum for information exchange, training and resource sharing across Maine’s land trust community. Through the leadership of Maine Coast Heritage Trust, Maine State Planning Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Gulf of Maine Coastal Program and others, Maine’s conservation community has achieved outstanding conservation work. According to the Land Trust Alliance’s 2003 Land Trust Census, a total of 1,307,359 acres has been conserved, ranking Maine second in the nation for acreage protected by land trusts (second only to California).

Despite this work to safeguard critical coastal resources, there grows an erosive sprawl across the landscape that is outstripping the capacity of the coastal conservation community. As a result, habitat for Maine’s coastal species is becoming fragmented, recreational and commercial access to the coast is being lost, and the unique scenic vistas and cultural resources of the region are disappearing. A study by Maine State Planning Office says the majority of the Maine coast will be classified as “suburban/urban” by 2050 if current trends continue unabated.

To address the compelling need and time-sensitive opportunities, the MCPI project team—LTA and its lead part-

ners, the Maine State Planning Office, Maine Coast Heritage Trust, and the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration Coastal Services Center (NOAA)—brought 70-plus land trusts and coastal organizations together in 2004 to engage in a year-long planning process to identify what it would take to save the coast. These many partners then coalesced to form the MCPI Coalition.

About the launch of the collaborative, Maine Coast Heritage Trust’s president, Jay Espy, says, “With this Initiative, we wanted to add to our collective ability to strengthen our coastal land trusts and stimulate new funding opportunities such as from the Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program. The sum of the on-the-ground results we hope will equal a dramatic growth in both the amount of quality conservation and the supportive constituency that understands its value.”

A Strategic Conservation Framework . . .

seeks to build upon existing programs and local expertise to:

- 1 Create a viable network** of conserved land that protects Maine’s priority coastal habitats, recreational and working access, and scenic and cultural features;
- 2 Help land trusts** acquire the professional and technical resources needed to proactively protect priority lands and attend to long-term stewardship needs; and
- 3 Build strong public support** and increased funding for coastal conservation.

Planning for an Entire Coast

Through the year of Coalition gatherings and discussion, this common vision for the coast emerged:

In 2025, despite increasing development pressures, the Maine coast will still be a landscape characterized by wild rocky shoreline and pristine coastal islands, protected tidal rivers and estuaries, active fishing access, working farms and forests, abundant recreational opportunities, and scenic views. Looking back from that time, we expect to see that MCPI helped catalyze Maine’s conservation community to work together for over 20 years to increase the pace and quality of coastal land conservation, resulting in significant on-the-ground conservation results. Thanks to this unique partnership of land trusts, conservation organizations, local, state and federal agencies, recreation and tourism groups, and private

fishermen, the Maine coast will continue to thrive as a vibrant natural, recreational, and commercial resource. A network of the Maine coast's most special places, large and small, will have been conserved for all time, sustaining Maine citizens and visitors through increased access to the ocean, preserved coastal scenic and cultural features, and protected habitat for native plants and animals.

From this statement of hope for coastal Maine, New England pragmatism moved the conversation swiftly to creating the playbook for implementation. Through their intensive planning work, the Coalition created a *Strategic Conservation Framework* with three overarching goals (at left). Underpinning these long-term goals are 16 short-term strategies to be accomplished by 2007. To achieve these, the MCPI Coalition combines its national and regional perspectives and resources with its local knowledge, community support and landowner relationships to achieve a new level of coordination, efficiency and effectiveness in coastal conservation.

More than a vision for guiding the future, this effort readies the Coalition to protect the places of our past. Says LTA National Director Ezra Milchman, "At one of the early MCPI Coalition meetings, I was saddened to learn that the coastal Maine property that first inspired my love of the land was soon to be developed into dozens of homesites. Had a proactive conservation plan like MCPI been in place just a few years earlier, a place with great meaning to so many people would have been saved. It is never too soon to start proactive planning to save the places you most cherish."

