



Letter from Woodstock Rolf Diamant

Thoughts on Kenai Fjords and Maine Woods

IN THE SUMMER OF 2004, while Nora Mitchell and I were in Alaska kayaking at Kenai Fjords National Park, we stayed overnight in the gateway community of Seward. Picking up the local paper, I read a story about a 1976 Seward City Council resolution that protested the establishment of the national park and how, almost ten years later, a second council resolution rescinded the earlier one. Apparently, over time, the perspectives of the people of Seward and their civic leaders had changed, and they were looking more favorably on the park as a major community asset. In the early years of the park, staff became active members of the community. A new park headquarters was strategically located downtown as a way to boost tourism in Seward. The anti-park resolution was increasingly viewed in the community as an embarrassing anachronism. The city council finally decided to clear its civic conscience by officially expunging the old resolution from the public record and praising the national park as a “good neighbor.”

Alaska writer Bill Sherwonit traveled to Seward in the 1980s and interviewed a number of formerly outspoken opponents of the park about this change of heart. In an article written for the Conservation Land Trust website, Sherwonit quoted Pam Oldow, a council member who had previously championed the anti-park resolution, describing Kenai Fjords as “one of the best things that ever happened to Seward.” Pressed on why she had fought the park, Oldow admitted, “It’s hard to say exactly why—I think more than anything, it was fear of the unknown.”²

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“You have to understand, Seward’s economy was horrible in the ’70s,” recalled resident Darryl Schaefermeyer, a former city administrator and aide to Alaska’s Senator Ted Stevens, explaining his reasons for initially opposing the national park. “We were still suffering from the economic damage of the ’64 earthquake, unemployment was more than 30 percent in winter, and the town had a very small tax base. We were worried that a park would hurt the economy even more.” Like Oldow, Schaefermeyer’s view shifted with time. “I admit it, my attitude has changed 180 degrees. The park has been a marvelous success, and most people in Seward today would speak highly of having it here. Kenai Fjords has become the backbone of the economy and a source of pride. And its staff from the superintendents on down have been good neighbors, good friends.”

I recalled this story of Seward when a few years later I read an interview with Clifford Hansen, reflecting on his role in the long, contentious fight against the creation of Jackson Hole National Monument (later to be incorporated into Grand Teton National Park.) In 1943, as a protest, Hansen, then a rancher and Teton County commissioner, saddled up with Hollywood character actor Wallace Beery on a highly publicized cattle drive through the heart of the proposed monument. Unimpressed, President Franklin Roosevelt proclaimed the monument and Hansen moved on to a long political career as US senator and governor of Wyoming. However, years later Hansen too felt compelled to publicly recant his park opposition. “I want you all to know that I’m glad I lost, because I now know I was wrong,” Hansen

Figure 1. Kenai Fjords National Park. Photo courtesy of the author.



said. “Grand Teton National Park is one of the greatest natural heritages of Wyoming and the nation and one of our great assets.”³

As I sit down to write this 14th Letter From Woodstock, the long-simmering controversy, in nearby Maine, over the potential establishment of a Maine Woods national park is once again beginning to boil over. Elliotsville Plantation, Inc. (EPI), a private operating foundation created by philanthropist Roxanne Quimby and now directed by her son, Lucas St. Clair, is proposing to donate almost 90,000 acres of forestland abutting the eastern edge of Baxter State Park along with a \$40 million endowment to establish a new unit of national park system. A broad coalition of Mainers, from the Maine Natural Resources Council to the Katahdin Chamber of Commerce, are now urging President Obama to use the Antiquities Act to proclaim the area as a national monument before he leaves office. Opponents include local town officials, snowmobilers, hunters, and a number of representatives of Maine’s wood products industry.

Reading reports from a recent round of public hearings on the proposed monument convened by US Senator Angus King, I couldn’t help but think about Pam Oldow, Darryl Schaefermeyer, and Clifford Hansen. Of course no two places and circumstances are exactly the same but it is difficult not to see some similarities with the concerns expressed by the park opponents in Maine. The “fear of the unknown,” as Pam Oldow described it, is certainly present in Maine; adapting to change is often the tallest mountain to climb. There is a fear that traditional recreational activities and access to private lands, enjoyed by Mainers for generations, may be curtailed by new ownerships. The anxiety that Darryl Schaefermeyer expressed—“that a park would hurt the economy”—is also front and center in the Maine Woods debate. As the traditional economy of the region changes, a transition from a resource-based to a more tourism-based economy will not be a panacea for everyone. The chimera also remains that lost jobs tied to industries that have been declining for generations, such as mining and forestry, could somehow all be brought back if it weren’t for the park and changes it will bring.

At some point, the Seward City Council decided that the time had come for a candid reassessment of their earlier opposition to their neighboring national park and for a public rapprochement. Hopefully, if a Maine Woods National Monument is created, that time will someday come for its opponents as well. Conservationists and park supporters, however, also need to objectively re-examine their own actions with the passage of time. As the economy and land uses shift, some people will be left behind. They must not be forgotten. Deep cultural and traditional connections to the land have to be acknowledged and incorporated into the planning for new park areas.

With national parks, there will always be a tension between national and local interests and objectives. If the national interest were not paramount we would probably have very few national parks today. There is a paradox, of course, as many national parks are established specifically for their unique sense of place and associated stories that are an inexorable part of the fabric of local communities and their landscapes. Most of our national heritage is therefore also local heritage. In a previous Letter from Woodstock I wrote about a national historic landmark dedication that was an extraordinary expression of *both* local and national

accomplishment and pride. Striking that symmetry is not easy; however, given the political environment we live in, it is essential.

In this context, ideological purity and rigid orthodoxy, in the pursuit of conservation, may ultimately be self-defeating. One size will not fit all. Empathy, flexibility, and innovation can be useful conservation tools. The Maine Woods proposal has evolved over the years from a huge Yellowstone-like national park to a smaller national monument that may be a better fit for Maine. Lucas St. Clair has played a critical role reshaping the proposal to recognize, in his own words, that “outdoor recreation is part of the heritage and the culture of our state” and that “the activities that we all care about will be permanently protected.”⁴ Hunting, snowmobiling, and other types of outdoor recreation are allowed to continue on all EPI lands currently open to these traditional activities, and the National Park Service has committed not to change that if the monument is approved.

The theme of this issue of *The George Wright Forum* is landscape-scale conservation. National parks themselves may provide only relatively small pieces of larger landscape conservation mosaics. However, the lessons learned in places like Kenai Fjords and the Maine Woods that combine both vision and pragmatism mixed with a measure of candid reassessment and rapprochement, may, in the long run, make an even larger contribution.



Endnotes

1. Theodore Catton, *A Fragile Beauty: An Administrative History of Kenai Fjords National Park* (Seward, AK: Kenai Fjords National Park, 2010).
2. Online at www.theconservationlandtrust.org/eng/conflicts_02.htm.
3. Online at http://billingsgazette.com/news/state-and-regional/wyoming/i-m-glad-i-lost-hansen-at-first-fought-grand/article_f8d23214-bec7-11de-9f07-001cc4c03286.html.
4. Online at www.pressherald.com/2016/05/16/mainers-express-misgivings-about-north-woods-national-monument/.