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# Singing Waters

*Unplanned conservation on four northern Maine rivers*

**Lloyd C. Irland**



Perhaps our grandsons, having never seen a wild river, will never miss the chance to set a canoe in singing waters.

—Aldo Leopold

IN SUMMER 1967, I WAS IN HIGH SCHOOL IN ILLINOIS. I PLANNED A TRIP on the Allagash River with my brother. We didn't end up going. We didn't have the time. So we hiked a piece of the Appalachian Trail. Today I ask myself how two Illinois teenagers, in 1967, even knew of the Allagash, an obscure river 1,200 miles away. Somehow the news in 1966, the year Maine created its Allagash Wilderness Waterway, had gotten to us. And it inspired me for a lifetime.

I eventually moved to Maine. Over the years, I've canoed or fished parts of the Allagash and other Maine rivers. In my professional life as a forestry researcher, I have flown over and studied the entire region. Last year's 50th anniversary of the waterway designation inspired this reflection on its importance as a wild river and as a force for the value of wildness in our lives.

As I consider the hold the Allagash maintains over me and others, I will compare it with three other rivers. The waterways I'll talk about here are the Allagash, from its source in Churchill Lake, northwest of Baxter State Park, 100 miles to the Saint John River; the Saint John, from the Saint John Ponds (several shallow lakes) 150 miles to the town of Fort Kent; the West Branch of the Penobscot, above Ripogenus Dam; and the rugged East Branch of the Penobscot, which flows more than 75 miles north of Katahdin.

In the 1950s and 1960s, northern Maine began to receive public attention with campaigns to preserve the Allagash. The Saint John saw a controversy over the Dickey-Lincoln Dam, but since that project was canceled in 1984, it has garnered little further conservation interest. In this complex history, questions emerge. How did the current, irregular pattern of "protections" for these rivers emerge, and why? Why did the Allagash but not the other two become a Wild and Scenic River? In the end, what was protected and what was not?

As I considered these questions, I ran into tension over federal and state roles. The federal government gave the Allagash further protection under its Wild and Scenic Rivers program in 1970. Soon after, a proposal to designate the Penobscot as a federal Wild and Scenic River surfaced but went nowhere.

*The Saint John River near the village of Allagash, Maine.* JERRY AND MARCY MONKMAN/  
ECOPHOTOGRAPHY

Other themes running through this story's currents are energy policies, competing needs and interests of river users, novel modes of river protection, divergent readings of the concept of "wilderness," the changing landscape of nongovernmental organizations, and influential personalities. I have concluded that the political culture in Maine and the patterns of land ownership drove the way the state has protected its rivers, and that people's fears and even literature affected the choice of which of the four rivers to protect and how to do it.

### The Rivers

**The Saint John** originates in the Saint John Ponds, in northern Maine. Some canoeists begin their trips on one of these lakes, but many others start at the Baker Lake Outlet or at road crossings downriver. At its most northerly point, the Saint John is a wide stream flowing over boulder riffles. The watershed's topography is modest. For this reason, energy developers did not propose hydroelectric projects for the Saint John until the 1950s. Likely because of its remoteness, the Saint John was not on the list of the four major canoe outings in the 1937 Works Progress Administration guidebook of Maine. But today, many endorse the Saint John as the premier wild canoeing river in the East.

**The Allagash** canoe voyage once began at Greenville, requiring two arduous carries before putting a canoe into Chamberlain Lake. Purists observe that Henry David Thoreau, on his 1857 canoe trip, never reached the "Allegash" (his spelling) proper, as he turned southeastward toward Webster Lake and the East Branch. All agree that the river is one of the few free-flowing streams of any length in a wilderness setting in the United States—ignoring, of course, the Telos Dam at Chamberlain and the low dam at Churchill Lake's outlet. Although they interfere with the natural flow, both dams hold back water and extend the canoeing season compared with that of the Saint John. The wilderness qualities of the Allagash are so outstanding, and so impressive, that these minor intrusions can't dilute the overall impression. No wonder I dreamed of the Allagash as a teenager. This was Thoreau's "damp and intricate wilderness."

**The Penobscot and its West Branch.** Stretches of this waterway up to Seboomook Lake have been dammed for generations; no one can recall what this "archipelago of lakes" (as the waterway has long been called) looked like in

Thoreau's time or even in 1900. The terrain is low to moderately rolling. Much of this area is now overlain by conservation easements held by several parties. Road access is by gravel roads with good surfaces from several directions. In 1976, conservationists supported a federal Wild and Scenic River designation for 295 miles of the East and West branches, a total of 164,000 acres of land, with 12,000 acres of public land acquisition. The designation never came. Since the early 1980s, a zoning rule under Maine's Land Use Regulation Commission and a conservation easement along the river on land formerly owned by the Great Northern Paper Company protect the immediate river corridor. More recent easements and fee acquisitions were aimed largely at other goals. From viewpoints along those two branches, the great hulk of Katahdin looms impressively on the horizon, forming a centerpiece of the visual spectacle.

