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Photographer raises support for a Maine woods national park

(NECN: Marnie MacLean) - For the last two years, photographer and conservationist Tom Szelog has traveled alone through the woods of Northern Maine.

He spends his days trying to capture the beauty of this vast wilderness, the journey isn't always easy....but his reward is moments like these:

Tom plans to create a book and traveling art exhibit with the photos he's taking. He hopes both will raise awareness and support for a Maine woods national park"

Tom Szelog: "When I visit a pond or a lake I try to picture what it would be like with people here and it's a national park and I get a nice warm feeling in my heart actually"

The idea of a Maine Woods National Park is not new. The group RESTORE the North Woods first proposed the park fifteen years ago. Their vision includes 3.2 million acres of land that will be protected...a project so big the federal government would have to be involved.

But Jym St. Pierre says that's a bargain for the only place left in the U.S. with this much undeveloped land.

Jym St. Pierre: "A lot of people throughout New England realize New England's back yard wilderness which was this area in Northern Maine that people took for granted really can't take it for granted any more."

St. Pierre says 8 million acres of land in the Maine woods has changed ownership in the last 15 years. Instead of paper companies who work the land and allow public access....St. Pierre says some of the new owners are developers looking for a return on their investment.

That scares Tom Szelog. He can't imagine losing any of this, and he is convinced a national park is the best way to protect the land and the wildlife.

Tom: "The Maine woods and the wildlife have been used by men in this state and other countries for jobs, food and shelter for centuries...it has served man well and it is time we served it well...time to give it a rest and preserve it."

That's not a feeling shared by everyone however....in the town of Greenville, which would be a gateway to the proposed park...there is a lot of opposition to the idea.

Craig Watt: "People come here not because they want to have a park ranger desk and a nice map and marked trails and those things...they want to come here for a feeling you are on your own...the feeling you get when you go in these woods"

Watt, a lifelong resident of Greenville, agrees protecting some of the land is important...but he argues, conservation easements are a better route.

He worries about a lack of infrastructure to support a park, and how traditional recreation would be restricted in a national park.

The folks at RESTORE believe they've addressed all those concerns, but without public support, Jym St. Pierre knows politicians won't get behind the plan either.

This is where Tom Szelog hopes his work and the images he captures, will help change minds.

Tom Szelog: "And just grab people by the heart...and show them this is a once in a lifetime opportunity to preserve the Maine woods and it's not just for Mainers or for people in U.S. for people all over world to enjoy and appreciate."