The Nuts and Bolts

With the MCPI's function defined, the Coalition's attention turned to form. The challenge was to find a structure and funding that married the need for the far-reaching vision with the realities of stretched schedules and wallets.

The initial MCPI project team worked with the Coalition to select a leadership group that represents the diverse interests of the coast. What emerged is a 20-member steering committee that acts as the decision-making body for the Coalition, headed by a volunteer chair from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Gulf of Maine Coastal Program. For the nitty-gritty work, the steering committee knew early on that it needed a mix of volunteer workgroups, new grant funds, leveraging of existing efforts and partnerships, and individual agency and organization investment. A project budget of

\$1.5 million was created to support the project through its initial 2007 goals, and fundraising began with a lead commitment of \$748,000 from NOAA.

The Framework, Goal 1

Creating a viable network of protected lands. From the very start the Coalition emphasized strategic conservation to ensure the best return on investment of conservation funds and efforts. To that end the *Strategic Conservation Framework* places at the fingertips of the land trusts robust information and tools for setting local and regional conservation priorities.

First up were a set of efforts compiling and creating conservation data on a coast-wide scale. After assessing existing information about the lands that best define the character of coastal Maine, the Coalition members selected three types of data to make whole and readily available: habitat, points of access to the coast, and scenic/cultural features.

As a result, in early 2006 three data development projects were launched. A new multi-agency collaborative entitled Beginning with Habitat [www.beginningwithhabitat.org] is spending a year identifying the prime habitat lands across the coast. At the same

time the first-ever mapping of all commercial and recreational access to the coast was begun by the Island Institute—an ambitious project that fights the quiet, undocumented loss of public connection and access to Maine's

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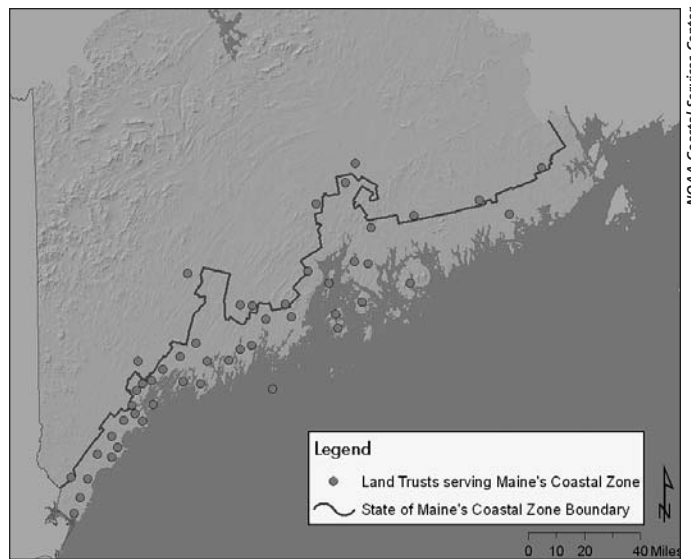


Tom Arter

THE SHEEPSHOT RIVER ESTUARY in Newcastle, Maine, lies within the service region of the Sheepscot Valley Conservation Association, a member of the Maine Coast Protection Initiative Coalition.

coastal waters. The Maine State Planning Office completes the trio with its work to develop and pilot a methodology communities can use to select their most defining scenic and cultural features. When all three projects have been completed, the conservation priorities that emerge from each data set will be depicted on a Coastal Reference Map—a tool that creates a new, broader viewing lens and context for a coastwide, viable network of conserved lands.

The next step is helping Maine land trusts use this information effectively in their communities. This is being accomplished through the building of a strategic conservation planning curriculum this year that will deliver through training sessions the best practices of strategic conservation, effective model processes and mentoring support to select land trusts.



