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# The Geography of Philanthropy

*With three meditations on humility*

**W. Kent Olson**



*Editor's note: In celebration of the centennials of Acadia National Park and the National Park Service, a former Appalachia editor and Maine resident considers the charitable motives that created the first national park on the East Coast, the first sprung full-blown from private philanthropy.*

Every privilege entails an obligation.

—Aldo Leopold

THE IRONY IN HONORING THE CREATION OF A NATIONAL PARK IS this: The honorees did not create it. Acadia, in Maine, was made by other-than-us. We can cite an omni-powerful architect or credit geologic forces unconnected to faith, or blend the two beliefs. Regardless, our species is mere recipient of a spacious geo-bioscape of salt water and mountains. An asset dropped willy-nilly on inheritors requires they re-earn the gift or risk diminishing it while in charge. So it is in 2016 with Acadia National Park, a century old in law, at least 420 million years old by the clock.

At Gettysburg, Abraham Lincoln spoke of soldiers hallowing the battlefield by blood sacrifice. Such giving, he said, exceeds our “poor power to add or detract” from what they did. It is different with warless places. Though not consecrated in the Gettysburg sense, Acadia is dedicated ground, sacred to some. Present society’s powers to enhance or lessen it are substantial and vie to cancel each other. I tell myself stewardship is winning. But outside Acadia, development has come on not-so-little cat feet and leveled its Cheshire grin at Mount Desert Island. More landscape consumption is inevitable. Acadia’s founders foresaw it in the late 1800s and acted to preserve the island core, eventually by irreversible federal means.

The summer colony had upper-class roots and, some of them, uncommon wealth. They enjoyed political connections. Many owned the geographies in question. Perhaps these men and women could have convinced each other that their offspring would keep family lands undeveloped. Instead, the founders went visionary. They planned a future for *Îles des Monts Déserts*, Island of the Barren Mountains.

They believed their power could add value to the lives of people they would not live to meet. The founders were philanthropists—“phil-an-thro-py

*Sunrise along the Ocean Path, in Acadia National Park.* THOMAS BLAGDEN, JR.

[fi-lan-thruh-pee] n: love of mankind generally.” Philanthropy thinks generations ahead, knows no discount rate, and assigns a high value to the future, in this case to the benefits of preserving the nation’s boldest conjunction of granite mountains and the crashing Atlantic.

EXCEPT IN ALASKA PERHAPS, NO OTHER VERTICAL NATIONAL PARK IS SO profoundly defined by the horizontal sea. Maine’s 3,478-mile coast is a tracery of jagged fractals: headlands, bays, islands, forests, marshes, and bogs. But only Acadia has those features plus a complete mountain range condensed on an island.

Eastward and south, within and beyond Earth’s visible edge, the borderless Atlantic Ocean makes Acadia, including a park-protected skein of satellite islands, vaster than the eye understands. The brain, however, instantly registers *B-i-g P-l-a-c-e*. Because of maritime effects, the sea-level and montane flora include arctic and high-elevation species. Our rocky summits top out modestly at 1,500 feet but have a bona fide treeline. Ambient conditions can resemble those at 5,000 feet in the White Mountains or at 9,500 feet in the Sierra Nevada. The ocean is a raw master.

The Atlantic is a roiling sea of inconstancies: turbulent tides, placid tides, aesthetic profusion, carbon sump, storm generator, planes of desolation, protein mecca, frolic space, chemical catchment, eagle vector, fetid mudflat, sine-curved-wave factory, gene bank, glacial erratic depository, dark tomb, froth and brine pool, museum of quartz veins and contorted schists, cancerous sun, the hope of cod, calcareous sands, astringent wind, lace-foam surf, sucking undertow, basalt floor, beat-up commons, seabird café, cacophony, predator banquet, euphony, salt mine, liquid desert, reliquary of foundered vessels, parabolic gulf whirlpool, snail hideout, cetacean highway. Little is predictable beyond the timing of tides. From terra firma—summits or rocking chairs—we idlers can look seaward, sensing danger in the blue aqueous allure, knowing the mountains have our backs. Acadia is most mysterious when the ocean conjures a fog and shoves it inland, enclosing everything in eerie grayness. You might feel beads of mist by the molecule.

