

Bangor Daily News

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SATURDAY/SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 19-20, 2009

SAVING, WORKING THE LAND

Few in Maine would dispute the importance of land conservation; just look at the overwhelming support the Land for Maine's Future program wins each time bond funding for its land acquisition is on the ballot. Maine Coast Heritage Trust, a private nonprofit conservation group, has earned an excellent reputation in the state for its 40 years of work preserving key coastal and island properties. The organization has protected 130,000 acres of land in eight counties, including 278 entire islands, and built 60 miles of trails for passive public recreation on those parcels.

In a quiet way, under the leadership of its new president, Paul Galloway, MCHT is evolving into a partner with community organizations working on economic development. In the past, land trusts like MCHT would cater to their constituencies that want to see choice coastal parcels protected from development. Those constituencies were heavily populated by part-time residents and by those who relocated to Maine from elsewhere.

MCHT has worked in concert with 105 local land trusts in Maine, so the organization hasn't been acting from high above local communities. And like most land preservation groups, MCHT works only with willing sellers, so it could not be accused of using hostile take-over tactics. But in recent endeavors, especially those in eastern Maine, MCHT is working to assist local resource-based business. In Washington County, MCHT is

increasing its presence, where it has worked with blueberry and scallop harvesting business cooperatives. It also is relying on local stewards to develop management plans for properties.

It's a savvy move for the organization, especially after a downward economic cycle. Those who want more economic activity in places like Washington County often point to land conservation as an impediment to their efforts at revival. The truth is, though, that preserving and protecting choice parcels adds to the region's quality of life and improves its assets, which can be used to grow ecotourism businesses.

The trust is using as its guide a five-year plan it developed before Mr. Galloway took over from long-time president Jay Espy. That plan included a \$100 million capital goal for its Campaign for the Coast, which it achieved.

In addition to dovetailing its efforts with local community goals, MCHT is publicizing more of the trails on its properties. In the past, public access was not exactly hidden, but in the interest of avoiding seeing the properties "loved to death," they were not included on statewide tourism lists and the like. The trust also has begun hosting field trips to its properties, which helps fight the "nature deficit disorder" that sociologists have identified in people, even those in Maine.

In this fast-changing world, the template MCHT is following — working with locals while aiming to preserve properties that are important to all of Maine — is a good model for others to follow.