Given the many trusts that are working in neighboring and sometimes overlapping coastal enclaves, collaboration in strategic conservation planning is key. To support better collaboration, MCPI funds were targeted to help launch, through the work of The Nature Conservancy, Maine Coast Heritage Trust, and Maine Land Trust Network GIS Council, a conserved lands database for GIS mapping that sets standards for how the myriad of available conservation data layers are organized, making information sharing easier, more professional and sustainable.

Making the point that strategic conservation not only helps identify land protection priorities but also ensures projects are highly competitive for limited funding support, Tim Glidden, director for the state conservation bond grant program, states, "The Initiative is developing the data and

A Coalition within a Coalition

by Roger P. Cole

The Mount Agamenticus to the Sea Conservation Initiative (Mt A to Sea) is a 10-member coalition conserving the unfragmented coastal forests, estuaries and working/recreational landscapes in southern Maine, and is a member of the MCPI Coalition.

In 3-1/2 years, Mt A to Sea has successfully completed a \$10 million dollar capital campaign, conserved over 1,300 acres and promoted a regional approach to land conservation. These accomplishments would not have been possible without the collaborative efforts and combined resources within the coalition.

As coordinator for the coalition, I respond to numerous inquiries from conservation organizations interested in the history and the methodology of the coalition. The coalition's organizational protocols, accomplishments and structural documents can be found online [www.mtatosea.org], though the story of the coalition is not easily communicated through documents.

IN THE BEGINNING: Mt A to Sea followed an earlier and smaller scale three-partner collaboration that provided a convincing example of the greater organizational efficiency and expanded fundraising opportunities available through partnering.

As a result of this earlier collaboration, the 10 conservation organizations—that heretofore, worked independently in southern Maine—began a conversation (that extended for over a year) about how they might weave similarities and differences into a unified arrangement.

During this period, the supporters for collaboration expressed their opinions and those not convinced of the benefits of collaboration probed the merits of working together. And in hindsight,

these respectful conversations provided partners with the confidence to launch the coalition.

FOUNDING DOCUMENTS: From the start, the coalition never developed the standard memorandums of understanding and founding agreements one might expect, but instead interacted with a high level of trust and communication. On advice from our auditors, however, an MOU was developed for the coalition in 2005. One early document that did anchor all partners to the coalition was the creation of a conservation plan for the 48,000-acre Mt A to Sea focus region. This science-based plan provided a profile of the characteristics that each partner agreed were critical resources to conserve in the Mt A to Sea region.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE: An Oversight Committee representing the 10 coalition partners meets monthly, with most decisions reached by consensus. The coordinator conducts the meeting and develops the agenda. Meetings are structured to provide a decision-making environment where every partner is heard and outcomes are based on what is best for the *whole* and not a single partner's interest.

Three committees (Finance, Campaign, and Communications and Policy) develop recommendations for consideration by the Oversight Committee. Managing the books and the accounting for the coalition requires skill and annual audits are conducted. One of the partnering land trusts serves as the coalition's fiscal agent.

The entire Mt A to Sea region is segmented into three land protection regions and land protection committees represent each of the three regions.

The coalition is staffed by a coordinator, campaign director and half-time administrative assistant. The campaign director manages all aspects of the fundraising, writes grants and oversees management of donor solicitations. The coordinator ensures

tools we need for strategic conservation. As a result, Maine will get high-quality land conservation projects that will compete well for our Land for Maine's Future program and other funding."

Goal 2

Building strong land trusts. A trip along Maine's coastal Route 1 shows landscapes marked with yawning conservation need. While the land trusts driving to meet this need are large in number, they are short on human resources, with volunteers stretched thin—of the nearly 50 coastal trusts, only 10 percent have two or more staff, and 60 percent have no full-time staff. Given this, the foundation to MCPI is helping these groups reach their full potential.

