

TNC speech 50 Year Anniversary
June 12, 2007
Roger Milliken, Jr.

Good evening. I have been given the honor of offering a few remarks to celebrate the 50th anniversary of The Nature Conservancy in Maine. I am moved to look out tonight and see so many leaders, volunteers, partners. All of you have helped us reach this milestone.

The Maine Chapter was founded in 1956. The minutes of the organizational meeting, reveal the strong hand of one person—our founder, Rachel Carson. This year we are also celebrating the centenary of this remarkable woman, the mother of the modern environmental movement.

You know what they say about Ginger Rogers? She did everything Fred Astaire did, only backwards and in high heels! Rachel Carson was this kind of performer. While writing her books, she cared for her ailing mother. She adopted the orphaned son of her niece. Galvanized by the spraying of a friend's bird sanctuary with DDT, and the resulting death of countless insects and birds, she set about writing *Silent Spring*. At the same time she was fighting the breast cancer that would ultimately kill her.

In the winter of 1962, after four years of labor, the book was finished and she sent it off to the New Yorker. On January 23rd, William Shawn telephoned and called her manuscript “a brilliant achievement full of beauty and loveliness and depth of feeling.” She records her reaction in a letter to her beloved friend Dorothy Freeman. She wrote:

I took Jeffie (her cat) into the study and played the Beethoven violin concerto.... And suddenly the tension of the four years were broken and I got down and put my arms around Jeffie and let the tears come. With his little, warm, rough tongue he told me that he understood. I think I let you see last summer what my deeper feelings are about this when I said I could never again listen happily to a thrush song if I had not done all I could. And last night the thoughts of all the birds and other creatures and all the loveliness that is in nature came to me with such a surge of deep happiness, that now I *had* done what I could—I had been able to complete it—now it had its own life.” (Freeman, *Always, Rachel*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1994 pp 393-94)

Rachel Carson had completed her magnum opus, and it was soon to be out in the world—and would release a hurricane of invective upon her. The chemical industry tried their best to discredit her as a hysterical woman. But she persevered in what she knew to be true, and the indiscriminate use of DDT was rolled back, reversing the decline of many species, especially raptors. We can only be amazed, and grateful for what she accomplished.

Another of her legacies is the Maine Chapter. She insisted that a chapter of the Conservancy be established in Maine, “because it is the only group know which is doing something practical about actually preserving areas. The group she called together applied and were chartered as a Chapter by the home office.

The Maine Chapter didn’t end up acquiring a parcel until 1961, when it bought 23 acres around Step Falls in Newry. This was a typical purchase for the young Chapter. The land was pretty, it was available, and so we bought it. And as documented on the posters around the room, we continued from one acquisition to another. We bought the towering pine forest of the Hermitage. We began to partner, with the State on Wolfes Neck Park in Freeport, with the Fish and Wildlife Service at Petit Manan. Our opportunistic approach matched that of the overall organization, which at one point in the 1960s had defined its mission as “preserving living museums of primeval America.”

In the 1970s however, back at headquarters in Washington, it dawned on the leadership that the opportunities for acquisition were endless and to be effective we had better focus. The Conservancy engaged in one of our periodic top to bottom reviews of mission and activities. Led by Bob Jenkins, the Conservancy carved out a niche of protecting biologically significant lands. Habitats for rare and endangered species became priorities, and we began to shift from an organization driven by opportunism to one driven by analysis and planning.

In the mid 1980s the Maine Chapter was approached by the Pingree family to take ownership of the Big Reed Forest. Of Maine’s 20 million acres, there were only 6,000 acres left of virgin, old growth forest, and the Pingrees had preserved 5,000 acres of this at Big Reed. Protecting this gem became the centerpiece of a capital campaign that raised what was then an impressive \$5 million over five years.

The effort to protect Big Reed matched an emerging focus for the Conservancy as a whole, perhaps best defined by its 1986 mission statement which was: “To protect the plants, animals and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on earth by protecting the lands they need to survive.”

Looking back, one theme in our history, is that when threats to our natural heritage, have arisen, people have looked to the Conservancy--and we have delivered. In the late 1980s, the Patten Corporation entered Maine in a big way, buying up large parcels of forest and waterfront, extracting as much development value as possible without regulatory review. They carved up over 60,0000 acres during their tenure here.

