Waiting and Seeing in Coos County: The Promise and Promises of Lake Umbagog

by Thomas Brendler

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About the National Community Forestry Center . . .

The National Community Forestry Center (NCFC) is a decentralized network with four regional centers and a national coordinator. The four regional centers are located in the Southwest, the Appalachians, the Pacific Northwest, and the Northeast. The Northern Forest Regional Center of the NCFC is administered by Yellow Wood Associates, Inc. of St. Albans, Vermont. The northern forest region, our primary area of service, comprises the states of Maine, New Hampshire, New York, and Vermont.

The core purpose of the Northern Forest Regional Center is to help rural people conduct and use research to inform decision-making about forest resources. Our goal is to add value to the work of communities, organizations, and institutions in our region who share a vision of healthy communities and healthy forests, now and for future generations.

The work of the Center includes:
- developing partnerships with existing organizations who share our vision
- assisting rural communities in defining research agendas and engaging scientists in participatory research
- conducting targeted research to address region-wide issues and opportunities
- responding to requests by rural people for information and technical assistance related to community forestry
- establishing mechanisms such as listservs, webpage, newsletter, and conferences to facilitate information sharing and networking
- publishing fact sheets, reports, and other materials on forest-related topics
- working intensively with up to three communities per year based on priorities established by the Bioregional Advisory Council.

We look forward to engaging you in this unique opportunity to support rural people in creating healthy communities and healthy forests. We would be happy to respond to your inquiries about the Center’s services, or about specific forest topics, and are prepared to assist you in locating forest-related information and resources.

The National Community Forestry Center is a program of the National Network of Forest Practitioners. Network members share an interest in rural community development based upon sustainable forestry, and, even more importantly, a conviction that healthy communities and healthy ecosystems are interdependent.
Editors Note—This case study was written in 1997. Since then, many things have changed in the Northern Forest, and in the area surrounding Lake Umbagog. We’ve chosen to present this story as is because we think it offers valuable lessons about the experience of one community whose forestland became the object of broad public interest.

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Context & History

On most maps of northern New Hampshire, the roads end at Errol, dodging east along Lake Umbagog and into Maine or west through Dixville Notch, toward Vermont. And with good reason: this is the heart of the Northern Forest, one of the largest contiguous forests in the United States, stretching some 26 million acres across New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine.

Lake Umbagog lies in the northeastern corner of New Hampshire, straddling the Maine border. It is fed by two dam-regulated tributaries which carry water from six other lakes in western Maine. Lake Umbagog serves as the headwaters of the Androscoggin River, which flows through the towns of Errol, Berlin, and Gorham, beyond which it cuts southeast through southern Maine and empties into the Atlantic.

At almost 8,000 acres, Umbagog is the second largest lake in New Hampshire, and the largest inland wetland system in New Hampshire. Its ecological significance has been recognized as a priority under both the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and the Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986. A portion of the lake’s wetlands has also been designated as a National Natural Landmark by the National Park Service. Lake Umbagog is home to a diverse abundance of wildlife, including many threatened and endangered species and boasts the largest loon breeding area in the state. The lake’s forested shoreline is almost entirely undeveloped, sparsely dotted with rustic cabins—weekend respites for residents of the region to hunt, fish, and snowmobile.

Amid such dazzling natural beauty – and concerns for its preservation – it is easy to overlook the influence of people on the landscape. The outlet of Lake Umbagog, at Errol, was dammed in the mid-1800s to power a local sawmill. Upgrading the dam to control water flows enabled timber companies to float logs to other mills more reliably, and the construction of more dams downstream even-
tually harnessed the Androscoggin to power a giant pulp mill in Berlin, some 40 miles downriver. Rising water levels expanded Lake Umbagog from 1,000 to 7,000 acres, and enabled the creation of the plentiful wetland habitats prized by today’s conservationists.

