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The Pinchot Wire: Private Cash, Public Lands - Why the Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument Matters

Char Miller
Pomona College

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by Char Miller



Here's how President Obama celebrated the National Park Service's 100th birthday: with the stroke of his pen, he established the Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument in Maine, one of the most innovative initiatives in U.S. environmental history. That's because the 87,500-acre park, which encompasses some of the Pine Tree State's most remarkable forests and waterways, is a gift of the Quimby family and comes with a \$40 million endowment, a private-public partnership without parallel.

Yet however green and well-funded this new acquisition may be, it also comes with controversy. Predictably, the state's Tea Party-backed Governor Paul LePage denounced the donation: "It's sad that rich, out-of-state liberals can team up with President Obama to force a national monument on rural Mainers who do not want it."

Not to be outdone, U.S. Rep. Rob Bishop (R-UT), chair of the House Subcommittee on Federal Lands, rebuked what he likes to call federal overreach: "If the President cared about local voices and improving our National Park System, he would have done this through the public process and not behind closed doors. Instead, he's hijacked a moment of celebration to advance powerful elite special interests over Maine's economy and citizens."

That public lands are controversial is how we know they are public, and thus debatable. But these debates, and their polarizing tendencies, should not deflect us from understanding this gift's significance. Since the 1990s, Roxanne Quimby, founder of Burt's Bees personal care products, has been upfront about wanting to donate her property to the federal government so that its rich biodiversity and unsurpassed beauty would be preserved in perpetuity. She and her family know too that rather than undercut Maine's economy, the new national monument will provide a dramatic boost to the state's already robust \$5.6 billion tourism industry. Other sites have contributed vitally to their surrounding communities, among the most recent beneficiaries are California's Pinnacles National Park, New Mexico's Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument, César E. Chávez National Monument in the Central Valley, and the African Burial Ground National Monument in Manhattan. These designations have become destinations.



That will be especially true for the Katahdin national monument, for Maine tourism has a long history. Henry David Thoreau may not have been the state's first visitor, but his 1840s excursions into the North Woods led him to write lucid accounts of this "grim and wild" land; he was also a fan of the local, cedar-infused beer. His roughing-it forays set the stage for Maine's informal motto stamped on every license plate: Vacationland. Millions of Americans have taken the hint, frolicking on shore, river, or lake. Emblematic of this is the annual migration of tens of thousands of boys and girls who spend their formative summers at camp. They learned, as I did at Camp Agawam, how to pitch a tent, shoot a rifle, and paddle and portage—by day we swatted black flies and mosquitoes; by night we were lulled to sleep by a loon's soporific call. Every one of us helped the state's economy hum, a hum that will intensify when Katahdin National Monument opens.

The new park's many visitors will also discover that the site builds off several earlier federal land-management initiatives in Maine. The White Mountain National Forest was the result of an early 20th Century grassroots movement in New Hampshire and Maine that first led to the passage of the Weeks Act (1911); this Congressional legislation authorized the federal government to purchase land from willing sellers, and many in the Granite and Pine Tree states sold their property to protect local, high-country watersheds. In 1918, the bi-state

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national forest was established, drawing millions of visitors every year.

Two million more yearly recreate in Acadia National Park, the first such site east of the Mississippi River. Private landowners on Mount Deseret Island donated property to the federal government in advance of President Woodrow Wilson's designation of the park in July 1916, a concerted effort to save more than 40 miles of Maine's spectacularly rugged coast. And the celebrated Appalachian Trail, whose northern terminus is Mount Katahdin, grew out of a complex mix of multiple state, grassroots

organization, and private property ownerships.

The Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument will extend these legacies and develop its own. It serves as a model for the kind of private-public partnerships that are redefining the conservation movement. It is reflective as well of the collaborative approach to landscape-scale management that is shaping how local, state, and federal land managers are securing the resources—human and fiscal—to ensure more sustainable stewardship of some of our most treasured terrain well into the future. By their magnificent and munificent gift to the American people, the Quimby family has launched the National Park Service into its second century of service.

Char Miller, a Senior Fellow at the Pinchot Institute for Conservation, is the W.M. Keck Professor of Environmental Analysis at Pomona College, author of [America's Great National Forests, Wildernesses, and Grasslands \(2016\)](#) and [Public Lands, Public Debates: A Century of Controversy \(2012\)](#), and editor of [America's National Parks](#), a book series for the University of Nevada Press.



Executive Office: 1400 16th St NW Ste 350 | Washington, DC 20036
Western Regional Office: 4033 SW Canyon Road | Portland, OR 97221
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