

Community-Based Conservation Helps Maine Town Adapt to Economic Shifts



This document is part of a series of case studies that build upon the data and insights presented in “Land conservation helps local economies grow: New England-wide analysis shows gains in employment follow gains in land protection,” published in 2019 and authored by Katharine Sims, Amherst College; Jonathan Thompson, Harvard Forest, Harvard University; and Spencer Meyer, Harvard Forest, Harvard University.

Community Support for Conservation

Bethel, ME and the surrounding area has taken a comprehensive and community-wide approach to conservation in recent years. One notable project, the Bethel Community Forest, has protected important forest land close to the downtown Bethel area and nearby Mount Abram ski area and Sunday River ski resort through a year-round, multi-use trail system. While the community forest provides access to over 900 acres of land itself, it also allows people to enjoy more than 2,400 acres of connected town-owned land nearby. Furthermore, the community forest and town land are connected to Sunday River’s 8,000 acres of land and the Appalachian Trail, creating a connected corridor of protected land.

During the process of creating this community forest, many local residents were curious as to how it would actually benefit and represent the community. As such, the importance of community buy-in has always been of high importance to organizations involved in the project, including Mahoosuc Pathways. Protecting this land was also important because of the area’s history of contested public access on private land. The group has worked with residents, organizations, companies, and other partners to ensure fair and safe access for both locals and visitors to the area. In this case, Mahoosuc Pathways was able to establish community support early on by committing to paying property taxes on the land, even though they were not required to do so.

Meeting the Needs of a Changing Economy

Historically, Bethel relied on the forest products industry to sustain the local economy, but in the 1980s many of

“Conservation for us, it protects the views that people love and care about so much here in the Mahoosuc region. It provides good access to these lands that we might not otherwise have.” — Gabe Perkins, Executive Director of Mahoosuc Pathways



Bethel Community Forest / Gabe Perkins / Mahoosuc Pathways

the sawmills closed as more and more of the northern forest was sold off. Other communities in the region faced similar struggles and many saw their economies bottom out. Bethel was able to avoid that fate because, as Sunday River continued to expand its footprint, forest product jobs were replaced with the booming need for home development to meet increased tourism and recreational populations. In addition to the remaining forest product jobs, the recreation and construction industries have provided a stable source of employment and revenue for the local area. The multiplying effect of access to this connected ribbon of land—and the important viewsheds it protects—has helped the local Bethel economy grow and adapt to regional changes.

Tourism and Recreation Sustain Local Jobs

The region’s beautiful landscapes, fresh air, clean water, and abundant resources have sustained a local economy built on tourism and recreation. Whether people come to escape the stress of city living, are drawn in by the nearby Appalachian Trail, or simply pass through on their way to Sunday River ski resort, Bethel depends on recreation as a crucial source of jobs and revenue. With nearly all of

Sunday River's 500,000 annual visitors coming through Bethel, the area has become a small ski town, providing a boost to the local economy.

New Locals Spotlight

Liz and Skip Repetto live in Bethel, but they didn't end up there by chance. Before moving to Maine, they decided that they wanted to move to a place filled with protected green space and opportunities to enjoy the outdoors. They explored across New England, visiting bike shops, ski resorts, libraries, schools, and country stores to get the feel for local communities, and Skip even used GIS mapping to assess the perfect place to call home.

“It was important for us to have proximity to conserved land that was protected in perpetuity,” said Skip. “We’ve seen people flock to this area because of the recreation.”

Both are quick to point out that their situation is unique—they were able to pack up and choose anywhere they wanted to live—but see a growing trend in their generation of people that want to remain active throughout their later years.

“We have nieces and nephews that come up to recreate and mountain bike and ski,” said Liz. “So the ability to have family from the coast of Maine visit us in western Maine for mountain-based recreation was a huge draw to us.”

Attracting People with Protected Land

Although the creation of the community forest was rooted in the ecological and environmental importance of the land, the main motivation for permanent conservation was to ensure recreational access. This multi-faceted approach attracted supporters across many groups, including young families and more traditional conservation-minded people, and created local interest for the Bethel Community Forest project. Access to well-maintained trails and conserved land has even encouraged many people to move to the Bethel area, including a growing population of retirees.

Conservation Leads to New Land Uses

The Borderlands is a mountain biking collaborative that attracts people to the Bethel area, utilizing conserved land and trail systems to offer year-round recreation. This collective features seven mountain biking destinations across two countries and three states. In addition to providing exciting new biking experiences for visitors and locals, Borderlands also focuses on stewarding the natural landscape and securing economic benefits for communities in the North Country. After working with a design firm to create a strong visual brand for the collective, The Borderlands was launched and has already brought increased economic activity to Bethel. During its first summer, The Borderlands attracted a notable following of bikers who spent time in town enjoying the trails and local businesses.

Although private landowners have traditionally permitted public access, permanent conservation is the only guaranteed way to protect the access that sustains local economies. Kingdom Trails, one of the seven destinations that make up The Borderlands, is on private land and had previously been open for public use. However, that access has recently been challenged, raising concerns about the future of the collective and creating uncertainty about this important source of outdoor recreation and local economic activity.

Saving Land and Jobs from Climate Change

Protecting a sustainable future for Bethel lies in its ability to create steady sources of economic activity throughout all seasons. Climate change poses a significant risk to the area's skiing industry, however, locals are working to create appealing year-round offerings that incorporate a strong, community-minded approach to protecting land.



Bethel Community Forest / Gabe Perkins / Mahoosuc Pathways

Local Stories, Regional Impact—The research that informs this document found compelling connections between permanent land protection and positive impacts on local economies throughout New England, and this series was developed to show what these findings look like in individual towns. For more information about how conservation affects local economies across New England, see the full study at <https://bit.ly/CSConFi>.

Highstead is a non-profit conservation organization dedicated to conserving the New England landscape and achieving the Wildlands and Woodlands Vision. Mailing address: PO Box 1097, Redding, CT 06875. 203.938.8809 www.highstead.net