The entire Northern Forest has been continuously cleared and cut since European settlement, evolving from a colonial treasure trove of timber (which supplied the British Royal Navy with virgin white pine for ship masts) to the foundation of a new nation’s growing economy. By the close of the 19th century much of the land which had originally been bought up by a mixture of wealthy families, timber companies, and farmers, was acquired by paper companies whose relatively undiscriminating demand for fiber had enabled them to outlast – and buy out – their neighbors. Although the firms themselves have been forever selling land to one another and being bought out and renamed (at such a dizzying pace that one still hears companies referred to by their former names), the land has remained primarily in the hands of large forest products companies. As recently as the early 1990s, timber, paper, and forestland investment companies owned about 86 percent of the land around Lake Umbagog, according to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

The continued presence of the forest products industry, the magnitude of its land holdings, and the sheer plenitude of forestland are three reasons why it has come to form the backbone of the region’s economy. For example, Crown Vantage’s paper mill in Berlin, home to many who spend their weekends around Lake Umbagog, employs nearly 1,000 people and works with some 150 independent suppliers. Crown Vantage (which absorbed the James River Corporation in 1980) is the largest employer in a county of 35,000 people. The mill runs just under half a million cords of pulpwood annually, generating about $200 million in added value.

For the towns and unincorporated townships in the Umbagog region, the forest and the forest products industry serve as the primary source of work, whether through direct employment with one of the large firms or small sawmills, logging contracting, road maintenance, consulting forestry, log hauling, or truck repair. While tourism—which is on the rise—does make a substantial contribution to the region’s economy—it remains a distant second. Yet, despite the fact that unemployment in Coos County (which dominates this region of northern New Hampshire) is falling, the area still has the highest jobless rate in the state (The Berlin Reporter, 6/28/97).

Coos County accounts for 20 percent of New Hampshire’s land base, but is home to only two percent of the state’s population.
Many of the people who live there have made a deliberate, often defiant choice to live close to the land, amid natural beauty, and to live at arms length from urban culture and the centers of government.

This northern corner of New Hampshire, divided from the south by the White Mountains which stretch across New Hampshire like Hadrian’s wall, seems like a another state altogether. Those who live there see themselves and their world quite differently from the neighboring “flatlanders” to the south, often identifying themselves with the rural communities of western Maine and even Quebec, from which many of their ancestors once emigrated. Some have lived here for generations. Most are proud to live here, and are suspicious (and often resentful) of outsiders flocking northward in increasing numbers or meddling in local affairs from afar. These sensibilities have been galvanized by what many see as chronic under-representation in the state legislature.

People in the Umbagog region have made use of its forests, lakes, and rivers for generations, especially for boating, fishing, hunting, and (more recently) snowmobiling. Many residents of Errol, Berlin, and other nearby towns own “camps” in the woods or along the lakeshore. Camps are essentially houses or cabins in the woods built and used by families primarily for recreational use in the warmer months (although some are used year round). At least in the case of the Umbagog area, while families own their camps, most lease their land from large landowners like Crown Vantage. Leases have traditionally been inexpensive, and accompanied by few restrictions. In addition, large industrial landowners continue to permit—and even encourage—recreation of all kinds on their lands. These types of arrangements are characteristic of the long-standing, cordial relationship between large industrial landowners and local residents across northern New England.

Much of the increased attention to the Umbagog region focused on the large industrial landowners who dominate the landscape. Many conservation groups questioned whether the region’s forests could sustain the mills’ demands for raw material in the long term. Other groups saw them as a influential player with whom they needed to build partnerships. This appreciation for the companies’ influence stemmed as much from the magnitude of their land holdings, as from their role as a leading employer, guarantor of access to forestland, and creator of hunting habitat in the form of logged tracts.

For many local residents, the timber and paper companies have long been seen as guardians of their way of life. One only need walk
through streets of downtown Berlin, from whose center the paper mill rises like a cathedral, to understand its significance. The successive owners of the mill have made substantial contributions to the social and cultural institutions of the region over the years. Ironically, people from all quarters also see companies like Crown Vantage selling land, unloading their subsidiaries, and wonder what will happen when they, too, are bought out, or simply shut down when the forest reserves run dry.

