

A Foot in the Door: Katahdin Woods and Waters National Park

by Gerry Lavigne

From what I'm hearing on radio and TV, Roxanne Quimby's campaign to sell her national park proposal is in full swing. And from what I'm seeing in the press, some Katahdin-area towns are falling for her ruse. That's unfortunate, because she is not telling the complete story about plans for a national park in the Katahdin region. Rather than a quaint little 150,000-acre park adjacent to Baxter State Park, national park supporters still envision surrounding the Katahdin and Greenville areas within a 3.2 million acre, nearly roadless wilderness park.

The Katahdin Woods and Waters campaign is not the first effort to garner support for a national park in the North Maine Woods. It's merely the latest clever strategy to get the federal government's foot in the door. In fact, wilderness land preservationists have been pushing the national park concept for at least the past two decades.

Chief among the wilderness park supporters has been an organization called RESTORE: The North Woods. With offices in Massachusetts and Maine, RESTORE has worked continuously for more than 20 years to establish its vision of a national park. In all that time, two elements of their vision remain unchanged: it must be 3.2 million acres, and it must be wilderness. For you see, RESTORE's park is not for people; it's to be a place where the land, its forests, and its wildlife can recover from the ravages of man's exploitation. Skeptical? Check out their website at: www.restore.org.

In its online vision statement, RESTORE declares: "We are five centuries too late to save the primeval North Woods. But we still have a chance to restore them". RESTORE goes on to describe its vision of "America's first restored landscape: a place of vast recovered wilderness, of forests where the wolf and the caribou roam free, of clear waters alive with salmon and trout, of people again living in harmony with nature". If you think RESTORE is alone in this wilder-

ness national park quest, think again. They identify more than two dozen like-minded partners working on their eastern wolf restoration initiative alone!

I remember attending a meeting sometime in the late 1990s in Greenville, ME, in which RESTORE dictated its plan for creating the 3.2 million acre North Maine Woods Wilderness National Park. The plan was not well received among the 200-plus attendees. As I recall, the RESTORE folks barely escaped being ridden out on a rail that night! One of the most controversial aspects of the plan was that most roads in these woodlands would be allowed to revert to forests. Camp owners and lessees would have to shift for themselves to get in. All timber harvesting would cease on the 3.2 million acre site, per national park policy. All motorized travel would cease, except on the few remaining roads. Snowmobile and ATV travel would be forbidden, except for a few exceptions, per national park policy. Fishing would be allowed, if you can get there. All hunting and trapping would be forbidden, per national park policy. Camping, hiking, and other low-impact outdoor recreation would be allowed, but highly regulated. As a sop to hunters, a token acreage would be designated as a National Preserve, where some forms of wilderness hunting could be allowed.



If the above plan sounds familiar, it should. Roxanne Quimby has proposed a very similar park use model for her Katahdin Woods and Waters initiative. After gaining little support for their massive national park plan, RESTORE didn't go away, they went underground, quietly building support for the park, and looking for that angle that would get some land into national park ownership. Well, RESTORE found that angle. In their online national park brochure, RESTORE reveals it as follows: "In many cases, the purchase of land by philanthropists has helped to catalyze the creation of a new park." Enter Roxanne Quimby onto the scene.

Roxanne Quimby is a self-made multimillionaire, having parlayed a cottage industry into a wildly successful corporation. Her story is truly a Maine-made American dream come true. Now finding herself among the 1%, Roxanne has the time and wealth to pursue her passions. According to the Quimby Family Foundation website, one of those passions is wilderness protection.

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I don't remember exactly when Ms. Quimby began buying land. It may already be over a decade ago. Her purchases were large tracts of industrial timberland. It is more than coincidental that all of her purchases to date are right smack on the eastern and southern periphery of the proposed 3.2 million acre national park. On her southern parcels, near the northern shore of Sebec Lake, Roxanne has a friendly neighbor. The Appalachian Mountain Club also has purchased a tract of land in the KI area, complete with former sporting camps. In both cases, the new landowners have placed restrictions on access, and on hunting privileges.

For a long while, Roxanne ruled her lands with an iron fist. She gated and closed roads, evicted camp lessees, and refused access for hunting, trapping, snowmobile and ATV use. Timber harvesting became a thing of the past. She seemed intractable and unwilling to compromise with the sporting public on the access issue. Her purchases and subsequent no-access policy seemed to be the embodiment of why RESTORE was advocating for a federally-owned park, i.e. to protect against individuals who would deny public access to the Northern Forest.