**The East Branch of the Penobscot.** Several traditional routes into Baxter State Park cross this river. The lands between Baxter's east boundary and the river were never a focus of conservation concern until recently. In the absence of threats from dams<sup>1</sup> and the lack of a strong canoeing constituency, the East Branch flowed peacefully for half a century after the Allagash was nationally designated. The 1937 WPA guide described the trip as starting at Greenville with an interval on Chesuncook Lake by motorboat. "For those who want an exciting voyage through the wilderness, the East Branch canoe trip is suggested," the WPA writers advise on page 422. "The journey is so difficult, with its carries and rapids, that few guides care to make it; some persons consider it the wildest canoe trip in the Maine woods." A portion of this area, about 87,500 acres, became part of the Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument in August 2016 after a long quest by Roxanne Quimby, the philanthropist and founder of Burt's Bees, to donate the land.

### **Maine's Political Character**

Maine's political genes contain strong antibodies against direct federal involvement in the state—except when it comes to supplying money. One catalyst to placing Katahdin in a state park was to prevent the federal

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1. The dam at Grand Lake Matagamon goes back to the 1840s and was present in Thoreau's time. It has been rebuilt several times and now needs major repairs.



**CONSERVATION AREAS**

- AWW** Allagash Wilderness Waterway
- MWI** AMC's Maine Woods Initiative
- BSP** Baxter State Park
- KIW** Katahdin Iron Works Tract
- KWW** Katahdin Woods & Waters National Monument
- 100MW** 100-Mile Wilderness

Light screen: principal private and public conservation lands, including easements

**MAJOR LAKES AND PONDS**

- 1 Baker Lake
- 2 Chamberlain Lake
- 3 Chesuncook Lake
- 4 Grand Lake Matagamon
- 5 Moosehead Lake
- 6 Round Pond
- 7 Seboomook Lake
- 8 Telos Lake

**EXISTING MAJOR DAMS**

- 1 Canada Falls Dam
- 2 Churchill Dam
- 3 Lock Dam
- 4 Matagamon Dam
- 5 Ripogenus Dam
- 6 Telos Dam

**DAMS NOT BUILT**

- 1 Big A Dam
- 2 Cross Rocks Rapids
- 3 Dickey-Lincoln Dam
- 4 Rankin Rapids

ABIGAIL COYLE/AMC

government from creating a national park, which Maine's own congressional delegation had proposed. Acadia National Park, the coastal national park, originated as a private donation. The early state park system was built around donations, too. Local interests opposed attempts to expand Acadia in 1978 and 1979; conflict over acquisitions and management has continued.

By the time of the New Deal in the 1930s, public ownership in Maine accounted for roughly 2 percent of the land. Proposals in the 1950s and 1960s for a federal North Woods National Park and later a National Recreation Area were strangled at birth. State management of the Allagash Wilderness Waterway was intended to forestall direct federal action. Later, the proposed Wild and Scenic River designation for the Penobscot vanished with hardly a trace. Federal dollars for acquisition, however, are most welcome; many important conservation projects have been aided by federal earmarks.

Conservative Mainers and landowners were not the only skeptics of federal involvement. Wilderness lovers mistrusted the government's motives. The environmentalist William O. Douglas said, "The prospect of making the Allagash another Yellowstone Park is sickening to many who know the wonders of this wilderness waterway."

### **Dams and Energy, Shifting Approaches**

The major dams on these rivers have been in place so long that their flowed lakes have become important recreational resources. But building new dams always upsets people. In the 1950s, the proposed Rankin Rapids Dam sparked new conservation interest in the Allagash. Rankin Rapids was canceled, but soon another project, the Dickey-Lincoln Dam, was announced. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which had never built a dam in Maine, planned this one. The project's sheer immensity was threatening in itself, comprising two miles of earthfill dam, many miles of transmission lines, and an 80,000-acre lake. Until then, the four rivers' remoteness had seemed to protect them from hydro development.

Other energy projects took the focus off rivers for a while. Maine Yankee Nuclear Power Plant in Wiscasset increased Maine's electricity supply from 1963 through the early 2000s. In the 1960s, planners expected a large coal-fired station on Sears Island in Penobscot Bay. That plant would have eliminated a need for large hydroelectric projects. But Sears Island was never built.