In the mind of one long-time Berlin resident, people in Berlin, even those employed by the mill, are resigned to the inevitability of the departure of the Berlin mill, regardless of who happens to own it when that day comes. This, he observed, marks a significant turnaround from the days when the mill formed the axis of Berlin’s culture and economy, and, by extension, of Coos County, and will likely lessen the blow (ease the economic transition) when Crown Vantage closes its doors. Production and employment have been slowly slipping—largely resulting from efforts to stay competitive (a paper mill in Kentucky where his daughter works, he says, turns out twice as much paper with a quarter of the workforce).

The Specter of Development

The prosperity of the 1980s led speculators of all kinds to set their sights on the Northern Forest, especially in northern New Hampshire. For residents and conservationists alike, fears of detrimental and irrevocable change were validated when a land developer bought 186,000 acres of former timber company land which it intended to subdivide. What made the sale particularly alarming was the fact that it was being offered for far more than the value of the standing timber. In their 1995 book, The Northern Forest, David Dobbs and Richard Ober conclude:

... Land was becoming a commodity in and of itself, beyond its value for growing wood. Real estate was a corporate asset that could be sold as needed to improve cash flow, ward off a hostile takeover, or pay off a debt.

The “Diamond Sale,” so named for the match company which originally owned the land, served as a proverbial warning sign, and prompted conservation groups to scramble to buy up land. Rising public concern about the fate of the region also attracted the interest of Congress, which commissioned the USDA Forest Service to conduct the Northern Forest Land Study in 1988. The study was designed to look at land ownership patterns and trends in the Northern Forest, and propose strategies for possible Congressional action. The
Governors’ Task Force on Northern Forest Lands, composed of three gubernatorily-appointed representatives from each of the Northern Forest states (New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine) worked with the Forest Service on the study, and also issued its own report to coincide with the release of the study in 1990.

One of the recommendations of the Governors’ Task Force was to create a four-state advisory, non-regulatory, non-acquisition body, the Northern Forest Land Council, to continue the work begun by the Northern Forest Land Study. The Council met from 1991 to 1994, sponsoring what Dobbs and Ober refer to as a “regional town meeting . . . arguably the most exhaustive debate ever held over a regional land-use issue.” The group’s recommendations were published in a report entitled *Finding Common Ground: Conserving the Northern Forest*. Among its recommendations, the report proposed basic strategies for public land acquisition in the Northern Forest, supported funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (a federal conservation-oriented land acquisition program) as well as state land acquisition programs, and emphasized the need to look beyond acquisition for other viable conservation tools.

To many, the Diamond sale foretold of a larger, imminent threat to Umbagog’s natural wealth from developers eager to buy up lakeshore property and subdivide for second homes and recreation-based enterprises. Umbagog was widely considered the last unspoiled lake in New Hampshire, but with the improvement of interstate highways, travel time from Boston was cut to just a few hours, and there seemed to be nothing keeping Umbagog from the fate of lakes like Winnepesaukee and Squam to the south, with their built-up shorelines, sprawling settlements, and swarms of watercraft. To complicate matters further, timber and paper companies were starting to unload their land – tempted by rising land prices or, in some cases, as a consequence of corporate buyouts. Still other corporate landowners were simply coming to the realization that they did not need to own land to maintain a flow of raw material to their mills. For example, since the early 1980s, Crown Vantage (formerly James River Corporation), at the time the largest landowner around Lake Umbagog, had been selling off nearly all of its land.

At the same time, however, many people, especially local residents, disputed that a development threat existed. Many still maintain this view, pointing to the fact that, despite the frenzy, the Diamond Sale developer never built on the land it retained. Critics also questioned whether development of any kind was necessarily detrimental, if it meant employment and business opportunities. Many in the region, especially outfitters, had already begun to enjoy the monetary benefits of increasing numbers of “flatlander” outdoor enthusi-
Northern White Cedar

asts. However, many of those same people also argued that building up Umbagog’s shoreline might easily be bad for businesses that market themselves based upon the area’s pristine character. Questions emerged: If there was to be development, what types were desirable, and how much should occur? And, more importantly, who should—or would—decide what was appropriate for the region?

