



Collaborating to **REVITALIZE** Northern Forest Tourism

The Northern Forest region, 30 million acres of northern New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine, has reached a critical point. With changes in industry mix, land ownership, and demographics, its economic future is in doubt.

The Northern Forest

All four states promote tourism growth in their northern counties—and with good reason, as leisure and hospitality have long been economic mainstays. But with region-wide collaboration, tourism could further enhance economic vitality, benefiting struggling families and communities.

Consider some advantages:

- **Scale:** Tourism employs one in 10 Northern Forest workers, second only to health-care services. It directly generates about 7 percent of the region's "gross state product" (up to 10 percent with multiplier effects).¹
- **"Export" earnings:** Visitors "from away" bring in several billion dollars annually.
- **Growth potential:** A day's drive for 70 million metropolitan residents, the region has natural attractions and host communities with underutilized capacity.
- **Community contributions:** The amenities that lure tourists also enrich residents'

quality of life through job creation and tax revenues that sustain public services.

Past efforts to develop, brand, and market Northern Forest tourism have focused on individual states. Given strong local allegiances—to New York's Adirondacks, Vermont's Northeast Kingdom, New Hampshire's White Mountains, and the Maine Woods—four-state collaboration has not come naturally. But recent efforts to counter parochialism are shaping a common vision and strategy.

The boost is needed. Compared with "downstate" areas, the region has significantly lower per capita income, higher poverty rates, higher transfer-payment dependency, greater unemployment and underemployment, and increasing numbers of elderly. The situation is largely the result of a long decline in resource-based and manufacturing industries. In New Hampshire's forestry-dependent Coos County alone (population: 33,000), more than 1,000 jobs have disappeared since 2006.

Moreover, the trends in several tourism money-makers—hunting, fishing, snowmobiling, whitewater rafting, and alpine skiing—are flat or downward.² Shorter vacations for tourists, higher gasoline prices, and land-ownership changes that threaten public recreational access add to the challenges.

Additionally, tourism's seasonality and low-end service occupations mean widespread job insecurity and low average earnings. At the peak 2010 summer season, Maine's leisure and hospitality workers averaged \$12.40 per hour and 26.8 work hours per week, compared with statewide averages of \$19.30 per hour and 34.4 hours per week.³ One study showed that barely 40 percent of tourism workers earned a living wage (by Maine's definition) and fewer than 25 percent received employer health coverage.⁴

The biggest challenges for the Northern Forest are better tourism jobs, and innovation in tourist destinations and products.



Photographs: Matthew Polstein, New England Outdoor Center

Organizing Regional Tourism

Since 1997, the Northern Forest Center has been a strong regional advocate, helping communities undertake forest-based economic and conservation initiatives and working to establish the region as a world-class tourist destination. In 2006, the Northern Forest Center and New Hampshire's North County Council secured funding from the Federal Economic Development Administration to launch the Sustainable Economy Initiative (SEI). Two years later, SEI's 60-member steering committee and all four Northern Forest governors endorsed the first sustainable Northern Forest development strategy.

The Northern Forest Center also organized the Summit for the Northern Forest to develop action plans. More than 20 tourism stakeholders, led by the Northern Forest Canoe Trail (NFCT), launched the Northern Forest Tourism Network

(NFTN), which built a communications platform and increased the coordination of tourism projects. At a second summit, in 2011, NFTN members produced a three-part action plan:

- Action research: Inventory, study, and share best practices; consolidate studies measuring tourism's growing importance to the Northern Forest economy.
- Training and workforce development: Help business owners, managers, and frontline employees respond to changing tourist demands.
- Product development: Capitalize more fully on the region's potential as a national and global travel destination.

Northern Forest Canoe Trail

NFCT is a 740-mile inland paddling route across New York, Vermont, Québec, New Hampshire, and Maine. It traverses several counties that lag behind state and national

median household income by up to 30 percent.⁵ NFCT has stimulated economic activity in all of them with its emphasis on stewarding natural resources, ensuring public access to waterways, and promoting canoe and kayak experiences.

NFCT's Community Economic Development Program catalyzes nature- and heritage-based development through reciprocal relationships with communities and businesses. Business partners provide paddler services, including shuttles, lodging, and supplies. The businesses—many small sole proprietors—gain the customers and brand recognition that a well-publicized expedition trail provides. Mutual benefits stem from cooperative product development (activity packages and itineraries), marketing (especially NFCT's online trip-planning tool), and events like paddling races and river cleanups. One 2010 Vermont vacation package boosted trail usage while netting \$22,000 for the host business.