By 2014, hydroelectric constituted 28 percent of Maine's power generation; nuclear, nothing; and coal, only 1 percent. Other renewables, mostly wood, accounted for 41 percent. Today, future growth in New England's electric load is expected to be modest, according to the regional transmission authority, ISO New England.

In a world of wholesale power markets and a volatile oil market, the appeal of river power looks very different than it did in 1960, especially with growing concern about carbon emissions. But in 1983, Maine's legislature passed a rivers bill banning dams for selected reaches of wild streams, and a movement to remove marginal hydroelectric dams and restore river ecosystems and fisheries now is gaining ground. So, the energy-policy aspect of river conservation has grown more complex than it ever seemed in the 1960s.

### **Recreation on the Wild Rivers**

Visits to the four rivers grew with the massive increase in outdoor recreation nationally in the 1950s and 1960s. Lawmakers in Washington, D.C., took note. The Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission spawned a new Bureau of Outdoor Recreation. Interior Secretary Stewart Udall published the bestselling book *The Quiet Crisis* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963) that examined Americans' attitudes toward preserving natural land. (It appeared with a foreword by President John F. Kennedy the same month Kennedy was assassinated.) Federal programs geared up to fund recreation land purchases and developments.

Access for recreationists has changed dramatically. After the early 1970s, logging companies shifted timber routes from the rivers to the new roads, enabling visitors to easily reach remote areas for the first time. By the late 1970s, I-95 had been widened to four lanes from the Medway area north to Houlton. New types of outdoor users appeared, including snowmobilers. Not all of the old-timers, whether woodsmen or canoists "from away," applauded these developments. When the Allagash Wilderness Waterway first was created, visits rapidly increased. By the late 1970s, northern Maine landowners and the state had created a cooperative called North Maine Woods Inc. to control use, manage campsites, recover costs resulting from visitor use, and charge fees for the use of private roads.



These days, many visitors stay only a few days, not the two or three weeks of yore. Since the peak in the 1980s and 1990s, river use, measured by camping nights, has been declining. On today's roads, access is easy enough that, from 2010 to 2015, day use averaged 26 percent of total visitor days on the Allagash.

### **Divergent Readings of the Term *Wilderness***

There are several categories of river users. One is the wilderness seekers, some of whom visit for one expedition and rarely return. To this group, *wilderness* usually means “quiet, pristine, free of motors, devoid of human influence.” Other visitors return annually for a nonmotorized refresher in the wilds. Another group consists largely of local residents, who use the roads and rivers to get someplace; many enter the wilderness frequently every year by motor vehicles. To this group, *wilderness* means “far away from town, where I go fishing.”

Agreements to designate riverways, parks, and public land units are not drafted in quiet monasteries but emerge from negotiations among parties with different interests, needs, values, and goals. “Agreements” that are reached often include terms whose meanings are left vague and that may be read very differently by later parties. Over the years, these groups have clashed numerous times. These debates continue to fester, continually preventing compromise. For years after the Allagash was designated, old-timers bemoaned it, saying with all the additional use the place was “ruined.” Perhaps its solitude was. It has proven easier to designate a river as federally Wild and Scenic than it is to get all of the various users to agree on what *wilderness* means and on how it ought to be managed.

Environmental advocates and wilderness users include numerous skilled writers. They draw on a pool of cultural ideas. Following the ideas of Richard W. Judd and Christopher S. Beach in their book *Natural States: The Environmental Imagination in Maine, Oregon, and the Nation* (Resources for the Future, 2003), one can tease out the cultural roots of wildland conservation. Mainers' attitudes bound them to their land years before that became a national idea. In their attitudes about wild rivers, we find traditional pastoralism, literary pastoralism, nostalgia in a conservative literature of place, political advocacy

of ecological integrity, and appreciation of recreation as sanctified activity—superior to other activities and a source of well-being.

### **The Changing NGO Landscape**

Large nongovernmental organizations emerged in the 1970s and 1980s and now mediate many conservation deals. The NGOs bring expertise and funding. They are well versed in managing opinion campaigns<sup>2</sup> and often funnel support from private families and foundations. They pursue projects for land that buffer river corridors, going beyond previous “waterfront strip” conservation. They are skilled at mobilizing federal and other funds. They understand exotica like carbon credits. The multiple funding sources involved require extensive negotiations, compromises, and finely honed legal and technical skills. Protecting land through easements did not exist in the 1960s. The practice is now a major conservation tool, like it or not, and not everybody likes it.