Differences even among those who agreed that development was coming to the region reveal varying and sometimes hypocritical views of nature. For example, the fact that much of Umbagog’s biological wealth is itself indebted to development—the construction of the Errol dam—not to mention generations of resident and non-resident use, raises the question of what exactly was to be protected from development, and why? Did those that sought to “protect” the lake seek merely to stave off an influx of second homes and shorefront hotels? Or did they want to turn back the clock and fence off the region as reclaimed wilderness, off limits to long-time residents and at the expense of part of the local way of life?

By the late 1980s, concern for the natural wealth of the Lake Umbagog region, pristine or not, was widespread, with one significant exception. As one Berlin native explained, the city’s dominance by the paper industry had created an island of industrial culture that shaped how people viewed their physical surroundings. He shared boyhood memories of running home from school with his eyes clenched to keep out the fly ash from the mill’s boilers, of the river water just beyond the mill bubbling from discharge, and of housewives wiping down clotheslines before hanging the wash. He described how, despite the fact that most of the hillside homes in Berlin have a “million-dollar view” of the legendary Mt. Washington, most people kept their windows closed and the shades pulled. In seeming contradiction, he went on, these same people who spent much of their time literally blocking out their natural surroundings, spent weekends and vacations around Lake Umbagog, though more as an escape than out of an explicit desire to reconnect with the forests beyond the mill.

This starkly different perspective calls into question what others had been assuming all along: that the natural wealth of the Umbagog region was proxy for the well-being of the surrounding communities. The assertion may very well have been true, but at least some did not see it so.
The Roots of Response

One of the great ironies about Umbagog is that people seem to have wanted the same thing—for Umbagog to remain unchanged, or as close to it as possible—but differed greatly but how best to achieve this goal. Would the problems just take care of themselves? Was the answer simply for people to dig in their heels and defend the status quo? Or were more aggressive, counter-maneuvers necessary? The differences of opinion, of which there seem to have been no shortage, reflect not only differences in how people envision their relationship to the forest, but also how they interpret changes in the world around them, and their role in it.

Coos County residents were already feeling overlooked by the state legislature and increasingly resentful and powerless in the face of growing interest in Lake Umbagog from “away.” For these people, hands-off approach stemmed as much from recalcitrance as it did from an earnest belief that it would achieve what they wanted. Others, possibly with more information about the powerful interests and vast sums of money involved, wondered whether they could afford to wait. One resident explained that the level of information about what changes were afoot in the region, as well as the ideas about what should or shouldn’t be done, varied greatly among local residents and many, even town officials, seemed altogether ambivalent.

The question of what was to be done in response to development also raised the question of whether there was a necessary role for government and non-governmental organizations. Local residents were vocally distrustful of conservation groups (most of which were based outside the region) and anxious about increased governmental meddling in local affairs. Yet, state conservation groups (including state chapters of national groups) feared the worst, and saw state and federal governments as the only possible partner with adequate wherewithal to stave off development in the region. The complexity and scale of the Umbagog threat, not to mention the sheer breadth of public opinion, would require a broad assemblage of public and private institutions to work together. The success of such an effort would rest heavily on their ability to work effectively in delicate partnerships, their willingness to experiment with new techniques and adaptive organizational relationships, and most importantly their ability to allay local suspicion by integrating the values and priorities of area residents.
Birth of a Refuge

In 1983, the Concord, New Hampshire-based Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, purchased a 162-acre island in the middle of the lake. The key to continuing this effort was money for the acquisition of land and conservation easements, as well as a mechanism for brokering the actual land deals. The answer came in the form of a unique public-private partnership. The Trust for New Hampshire Lands was formed in 1986 to raise private funds for this effort and to negotiate land deals. The Land Conservation Investment Program was established by the New Hampshire state legislature in 1987, armed with nearly $50 million in state money. While the prosperity of the 1980s had raised the specter of development at Umbagog, ironically it had also made public monies more plentiful in this famously frugal state. (Perhaps one reason for the palatability of the Trust for New Hampshire Lands and the Land Conservation Incentive Program was the fact that both were created with the explicit understanding that they would be phased out after a period of five years.)

In the first three years of the effort, the Land Conservation Incentive Program and the Trust for New Hampshire Lands together had secured some 90,000 acres in 110 towns across the state. For its part, Maine created a similar entity, the Land for Maine’s Future Board at approximately the same time.

