

Jay Espy



Jay Espy joined the Elmina B. Sewall Foundation as its first executive director in January 2008. Based in Brunswick, Maine, the foundation focuses on the environment, animal welfare, and human well-being, primarily in Maine.

For the prior two decades, Espy served as president of Maine Coast Heritage Trust, a statewide land conservation organization. During his tenure, the Trust accelerated its land protection efforts along Maine's entire coast by conserving more than 125,000 acres and establishing the Maine Land Trust Network, which helps build capacity of local land trusts throughout Maine. He also led the Trust's successful Campaign for the Coast, raising more than \$100 million for conservation and doubling the amount of protected land on Maine's coast and islands.

Espy received his A.B. from Bowdoin College and master's degrees in business and environmental studies from Yale's School of Management and its School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. He serves on the board of the Maine Philanthropy Center and the Canadian Land Trust Alliance. He is a former chair of the Land Trust Alliance, a national organization serving land trusts throughout the United States. In October 2010 he was named the Kingsbury Browne Fellow for 2010–2011 through a joint program of the Land Trust Alliance and the Lincoln Institute. Contact: jespy@sewallfoundation.org

LAND LINES: *How did you first become involved in the field of land conservation?*

JAY ESPY: Early in my senior year at Bowdoin College a wonderful placement counselor pointed out that some real-world experience might be useful in helping me secure gainful employment. I landed an internship documenting seabirds in Maine's Casco Bay as part of an oil spill contingency planning project. This experience kindled an intense passion for the Maine coast and set the stage for my professional career. Following a stint working for an environmental consulting firm, graduate study in business, forestry, and environmental science at Yale, and several more internships, I was thrilled to accept an entry-level job at Maine Coast Heritage Trust (MCHT) in Topsham. At the time MCHT was a small statewide land trust and a great "school of hard knocks" for an aspiring 20-something conservationist with virtually no credentials.

LAND LINES: *What are some of the most significant land conservation projects in which you have been involved?*

JAY ESPY: In the late 1980s a 12,000-acre parcel of coastal land in far Down East Maine near the Canadian border was put up for sale by a major corporation divesting all of its timberland holdings in the northeastern United States and Maritime Canada. This was the largest remaining undeveloped block of coastal land in Maine, and one of the largest anywhere on the eastern seaboard. MCHT had never before faced such an exciting or daunting challenge.

In partnership with the State of Maine, The Conservation Fund, and the Richard King Mellon Foundation, MCHT led an effort to acquire the property and to work with local and state officials on a plan to conserve the land while incorporating appropriate working forest management, recreational trail development, and affordable housing in the Town of Cutler. Although we didn't know it at the time, we were doing "community conservation" by engaging a wide range of constituents with varying interests. This project also put MCHT in the business of landscape-scale conservation. Dozens of projects have since been completed in that region, known as Maine's Bold Coast. More than 20 miles of breathtaking shoreline are now accessible to the public and provide economic opportunities for the community.

I feel privileged to have helped protect many other lands, both large and small. Marshall Island, a 1,000-acre gem 15 miles offshore from the Blue Hill peninsula, was once slated for major development, but now has an extensive coastal trail system developed by MCHT. Aldermere Farm in Camden and Rockport is an iconic saltwater farm. Albert Chatfield began raising Belted Galloway cattle here in the 1950s, and the farm has been home to an award-winning breeding herd ever since. Following donation of the property in 1999, MCHT has greatly expanded farm programs for local youth and the community in general and protected additional nearby lands that are being used to support the growing local food movement.

LAND LINES: *When did you become aware of the Lincoln Institute's work in land conservation, and how have you been involved in our programs?*

JAY ESPY: The timing of my entry into the conservation field was most fortuitous. Within months of joining MCHT, I was invited to a gathering of conservation professionals at the Lincoln Institute, co-hosted by the Land Trust Alliance (then known as the Land Trust Exchange). I had previously met Kingsbury Browne very briefly at a conference in Washington, DC, but at that gathering I had the chance to spend a full day with him and some of the other revered leaders of the modern land conservation movement.

Over the course of many years, the Lincoln Institute became a "watering hole" for conservationists, many of them originally assembled by Kingsbury, and they became valued mentors to me as I learned the trade. The Institute has continued to be a place

where creative minds gather to innovate and where cutting-edge research and communication for the broader conservation community are encouraged. I am honored to be part of that legacy as a Kingsbury Browne Fellow.