### **The Old-Fashioned Conservation Way: Donations**

Governor Percival Baxter’s magnificent donations for Baxter State Park remain distinctive nationally. Rockefeller money funded a major study of conservation options for the Allagash. The conservation easement donated by Great Northern Paper Co. along the Penobscot is largely forgotten today, but it represented a significant step at the time. Donations initiated several of Maine’s popular state parks, as well as Acadia National Park. And in recent years, Roxanne Quimby struck out on a totally different path. Baxter opposed national park status for Katahdin, but Quimby set out to create one. This may portend a shift in the politics of federal involvement in the Maine woods. Have the priorities of a few wealthy families and individuals affected their choices of areas to conserve and their influence on management? Perhaps. But in this instance, it is hard to argue with the conservation achievements. Try a thought experiment: Would a centrally planned effort by technocrats, with all of their maps and geographic information systems, have chosen

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2. A short list would include The Nature Conservancy, the Forest Society of Maine, the Appalachian Mountain Club, the Trust for Public Land, and the New England Forestry Foundation. North Maine Woods Inc., which conducts much of the management on these rivers, is also an NGO, though not often thought of as such.

different conservation targets in the North Woods? Would they choose the same priorities?

### **Another Conservation Method: Regulation**

In a privately owned landscape, a key government role is regulation of private land. Such was advocated by the first Allagash Authority in 1965. This was the origin of the one-mile strip within which logging practice was to be regulated by the state. The environmental impact statements on the proposal to name the Penobscot a Wild and Scenic River also recommended regulation; acquisition was to be highly selective.



*Then-Senator Edmund Muskie, second from left, and then-Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall, second from right, visited with woodlands managers of International Paper and Great Northern Paper companies. LLOYD IRLAND COLLECTION*

By the 1970s, logging was being conducted in the snow-free seasons, and rivers felt the impact. Every spring, brown water surged to the lakes and streams. Several years of debate, adoption of “best management practices,” zoning adopted in the 1970s, and an improved attitude toward water protection all made for important progress.

From the beginning, regulation was controversial; it was accompanied by prolonged controversy and resistance, culminating in major reforms of the Maine Land Use Regulation Commission process in 2012. Reluctance to regulate reflected the Maine state government’s passivity until the Curtis administration in the early 1970s. Jerome Daviau’s book *Maine’s Life Blood* (House of Falmouth, 1958), Ralph Nader’s 1970s study called the Paper Plantation, and the 1973 memo on public lands from Maine Attorney General Jon Lund to the governor all showed that state government was determined to do nothing on any of these matters unless pressed *very* hard.

### **Public Land Acquisition**

Any conservation program in a privately owned region must minimize outright government purchases of land. From the turn-of-the-twentieth-century conservation movement through the 1930s, Maine was passive in its public lands policies, while other Northeastern states were creating extensive systems of forests and parks. Maine’s aversion to public ownership grew from many sources, including interest group pressures by powerful lobbies. But many Maine citizens resist public ownership and regulation, and their attitude helps explain why early river activists focused strongly on the immediate waterways and not the wider landscapes. Protective corridors, such as along the Appalachian Trail and the Allagash Wilderness Waterway, attempt to protect rivers and trails with minimal land acquisition. They do not really protect wilderness in a landscape sense and were never intended to.

One theme pervades: Since the original Allagash bond issue in 1966, the state has been reluctant to spend any of its own cash. This probably reflects the narrow base of political support for wilderness in Maine. It may have had a useful effect, however, by stimulating innovative approaches to conservation that nobody envisioned in 1966.

## Personalities and Writers

Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson's programs responded to the upswing in outdoor activity and travel of the 1950s and early 1960s. Interior Secretary Stewart Udall was a major public advocate for conservation. Major new designations for parks and monuments were made; entirely new types of conservation units emerged, notably, Wild and Scenic Rivers.

Maine governors influenced conservation in their own ways, by their own ideas, by their appointments, and by choosing what to support and what not to. Governors Edmund Muskie, Kenneth M. Curtis, James B. Longley, Joseph E. Brennan, John R. McKernan, Jr., Angus King, and John Baldacci all supported wild rivers. Literary lions since Thoreau have included William O. Douglas, John McPhee, and Udall. Writing by Richard Saltonstall, Dudley Cammett Lunt, Dean Bennett, Lucius Hubbard, Lew Dietz, and J. Parker Huber created a special aura around the Allagash.

Beyond the federal officials, writers, landowners and their representatives, environmental and outdoor advocates, and governors, a long article could be written about the many personalities, activists, state officials, and landowner representatives involved. Active coverage by local journalists, especially for the *Maine Times* and the *Portland Press Herald*, contributed notoriety to the steps along the way.

