Public Access to Private Lands for Recreation and Tourism in the Northern Forest

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Research findings revealed great concern by Northern Forest residents and visitors regarding the impacts of land tenure change and access to forest lands. These findings, disseminated through roundtables and a project website, have served as a starting point for Northern Forest landowners, planners, natural resource agencies, and recreational interests to better understand landowner decisions and improve communications between diverse stakeholders.

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Project Summary

**Rationale:** Land tenure changes, globalized timber industry, growing recreational demand, and new conservation easements have all contributed to the changing landscape of the Northern Forest region. To effectively cope, adapt, and plan, Northern Forest communities need a better understanding of how social and economic forces are affecting rural development prospects, particularly with respect to tourism and recreation on private lands.

**Methods:** Four methods for research and outreach were used in this study:

1. **Web-based Stakeholder Involvement Tool:** This tool was used to gather public input regarding land tenure change, recreational access, landowner liability, and changes within Northern Forest communities.
2. **Analysis of Limited Liability Recreation Statutes:** Each of the Northern Forest states has a limited liability statute that protects landowners. A re-examination, comparison, and critique of these statutes was conducted focusing on the successes and challenges in each state.
3. **Landowner Mail Surveys:** This study surveyed two distinct groups of landowners: private landowners owning 10 acres or more and large investment landowners with greater than 1,000 acre parcels.
4. **Roundtables:** To disseminate research findings and develop recommendations, each state hosted its own roundtable. Roundtables were organized with the help of study collaborators and included landowners, natural resources agencies, non-governmental organizations, tourism and recreation interests, town planners, elected officials, and chambers of commerce. A project web site was developed to continue the discussion and share results with a wider audience.

**Findings and Outcomes:** Results indicate that almost half of private landowners have not limited or denied recreational access to their lands in the past ten years, and less than 10% have closed off their land completely. Large investment landowners also allow the public to recreate on their lands, with 87% of landowners allowing public recreation. Despite this level of access, the perception held by the majority of private landowners and the public sentiment from the stakeholder involvement tool suggests that public access in the Northern Forest has decreased over the same ten years. Results also suggest that many private landowners are not well informed about the liability protection offered them by state statutes, while large investment landowners tend to be much more familiar with landowner liability statutes.

**Implications for the Northern Forest region:** Findings were disseminated through roundtables and a project website, serving as a starting point for Northern Forest landowners, planners, natural resource agencies, and recreational interests to better understand landowner behaviors and perceptions and improve communications between diverse stakeholders. By gaining insight into landowners’ perspectives, interested parties will be better able to promote recreational access and tourism throughout the Northern Forest region, thus benefitting the local economy, traditional culture, and forested landscape.
Northern Forest economies are changing.

Traditional forest-based economies focusing on timber and paper production are less prominent.

Communities are seeking to diversify their economies through nature-based tourism and recreation.

Nature-based tourism and recreation is becoming a more important economic driver in the rural communities of the Northern Forest.
Background and Justification

- As nature-based tourism and recreation becomes a more significant economic force, access to forest land for recreation is essential to sustain that economy.
- With more than 85% of land in the Northern Forest privately owned, maintaining public access to privately owned forest land is critical for economic and cultural sustainability.
As forest-based economies have declined, new patterns of land ownership have emerged. Large industrial landowners have been disinvesting land, selling to a variety of new owners. Landowners, some new to the area, are making land-use decisions that may vary from traditional land-use decisions. Such land ownership changes may have an impact on the amount of recreational land available in the Northern Forest.
Limited Liability Statutes
• Court cases were examined in each state. Cases dealt with liability issues and landowners.
• Analysis focused on cases decided for the plaintiff, as these cases identified possible loopholes in statutes.

Stakeholder Input
• Web survey asked participants about their perceptions of public access, land sales, and community changes.
• The perceptions of all stakeholders were sought.
Methods: Private Landowner Survey

- 6 towns in each state were selected.
- In each town, 100 landowners were selected.
- Landowners were sent a mail survey.
Methods: Large Investment Landowner Survey

- A sample of 114 landowners across the Northern Forest was compiled.
- All landowners owned parcels greater than 1,000 acres.
- Landowners were sent a mail survey.
Participants in the web forum stated that public access had decreased over the past 10 years, while land sales had increased over the same 10 years.
Results: Private Landowners and Recreational Access

- 57% stated recreational access has declined over the past 10 years
- 41% do not limit access, 7% limit all access
- 53% were not familiar with limited liability statutes in their state
- 83% stated education and outreach about limited liability should occur
Results: Private Landowners and Land Sales