MCPI is creating two new pockets of funding for organizational capacity building and increasing implementation of the revised *Land Trust Standards and Practices*, anticipated to total \$350,000. One program, which is fully funded, focuses two-year competitive grants of up to \$60,000 with technical assistance packages to land trusts for significantly expanding their professional staff, programs, and/or collaboration. These grants are targeted for those organizations standing at the point of transformation into leading, professional land trusts. For those organizations not ready for the larger grants,

a separate program is being developed that will focus competitive grants averaging \$10,000 on capacity-building projects such as developing organizational and strategic conservation plans, enhancing their boards, building fundraising skills, and strengthening easement stewardship and land management practices.

Other capacity gaps identified by the Coalition were mapping services and savvy. Starting with a GIS needs assessment in 2005, a grants program then was designed to increase broadly GIS usage and capacity within the coastal land trust community. Grants totaling nearly \$70,000 were awarded to three organizations that will serve as GIS Resource Centers across the coast. These centers will use the funds to establish and upgrade their GIS capability. In time, this will enable the centers to provide land trusts in their service area with training, mapping services and access to equipment. In addition to the grants, MCPI also awarded six copies of ArcView software to four organizations.

Regarding stewardship of protected lands, MCPI is providing financial and other support to strengthen Maine's Conserved Lands Registry, coordinated by Maine Coast Heritage Trust, to help local land trusts collect and access the data they need for long-term responsible easement and fee land stewardship and defense [www.conservelands.net].

communication among the partners and committees and leads community outreach and municipal alliance-building.

BUILDING ALLIANCES: The partnership recognized that the region targeted for protection—simply because of its size—could not be conserved solely through the coalition's efforts. To expand conservation practices (i.e., municipal open space bonding,

The Mt A to Sea Initiative's work to protect land and water in southern Maine aids species such as the state endangered Blandings turtle (pictured) as well as the state threatened spotted turtle.



Maine Chapter of TNC

development impact fees for conservation and even suggestions on what roads to leave unpaved) alliances were formed with the municipalities within the Mt A to Sea focus region. The web of community connections established through the local coalition partners provides the vehicle for gaining invaluable access to municipal officials and regional planners.

DISTRIBUTION OF FUNDS: As much as collaborations increase opportunities for fundraising, they also increase the amount of time spent determining an equitable distribution of the dollars. This aspect of collaborating need not be any more challenging than other components of a partnership, but may require frequent revisiting and internal dialogue.

A feasibility study determined that a public, private and government agency capital campaign could conceivably raise \$10 million dollars (cash and land value combined).

To provide funds for stewardship, capacity, community outreach and campaign expenses, 21 percent is deducted from unrestricted funds and divided up across these four pre-determined categories.

The diversity of partnering members has provided Mt A to Sea an opportunity to reach a wider pool of potential funders. For example, the larger partners assist with obtaining federal and state funding and an occasional land/easement gift, and the three land trusts tend to draw individual donors, land gifts and municipal funding.

SUMMARY: Mt A to Sea's diversity of partners is its greatest strength. By including federal and state agencies, and large, established conservation organizations, along with three local land trusts, the coalition availed itself of a professional skills base and networking matrix unavailable to each independent partner. The findings of an outside evaluation commissioned by the partnership clearly indicated that the coalition practiced more efficient and effective conservation, expanded the capacity of the individual organizations and advanced municipal conservation planning (the full evaluation is on our website). 🍄

Mt A to Sea partners include: the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service/Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge, the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, the Wells National Estuarine Research Reserve, the Maine Coast Heritage Trust, The Trust for Public Land, The Nature Conservancy, the Great Works Regional Land Trust, the Kittery Land Trust, the York Land Trust and the York Rivers Association.

A Talk with Two MCPI Coalition Members

The Great Works Regional Land Trust in South Berwick, Maine, and the Sheepscot Valley Conservation Association in Newcastle have several things in common. They are both small local land trusts that have been serving their areas for many years (20 and 37 years, respectively). They are both fighting the heavy threat of development, and they are both members of the Maine Coast Protection Initiative Coalition.