## What Was Protected

Acquisitions for the Allagash Wilderness Waterway, and easements along the Penobscot, protected these rivers from becoming avenues of camps or routes through subdivisions. Easements included the huge Pingree conservation easement, signed in 2001, which protected more than 762,000 acres of forestland and riverfront (some along the Saint John) in six counties. The Nature Conservancy's 1998 acquisition of some 185,000 acres along the Saint John protected 80 miles of river. The township at Round Pond on the Allagash was obtained in a trade in the 1980s. Much of the Penobscot is protected by an easement and regulations. The rivers appear to be secure from further hydroelectric dam construction, even after the closing of Maine's nuclear power plant and the age of carbon consciousness and costly oil.

## And What Wasn't Protected

For all the good that activists and officials have brought to Maine's wild rivers, some things remain vulnerable. First, the water volume. "Climate change has had significant impact on Saint John River canoeing, as the peak runoff period has been moving earlier in the year," Al Cowperthwaite, the executive director of North Maine Woods Inc., told me. He said this means that one can't predict when there will be enough water to support boats. "In the 1970s, adequate water for canoeing was usually predictable until the first of June," he said. "There have been years recently when the water has been too low the first of May."

The forest had changed by the 1970s. With the new roads, the riverways were no longer entirely silent, flowing through unsettled forests. Canoeists coming into the region noticed damage by the spruce budworm, a native insect that can defoliate entire trees, and related clear-cutting. And visitors could often hear the rumble of log trucks.

Wilderness purity along the rivers was not fully protected. As river traffic increased, more motors appeared in different seasons, and pragmatic Maine river managers ignored the protestations of "purist" recreationists. Apart from occasional hand-wringing following one crisis or another, the federal wardens of the Allagash seem to have been content to stay out of local battles.

Since Thoreau's time, catching a wild trout has been a key part of the wilderness mystique. None of the conservation steps, though, could protect the prime native brook trout fishery of the Saint John from invasion by the muskellunge, or musky—the giant pike introduced into the Canadian headwaters in the 1960s. Nor could they reverse the effects of predicted climate change on water temperatures.

Finally, residues of various pollutants have turned up in fish samples in the Allagash. Remoteness has not protected the rivers from the region's "chemical climate."

## History Lessons

Private landowners tend to resist grand plans. Had the present level of conservation along these rivers been proposed in one package in 1965 (or even 1995), it would have stood no chance of adoption. The history of the four rivers illustrates how uncertain and contingent the present level of protection has been. Given the ownership, financial, management, and political constraints, could some large-scale, technically driven planning exercise have done better? Are there gaps and loose ends? Surely.

Each river is protected in ways different from the next. As varied as this conservation landscape remains, could the average canoeist run all four of them and then tell you which one is a federal Wild and Scenic River? Visitor surveys on the Allagash in 2003 reported high levels of satisfaction. This seems inconsistent with the long lists of complaints by purist factions. And it reflects how different various river users are and how their expectations vary.

Wealthy people have usually preserved land in Maine. But along the Allagash, river recreationists allied with wide groups that included the wealthy. Together, they created a conservation program that used federal government aid. The movement preserved, however imperfectly, an icon of the Maine woods and its culture. Succeeding efforts on the other three rivers have also made significant accomplishments in the long-term public interest, though in different ways.

The Allagash corridor and the Great Northern Paper easements on the Penobscot prevented major land sales that few could have predicted. But change was on the way. Industries were changing, and waves of subdivisions threatened to gentrify and fragment the North Woods. The future will be different. We can't be sure that muddling through, so to speak, taking conservation one small step at a time will work from now on. Understanding this past experience does not mean recommending we always do things the same way. But in a largely private landscape, conservationists must still sense the opportunities for incremental change.

The epigraph to this article is from the conservationist Aldo Leopold's reflections after a favorite canoe stream—Wisconsin's Flambeau—had been dammed. In contrast, planned or not, extensive reaches of these four Maine rivers still sing.

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LLOYD C. IRLAND is a forestry consultant whose distinguished career has included directing Maine's Bureau of Public Lands and, as Maine's state economist, researching forest inventories. He also was a senior research scientist and lecturer at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and is the author of several books, including *The Northeast's Changing Forest* (Harvard University Press, 1999). This essay is adapted from a book he is writing on Maine's wildland rivers.

*This article is dedicated to the memory of the conservationist Clinton B. "Bill" Townsend (1927–2016). Maine's rivers have had few better friends.*