

Is the area of protected habitat increasing in the Casco Bay watershed?

CBEP Goal: Minimize adverse environmental impacts to ecological communities from the use and development of land and marine resources.

Status

The Casco Bay watershed continues to provide valuable habitat for a range of fish and wildlife species. Available habitat, however, can be lost or degraded by human activity, especially urban and suburban development. Constructing homes or shopping malls converts field and forest wildlife habitats to lawns, roads, and remnant forest plots that support a less abundant and less diverse animal community.

While land conversion in the Casco Bay watershed may have slowed slightly due to the recent economic downturn, the population of the Greater Portland area is growing, and the use of land for homes and businesses has been growing still more rapidly. Development today consumes more land per person than it did a generation ago, and much more than it did in the mid-twentieth century. Much of the regions' recent growth has been centered not in existing urban areas, but in peripheral communities that, until recently, were largely rural.

Such land use trends reduce both habitat quantity and quality; pose challenges for industries based on natural resources; and block access to wild lands for traditional pursuits like hunting and hiking. Land conservation efforts play an essential role in ameliorating such unintended consequences of land use choices.

Maine has a vibrant tradition of locally led conservation. As of June 2010, the Maine Land Trust Network listed 100 land trusts and other organizations dedicated to conserving land around the state (MLTN 2010). Those groups are involved not only with protecting habitat, but also with preserving farmland, protecting working forests, and



Conserved lands in the lower 16 municipalities around Casco Bay. Many conserved lands remain in private ownership, and do not allow public access. Always check with the landowner before visiting any protected area.

developing recreational trails. Several times, Maine's voters have supported bonds to fund land protection through the Land for Maine's Future Fund, which has protected nearly half a million acres in Maine since its inception (Maine State Planning Office 2010). State and federal agencies also undertake conservation initiatives, and facilitate local efforts by providing technical assistance, leadership, funds, and other support.

The Casco Bay watershed itself is home to at least 25 nonprofit organizations directly involved in land conservation. About half the towns in the watershed have



Examples of properties protected with support from the CBEP Habitat Protection Fund in Scarborough, Bridgton, and Pettingill Island (clockwise from top left).

CASCO BAY HABITAT PROTECTION FUND

CBEP's Habitat Protection Fund supports local conservation by providing seed funding in support of habitat protection efforts by land trusts, towns and state agencies. Between 2006 and 2010, CBEP invested more than \$250,000 through the fund to support a dozen conservation projects. While not all projects are complete – and thus permanent protection is not yet assured – the projects involve over 4,500 acres of land. They have resulted in protection of a Casco Bay island and purchase of land for a park in Bridgton, Maine, and they include several projects to protect wetlands, mudflats, riparian areas, and forests. The projects

provide significant opportunities for recreation, while two included efforts to support local agriculture.

CBEP funding typically represents only a small fraction of a project's total cost: sponsors must raise the bulk of necessary monies from other sources. But CBEP funding is often available early in project development, and can be used to support the cost of surveys or appraisals, without which project negotiations often cannot begin. And by clearly demonstrating local support, CBEP funds can also boost the chances of receiving funding from state, regional, or national sources.



conservation commissions, which are generally volunteer-based municipal commissions that work to improve management of open space in our communities. Local organizations garner support for conservation efforts from a variety of sources, including private donors, foundations, local community members, municipal budgets, the Land for Maine's Future program, and federal grants, as well as from CBEP's own Habitat Protection Fund.

Counting Protected Lands

Land protection takes many forms, and some areas that local residents think of as "protected" may in fact be more vulnerable than is generally known. Town forests, for example, are often considered permanently protected. Yet most are community assets that could be tapped at any time to address community needs. In the absence of other restrictions, town forests could become the location of a new school or town building, or even be sold to raise revenue for cash-strapped municipalities.

Conservation easements are an important tool for land conservation. Under an easement, certain rights associated with land ownership – the right to subdivide the property, construct a house, or log an area of forest, for example – are donated or sold by the land owner to a conservation organization. Such restrictions are binding not only on the current land owner, but on future owners as well. Easements thus provide a legal mechanism for permanent protection.

Conservation easements, however, are drafted on a case by case basis. Each one reflects the particular landowner's wishes, the conservation goals being addressed, and legal and practical constraints. Some easements allow agriculture, logging, or even limited residential or commercial development. It is thus sometimes difficult to decide exactly what constitutes "protected lands."

Acres and Parcels

Since 1997, The Gulf of Maine Coastal Program Office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, with significant funding from CBEP, has maintained a geographic database of conserved and open space lands in the lower 16 municipalities¹ of the Casco Bay watershed. Several different levels of protection are tracked: (1) conserved lands that are permanently protected; (2) open space lands that lack permanent protection, including unofficial conservation lands; and (3) recreational lands, which include areas that are used primarily for recreation, but may provide some conservation or habitat benefits. Open space lands that are not permanently protected comprise a variety of lands: areas in agricultural or tree growth programs; those owned in common by homeowners associations; areas conserved

¹ The 16 municipalities are Cape Elizabeth, South Portland, Portland, Westbrook, Long Island, Chebeague Island, Falmouth, Cumberland, Yarmouth, North Yarmouth, Pownal, Freeport, Brunswick, Harpswell, West Bath, and Phippsburg.

Protected Lands in Lower 16 Casco Bay Watershed Towns, 2010.

Level of Protection	Number of Parcels	Total Acres Protected	Percent of Casco Bay Watershed
Conservation Land	438	15,694	7.5%
Open Space (no protection)	306	7,494	3.6%
Recreational Land	110	1,917	0.9%
TOTAL	854	25,105	12.0%

to protect drinking water; town forests for which there exists no legal barrier (such as a conservation easement) to block conversion to another use; and similar areas.

As of 2010, 854 parcels in the lower 16 municipalities of the Casco Bay watershed, amounting to more than 25,000 acres and 12 percent of the area of the watershed, are being tracked in the database. A majority of those lands, some 15,694 acres – about 7.5 percent of the area of the towns examined – is considered permanently protected.

Trends and Conclusions

The amount of permanently protected land in the lower 16 municipalities of the Casco Bay watershed has more than doubled since 1997. That truly remarkable achievement reflects the diligence and hard work of many individuals and organizations throughout the region.

Year	Number of Sites	Area Permanently Protected (acres)	Percent of Study Area
1997	246	7,300	3.5%
2005	341	10,900	5.2%
2010	438	15,694	7.5%

Collectively, those efforts are of great significance to local communities. No location in any of these 16 towns is more than three miles from permanently protected conservation lands: the typical distance is less than two-thirds of a mile. There is little doubt that conservation efforts are playing an important role in protecting the character of the landscape in the watershed.

References

- Maine Land Trust Network. 2010. MLTN: Alphabetical List of Land Trusts. http://www.mltn.org/view_trusts-alphabetical.php
- Maine State Planning Office. 2009. *Land for Maine's Future Program: Protecting Maine's natural heritage and future economic health. The 2009 Biennial Report to the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry.* Augusta. February 2009. <http://www.maine.gov/spo/lmf/docs/ACF%20Biennial%20Report%202-09%20WEB.pdf>