The founders treasured the area as physical entity, but also as a range of moods generated by contending forces: unrelenting sea versus unyielding land. Obvious to all but the cynical or seriously ignorant, Acadia was a place for the ages.





*The Beehive rises above a tidal pool behind Sand Beach.* THOMAS BLAGDEN, JR.

Batter my heart, three-personed God . . . make me new.

—*John Donne (1572–1631)*

### **First Meditation: Landforms**

National parks are landscapes of power. They are places of incomparable natural beauty and stunning geography. History reposes in the parks, yet they store the future too, in the form of Earth's genetic mother lode, which abides there wild, live, unsequenced, not yet recombined.

National parks have inspired scientific discovery and enterprise, but also great art, writing, theology, observation, conservation politics, interpretation, philosophy, and philanthropy, while equally informing the lives of millions of walk-a-day people, whom Henry David Thoreau approvingly called "Saunterers."

Today's saunterers are the trampers among us who, like bugs cavorting on a membrane of water, tread Earth's bolder surfaces in disbelief, astonished not to be engulfed, grateful to be upheld at all. Just as Annie Dillard detected

Earth's curvature through the arches of her feet, saunterers too can possess outraged sensibilities. They too can experience the ecstasy of insignificance—*ex stasis*, to stand out—while moving in sympathetic if sometimes frightening connection with colossal nature.

Enveloped by clouds on Katahdin, here is Thoreau in a stupefied tizzy: "I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries!" He stood out as, paradoxically, small but distinct, upright but not exceptional or intrusive, and suffered a fearsome grace: "*Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we?*" The experience knocked him briefly godless, as a lightning bolt takes out house current, and produced his darkest prose.

Thoreau's fleeting encounter with Katahdin's starker natural facts marked his mind's terrain. More persistent than a photograph, the image altered the physical land he knew. It was as if the mountain had embodied the event, in effect re-*placing* itself as a different Katahdin, with Thoreau as electrified onlooker. He lost the oriented core of himself "through the loose grating" of his ribs. Maybe as a bonus the naturalist who once said, "All change is within me" learned something about metamorphic rock.

THE RUSTICATORS WANTED TO PREVENT BAD DEVELOPMENT, PRESERVE scenic beauty, ensure pure water, foster scientific study, and honor historical values. By turns, they adopted a more controversial objective: to open their property to a public not of their station. Yes, they sought "brain workers" (an acceptable clientele), said one founder, George B. Dorr. "But what we want to provide for specially is the need of people of moderate or narrow means who would appreciate what [Acadia] has to give in beauty, interest and climate." Another founder, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., had last-minute concerns about automobiles bringing "an undesirable class of tourists." However, all in the end concurred with a third principal founder, Harvard University President Charles W. Eliot, who wrote, "It seems absolutely necessary that some at least of these private points should be held by a board of trustees, or otherwise, for the use of the public."

In 1901, Eliot formed the Hancock County Trustees of Public Reservations, the state's first land trust. He invited Mainer and permanent Bar Harbor resident Luere B. Deasy into the charter group as counsel. Deasy, later chief justice of the Supreme Judicial Court of Maine, negotiated the incorporation. Masterful in things legal, credible in things local, respected in things civic

across Maine, deft with the written and spoken word, Deasy was crucial in gaining community and legislative support.

Gifts of money and property eventually flowed. The trustees accumulated a 5,000-acre preserve and in 1916 donated it as Sieur de Monts National Monument, nucleus of the first eastern national park and the first sprung full-blown from philanthropy. Besides celebrating a natural Acadia formed over eons, in 2016 we honor the founders' civic principles and political know-how, and their hopes to inspire successors to meet the expectations of guardianship.

