

Appalachia

Volume 62
Number 1 *Winter/Spring 2011: Up from
Devastation*

Article 5

2011

A Northern Forest Mosaic: Community-Based Conservation After the Weeks Act

Sally Manikian

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Manikian, Sally (2011) "A Northern Forest Mosaic: Community-Based Conservation After the Weeks Act," *Appalachia*: Vol. 62: No. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol62/iss1/5>

This In This Issue is brought to you for free and open access by Dartmouth Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Appalachia by an authorized editor of Dartmouth Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu.

A Northern Forest Mosaic

Community-based conservation after the Weeks Act

Sally Manikian



CRAIG LOMBARD OWNS 1,000 ACRES OF LAND IN BERLIN, NEW Hampshire. The parcel is relatively unremarkable: slopes of woodlot crisscrossed by logging roads and wildlife paths, abutting the summit of Mount Forist on one end and Jericho Mountain State Park on the other. For years, the parcel remained woodlot, accessed for timber and local recreational use. It is undeveloped but highly developable.

And Lombard wants development. He is a businessman motivated by the logic of marketing and tourism. Seeking to preserve public access and recreation, he set up an organization called Wilderness New England to promote dogsledding, primitive camping, snowmobiling, hiking, and, as advertised on his website, even Frisbee golf. Wilderness New England is his member-based organization. Dues go toward the recreational development of the property. Lombard works full time selling prosthetics and managing property in Conway, so he hopes that Wilderness New England will organize itself and that the 1,000 acres he bought and conserved will become a community asset and economic driver in a city under hard times.

As a businessman, and landowner, he is also out to market and promote a certain type of experience. His interest in wilderness comes from his motivation to provide a stunning backdrop to the yurts and tent platforms WNE offers to its members. Lombard's business depends on a landscape of rugged mountains. He works to keep the dense thickets of forest—its views and its resources—intact.

THE LANDSCAPE IN THE NORTHERN FOREST IS CHANGING: HOUSES spread along ridgelines where the struggling timber industry must quickly “liquidate” timber and sell the land to make money. Land once owned by a single entity, such as the Brown Company in Berlin, is splintering into many parcels owned by investment groups with few community ties beyond the contractors hired to cut. Although timber practices have always been dictated by economics and profit, land fragmentation and an uncertain timber market indicates a new kind of challenge for those who want to protect a way of life and a stretch of forest.

Where residents once knew all of the landowners, today's owners seem mysterious and distant. As a pure investment asset, the land becomes subject

Rangers from the Androscoggin Ranger District of the White Mountain National Forest tour the forest with members of the Randolph, New Hampshire, Forest Commission.

Dave Willcox of Randolph is third from left; district ranger Katie Stuart is third from right. EDITH TUCKER

to the rapid decisions of stock and trade economics: clear-cutting the land when the timber sales boom, blocking off or limiting access in order to increase resale value, without accountability for local needs.¹

Locals who have ranged freely through these forests find no guarantee of continued access. They now ask, Will I still be able to access the land for recreation? Will the mountain slopes remain wild? Who is responsible when something goes wrong? A hundred years from now, will there still be jobs in the forest? What will the land look like to my children? What can I do to preserve these resources?

A hundred years ago, no one could answer these questions, until the Weeks Act, passed in 1911, came along as an attempt to answer them by having the federal government step in. History did not stop with the Weeks Act, though, and in the time since it was instituted, people trying to conserve large northeastern tracts have fine-tuned their approaches, taking cues from the needs of local community members who value both the forest industry and public access. As a result, northern New Hampshire, one of the birthplaces of the Weeks Act, now composes a mosaic of land types: private, private under public easement, federal wildlife refuge, national scenic trail, state park, community forest, and federal forest. Now, when a community seeks to protect the forest that it values, ways to do so are many—unless it is within the proclamation boundary² of the White Mountain National Forest.

Since the Weeks Act and the advent of forest technology, managers of industrial timberland cut with an eye to the 30-year regeneration cycle of the forest, skimming selectively and cutting parcels to ensure the growth of a mix of pulp and straight saw logs. It was expected that a single owner, families, or industrial mills, would be the same owner 30 years later. Somewhere around the 1980s, a new form of timber owner emerged: the timber investment management organization, a management group set up with a life of 10 years. This is the more subtle challenge: In contrast to the Weeks Act, which was a reaction to a strong physical threat, expressed in raw overharvesting,

¹ Economics and the need to make a profit have always influenced forestry. It is easy to over-idealize the age of local timber companies driven by local needs. Today's difference, important and subtle, is that timber owners, buyers, mills, and producers are scattered all over the globe. Communities that abut the forestland have even less input than before in how the land is managed and what access is guaranteed.

