

COLUMN

Maine needs North Woods National Park

Ken Burns' recent PBS series on the national parks tells many stories that are an inspiration for Maine.

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From the top of Mount Kineo in Moosehead Lake, an observer can see much of what would be included in a federal park and preserve.

PORTLAND, Oregon — Spectacular landscapes and stories of selfless acts to benefit Americans not yet born weren't the only themes to run through Ken Burns' recent public television series, "The National Parks: America's Best Idea."

So was the tireless resistance, played out time after time, to creating the parks in the first place.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George Neavoll was editorial page editor of the Portland Press Herald and Maine Sunday Telegram in 1991-99. He is retired and living in the "other Portland" in his native Oregon.

Oregon's two U.S. senators fought doggedly to halt the creation of Crater Lake National Park in 1902. Ranchers and legislative leaders fought just as hard to deny a National Park System presence in the beautiful Kansas Flint Hills in 1996.

Now Oregonians and Kansans love their national parks. Crater Lake is featured on

Oregon's "state quarter," issued in 2005. The Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve will grace Kansas' "America the Beautiful" quarter in a new series beginning next year. The designs for both were suggested by the states themselves.

Creation of a Maine Woods National Park and Preserve predictably would bring a similar turnabout in public opinion. It has happened with virtually every new park unit placed in the system.

Park opponents fear a Maine Woods park would destroy jobs, bar public access and change a way of life that is precious to the region. The evidence is to the contrary

in every one of America's 58 national parks. Each has created jobs, expanded access and preserved a way of life that almost surely would have vanished otherwise.

Certainly a National Park Service study of the proposed site (a study still awaiting congressional approval) would show it qualifies for national park status. Stand atop Mount Kineo, any of you who disbelieve, and look off in any direction.

Moosehead Lake spreads like a watery canvas below, with Lily Bay away to the east and Brassua Lake to the west. The wild lands of the Debsconeag lakes and upper Allagash and St. John rivers lie beyond.

A park would be acquired, like all national parks, over time. Authorized boundaries stretching from the Maine-Quebec border to the East Branch of the Penobscot, from Umsaksis Lake on the Allagash to Sebec Lake near Dover-Foxcroft, would embrace some of the grander scenery on Earth. It would be Maine's Yosemite, New England's Yellowstone.

Every acre would be acquired on a willing-seller basis only.

The mill towns of Millinocket and East Millinocket; the lake communities of Rockwood and Greenville; the natural gateways of Jackman and West Forks all would benefit from their proximity to a national treasure.

Hunting, snowmobiling and other traditional uses would continue on the "national preserve" portion of the site. (Similar preserves abut Denali, Wrangell-St. Elias and other Alaskan national parklands.)

Of course there will be opposition; there always is opposition. The Portland Press Herald called the proposed purchase of what would become Baxter State Park in the 1920s "the silliest proposal ever made to a legislature." Today, like Acadia National Park on Maine's Atlantic Seaboard, it is a state icon, a tribute to the foresight of its founders.

(Baxter State Park would remain in state hands, as it should, under any national park proposal.)

"The national parks are a defining part of who we are as a people," Ken Burns told a National Press Club audience as his six-part series got under way. The park system is "the Declaration of Independence applied to the landscape."

Burns, who has himself been called a "national treasure," is driven by the same passion that drove early parks protectors. Many of the nation's more stunning vistas would no longer exist if it weren't for such as John Muir, John Burroughs, Theodore Roosevelt and, in Maine, George Dorr.

"America's best idea" now has spread abroad until "national parks" can be found in nations around the world.

Maine is fortunate in having ecosystem-scale landscapes remaining in the North Woods. They may have been heavily logged, roaded and otherwise drastically altered. The land remains, however, and can be restored — not to its primeval condition, perhaps, but to an approximation of it.

It's happening today in Redwood National Park, and has happened in Great Smoky Mountains National Park and, in Maine and New Hampshire, the wilderness areas of the White Mountain National Forest.

A bronze plaque bearing the bas-relief image of Stephen Mather, first National Park Service director, stands at the portal of parks across the country. His zeal for the national parks under his care set the tone for the service's future direction.

The plaque's text reads: "There will never come an end to the good that he has done."

A Maine Woods National Park would bear the latest testimony to that fact.

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