Judith S. Goldstein's essay "Tragedies and Triumphs" describes the park's advent as "the great democratizing force on the Island." Public ownership spurred a more economically, socially and religiously diverse visitorship and mix of residents. Acadia improved us as a people. The founders' legacy challenges all to protect it, a harder proposition today. In a democracy riven with intra-governmental strife, national parks usually get hindmost.

Said differently, are we, in Wallace Stegner's words, "a society to match the scenery"?

THE PREEMINENT TWENTIETH-CENTURY BOOK ON THE MAN-AND-nature relation is *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford University Press, 1949). Author Aldo Leopold propounds his now famous Land Ethic, introduces the word *ecology* into common parlance, and explains "contrast-value": "Outdoor recreations are primitive, atavistic; . . . their value is contrast-value; . . . excessive mechanization destroys contrasts by moving the factory to the woods or to the marsh."

Unexposed to Leopold's words, Acadia's founders nonetheless understood contrast-value: Natural spaces should differ vividly in character from what surrounds them. A protected Mount Desert's importance to plants, animals, and people rises in proportion to development's advance. As big highways, big boxes, and big towers encroach, we value our home park yet more. If, as expected, the U.S. population reaches 400 million by 2050, the brave new society will need, even more than we do, the permanent naturalness of Acadia and other refugia.

Leopold: "Recreational development is not a job of building roads into lovely country, but of building receptivity into the still unlvely human mind."

## Second Meditation: Witness

Conservationist David Brower told me wilderness is a place the ages have made perfect. But is this true? Aren't wild places works in progress if someone is bold enough to imagine unreckonable time?

Wild lands are in motion always, difficult to perceive. Geologic, evolutionary, and aesthetic motion. The center holds but nothing is static. Not the eroding strata of the Grand Canyon, the sandstone buttresses of Zion, the rising fault scarp of the Tetons, or the "fixed" granites of Acadia. The ages are still perfecting them. Hell, the Atlantic Ocean widens every year at the rate your fingernails grow.

If untamed places constantly renew, we might graciously not interpose an accelerated version of events. We might be lucky enough to witness some minute or grand physics of the act.

ANOTHER SLANT ON CONTRASTS: THE GEOGRAPHIES WE SET ASIDE FROM economic competition boost the market-controlled ones. The property gifts constituting the early park enabled a landscape to generate wealth with all its trees left upright. Acadia's 2014 visitors spent \$220 million in communities within 60 miles, underwriting 3,400 jobs and \$91 million in labor income. Just as conservation operates at the market rim, people in the park's economic compass live at least partly off interest annually produced by a protected Acadia. Asked to estimate the asset's worth *as is* to developers, an appraiser told me, "Maybe \$2 billion."

Publicly owned Acadia would not exist without privately won wealth. Our economic system generated much of America's land protection capability. When markets do well, conservation does. Witness how Acadia's founders redistributed portions of their gains.

Maine knows about private wealth metamorphosed into public assets. The state has 92 land trusts, guided by Maine Coast Heritage Trust (MCHT). Including giant nationals like The Nature Conservancy, The Conservation Fund, and the Trust for Public Land, such charities buy property outright or receive it as a gift, then protect it, frequently donating dollars to match government expenditures. Communities love their conserved geographies.

Land gifts at Isle au Haut gave the park a presence far offshore and another compact mountain range. Coupled with donated easements on other Acadia archipelago islands, the contributions protect views seen from the mainland and enrich the experiences of people traveling the coastal waters.



Benefactions behind land acquisitions can occur below radar. Helped by MCHT and Friends of Acadia, the land trust Elliotsville Plantation, Inc., quietly acquired in-holdings for transfer to Acadia. In another case, Lyme Timber Company, without fanfare, negotiated a deal to put under park management 1,500 threatened acres on the Schoodic peninsula, funded partly by anonymous backers. Friends of Acadia and MCHT split the public fundraising for a \$1-million conservation easement protecting Schoodic forever.