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A 2010 survey of NFCT's business partners by the University of New Hampshire's Carsey Institute found that 83 percent viewed the collaboration as beneficial.⁶

Employee Training

Outstanding tourist services require highly skilled, motivated employees, so all four states are pursuing workforce development. The Maine Woods Tourism Training Initiative (MWTTI) is a project of the Maine Woods Consortium, a network that fosters conservation, economic prosperity, and community vitality. MWTTI was launched in 2009 with support from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development and the Maine-based Betterment Fund. Six county-level networks now coordinate curriculum design, creation of teaching materials, and training workshops.

Through spring 2011, more than 300 tourism employees and managers participated in sessions on customer service, marketing, social media, interpretive skills, and destination information. Most trainings emphasize core hospitality and customer service to facilitate workers' transition from traditional manufacturing industries. To serve dispersed communities, DVD lending libraries distribute curricula to businesses and employees who cannot attend workshops. An online training program was added in summer 2011.

The Northern Forest Tourism Network is now inventorying tourism training and formal tourism education programs region-wide—including at Paul Smith's College

(New York), the Northeast Kingdom Travel and Tourism Association (Vermont), and White Mountains Community College (New Hampshire). Near-term goals are to share successful curricula and teaching media and establish a train-the-trainer network.

Coastal Enterprises Inc.

CEI is a Maine-based community development corporation and community development financial institution. Since 1977, CEI has focused on creating economic opportunity for low-income people, initially in Maine's rural towns and regions. It has provided more than \$677 million in financing to 2,104 enterprises and has leveraged more than \$1.5 billion for micro, small, and midsize enterprises. Projects range from value-added processing of natural resources to community facilities, affordable housing projects, and tourism.

An example of primary impacts on businesses directly involved in tourism is CEI's investment in the New England Outdoor Center's Ktaadn Resorts project in economically depressed Millinocket, Maine. Phase I included land acquisition, construction of nine "green" (LEED-certified) cabins, and renovation of additional facilities. As of this writing, the project has upgraded NEOC's infrastructure and has converted eight part-time jobs to full-time.

CEI's work on the 13 Mile Woods Project in Errol, New Hampshire, demonstrates secondary impacts, which include enterprises and activities that sustain infrastructure needed for a thriving rural tourism. CEI used New Markets Tax Credits

to finance conservation of 5,269 acres, protecting them against overdevelopment and sustaining ecological, economic, and recreational benefits. Errol manages the woods as a working forest and recreation area, supporting tourism and the local forestry industry.

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The Northern Forest Tourism Network reaffirmed its commitment to four-state collaboration at its 2011 summit, framing an action plan that strengthens cooperation in employee training, product development, market research, and economic research. Stakeholders are progressing toward a more comprehensive and ambitious Northern Forest tourism strategy while also supporting state and local initiatives. As collaboration grows, the North Forest will, too.

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Endnotes

- ¹ David Vail, "Revitalizing Maine's Rural Economy: A Lead Sector Strategy" in *Health Care and Tourism: A Lead Sector Strategy for Rural Maine*, eds. David Vail and Lisa Pohlmann (Augusta, Maine: Maine Center for Economic Policy, 2007).
- ² H. Ken Cordell et al., "Outdoor Recreation Activity Trends: What's Growing? What's Slowing?" *Internet Research Information Series* (Athens, Georgia: USDA Forest Service, 2007).
- ³ *Maine Labor Market Digest* (Augusta, Maine: Maine Department of Labor, November 2010), p. 7; and *New Hampshire Occupational Employment and Wages 2010* (Concord, New Hampshire: New Hampshire Economic and Labor Market Information Bureau, October 2010), 84-87.
- ⁴ David Vail and Wade Kavanaugh, *Livable Wages in Maine Tourism?* (Augusta, Maine: Maine Center for Economic Policy, 2001).
- ⁵ Charles Lawton, "Lessons from Southern Maine's Economic Success," in *Spreading Prosperity to the "Other" Maines*, eds. Lisa Pohlmann and David Vail (Augusta, Maine: Maine Center for Economic Policy, 2005), 63-72.
- ⁶ Barbara Wauchope, "Northern Forest Canoe Trail Evaluation" (working paper, University of New Hampshire Carsey Institute, Durham, New Hampshire, 2010).