² The proclamation boundary of federal forest acquisition is limited to recognized watersheds. The U.S. Forest Service can acquire land within the proclamation boundary without congressional approval because of the Weeks Act.

destruction of views, and damage to water quality, the current threats are increasingly found in fragmentation and rapid change of ownership, the flagging economic viability of forestry, and the temptation to subdivide and sell for housing development.

From 1980 to 2007, 24 million of the 26 million acres of forest in the Northern Forest³ changed hands, some parcels even three or four times. These parcels were sold to pension plans, foundations, private equity firms, large capital investors, and endowments.⁴ To narrow this perspective, consider the Mahoosuc region, between Berlin, New Hampshire; Bethel, Maine; and, to the north, Errol, New Hampshire. In 1980, just three companies held half (300,000 acres) of this region's forests: International Paper Company, Brown Company, and the Pingree family. In 2004, traditional ownership patterns ended here⁵ when International Paper and MeadWestvaco (which acquired the Brown Company) sold their land.

In northern New Hampshire, the number of landowners owning small parcels of 200 to 1,000 acres each increased tenfold from 1980 to 2007. As timberlands, mills, and manufacturing declined, it was no longer typical for one owner to manage a large block of timberland with the goal of keeping that land producing for the long term. In Maine, in 1988, industrial owners accounted for 7.7 million acres of timberland, and large non-industrial owners held 3.1 million acres. By 2004, the proportions were nearly reversed: industrial interests held only 3.2 million acres, and non-industrial owners, 6.5 million acres. The forest parcels have been fragmenting into smaller pieces, many of which timber investment management organizations and real estate trusts manage.⁶ Forest jobs are declining as mills and factories close. Land is more expensive. Public access to the forest is reduced. Also, until the economic downturn, more second homes were sprouting.

³ Note that the concept of the Northern Forest is new. The Northern Forest Center defines the Northern Forest as a connected tract across the boundaries of New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine.

⁴ The Open Space Institute reports that an estimated 60 million acres of forestland in the United States have changed hands from forest product companies to financial investors. In 2006, 10 million acres of timberland changed hands. Sales have slowed but 50 to 60 million acres more could change hands during the next decade.

⁵ A similar event occurred when Diamond International Corp. liquidated its holdings in Maine in 1988.

⁶ This is different than the old way of a company owning the forest and manufacturing facilities. In Maine, the last big industrial owner is Canadian-based Irving.

For the past twenty years, those seeking to conserve land have negotiated sales (of land or easements) to conservation organizations. Nonprofit organizations and private land trusts have cropped up to identify, secure, and manage these lands. Beyond the purchase price, caring for land is expensive. It requires surveys, title searches, legal counsel, stewardship plans, and endowments.

The Open Space Institute looked at the Mahoosuc region of Oxford County, Maine, and Coös County, New Hampshire, and estimated that within the next ten years, 7 to 28 percent of the region's forestland (about 40,000–150,000 acres) could come up for sale. The total estimate for the Northern Forest region of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and New York is 2 to 7 million acres. If the first generation of sustainable forestry began with the Weeks Act and national forests, the next generation was the conservation easement. The emerging third generation of sustainable forestry involves industries: they provide market incentives to protect ecosystems, similar to cap-and-trade agreements that place a price on lowering air emissions.

“The movement is from a hammer to a scalpel,” said Mike Wilson of the nonprofit Northern Forest Center, dedicated to strong community economies. The approach changed when the public recognized how important land conservation is, and the conservation experts recognized that they should take a more nuanced approach to saving land. They are more sophisticated in how they craft easements today. Some easements set aside land for managed forests, others for wildlife habitat, others for watershed protection, and still others to allow areas for snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles, skiing, and hiking—and all while allowing public access to all of the lands.

“There is a strong interest from the local citizens to be engaged and have a seat at the table with regard to land ownership in their communities,” said Rodger Krussman, state director of the New Hampshire and Vermont offices of the Trust for Public Land. Krussman was involved in the creation of town forests in Errol and Randolph, New Hampshire.