Amid this atmosphere of abundant state and private conservation monies, the Trust for New Hampshire Lands assembled stakeholders interested in the Umbagog region, including state agencies from Maine and New Hampshire, the Appalachian Mountain Club, National Audubon Society, private landowners, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). This assortment of stakeholders came to be known as the Lake Umbagog Study Team. In the group’s discussions, the USFWS, which had been interested in Umbagog for quite some time, championed the idea of a national wildlife refuge. Realistically, USFWS was the only entity with adequate funding for such a sustained program of land acquisition. USFWS’s long-standing interest in creating a national wildlife refuge at Umbagog was galvanized by the discovery in 1988 of a nesting pair of bald eagles, the first in the state in nearly 40 years.

The agency convened a series of preliminary meetings involving state agencies, conservation groups, landowners, and the USFWS to discuss its notion of a refuge at Umbagog. Two years later, the USFWS began preparing an Environmental Assessment – as required by the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) – to
determine whether its refuge proposal would “significantly affect the quality of the human environment.”

Preparation of the Umbagog Environmental Assessment began in 1990. As part of this process, the USFWS organized three preliminary “scoping meetings” in September (in Errol, Berlin and Concord), and held an additional three meetings following the December release of the draft Environmental Assessment. At the same time USFWS officials met one-on-one with the county land board, hunting clubs and other local interest groups in an effort to sell and tweak the refuge concept. The final Environmental Assessment was issued in June of 1991, concluding that the creation of a refuge at Umbagog would not “adversely affect the quality of the human environment” and would “result in preservation of existing uses [and that] land use changes [would] be minimal.”

The action proposed in the final Environmental Assessment called for the creation of a 7,256-acre National Wildlife Refuge through the gradual acquisition of property by the Fish and Wildlife Service. The function of this “core” area would be to protect and manage the lake’s wetland habitats for those species which depend on them. According to the plan, this refuge would be surrounded by an 8,609-acre protective “buffer” constructed through a combination of conservation easements (procured by both the USFWS and the Land Conservation Incentive Program) and acquisition by the Land Conservation Incentive Program. For its part of this cooperative effort, the state of Maine proposed easement protection for nearly 13,000 acres on the eastern side of the lake.

The key to the success of the refuge and the broader collaborative effort was to involve the handful of large industrial landowners which owned most of the land in the Umbagog area. According to an official from Crown Vantage, industrial owners had a number of reasons to cooperate in the creation of the refuge. First, much of the land considered to be of high conservation value, namely wetlands, was not productive timberland. Second, the USFWS was obligated to pay market value for the land it sought. And third, selling off ecologically significant parcels would spare the company difficult, unwise, and perhaps controversial land deals later on, which might ultimately spur unwanted litigation and legislation. For the time being at least, the landowners could enjoy the freedom to negotiate with an emerging legion of interested buyers.

Not surprisingly, Crown Vantage was the first large landowner to negotiate with the USFWS and the Land Conservation Incentive Program. Boise Cascade (then the second-largest landowner around the lake), the Pingree heirs (represented by Seven Islands Land Com-
pany), and Union Water Power Company soon followed suit. While some landowners preferred to sell their land outright, perhaps out of a concern that a clear and succinct relationship with the conservationists was a safer route, Crown Vantage also negotiated easements with the Land Conservation Incentive Program. The company’s philosophy continues to be that land need not be publicly owned to be well-managed and protected.

In July of 1992, the Land Conservation Incentive Program purchased the first piece of the refuge complex, a nearly 450-acre waterfront tract for $2 million. The Lake Umbagog National Wildlife Refuge was officially established in November with the USFWS’s purchase of its first parcel. At present, the agency has acquired 4,100 acres. The State of New Hampshire, via the Land Conservation Incentive Program owns more than 1,000 acres, and holds conservation easements on more than 2,500 acres. The State of Maine has not yet acquired any land or easements as part of the Umbagog effort.