In 1988 Patten bought the land around spectacular Donnell Pond, an inland version of the mountains and lakes of nearby Acadia National Park. All across Maine, lovers of land were wringing their hands. The State approached the Company and received a cold shoulder. But the Patten offices were in Topsham, not far from the Conservancy’s. And our leaders at the time were men of unmistakable charm—and vision. Mason and Kent paid them a visit--and received such a poor reception that they left the meeting convinced that no resolution was possible. But they went back again and again, and finally struck a

deal to protect 9,000 acres. Today, thanks to the help of many other partners, and our recent 10,000 acre purchase at Spring River, this conservation area now comprises an ecologically viable reserve of 24,000 acres.

That same year, 1988, the first leveraged buyout in New England's paper industry sent seismic shocks throughout the region. The Chapter worked with a wide array of environmental and sportsmen's interests—many in this room tonight—to give birth to the Land For Maine's Future Program, which has since supported the protection of lands and waters throughout the state.

Jump ahead with me now ten years to 1998. We had moved beyond saving a patch here and a patch there. We had begun to look at the whole quilt. Most of the large, contiguous parcels were owned by the forest industry, however, and we had had no success in getting a seat at the table with them. In the years preceding 1998, millions of acres had changed hands as the industry divested its lands. In mid-year, International Paper put 200,000 acres on the market.

We teamed up with a timber investor a new approach for us--and for the investor. In essence, we committed \$3 million to purchase a conservation corridor along the St. John River. That allowed the investor to sweeten its offer to \$35 million, well beyond the \$32 million of timber value the land represented.

The bids were opened in September, shortly after the Chapter Board had committed to initiate a fundraising campaign of \$20 million, \$5 million more than our capital campaign consultant advised. Our bid came in third. Another opportunity to protect a large forested landscape had slipped though our fingers, and we returned to focus on the challenges of our \$20 million campaign.

And then, just before Thanksgiving, Kent received the fateful phone call. The high bidder had fallen through. International Paper was willing to accept our bid—if we could close in six weeks.. Oh, and one more thing--the timber investor had since committed their funds elsewhere—so if we wanted to move forward, we would have to come up with the full \$35 million dollars ourselves. Kent, stunned, hung up the phone. Shaking his head, he asked himself, “How can we possibly do this?” And then his heart outvoting his head, thought, “How can we not?”

We were fortunate to have a leader like Kent, thoughtful, deeply committed, and inspiring. “We can do this!” he told us over and over. We were lucky to have leaders on the board like Leon Gorman, Sherry Huber and Joe Wishcamper, who were quick to respond to a life-changing opportunity. The rest is history. Kent and Joe brought their audacious proposal to the Board of the Maine Chapter. We looked each other in the eyes, held hands and jumped. We would take it on.

Kent, Joe and Carol, Leon and Lisa raised \$10 million in six weeks, and this was enough to convince the Conservancy President to loan the Maine Chapter \$35 million so we could complete the purchase. Two years later we had raised \$56 million.

The Maine Chapter's success had a galvanizing effect on the rest of the Conservancy. That a small state like us could master the purchase of 200,000 acres, that we had doubled the record for money raised for a single transaction, inspired—and challenged—our colleagues throughout the country and around the world. I had the pleasure of joining the Board of Governors in Arlington shortly after, and I watched with pride, and I confess, some trepidation, as the amount of money loaned to Chapters all over the country doubled to about \$600 million.

The Maine Chapter challenged and inspired the rest of the Conservancy.

And now, in the call and response that characterizes dynamic organizations, our Chapter is being challenged to focus our work around two words in the mission statement “on earth.” To protect the diversity of life on earth.

And so the Maine Chapter is keeping our focus on partnerships with Amigos de Sian Kaan in Mexico, while we expand our view beyond traditional boundaries to the NW Atlantic, the productive fishery that stretches from Chesapeake Bay to the Bay of Fundy. Seeing the potential to play a part in its conservation in the Gulf of Maine, we are entering, carefully, collaboratively, into the worlds of underwater conservation and fisheries management.

Just as importantly, we continue our work smaller scales. This work is less glamorous, perhaps, but no less important. One such effort is the parcel by parcel protection underway in the Kennebec estuary, used by every migratory species—fish and fowl—as they swim and fly between summer and winter homes along the east coast of North America.