These communities now have the opportunity to manage their landscape to craft easements that reflect their dreams for the land and they are taking it. As a result, the community forest has become an increasingly realistic option. The creation of a community forest is somewhere between traditional federal ownership (higher protection, lower local control) and private ownership under easement (local control, but a different level of protection). A community forest ensures that locals own and articulate priorities for the land's uses. “It is a fundamental way to maintain and bolster the relationships between a

community and the forest that surrounds them,” said Wilson. “It gives them ownership and a stake in the land, rather than historically where there was a much more passive role.”

The thread that connects the various forms of today’s community forests is the social capital they provide; the opportunity for engagement in the process stimulates community action and ownership. “Active management generates active participation,” Krussman said.

The genesis of a community forest is never an isolated affair but tends to pull in national nonprofit organizations such as the Trust for Public Land, The Nature Conservancy, or the Conservation Fund, as well as regional organizations such as the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests. Towns also work with the U.S. Forest Service. The federal government’s Forest Legacy Program provides money for the process (working through states to create state-owned easements protecting private forests), as do New Hampshire’s Land and Community Heritage Investment Program (used for fee purchases, easements, and other work related to carrying out conservation work), and the National Park Service’s Land and Water Conservation Fund which matches funds towns raise to buy or protect land). It is clear that many strategies have led to the mosaic of land ownership and protection.

TWO RECENT TOWN FORESTS, IN RANDOLPH AND ERROL, NEW HAMPSHIRE, exemplify the multiplicity, the partnership, and the challenges a community faces.

The largest town forest in New Hampshire is the Randolph Community Forest, created in 2001. It measures 10,000 acres, or roughly one-third of the town’s total land base. The land had been industrial timberland for many years. It was open to the public, except in areas where logging was taking place. The Hancock Timber Resource Group, which previously owned the land, felt the pressures of the declining timber industry along with the growing demand for land for development. The vast tracts of land owned by Hancock, if developed, would have been an incredible strain on the town’s resources and infrastructure. Yet, Hancock still needed revenue.

In 1995, town leaders in Randolph learned that Hancock had applied to the Forest Legacy Program⁷. Here was an opportunity to keep the land residents loved from being sold, subdivided, developed, or some other uncertainty.

⁷ A sharp local reporter, digging for another story, came across this finding and brought it to the attention of the town.

Town officials organized campaigns. Soon a three-person negotiating team assembled itself. Walter Graff, John Scarinza, and David Willcox, had experience on the Randolph Planning Board and Conservation Commission and a wealth of experience in politics in general. Graff is also vice-president of the Appalachian Mountain Club. Meanwhile, Hancock's initial Forest Legacy application was unsuccessful; its project was low on the state's priority funding list.

The ice storm of 1998 changed the picture. Before, Hancock was attempting to sell only the Forest Legacy easement to the state, but after the storm did its extensive damage, Hancock now wanted to sell outright the entire parcel plus 2,300 acres. Those extra acres happened to be "acquirable lands" within a proclamation boundary of the national forest. This new picture meant that the private timberland could become federally owned. What was once a push to place private land under public conservation easement had ballooned into a chance to acquire significant public land holdings for the Randolph community and the National Forest. Now towns, nonprofits including The Trust for Public Land, and the federal government all started talking.

Even at that point, the decision to work toward a community forest was not definite, commented Willcox. Money and funding was a daunting problem, and the town was reluctant to take on ownership. One option was for the Trust for Public Land to buy the land and sell it to another private forest landowner under easement. This would have achieved one of the goals of protecting land from more house building. But new conversations started: could Randolph residents hold the land as a working forest? Public meetings hosted by the planning boards of Jefferson and Randolph joined townspeople with state conservation organizations. Residents asked, What was the difference between a responsible private owner and a public forest? (Answer: the community strongly connects to a public forest.) Could they balance different interests for the land? (Answer: Yes; the tract is large.) Could a town manage a working forest? (Answer: Yes; develop a plan and hire a manager.)

If the funding could be located to purchase the land (with a price of \$1.8 million), there would be a long-term benefit. "There is a real economic value in owning the forest, if the town can put the deal together," Wilson said. Buying land was expensive, but timber harvesting would be a revenue source. Preliminary data for Randolph showed that the property would be self-supporting for as long as 50 years.

Funding a community forest is a significant hurdle. To return to the case of the Mahoosuc region, the Open Space Institute estimated that the

cost of conservation through easement and fee purchase would be \$30 million to \$120 million to cover the 7 to 28 percent of the region's forestland (40,000–150,000 acres) that is expected to become available in the next ten years. Randolph tackled its daunting task through fundraising: \$1 million from charitable organizations, \$250,000 from the state Land and Community Heritage Investment Program (LCHIP), and a final \$600,000 from the local Randolph Foundation, which formed in 1962 to fund a park. To contrast with another recent forest, the 13 Mile Woods Community Forest in Errol was funded through a bond to be repaid through forest production.