**A Precious Puzzle: Perspectives & Lessons**

As is the case with many rural communities, the people who live near Lake Umbagog harbor a fundamental distrust of the federal government. Largely for this reason, many of those who agreed with the need for a refuge expressed interest in seeing a county-based solution rather than a state or federal one. The creation of the refuge is considered by many to be emblematic of a larger trend toward increased governmental meddling in the affairs of rural communities. One critic saw the creation of the refuge as a foothold with which the state and federal governments would soon begin to leverage increased restrictions on land access and traditional land uses. While such apprehension might seem exaggerated, the Environmental Assessment does state that the refuge’s primary purpose is habitat protection and includes malleable wordings such as “appropriate traditional wildlife-oriented public uses” [italics added].

For some local residents, these apprehensions were validated during the creation of the refuge. There is an almost unanimous sense among Errol residents and other participants in the process that local people were involved too late and too minimally. There were only six public meetings in all, four of which took place in rural communities near the proposed refuge.

It is also quite clear from the Environmental Assessment that at the time that the first public meetings took place there was already a proposal on the table. In fact, some who were present at the
first public meeting in Errol recall raising concerns about the creation of a refuge, only to be advised that the purpose of the meeting was to explain "how things were going to be."

Citing the 50 percent drop in public meeting attendance following the release of the draft Environmental Assessment, many argue that USFWS in particular should have taken a larger role in working with local residents. Nevertheless, while the local residents interviewed faulted the refuge process, most conceded that the refuge was a hard choice but a good idea. Indeed, the final Environmental Assessment reports that 85 percent of all written responses to the draft Environmental Assessment supported the refuge proposal, and that there was substantial support expressed at public meetings (albeit “less vocal” than the opposition).

Defenders of the process maintain that communities like Errol constituted neither “interested buyers” nor “willing sellers” in a project that was based upon the sale and purchase of land. They also point out that the landowners – upon whom the success of the effort rested – insisted on confidentiality, which precluded public involvement earlier in the process.

Some contend that the “unweighted” public involvement facilitated by the NEPA process is insufficient, and therefore question the USFWS’s determination of “no significant impact” on the human environment. (Perhaps the Environmental Impact Statement that a finding of “significant impact” would have required, might have anticipated and resolved some of the local residents’ lingering concerns.) As one observer noted, “public policy needs to account for proximity.” Supporters of this concept argue that because neighboring communities stand to be most acutely affected by changes in land management and ownership, they should be afforded greater involvement and influence in public resource management. As one local resident bluntly summed up, referring to policy makers: “Those people don’t live here.” The question that remains is: To what extent should local communities be involved in efforts like the Umbagog refuge, and how? Can greater local involvement be compatible with the fundamental goals of the proposed project—in this case habitat protection?

For some, local complaints of not being adequately involved are symptomatic of a larger problem: communities are too often caught in a reactive posture. This thinking is reinforced by policy mechanisms like the NEPA process in which the public’s role is largely responsive. Even definitive victories, like the defeat of a proposal in the 1970s to mine Lake Umbagog, can be ultimately reactive. One observer advocated the need to develop the capacity of rural communities to become proactive by overcoming divisiveness
and aggressively pursuing their own homegrown vision. Why, he posited, didn’t the town of Errol or Coos County create a strategic plan for the Umbagog region or at least seek assistance in doing so? In other words, why did they wait for the USFWS to propose a refuge?

Local people have also been perplexed by a sense that little has happened since the refuge was designated. USFWS’s most recent acquisition—4.25 acres—occurred during the summer of 1996. The refuge’s hunting and management plans, both of which the Environmental Assessment assured would be promptly completed and would involve extensive consultation with local residents, have yet to take shape. The main reason appears to be inadequate funding of the refuge since its creation. This has stalled acquisition and hampered other required refuge activities such as ecological inventories and the completion of the refuge’s management plan. (It should be noted, however, that many local residents point to the newly-constructed refuge headquarters, which one person likened to Fort Knox, as an indication the agency has funding, but is not spending it prudently.)

Conservationists are concerned that Land for Maine’s Future has yet to acquire any property or easements, leaving most of the eastern shore of Lake Umbagog unprotected. It seems that Maine has areas it considers to be of greater conservation priority than Lake Umbagog.

