

A Northern Forest Fairy Tale - Randolph, New Hampshire, buys 10,000 acres of White Mountains forest to preserve it

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ONCE UPON A TIME, A TINY TOWN SOUGHT TO NURTURE A FOREST TO HAPPILY EVER AFTER.

Over the next few months, the residents of little Randolph, New Hampshire, which claims a year-round population of about 350, will take possession of a sprawling 10,000-acre chunk of the state's famed White Mountains. In an audacious move hailed as a high-water mark for the community-forest movement, the town of Randolph will, with this single purchase, protect traditional working forest practices and provide a sound future for historic recreational uses as diverse as hiking and hunting, snowmobiling and maple sugaring.

Thanks to the town, two massive parcels of the White Mountain National Forest--the Presidential Unit and the Kilkenny Unit--will be forever joined. Three separate watersheds will gain protection, and one of the Appalachian Trail's principal viewpoints of the northern Presidential range will be preserved. With this one bold initiative, Randolph will preserve a critical wildlife and ecological corridor that stitches together boreal woodlands of both the United States and Canada. And the town will ultimately enjoy a revenue stream that could dwarf its past profits from a yield tax on forest management practices.

Top to bottom and beginning to end, it's a Northern Forest fairy tale come true, and the story it tells should inspire other timber country communities around New England and the nation.

For at least a century, Randolph residents had considered the deep woods and crenelated peaks of the Pond of Safety Forest a part of their collective community. Located between the larger villages of Gorham and Lancaster, Randolph is a town with no commercial center, no downtown, no crossroads.

"You can drive right through town and never know you drove through a town," says John Mudge, a longtime summer resident and board member of the Randolph Foundation. But you couldn't miss Randolph's woods: thousands upon thousands of acres from the foot of Mount Madison north to Randolph Mountain and Mount Crescent and farther still to the quizzically named Pond of Safety and the Kilkenny Ridge beyond.

But that forest was, in fact, privately held by a succession of commercial timber interests. In the last 10 years, according to David Willcox, Randolph's town moderator and a member of the planning board, ownership of the Pond of Safety Forest had changed hands at least four times. The most recent owner was the John Hancock Timber Resource Group, which managed the forest for investment purposes.

"Decision-making about the forest was getting farther and farther away from town," Willcox notes. It was part of a shift in land ownership patterns with dramatic implications for New England's North Country. In the last year alone, more than 5 million northern forest acres were offered for sale. Increasingly, the people of Randolph looked up towards Canton Notch and Pond Hill with unease.

Now, however, the Pond of Safety Forest will forever remain a link in the North Country wilds, thanks to a massive private fundraising effort, creative financing and thinking in and between local, state, and federal

agencies, a supporting cast of conservation organizations and outdoor organizations, and the willingness of the Hancock company to work with all of them. Oddly enough, it was a devastating storm that gave Randolph's residents the chance to purchase the property.

In 1997 the Randolph Planning Board learned that the Hancock company had applied to place most of the 12,490-acre Pond of Safety Forest into the federal Forest Legacy Program, which buys conservation easements on forest land at a fair market value. Randolph and its neighbor, Jefferson, where 2,000 of the acres were located, weighed in with support for the initiative.

"At the time, we weren't even thinking about buying the land, of course," recalls Wilcox. Residents were just relieved that Hancock planned to keep the block intact and in a forested state.

Then, in February 1998, a terrible ice storm struck the region, "and changed the landscape," notes Wilcox, "in more ways than one." Trees below about 1,400 feet in elevation in the Forest escaped the brunt of the storm, but a half-foot of ice sheathed trees in a huge sweep of forest above 1,500 feet. There, nearly three-quarters of the trees lost their crowns; for weeks the snapping trunks sounded like cannon fire. "It looked like somebody had taken a helicopter, turned it upside down, and whacked off all the treetops," says Jim Meiklejohn, chairman of the Randolph Conservation Commission. Hancock surveyed the forest, cut what timber remained, and decided to sell the land outright.

That's when the town of Randolph went to work, cobbling together a partnership that cut across municipal boundaries and weaved together agencies at the local, state, and federal levels. The U.S. Forest Service had long eyed 2,000 acres of Hancock land behind the White Mountain National Forest proclamation boundary--a tract that includes the 10-acre Pond of Safety. To buy it, New Hampshire's congressional delegation scored a \$3 million federal allocation. Half that money comes from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund and will be used to purchase the northernmost 2,030 acres of land, which will be added to the Kilkenny Unit of the White Mountain National Forest. The other half comes from the Forest Legacy Program.