The Randolph community needed to then define its forest's relationship to the White Mountain National Forest (WMNF) and how Randolph would manage its lands that fall within the federal proclamation boundary. The USFS was interested in acreage within that boundary known as the Pond of Safety tract. Federal forest management has its critics in northern New Hampshire, but possible funding sources for this forest were federal. In the end, the residents of Randolph and the WMNF reached what is considered an exemplary agreement. The federal appropriations bill noted, "The management of this tract shall be planned and undertaken in consultation with the elected officials of the town in which it is located."

"We work in a shared landscape," said Katherine Stuart, the district ranger on the Androscoggin District of the White Mountain National Forest who works closely with the Randolph Community Forest, "meaning that we collaborate across boundaries, so that when management decisions are made, we can often share them." What could have been a turf battle, between federal agency and hackle-raised locals, turned instead into a model partnership.⁸ "A lot of credit can be given to federal agencies," Krussman said. "They are interested in what's inside the boundary, but are supportive of conserving what is adjacent and outside."

Nearby Gorham created a town forest in the 1930s to protect its watershed, and Lyme had one that came by chance through tax deed, but the Randolph Community Forest was the first to promote local forestry, with forestry and income from timber harvesting listed as the first two goals in the forest

⁸ Another example of this is the 13 Mile Woods Community Forest in Errol, near the Umbagog Wildlife Refuge.

⁹ The Randolph Community Forest can make decisions through its five-member forest commission. It is not required to go through town meetings (the legislative bodies of many New England municipalities) in either of its towns (Randolph and Jefferson).

stewardship plan.⁹ One of the biggest assets of the RCF is how it has inspired other communities.

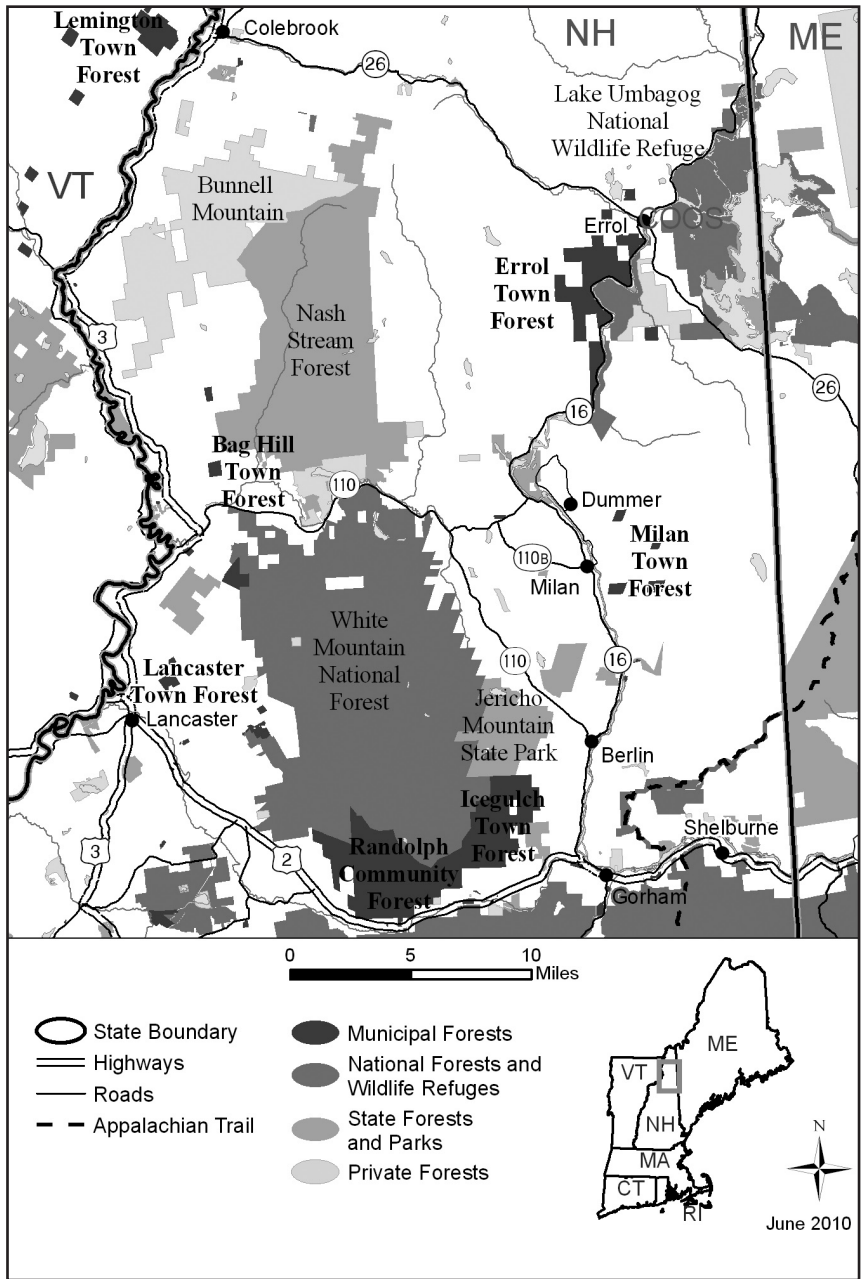
“We’re being used as a model,” said Willcox, who often travels to public meetings with fellow Randolph Forest Commission member Scarinza. The RCF has achieved national attention, hosting tours for communities across the country, most recently from Washington State.

