

OUR OPINION: Quimby donation ensures access to North Woods

Roxanne Quimby describes herself as an artist, but instead of painting landscapes to convey her vision, she buys them.

That has created no small amount of controversy in the North Woods, where her environmental philanthropy has been seen as a vehicle to impose her land-use values on others by prohibiting snowmobiling, hunting and commercial logging in places where it has long been allowed.

But while she may be an artist, she's not an absolutist, and negotiations with some of the groups representing hunters and others have made friends out of former enemies. "I'm really interested in getting things done," Quimby says, and judging from her recent activity, she knows that means compromise.

Earlier this month, Quimby closed a \$2.6 million deal with the state in which she sold land and conservation easements totaling 7,785 acres outside Millinocket adjacent to 200,000-acre Baxter State Park. The new state land remains open to hunters.

Then she announced her offer to donate more than 70,000 acres to the National Park Service to be a Maine Woods National Park next to Baxter. She also plans to donate to the state 30,000 acres north of Dover-Foxcroft that would be managed like a state park, in which hunting and snowmobiling still would be allowed.

If the state and federal governments are willing to accept these gifts and the financial responsibilities that come with them, this will be a major victory for land conservation in Maine.

People who complain that a national park would change the way land has been used miss the point. That's changing already.

Maine has enjoyed a system where private paper companies owned vast tracks of land and permitted the public to use them.

Those vertically integrated companies are going away, and the land is more and more likely to be owned by real estate investors who want to exploit their recreational potential as well as their timber resources.

In such a setup, the public could be left out.

A Maine Woods National Park on Quimby's donated land won't displace as much as it would preserve at a time when the public can't count on access to privately owned land.

That's a vision of Maine's future that no one wants to see.