While those efforts were underway, the San Francisco-based Trust for Public Land offered to obtain an option to purchase the property, which would buy valuable time.

Last summer, the Randolph Foundation stepped into the breach. Founded in 1962, the charitable foundation has a long history of supporting local conservation projects. IT announced a \$2 million fundraising campaign, and pulled on the ears of both locals and the hundreds of "summer people" who spend the warm months in historic cabins nestled throughout Randolph.

The Foundation has collected contributions and pledges totaling more than \$1,162,596 from 200 some individuals, corporations, and foundations-including a \$250,000 challenge grant from the Merck Family.

With local support assured, the Trust for Public Land bought the entire 12,490-acre Hancock tract on December 27, 2000, for its fair market appraisal of \$4 million. TPL plans to sell a \$2 million conservation easement to the state of New Hampshire and sell the land outright to the towns of Randolph and Jefferson. With another 1,000 acres of adjacent land purchased from the Gorham Land Company, the land deal will mean more than 3,000 acres added to the national forest, and a community forest of more than 10,000 acres.

"This is really an effort to keep the forest under local control," explains Mudge. "We want to protect the historic recreational uses. We want to make a contribution to the wood products industry. We want this land to be preserved and properly managed as a working resource in the North Country."

Once the financial and legal arrangements are complete, the town of Randolph will manage the forest through a town forestry committee and a professional forester contracted to draft a management plan. The marketable timber that remained after the ice storm was removed so it will be years before the town realizes a significant financial return on forest practices there.

But with an emphasis on long-rotation hardwoods and sawlog production instead of pulpwood, the forest will eventually provide habitat for the area's black bear, moose, lynx, pine marten, fisher, and boreal chickadees. The Randolph Mountain Club, one of the nation's oldest hiking clubs, will maintain and re-establish miles of trails through the property. And the residents of Randolph will never have to look up towards the Kilkenny Ridge and see houses where trees used to be.

"We're waiting for the other shoe to drop," says Meiklejohn, chuckling. Like many, he's wowed by the win-win nature of the deal. "We've been cooking on this for more than two years now," he explains, "and there's been no opposition. There are those that say, 'Heck, we're a little-bitty town. How are we going to manage a huge forest?' But nobody's saying don't do it."

And other towns across New England are looking at Randolph and thinking, Maybe we can do it, too.

They'll have as their role model not only a beautiful forest, but an historic one. The Pond of Safety Forest takes its name from a spruce-ringed basin nestled under the Kilkenny Ridge, where the peaks of the Northern Presidential range are reflected in quiet waters.

How the pond got its name is a story with several permutations, but here is the most widely accepted telling: Four soldiers from the Continental Army were captured by the British and released after pledging not to bear arms against the redcoats again. When they returned to their regiment their superior officers ordered them back into service. Being honest men--or at least prudent, aware that if recaptured they would likely be executed--the soldiers instead retreated to a remote White Mountain pond, where they lived off the land until after the war. Once the damnable English were booted from New England the four soldiers resurfaced in the nearby town of Jefferson, where they became upstanding members of the community and regained their military pensions. And their White Mountain hideout became known as the Pond of Safety.

At least two aspects of the Forest's new lease on life make the Pond of Safety Forest project a model of community forestry. First is the sheer size of the project; most community forests in New England are measured by the tens or hundreds of acres, not by the thousands. How a town the size of Randolph manages a forest the size of many state parks will be an unfolding story--and a closely watched one.

More interestingly, according to the Trust for Public Land's Roger Krussman, is how the plan to save the forest involved so many partners and players. One of the major advantages to the effort to purchase and protect the Pond of Safety Forest was the diversity of players interested in the forest's conservation.

"We turned to every aspect of public and private funding out there," says Krussman. "There's federal money going to the state, town money, philanthropy. It's a true community effort, and definitely a model for the future."

But having such widespread support and involvement also brings challenges. "Each person at the table wants their particular concerns addressed," Krussman says. Details of how the Pond of Safety Forest will be managed are still being hammered into place, but a skeletal framework is clear. Randolph will own the land, but a conservation easement outlining forest management practices will be held by the state of New Hampshire. High priorities for the town include having the forest support traditional wood products industries and preserving and expanding recreational use.

Today, the forest still bears the scars of the devastating ice storm. Walking off-trail through much of the woods is a miserable experience; in the winter, even snowshoers are stymied by smashed crowns and tangles of branches. And although the financial return on their investment won't come for years, there's another kind of revenue Randolph residents can be assured of.

"Wouldn't it be great," says Meildejohn, "if future generations looked around and said, 'Geez, our grandparents really were pretty smart.'"

That, it appears, is a sure bet. AF

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