Another stellar example, is the ongoing work in York County of painstakingly purchasing one lot after another to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. York County is the sprawl capital of Maine, and Marion Fuller Brown, Helen Winebaum and others, having committed to an initial goal of protecting 14,000 acres around Mt. Agamenticus, have succeeded in the protection of 12,000 so far. The Conservancy has had a personal hand in over 90 of the parcels acquired, and provided the legwork and support for dozens more.

Working at all scales is critical. We must boldly seize opportunities like those offered by the St John AND work patiently and diligently, to shore up a defense against losing to sprawl precious lands that serve as backdrops and watersheds for our more populated regions, which here in Maine happen to also be those regions which harbor the highest biodiversity.

Before the St. John Purchase, the Conservancy in Maine had directly contributed to the protection of 100,000 acres. A major milestone. Now, less than ten years later, that number is 1.2 million acres. We didn't do it all ourselves--not by a long shot. Our partners are too numerous to name tonight. But together we have had a hand in the

protection of one out of every three of the total 3.6 million acres of the state that enjoys conservation protection through easement or full ownership.

And today we are celebrating our advance into another frontier for us—the Penobscot River. It wasn't until 1990 that the word “waters,” was added to the Conservancy's mission statement, “by protecting the land and waters they need to survive.” We had been focused almost exclusively on land. Now we are joining with others, those who recognized before we did that this river is indeed a heart line of Maine.

The Penobscot River Coalition worked out the details of dam purchase and removal with PPL. Mike Tetreault, as he assumed the leadership of the Maine Chapter three years ago, quickly grasped how this historic effort would advance the Conservancy's mission in Maine. He saw that restoring the river would connect the lands we had protected in headwaters around Katahdin, with the Gulf of Maine, the geographical heart of the NW Atlantic, where fisheries were in decline.

As our partners NRCM and others had learned with the removal of the Edwards Dam on the Kennebec, Mike understood that the river system would bounce back—insects would return, fish would migrate and spawn, and all this life would feed the traditional cycles upriver and down.

Looking back since 1956, we can see that our vision has continued to expand. It has grown to include sustainable human communities, be they the burgeoning towns of southern Maine, the threatened logging communities up north, fishing villages down east, or the Penobscot Indian Nation.

The Penobscots have been here since before time began. They have watched without recourse as their traditional lands were taken, their people sickened by diseases introduced—some deliberately—by our ancestors. Both their native river and their life ways have been dammed—and polluted—by what we once called the forces of progress. But they have persisted in their home place, and now allies have appeared, united by a vision of helping to restore a river, and to restore a sense of balance between us humans and our natural home.

Log drives and sawdust no longer choke the Penobscot River. Over the last 30 years, much of the pollution has been cleaned up. And soon the dams will be coming out. There is a whiff of restoration in the air. We are gladdened and honored to be part of an effort that is beginning to make amends for the harms of the past.

Today, 50 years after the publication of *Silent Spring*, the bald eagle has recovered. This, a key bird for our nation and for the Penobscot Nation and native peoples across this continent, was brought to the verge of extinction by DDT. Thanks to the steely resolve of a committed woman, that chemical tide was turned back, and it is likely this year that the bald eagle will be removed from the endangered species list.

Rachel Carson faced an overwhelming challenge. She said she would never again be able to enjoy the song of a thrush unless she had done all that she could. She stood strong, and with her vibrant, literate prose gave birth to a wave of environmental awareness—and action.

There is a whiff of restoration in the air. The possibility of a healing, which, if we muster a Carson-like dedication and persistence, we may yet realize. And yet the threats loom large. Population, sprawl and global climate change threaten all we have accomplished over the last 50 years. This is no time to rest on our laurels. We must act with renewed urgency and resolve, at unprecedented scale in Maine and around the globe. As we mobilize to do so, the potential for restoration and balance glimmers before us.

Fifty years ago, Rachel Carson founded the Maine Chapter, because, in her words, “This generation must do the job, because natural areas are disappearing fast.”

If the rate of destruction was fast then, it is exponential now. Our efforts must rise again to meet the scale of the challenge, both in Maine and around the globe.

Fifty years from now, may others stand here and say of us—“they understood and they acted.” May they say that we did what we could so that we, and they, could continue to enjoy the music of the thrush, the rise of a salmon from the waters of a river, the vista and refuge of landscapes protected for the preservation of life itself.

May it be so!