Others see Umbagog’s budgetary crisis as a fundamental shortcoming of the process by which refuges are created: First the refuge is designated, and then property and/or easements are purchased to gradually “fill in the puzzle.” One recommendation offered in hindsight was to ensure that the USFWS has the resources to implement its plans prior to designation. Under such an arrangement, funds for acquisition would not only be in place at the time of designation, but would also be paired with management monies.

Many residents of Errol and nearby towns also point to several detrimental (and perhaps unforeseen) impacts they see as linked to the USFWS and the refuge. These include higher property taxes, inadequate revenue sharing payments, and restrictions placed on lakefront camps. While some residents argue that the USFWS’s willingness to “pay anything” has driven up property values and property taxes, it is more likely that the agency was simply trying to be a competitive bidder amid growing demand for lands around Umbagog. At any rate, this observation is curious, considering the sense among some landowners that agency bids were below market value and the fact that the agency’s own regulations require it to offer the market rate for property, based on the land’s “highest and best use”—in this case, development.
In addition, residents argue that revenue sharing payments, made by the USFWS to local governments in lieu of property taxes, have not reflected the agency’s original promises. While it is true that the agency’s Congressional appropriation can cause payments to fall short of agency calculations, data indicate that USFWS revenue-sharing payments have still exceeded the amount local governments would have received had lands remained in private hands. The main reason for this is that USFWS payments are based on appraisal of its property based on its value for development. By contrast, at the time the refuge was created, 78 percent of the Errol lands to be included in the proposed refuge complex were taxed under New Hampshire’s “current use” status, which, as an incentive to keep land in a forested condition, yields a reduced tax rate for forestland. Moreover, because much of the land that interested the USFWS was wetland, which is taxed at an even lower rate, it is likely that the margin between USFWS payments and property taxes would be even greater. The agency also points out that keeping the land it acquires in a forested condition spares the local governments the cost of additional public services development would require, such as sewage, schools, and road maintenance.

It might have been the USFWS’s appraisal system which led to another frustration for local residents: increases in land rents for camp leases. Many see costly leases, together with tight restrictions on repairs to existing camps, as part of an attempt by the USFWS to slowly shut the refuge off from traditional land uses (much in the same way rising property taxes were seen to be forcing people to sell). By one account, land rents tripled in just a few years, but some of those interviewed added that rents had already been increasing under corporate ownership. At any rate, this development is perhaps the most troubling of all because camps embody the local way of life, especially the value placed on independence, self-sufficiency, and direct interaction with nature. Because camp leases were originally created by large private landowners as a way to encourage public stewardship, their demise seems ironic in this era of heightened conservation.

Those involved in the creation of the refuge know that their work has only begun. Fortunately it appears that the lull in activity on the refuge is only temporary: a comprehensive refuge management plan (which will include the required hunting plan) is to be completed by 2004, and the Refuge Manager is working with the Audubon Society to establish a network of volunteers and supporters from near and far. A wide variety of groups across the country have mobilized to increase the Land and Water Conservation Fund appropriation, and there is talk of creating another the Land Con-
servation Incentive Program, which could help continue piecing together Umbagog’s precious puzzle.

Beyond the Refuge: 
Emerging Efforts in the Upper Androscoggin Valley

The creation of the Umbagog National Wildlife Refuge and the crisis which led to it marked a turning point for local residents and concerned “flatlanders” alike—a proverbial Rubicon that once crossed allows no return. Still, many local residents openly pine for the days when they, in their teens and twenties, first moved to the region for its quiet, its isolation, its beauty.

In the six years since the refuge was created, the innocence lost has been replaced by a more savvy, pragmatic sensibility characterized by a commitment to local capacity-building, an appreciation for the interdependence of economic and ecological concerns, and an adherence to a long-term, regional perspective. A heightened sense of regional identity has been coupled with the emergence of a new breed of sophisticated and intriguing partnerships. Therefore, while few would credit the Umbagog refuge as the wellspring of these latest initiatives, most would agree it has played crucial supporting role by drawing valuable attention to a traditionally neglected corner of New Hampshire, and by illuminating the complex web of issues and stakeholders involved in balancing economic development and environmental protection in the region. These contributions, however indirect, may prove to be among the refuge’s most significant.

