

## **EDITORIAL: New management won't stop Allagash conflicts**

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The Allagash Wilderness Waterway in northern Maine has a complex and tortured history. A new proposal to resolve the conflict that has plagued management of the park promises, however, only a new and different kind of torture.

The conflict revolves around the fact that access and development around the waterway are restricted to keep the Allagash's "maximum wilderness character." That's what the law requires. Yet the waterway exists in a working forest, adjacent to communities whose residents have used the river as they liked for generations. And the communities in that region have said loud and clear to the state: We want to use this river in any way we choose. Don't restrict our access to it.

A referendum approved by voters in 1966 placed severe restrictions on the development of the Allagash, but state management of the river and its surrounding land has historically been subject far more to political winds blowing from the north than to those legal strictures. Structures have been built where they shouldn't have been and more access points to the river have been allowed than the law says is proper within a wilderness designation.

There have been lawsuits, settlements, study groups, agreements, legislation, more agreements -- and then abandoned agreements. No matter what approach the state has taken to managing the Allagash, it has resulted in conflict. That conflict periodically erupts, with periodic attempts to quell it.

The latest was this past legislative session, where a hard-won management agreement signed a number of years ago by many interested parties lay in tatters on the Statehouse floor after being torn to shreds by northern Maine interests.

Gov. John Baldacci's response was to try again to bring peace to the Allagash through consensus. A committee met over the summer and came up with yet another way to oversee the waterway's management.

It has taken the Baxter Park Authority as a model, and recommended assembling a governing board consisting of the attorney general or his designee, the state commissioner of conservation, the State Planning Office director and two citizens, one from each of the state's congressional districts.

This approach really doesn't replicate the Baxter Park governing board in a crucial way: that board has its own endowment for running the park and is thus immune from political machinations. The proposed Allagash board would still be beholden to the Legislature, which means it will still be utterly vulnerable to political manipulation.

What's wrong with the Allagash isn't organizational structure. What's wrong with the waterway is a decades-long lack of political courage to stick to the commitments the state made long ago to manage the park for its maximum wilderness character. No rearranging of people or management can substitute for that fundamental commitment. Only when the state's leaders undertake that responsibility honestly, seriously and fully will the conflicts around the Allagash finally subside.

#### Reader comments

Bill Randall of Winthrop, ME

Dec 4, 2006 10:08 AM

Your column is dead on. My resolution motto is "Keep it simple stupid" and this new politico/administrative quagmire will not resolve anything. Why our Governor or anyone else would think so, I cannot imagine. This northern minority group has always opposed the AWW in any form and they will continue to be a thorn in this new group. To think we are still fighting and arguing about what the AWW should or shouldn't be saddens me when I know that we've already gone through a lengthy process that produced agreements and understandings we have failed to uphold. It's time to seek a clear and undisputable resolution in a court of law.

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