No one will forget the astonishing gift of Ruth and Tris Colket, \$5 million to Friends of Acadia, making our national park the first with an endowed trail system. Echoing Dorr's invitation that all should enjoy Acadia, the Colkets insisted people of ordinary means have opportunities to participate in the \$13-million program. The ideal was realized. Most funds came from high-capacity givers (as hoped), and the greatest number of contributions came in \$5 to \$100 gifts (as hoped). Among 1,800 donations, my favorite was a \$54 check from a 13-year-old preparing for bat mitzvah. The number 54 was significant in her faith, she wrote. It is a multiple of 18, symbolizing the Hebrew "chai," meaning "life."

Philanthropy is as humble as it is generous. It expresses itself across the wealth continuum no matter a giver's means. It inspires always.

And it takes nonmonetary forms. Volunteerism, for example, is generosity of action—in trail work, nonprofit governance, committee involvement, event management, member recruitment, donor solicitation, policy development, investment decisions, public testimony, article writing, park cleanups, and so forth.

Philanthropy has an avenue for anyone with a heart and the will to open it.

#### SOMETIMES THE GIFTS OF NATURE WE GIVE OURSELVES GENERATE PUNISHMENT.

George Dorr felt it when a state representative from Bar Harbor submitted a bill to nullify the Hancock Trustees' charter and tax its land holdings. This bit of myopic pseudo-governance failed when Dorr hastily garnered legislators sympathetic to the trustees' cause. Similarly, when Governor Percival Baxter began assembling lands for state purchase, legislators balked. Unfazed, he bought the parcels himself, created a trim, three-person park authority independent of legislative control, and wrote the deeds donating a breathtaking 200,000-acre wilderness to Maine's people. His legal protections have kept Baxter State Park mostly free from politicians and bureaucrats.

The trust deeds designated the land “forever wild.” So ironclad were the governor’s proscriptions, the park remains better protected than Acadia; the state-managed Allagash Wilderness Waterway (a national Wild & Scenic River); all other Maine-owned parks and designated reserved lands; the Appalachian Trail (at over 2,000 miles, America’s longest and skinniest national park); and Saint Croix Island International Historic Site. The centerpiece of Baxter State Park, and of the governor’s brash largesse, is Katahdin. The massif and the surrounding territory filling his boundary are wilder than when he assembled the gifts. Nature is in the ascendant.

BAXTER (1876–1969) AND DORR (1853–1944) HAD SIMILAR BACKGROUNDS. The former was a political sophisticate, the latter trained himself to become one. Neither man married, each benefited from a privileged upbringing, each had a classy education (Bowdoin and Harvard Law for Baxter, Harvard and Oxford for Dorr). Both prized an icon of natural Maine, fixed on a conservation objective, and battled the legislature. Each drew down his fortune without thought of recompense or fame. Dorr died blind, his bank account all but depleted.

Had the park not come about in 1916, had its constituent properties remained undeveloped, could we establish Acadia whole in 2016?

Could we gain title to 37,000 acres? And negotiate 200 conservation easements protecting an additional 13,000 acres of private land?

Would we?

My guess: If owners offered donated lands today, a Pyrrhic culture war would ensue thanks to (1) a stop-everything Congress inattentive to governance, (2) a contentious national electorate, and (3) the phenomenal value of coastal property fueling development lobbies. Add this friction: as in other states, some politicians in Maine favor taxing nonprofits holding real estate, excluding church and hospital property. And the governor has twice blocked voter-approved land acquisition funds, including for deals under contract with private donations in place.

Spurned philanthropy is seen in the movement for a new national park. Roxanne Quimby, her son Lucas St. Clair, and their family, who own land abutting Baxter State Park, wish to donate 150,000 acres—equaling four Acadias. Opposition is unfriendly (but seems lately tempered). The family promises \$40 million to endow a Maine Woods National Park and National Recreation Area. For putting their merchantable timber off-limits and curbing certain recreational uses, they endure detractors slamming even their charitable motives. Many resent the idea of federal ownership.