Below, Tin Smith, board member of Great Works and Maureen Hoffman, executive director of Sheepscot Valley discuss the impacts that the Coalition has had on their work, as well as what their land trusts in turn have contributed to the Coalition.

Describe the impact the MCPI has had on your land trust.

TIN: It has brought an awareness of the whole coast as a key statewide resource to the work the Great Works Regional Land Trust is doing locally. The Trust has also benefited directly from access to GIS mapping from the Wells National Estuarine Research Reserve supported by MCPI grants.

MAUREEN: As a coastal land trust, we experience directly the increase in development and the rising costs of land in our area. MCPI has broadened our knowledge of conservation efforts along the coast outside our area, brought us in contact with many more organizations, not just land trusts, that are concerned about development along the coast, and helped us learn new techniques for doing our job a little better.

Describe what your land trust has brought to the process.

TIN: On the ground experience from the part of the state that is absorbing the most intense pressure from development. In south coastal Maine there is very little oceanfront land left either to develop or conserve. The struggle to balance growth and maintain the benefits of ecosystems has moved to our estuaries and watersheds that directly influence coastal resources.

The Trust, through its initiation and participation in the Mt. Agamenticus to the Sea Conservation Initiative (see *other sidebar*), has brought experience in both what a partnership can achieve and an understanding of the effort that that level of success requires.

MAUREEN: Our land trust, while protecting land, has also specialized in offering GIS services to other trusts as well

as working to help towns protect their natural resources while planning for future growth. We have brought that experience to the MCPI process and tried to help direct use of new technologies on a scale that can most help all the different sizes of land trusts on the coast.

What advice would you give other small land trusts looking to join a collaboration?

TIN: Collaborations take resources—time and money—to run successfully. The more organized and staffed your own operation the easier it is to participate in a coalition. The time demands for a collaboration can be hard on volunteer members.

Benefits and goals need to be clearly delineated and understood by all the partners (focus area(s), natural resources to be protected, how financial resources will be allocated, how decisions will be made, what commitments are required, stewardship responsibilities, financial obligations, joint staff oversight). Every partner should be there for a specific reason.

Collaborate in areas (fundraising, database management, stewardship) that will return the most benefits. You don't need to collaborate on everything.

Set a specific timeline for the collaboration and date for it to be evaluated and renewed. Everyone on your board needs to support the collaborative effort even if they do not take a direct role. It can be a great way and often the only way to take advantage of larger opportunities. The more complex and costly the project, the more partners needed.

MAUREEN: Collaboration can be as large as mergers or joint projects and as small as having someone in a similar position to bounce ideas off of. Any collaboration, and MCPI in particular, works because the whole is always greater than the separate parts and conservation is benefiting from the exposure to other groups concerned with protecting the coast of Maine that comes from working in a collaboration such as MCPI.

What are your hopes for the future of the Maine coast?

TIN: That the Maine coast remains and is appreciated as a high quality national treasure both by local residents and those from "away," and continues to provide both recreational and economic benefits that are accessible.

MAUREEN: I hope that the Maine coast of the future remains as vibrant a natural and scenic resource as it is today.

Underlying this registry and all these grant efforts is the theme of collaboration—each effort designed to build strength and efficiency from numbers.

"I've noticed a lot more discussion lately among land trusts in coastal Maine about collaborative efforts: ideas like joining efforts on land projects, coordinating stewardship responsibility and sharing staff in neighboring regions," says Liz Petruska, executive director of the Medomak Valley Land Trust. "MCPI initiated much of this conversation and seems committed to providing resources to help local

trusts move forward together. It's an exciting time to be working in land conservation."

Goal 3

Fostering public support and funding. Broadening and deepening the base of conservation support is the third goal of MCPI. On this topic, the Coalition will promote three themes: messaging, funding and partnerships.

