



SETTING THE CONSERVATION AGENDA FOR THE 2009-2010 LEGISLATIVE SESSION
A CALL FOR STEWARDSHIP

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Massachusetts has a long and proud tradition of conservation, giving birth to some of the nation's oldest and strongest environmental laws and programs. But current statutes and regulations are important conservation tools only when implemented with adequate political and financial support for enforcement. The rapid change in the Commonwealth's economy, and the resulting impact on our natural resources, requires reforms of existing programs in order to keep pace with present challenges and improve the efficiency, transparency, and accountability of state government.

The time has come to reinvigorate the spirit and ethic of *stewardship* among elected and appointed officials, citizens, and advocates—a collective responsibility to protect, manage, restore, and enhance the natural resources of the Commonwealth—in keeping with the natural beauty of Massachusetts and the eloquent promise of our state constitution. Article 97 of the Amendments to the Massachusetts Constitution states “*The people shall have the right to clean air and water, freedom from excessive and unnecessary noise, and the natural, scenic, historic and esthetic qualities of their environment; and the protection of the people in their right to the conservation, development and utilization of the agricultural, mineral, forest, water, air and other natural resources is hereby declared to be a public purpose...*”

Farming, forestry, and fishing once dominated the state economy on land and at sea. Today the Commonwealth's competitive advantage is found in high paying, knowledge-intensive economic clusters where information is the prime commodity. The high demand for housing of Massachusetts' information age workers, fueled by expanding transportation and telecommuting options, is driving more and more poorly planned residential development into exurban areas, destroying wildlife habitat and dislocating traditional farming and forestry. Off the coast, while traditional activities like fishing continue, they are now joined by modern uses, such as aquaculture and energy development. The need for renewable energy sources to sustain Massachusetts' continued growth and prosperity has led to proposals to tap the force of ocean wind and waves.

The actions taken and not taken over the next decade by public agencies, private non-profit organizations, and the private sector to meet these challenges will permanently shape the future of the Commonwealth's landscape. Conservation should be a priority in policy and resource allocation decisions. Over the past years, and this year, public conservation programs have suffered some of the most severe operating budget cuts in state government. Mass Audubon challenges the Patrick Administration and the Massachusetts legislature to restore overall spending for conservation to a minimum of 1% of the total operating budget. We thank Governor Patrick for meeting our challenge and committing to an investment of at least \$50 million per year for land protection, and ask that he keep that commitment.

One half of the solution to sprawling development is strategic land conservation that protects the most valuable remaining natural areas in the Commonwealth. The other half of the solution is smart growth through investments and policies that make better use of existing infrastructure and encourage more compact, mixed-use development and affordable housing. In a home-rule state such as Massachusetts, the responsibility for land use planning and the authority to regulate development rests with municipalities. But the state laws that establish the framework for local planning and development contain restrictive provisions and discourage local control. These enabling acts must be modernized to allow communities to encourage desirable development in locations that are well suited for it, while discouraging inappropriate and wasteful development that exacerbates sprawl.

Although we often view the ocean as starting where the land ends, that separation is arbitrary. Rapid development in coastal areas destroys sensitive habitat and impairs ecological processes. Growing tensions between existing and proposed uses of the Bay State's ocean for food and energy production, transportation, and recreation catalyzed the formation of the Massachusetts Ocean Management Task Force. The Task Force recommended comprehensive legislation that would establish clear planning procedures to assert the Commonwealth's authority to manage these public trust resources—and bring state government up to speed with private industry innovations.

New laws and policies, however substantial, are not enough. An even more fundamental change in values is essential to protecting the nature of Massachusetts. We believe that the health of our land and ocean is critical to the health of the Commonwealth's future. The air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, and the places we visit to seek peace and quiet are all afforded us by strong public investments and policies. The leaders of today have a responsibility to point the way to a healthier and more sustainable future.

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