### Third Meditation: Reciprocity

Think of the national parks as sanctums. One enters respectfully, in quiet awe, with thanks, on the terms of the place itself, the more able to experience self-regeneration. Recreation in nature is *re*-creation. Yet for all their generative capacity—re-creation happening at land level before one's shocked eyes and transforming any spacious mind—these powerful Great Rooms of Nature cannot make it alone.

So overwhelmingly manifest are the physical attributes of parks, so battering their raw effects on the heart, it is easy to judge these places indestructible. That is a fool's conclusion, the sure road to civil apathy, leading reliably to withering a plenitude no human made or can remake and that therefore requires willful care by the many. For wild places to thrive, our species, the only one that can, must be generous as in Genesis, dressing and keeping the Garden, preserving what renews us.

LAND-BASED ALTRUISM ON THE SCALE OF DORR, ELIOT, ROCKEFELLER, Deasy, and company at Acadia, Baxter at Katahdin, and of the Quimby-St. Clair Maine Woods proposal, comes once or twice a century if a state is lucky. Grand civic acts affecting the Whole People, for all time, are often denigrated. The record also shows that the proposers persist. Helped by muscular, politically adept advocates such as the Natural Resources Council of Maine, they often prevail, a grateful public eventually quashing the opposition. We see the results—geographies of philanthropy—everywhere.

In Maine's comely communities and people-scaled cities, in the remote Unorganized Territories, in cathedral forests, their bogs, lakes, floras, tundras.

Along legendary rivers. Across Katahdin's spiked ridges.

At Isle au Haut and atop glacier-rounded Acadian granites.

Visionaries a hundred years ago etched a legal demarcation around an incomparable place and bequeathed it intact to rolling sets of protectors. In establishing a world-class national park, the trustees made real their love of



*Lily pads on Little Long Pond, a lake placed under permanent protection in 2015 by David Rockefeller. Its care is shared by Acadia National Park and the Town of Mount Desert.* THOMAS BLAGDEN, JR.

humankind and nature, apportioned equally between the two. We the present generation thank them.

To the next trustees we say: Listen up! As we did, you are soon to receive an undiminished Acadia.

As we did, you must earn it anew.

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KEN OLSON, of Bass Harbor, Maine, directed the AMC hut system (1971–73) and served as publisher of AMC books, periodicals, and maps (1974–77) and editor of *Appalachia* (1977–78). He headed three conservation organizations before retiring, in 2006, as president and CEO of Friends of Acadia. “The Geography of Philanthropy” appears in different form in *Acadia National Park: A Centennial Celebration*, photographs by Tom Blagden, Jr., essays by David MacDonald, Sheridan Steele, Christopher Crosman, Dayton Duncan, Christopher Camuto, W. Kent Olson and David Rockefeller, Jr. (Friends of Acadia and Rizzoli, 2016). The three meditations ran in *Friends of Acadia Journal*, 2003.

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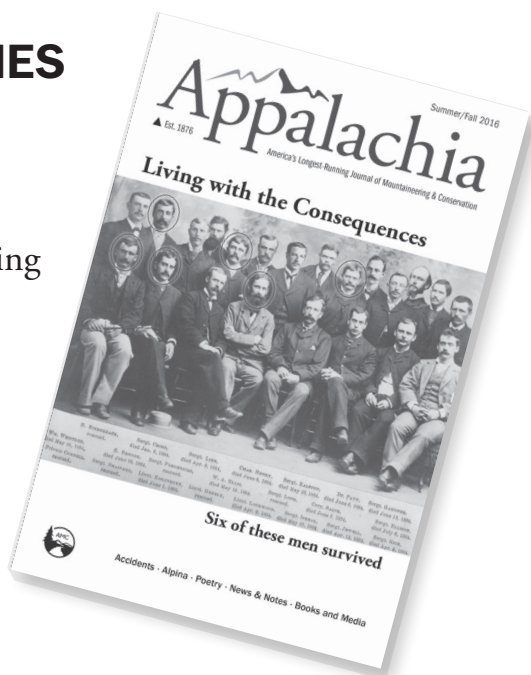
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