The coast, while a priority in the mind for summer vacationers, faces stiff competition to be a priority for conserva-

tion funds in the private and public sectors for its protection. To this end, the Maine Coast Heritage Trust and Cross Current Productions are helping to tune and magnify the collective voice of the Coalition. With the input of an MCPI workgroup, they are developing a communication plan and tools aimed at deepening the understanding of coastal conservation in the minds of coastal decision-makers in government, business and other organizations. Concurrently, a separate workgroup is mapping out a fundraising strategy that will detail how the Coalition will use its collective voice to advance conservation funding.

The Coalition recognizes that the collective leverage and goodwill gained from its partnership will be the most effective tools for addressing ongoing—and often intense—development pressure from myriad coastal resource users. More than anywhere else in the state, the expense and desirability of coastal real estate demand is placing up front the need for creativity and collaboration in solving conservation challenges. The Initiative, therefore, places a premium on encouraging and sharing lessons coastwide from innovative partnerships for conservation. For example, MCPI funding is supporting the work of the Mt. Agamenticus to the Sea Con-

servation Initiative (see p. 12) in providing tools and technical assistance to help towns realize their full potential as conservation leaders. Further down the coast, funding is also invested in the Mid-Coast Council for Business Development & Planning [www.mcbdp.org] in their work with 12 towns and the local Mid-Coast land trusts to implement a strategic regional open space plan that is based on a thorough, community-based visioning project.

At a recent Coalition meeting, Stewart Fefer, who chairs the MCPI steering committee and is director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Gulf of Maine Coastal Program, said, "This Initiative is founded in the spirit of collaboration and partner-



Maine Coast Heritage Trust

ship for which Maine is known nationwide. The unique and important component of the projects supported by MCPI is that they all fit together under a coast-wide strategic framework aimed at advancing conservation."

The Next Chapter

The MCPI engines are running full tilt to achieve the 2007 *Strategic Conservation Framework* goals. Currently 10 workgroups are up and running, \$233,000 of grants awarded, and the 16 separate strategies all underway. And the broader coastal and conservation community is taking note. Margaret Davidson, director of the NOAA Coastal Services Center, which is a participant and funder for MCPI, states, "This process and products of the MCPI project are timely and relevant models for private-public partnerships to advance coastal conservation. We are using the lessons learned in Maine to help further conservation across the country."

Already emerging from their collaborative work are a definition of statewide and regional conservation priorities, new support for a wide variety of coastal conservation efforts, enhanced capacity of coastal land trusts to be more proactive and strategic, and stronger public understanding of and investment in coastal conservation work.

With these growing accomplishments under their belt, the Coalition is beginning to look ahead to the next horizon. In 2007 they will be assessing status of MCPI and decide if and how to move forward, including changes in scope, character, funding and leadership.

"No matter what form the Initiative takes, the experiences and lessons learned from this collaboration will infuse all of our future coastal conservation work," says Jim Connors, with the State Planning Office Coastal Program. "The journey is as important as the destination." 🍀

Amy Owsley is the Land Trust Alliance's field representative for the Maine Coast Protection Initiative.

Online Resources

- **Maine Coast Protection Initiative**
www.protectcoastalmaine.org
- **Maine Coast Heritage Trust**
www.mcht.org
- **National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration Coastal Services Center**
www.csc.noaa.gov
- **Maine State Planning Office**
www.state.me.us/spo
- **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Gulf of Maine Coastal Program**
www.fws.gov/northeast/gulfofmaine
- **Beginning with Habitat**
www.beginningwithhabitat.org
- **Maine Conserved Land Registry**
www.conservelands.net
- **Mid-Coast Council for Business Development & Planning**
www.mcbdp.org
- **Mt. Agamenticus to the Sea Coalition**
www.mtatosea.org
- The excellent report by Sylvia Bates, *Models of Collaboration Among Land Trusts*, Maine Coast Heritage Trust, June 2005, can be found on www.itanet.org.