LAND LINES: *What do you see as future trends in land conservation?*

JAY ESPY: The conservation field is growing, changing, and maturing in what I believe is a very healthy way. Not long ago many of us in the field thought land conservation was all about the land. I well remember early land trust brochures full of pictures of beautiful landscapes, but entirely devoid of people. Fortunately, that's no longer true.

Today, most of us in the movement understand that land conservation is about land and people. It's about how our communities benefit from healthy ecosystems; how outdoor recreational opportunities close to home combat youth inactivity and obesity; how protected farmland contributes to food security and the availability of nutritious local food; how outdoor spaces incorporating local arts and entertainment contribute to vibrant downtowns; how clean water, forestland, and a host of other sustainably managed natural resources support economic development and jobs; and how well-managed land allows each of us individually and collectively to live richer, fuller lives.

All across the country, the silos that have separated the work of conservation, public health, arts, education, hunger, housing, food production, and economic development are coming down. I'm encouraged by this trend. Our work today will only stand the test of time if it has direct and tangible benefit to people over many decades. Collaborative engagement of those with wide and varied interests seems an essential ingredient in any successful recipe for enduring conservation.

LAND LINES: *How can the challenges of funding conservation become opportunities?*

JAY ESPY: We do face many challenges on the funding front. Public funding from traditional federal and state government sources has been declining, private foundations have seen the corpus of their endowments erode, and individual donors have

been understandably more conservative with their philanthropic investments as the markets have seesawed. As a result, fewer of the mega-scale land deals requiring tens of millions of dollars that we saw in the late 1990s and early 2000s are being launched today.

That said, there is still a great deal of very important conservation work being funded around the country. Public support for local conservation remains high, with most local bond initiatives continuing to pass by wide margins. Foundation and individual giving for conservation has not tanked as many feared. Funders remain supportive, but have become more discerning. Also, conservation projects that address multiple human interests and engage multiple partners appear to be attracting new, nontraditional sources of support. I recently spoke with a health funder who views securing more land for public recreation as a critical preventative health-care measure. Funding for farmland conservation has also grown substantially in recent years, fueled in part by the explosive popularity of the local food movement.

LAND LINES: *Can you share some examples of innovative land conservation successes?*

JAY ESPY: In a remote area of eastern Maine, the Downeast Lakes Land Trust has been working for more than a decade to protect large swaths of forestland with extensive shore frontage near the community of Grand Lake Stream. These lands and waters have supported the timber and recreation-based economy for more than a century. With the decline in the paper and pulp industry, several large commercial timber holdings have been sold.

Rather than simply wait for the inevitable development of seasonal vacation homes and resulting loss in local culture, the community has worked in remarkable ways to acquire tens of thousands of acres and miles of shore land for use as a revenue-generating forest, wildlife preserve, and remote recreational areas. Local business owners, fishing and hunting guides, representatives from state and federal agencies, members of the Passamaquoddy Indian Tribe, and elected officials from the local to the national levels have all joined forces with the land trust to acquire these properties and manage them for sustainable

timber revenue, as well as for other traditional uses, including hunting, fishing, camping, and paddling.

In the central Maine town of Skowhegan, an enterprising young woman has acquired an old county jail, which she is converting into a grain mill. Once operational, the mill will process approximately 600 tons of grain annually, an amount requiring roughly 600 acres of farmland cultivated in grain crops. This area of Maine was once a thriving wheat-growing region, and is purported to have supplied the Union troops with a substantial portion of their bread during the Civil War. Located in the heart of town, the parking lot of the old jail already serves as the site of a successful local farmers market. A commercial kitchen and several food and crafts business are co-locating in the jail, helping to create a "food hub."

Skowhegan is the county seat of one of the most impoverished counties in Maine. Could the food hub start to change the fortunes of this region? Could a growing demand for grain stem the tide of farmland loss and result in more farmland acres being conserved and cultivated? Signs suggest the answer is to both questions is "yes." I think what's happening in Skowhegan is a wonderful example of the new face of conservation. It's not yet readily recognizable, but I suspect we'll get to know this community-based approach better in the years ahead.

LAND LINES: *What are your expectations about the role of conservation in the current volatile economy?*

JAY ESPY: I'm quite optimistic because adversity has a way of bringing people together. With less, we're learning how to work collectively to do more. As more people participate in conservation, develop relationships with and around land, and experience the positive impact those relationships bring to their lives, I'm convinced we will see even more widespread, meaningful, and durable conservation achievements. Land, people, and community are all deeply intertwined. Ironically, these trying times may be accelerating the inevitable transformation of conservation into an endeavor that benefits even more people and more aspects of community life. **L**