- 82% stated land sales have increased over the past 10 years
- 30% purchased land in the past 10 years
- 49% are 1st generation owners
- 18% have sold land in the past 10 years
- 62% are permanent residents

Change in Land Sales Past 10 Years

- 59.8% Increased
- 24.1% Dramatically Increased
- 14.2% Same
- 1.3% Declined
- 0.6% Dramatically Declined
Results: Large Investment Landowners

- 43% stated recreational access has declined over the past 10 years
- 87% allow access, 13% do not allow access to their land
- 61% are moderately/very familiar with limited liability statutes in their state
- 39% have owned their land for 10 years or less
- 18% have owned their land for 50 years or more

Change in Public Recreational Access Past 10 Years

- 38.0% Declined
- 33.0% Same
- 20.0% Increased
- 5.0% Dramatically Increased
Project Outcomes: Roundtables

- Roundtables were conducted in each of the Northern Forest states, presenting results from the private landowner survey.
- Landowners, recreation and tourism interests, non-governmental organizations, natural resource agencies, and local officials were invited.
- Participants identified specific issues, recommendations to address those issues, and potential “next steps” they could use in their own community.
- 83% of participants reported an increase in knowledge about the perspectives of other participants.
- 66% of participants reported they had gained new ideas for improving recreation on private lands.

Discussing strategies and “next steps” in ME.
Project Outcomes: Outreach

Project web site includes:

• Background about the project and the methods used
• Research results from all phases of the project
• Media coverage of the project
• Discussion board allowing visitors to comment on research results
• Presentations from the project roundtables and conferences
• Links to additional resources related to recreation on private lands

Visit the web site at:
www.privatelandaccess.org
Implications and Applications in the Northern Forest region

Results indicated that many private landowners are unaware of the liability protections offered to them. Coupled with a fear of lawsuits from those using their land, this lack of knowledge may lead to a decrease in private land available for recreational use into the future. Educational efforts should focus on providing landowners with the liability information they need to feel comfortable leaving their land open for recreation.

Results also suggest landowners are concerned about the rate of land sales occurring in the Northern Forest. Land sales may be changing the landscape and traditional recreation patterns. By bringing long-term landowners, new landowners, and recreation interests together, the Northern Forest region may be able to find common ground among stakeholders and ensure recreational access into the future.
The process of finding common ground is underway. Roundtables allowed diverse stakeholders to interact and gain valuable insight into other perspectives. As one participant commented, “It has been a good starting point to bring stakeholders together.” Informed with other participants’ perspectives and new findings on recreational access, landowner behaviors, and limited liability statutes, roundtable participants have fostered change across the Northern Forest region. Below are some examples of participant accomplishments since the roundtables:

1. Disseminated information to members about responsible recreational use (print and web).
2. Worked with landowners to establish a hiking trail connecting pre-existing trails.
3. Developed a waterway campsite protocol.
4. Secured funding to conserve recreational land.

Sample town: Morgan, Vermont
Future Directions: Research

• Conduct research on the feasibility of landowner incentives to keep land open for recreation.
• Conduct research on land sales data, to determine if the perceived increase in land sales is in fact happening throughout the Northern Forest region.
• Conduct research to determine the economic importance of nature-based tourism and recreation to the Northern Forest region.
• Conduct research to better understand differences in attitudes and behaviors of long-term residents, new residents, and second home owners.
Future Directions: Outreach

• Conduct outreach and education related to limited liability statutes, focusing on landowners throughout the Northern Forest region.
• Conduct outreach and education to recreational groups with the goal of increasing appreciation for private land access. This outreach would focus on proper recreation techniques, traditional land uses, and communicating with landowners.
• Continue the dialogue started by the roundtables. Interaction between stakeholders will lead to continued recreational access into the future.
Publications:


List of products

Presentations:


List of products

Presentations (cont’d):
List of products

Roundtables:

• New York - April 1, 2008
  Heaven Hill Farm on the Uihlein Estate
  Lake Placid, New York

• Vermont – May 8, 2008
  Wildflower Inn
  Lyndonville, Vermont

• Maine Roundtable – May 30, 2008
  University of Maine
  Orono, Maine

• New Hampshire – November 18, 2008
  Plymouth State University
  Plymouth, New Hampshire
List of products

Proposals for Funding Submitted:

Popular Press and Media:
New England Cable News Interview (2007)
Across the Fence Episode (2008) Responding to the Changing Landscape of the Northern Forest Region
Vermont Public Radio Interview (2008)

Other Products:
Project website: www.privatelandaccess.org
Stakeholder database with over 400 email addresses