Most notably, the relationships built through the creation of the refuge have led to a collaborative effort between the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC) and Crown Vantage on USFWS and company land, involving an extensive forest inventory, and an ecologically-minded forest management plan. A pilot timber sale under the arrangement was carried out during the winter of 1996-97. The sale was judged by one Crown Vantage official to have been economically viable, despite the lower softwood volumes and extra staff time involved. Those who collaborated on the management plan are hopeful that the success of the project will help to further diversify the conservation tools available to the Umbagog region.

A similar project, involving cooperative field research and the development of a management plan, is planned for Mead Corporation lands abutting the Umbagog refuge. By working cooperatively with large landowners, AMC hopes to preserve the natural wealth in the Umbagog region while allowing forests to continue to generate income and employment.
AMC’s partnership with Crown Vantage forms part of its Upper Androscoggin Valley Community Conservation Project, a broader effort to stimulate the long-term conservation of the region’s natural resources by promoting a sustainable local economy. This effort has involved opening an office in Gorham, collaborating with and participating in a variety of local groups, (not to mention supporting some of their endeavors through a mini-grants program) and commissioning a regional community development study. AMC has also organized a popular “source-to-sea” canoe trek and helped develop a pilot watershed curriculum for the Gorham Middle School.

Most significantly perhaps is the development of an Androscoggin River Watershed Council, which will address such integral issues as river recreation access, riparian protection, and recreation-based economic development. All of these activities coupled with a heightened local presence mark a significant transformation for AMC, a 120-year old conservation organization with a deep-seated local reputation as an “elitist outsider.” AMC’s new role as a sympathetic, effective partner may bode well for a region wracked by long-standing tensions between outsiders and locals.

As in many areas of the United States, natural and cultural heritage in the Umbagog region is becoming increasingly recognized as a fulcrum for sustainable, locally-based economic development. Perhaps most visible is Berlin’s Northern Forest Heritage Park, which includes a Heritage Trail highlighting Berlin’s historic features, and an interpretive center on the cultural, forestry, and natural history of the Upper Androscoggin Valley. In addition, Tri-County Community Action, a multi-purpose social service and advocacy organization in northern New Hampshire, is developing a conservation-based development ecotourism project on a section of the Androscoggin about halfway between Berlin and Errol, as part of its economic development program. These initiatives will likely be strengthened by the Governor’s creation in early 1998 of a new tourism district in Coos County, “The Great North Woods.” The announcement was intended to boost tourism in the region, distinguish it from the Central White Mountain region immediately to the south (symbolized by the famed Mt. Washington). A newly-formed association was also created to act as a clearinghouse for providing information on the region to residents and visitors alike.

Epilogue: A Legacy of Hope

On a blustery day in June 1997, some 50 people clustered in the shade of a tent pitched on the lawn next to the newly-built headquarters of the Lake Umbagog National Wildlife Refuge. Both the
weather and the liveliness of the guests seemed at odds with the purpose of the gathering: the dedication of the refuge headquarters to the memory Steve Breeser, Umbagog’s first Refuge Manager, who died tragically a year before.

Breeser continues to be hailed by locals and non-locals alike as an example of how things should, and can, be done. Though not from the region, Breeser made an earnest and exhaustive effort to bridge the awkward and cavernous gap between the federal government and rural communities. To local residents he was aware, interested, compassionate, and an excellent listener. Breeser’s reputation and successes also testify to the enormous dividends possible from a seemingly small investment of asking and listening and, more broadly, to the pivotal role of personality, of a human face in natural resource management.

One of the central ironies in the Umbagog refuge’s evolution was that both its proponents and its detractors wanted to preserve Umbagog’s natural wealth and the ways of life associated with it. It is this sentiment which has supplied a crucial common thread for the wealth of initiatives which have emerged in the wake of the refuge’s creation, projects which regard economic and ecological objectives as inextricable, and whose strength depends on innovative partnerships. Perhaps Breeser’s most significant legacy is that people who disagree can indeed be brought together around matters of common concern, and sometimes make progress.
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