I don't know if Roxanne has been a proponent of the wilderness national park concept all along or not. But within the past few years, she has changed tactics. Ms. Quimby has taken a step back into the shadows. She has created a management company called Elliotsville Plantation, Inc., and she has directed her son, Lucas St. Clair, to be the public face of that company. Lucas is smooth-talking and affable. He is definitely on a mission, that being to gain support for the creation of a national park in Maine's North Woods. Unlike his anti-hunting mom, Lucas portrays himself as an enthusiastic upland bird hunter, and fly fisherman. St. Clair's main challenge is to find ways to gain the support of hunters and snowmobilers for the wilderness national park concept.

To gain that support, Lucas convinced mom to designate some of her lands as a recreation area. In those parcels, the southern one, and those lands east of the

East Branch of the Penobscot River, hunting, snowmobiling, and ATV access would be allowed, but tightly regulated. This move would get sportsmen accustomed to the concept of hunting in the tightly-regulated environment of a "National Recreation Area" administered by the National Park Service. And what a bargain! Take 100,000 acres of working forest, all of which was open to hunting all species, close it down for a while, and then re-open it under tight restrictions. Works for me! To date, only upland bird hunting is allowed on lands managed for hunting by Elliotsville Plantation, Inc., according to their website: www.katahdinwoods.org.

In addition to managing access on Roxanne's lands, Elliotsville Plantation, Inc. seems to be keenly focused on building support for a national park. To that end, we are led to believe that the park they named "Katahdin Woods National Park", would consist of only 150,000 acres on both sides of the East Branch of the Penobscot River and adjacent to the 215,000 acre Baxter State Park. Seems like a reasonable amount of land, considering there still remain nearly 10 million acres of working forest up that way. As proposed, the western half of the acreage would be administered as National Park, while those lands lying east of the river would be managed as a National Recreation Area.

To support the park concept, Lucas has come up with a very positive economic analysis. Based on economic trends near national parks with adjoining recreational areas elsewhere, our tiny national park would create an economic boon for the Katahdin Region. But I suspect these folks are blowing stardust in our faces. I believe the best estimator of economic potential for the new national park is Baxter Park itself. Baxter is larger, but practices a similar limited access policy that The Katahdin Woods NP would impose. With an average of 115,000 visitor-days per year, has Baxter State Park kept the Katahdin region out of the economic doldrums lately? Can the Katahdin Woods NP attract more visitors than Baxter? I doubt it. At least in Baxter, you get to climb the mountain. In Katahdin Woods NP, all you'll be able to do is gawk at its eastern face! In the fi-

nal analysis, the economic potential of a new national park in the Katahdin region can only be objectively gauged if we know how large that national park will ultimately be, and to what degree access will be regulated. Develop it and they will come; gate it and they cannot!

And therein lies the most troublesome part of Roxanne's willingness to donate seed land to establish a national park. Once it becomes federally-owned land, local and even state decision-making goes out the window. RESTORE states it best in its online brochure "(Establishment of the 3.2 million acre Maine Woods National Park) cannot be accomplished as a local, or even as a state effort. It will take the will and the generosity of the American people and the resources of the national government to meet this challenge." Once Roxanne lets that Jack-In-The-Box loose on northern Maine, there is no stuffing it back in. Be very wary of assurances and promises that Elliotsville Plantation, Inc. are making. They cannot speak for the federal government, nor can they alter the long-standing policies of the National Park Service.

Finally, I would not be surprised if the donation of her East Branch Penobscot lands as a national park is not the last philanthropic gesture that Roxanne has up her sleeve. Her next move could be to donate her Sebec Lake area lands to augment the new park. The Appalachian Mountain Club could do likewise in the KI area. Now the new park can grow from the east and the south, like a metastasizing cancer on the northern Maine landscape. And so it goes, as parcel after parcel of willing donors or sellers emerge until RESTORE's 3.2 million acre paradise eventually becomes a reality. And finally, the federal government would have a place to re-introduce the gray wolf to the Northeast without needing the approval of Maine government.

To the people of the Katahdin region, and to all Mainers, please don't allow the National Park Service to gain a foot in the door. Our working forests, hunting and outdoor access heritage, and the economy of northern Maine would be damaged forever. ●