

Land Protection: Now or Never... Forever

A Land Protection Strategy for Mass Audubon

February 2003

The coming decade will be a critical time for land conservation in Massachusetts. The current rate of development is an unprecedented threat to native species and is rapidly closing the window of opportunity for conservation of these species and their habitats. Within our lifetime, this window of opportunity will close forever throughout Massachusetts. In much of the state, this timeframe is even shorter, with a decade or less remaining to make a meaningful difference.

Recently a statewide Task Force identified more than one million acres as critical for conservation in Massachusetts. This land includes forests, farmland, water supply lands and recreational areas. Mass Audubon is committed to achieving this statewide conservation goal, working cooperatively with our conservation partners. In addition, we have focused our land protection efforts on protection of the land that is most critical for the conservation of the state's ecological diversity in the vicinity of our sanctuaries and beyond. Our Strategy for accomplishing this goal will require an extraordinary commitment by the organization. Yet we are driven by a simple fact – *the longer we wait, the less remains to be saved.*

The actions that Mass Audubon and the rest of the statewide land protection community take over the next 10 to 15 years will permanently shape the future of the Massachusetts landscape, its species and its habitats. In order to make a significant impact in the time remaining, our energy, resources, and expertise need to be more targeted toward those lands that contain important wildlife habitat.



A Strong History of Land Protection

The Massachusetts Audubon Society has a long and proud history of land conservation beginning with the acquisition of our Moose Hill Sanctuary in the 1920s. Today, through a combination of gifts and purchases, Mass Audubon's land holdings total almost 30,000 acres, including more than 26,500 acres that we own and manage, and permanent conservation restrictions on an additional 3,500 acres of private land. This land encompasses Mass Audubon's 60 wildlife sanctuaries and serves as the foundation for our educational programs and ecological management efforts statewide.

The Closing Window of Opportunity



According to Mass Audubon's 1999 report *Losing Ground*, at least 16,000 acres, or 25 square miles, of woodland, farms, and fields in Massachusetts are lost to development each year.

Massachusetts' forests have been particularly hard hit, with the state *leading the nation* in the percentage of forestland lost to development between 1982 and 1997. Most of this development is low-density residential "sprawl," a land-consumptive pattern of development that fragments the landscape at a rate that far exceeds the rate of population growth.

For example, the population of Massachusetts grew by 28% between 1950 and 1990. During the same time period the amount of developed land increased 188%. If growth continues at the same rate as during the 1990s, all of the remaining developable land in Massachusetts will be consumed within the next 15 years. The



cumulative impact of this incremental growth is alarming, leaving species and natural communities – *the Nature of Massachusetts* – very much at risk. There have been several efforts in recent years to document the biodiversity of the Commonwealth, including two recent publications of the Massachusetts Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program – *Our Irreplaceable Heritage* and the *BioMap Project*. Some of the key findings of this work are as follows.

- **One out of every five** native plants and animals in Massachusetts are state listed as threatened, endangered, or of special concern.
- More than **75 percent** of *all* of these species and natural community occurrences are located on **unprotected** private land that could be lost to development.
- Many of the regions with the highest biodiversity, such as Cape Cod and the Connecticut River Valley, are also experiencing the most rapid rates of growth.

Rapid growth threatens the *Nature of Massachusetts* in several key ways. These are: habitat loss, habitat fragmentation, disruption of ecological processes, invasive species, and incompatible human uses of the land. Direct land protection action is the most effective way for Mass Audubon to respond to these identified threats.

The Mass Audubon Priority Habitat Data Layer: The Foundation of our Strategy



Mass Audubon's Land Protection Strategy is grounded in the most current, science-based information available. It will allow us to conduct statewide and Sanctuary-level resource analysis, using

computerized mapping known as Geographic Information Systems (GIS). Two recent sources of biological conservation information – Natural Heritage's BioMap and The Nature Conservancy's Ecoregional conservation data – have been integrated with existing Mass Audubon land ownership information to create the **Mass Audubon Priority Habitat Data Layer**, a new, powerful tool that now serves as a guide for our land protection efforts. Using the Priority Habitat Data Layer, we have identified key parcels within one half mile of our existing sanctuaries. These

lands are now being sorted for relative priority through the development of parcel-based land protection plans for each sanctuary.

The Priority Habitat Data Layer will serve as a "lens" through which we will identify land protection priorities and evaluate opportunities in the next decade. It will be used to identify priority areas of interest for the organization – **including land abutting existing Mass Audubon sanctuaries as well as new focus areas for the organization**. It will serve to better evaluate individual land acquisition opportunities and partnerships, as well as for making decisions about additions to our Sanctuary network to address geographic gaps in our land holdings.



An Action Plan for the Coming Decade

Mass Audubon's Land Protection Strategy will be implemented through the following actions.

- ➔ **Mass Audubon will rely on its Priority Habitat Datalayer as the foundation for land protection decision making** including:
 - prioritizing existing Sanctuaries for land protection efforts;
 - identifying new focus areas statewide; and
 - analyzing specific land protection opportunities.
- ➔ Mass Audubon will **develop Sanctuary-based, parcel-level, land protection plans beginning with the areas that have the most critical habitat and are most threatened**. Upon completion of each of these plans, we will strengthen relationships with key landowners and explore land protection options for their properties.
- ➔ Mass Audubon will **Serve as a Catalyst** for the conservation of lands with overriding statewide biodiversity significance – whether or not these lands are part of our sanctuary network.
- ➔ In high priority areas, Mass Audubon will **Seek Opportunities to Participate in Conservation Partnerships** to advance larger and more complex land protection

projects, including biodiversity conservation on a landscape scale.

- When the protection of a given property is of mutual interest to Mass Audubon and a municipal, state, or federal agency, Mass Audubon will **Undertake Cooperative Projects and Pre-Acquisitions** for these agencies.
- In priority areas, Mass Audubon will provide technical assistance for landowners in the area of **Conservation-related Estate and Financial Planning**.
- Mass Audubon will continue to play a leadership role in carrying out **Conservation Buyer Transactions**. With this tool, Mass Audubon will cost-effectively ensure permanent conservation of key properties through conservation restrictions, by our involvement in a transaction between the seller and a private buyer.
- Mass Audubon will work to **Strengthen Expertise Internally and Externally with Conservation Partners**. Mass Audubon will work with land trusts and others to build capacity, particularly when there are overlapping geographic areas of interest.
- Mass Audubon will **Commit Resources** to ensure implementation of this Land Protection Strategy, including staffing, funding for land acquisition, and enhanced GIS Mapping. In order to enable Mass Audubon to respond quickly to high-priority land protection opportunities, a Land Rescue Revolving Fund will be created.

Summary

This Land Protection Strategy will enable Mass Audubon to make the most of the time available to make a significant difference in the conserved landscape of Massachusetts. The high priority that Massachusetts residents place on land protection is both a reflection of their appreciation of the beautiful and ecologically diverse state in which they reside and a recognition of the accelerating rate of development and the quickly closing window of opportunity to make a meaningful difference. By fully implementing this strategy, we will also ensure the protection of the *Nature of Massachusetts* that we know and love today for generations yet to come.

How You Can Help



Donate land or conservation restrictions on ecologically significant lands to Mass Audubon



Contribute financially – through cash, stock or similar gifts to the Land Rescue Fund and to provide support for staffing or land stewardship



Donate real estate through our House to Habitat Program



Consider directing funds to Mass Audubon's land protection efforts through a bequest



Get involved with your local land trust, community open space efforts, or as a Mass Audubon volunteer

**For more information about Mass Audubon's land protection program contact:
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