Community forests are a new wave of forest management, and the curiosity is spreading across New Hampshire and the Northern Forest. “There is quite a movement starting now,” explained Willcox, looking at Errol, and the New Hampshire towns of Freedom and Albany, which have also started community forests. A one-stop shop for resources is found in the new Community Forest Collaborative (bringing together the Trust for Public Land, the Northern Forest Center, and the Quebec Labrador Foundation) and the Open Space Institute’s Community Forest Fund. In Shelburne, New Hampshire, officials and residents want to protect the rural character and woods roads, and the Conservation Commission has hosted various public forums about natural resources.

MAPS TELL A FASCINATING STORY: LINES OF TOPOGRAPHY SHOW glacial carving and watersheds, lines of trails show recreational use, and lines of property show where different levels of ownership begin and end. A flip-book of maps depicting the Northern Forest region would show a block of private land, then a burst of new color with federal ownership after the Weeks Act, then a shattering of the private block as timber ownership changed in the 1980s, and now a shaded variety of public-private partnerships.

But what is the next page of this flipbook? What is the next tool in the conservation toolbox? What new color is going to show up in the mosaic?

Traditional tools such as public acquisition or the conservation easement (our hammers and scalpels) are becoming inefficient ways to protect land because of the rising cost of land and the changing economic climate. Forestland is becoming expensive, and the public funding sources are drying up. In response, those interested in land protection are looking at an even bigger idea: the concept of “landscape scale” conservation. That is, paying or finding subsidies for private landowners to protect “ecosystem services” such as trees that sequester carbon emissions, filter water, and keep air and soil healthy. Those supporting conservation include motorsport associations, hunters, anglers, local businesses, schools, and towns.



In northern New Hampshire, as large forest tracts splinter for sale, conservationists have become creative in preserving land. Town forests, one of the responses, are shaded here in dark gray. CATHY POPPENWIMER/AMC



George "Georgie" Brodeur, of Whitefield, New Hampshire, is one of the youngest loggers working in New Hampshire. In 2008, at age 19, he operated a skidder in the Randolph Community Forest. EDITH TUCKER

Interestingly enough, although the world since the Weeks Act has become increasingly complicated, with an ever-increasing array of players and terminology, the fact remains that the most successful way to conserve land in the Northern Forest region is through open dialogue with a variety of interests and stakeholders.

I OPENED THIS PIECE WITH A VIGNETTE FROM BERLIN, AN EXAMPLE of one of the varied stakeholders in the game of conservation. Although Lombard might not seem like a conservationist, as he is driven by marketing and economics, he is ultimately running a business that depends on the maintenance and sustainability of a forested landscape. He is an example of the unlikely partners in landscape scale conservation.

In the nearby township of Success, adjacent to Berlin, is a parcel of timberland that is a new piece in the mosaic. It is 24,000 acres, riddled with snowmobile trails, berry pickers, and wildlife corridors. It is 24,000 acres that has been operated as timberland for more than a century: the original name Success derives from the conclusion that whoever decided to operate a timber operation there would have great success, and an intrepid explorer can now easily find rusted iron remnants of railroads and early logging camps.

Just as Randolph and Errol worked with timber companies, Success township is working with the current timber owner, T. R. Dillon, who is considering a conservation easement. And, as in Randolph and Errol, a nonprofit organization—the Conservation Fund—is overseeing the discussions. When

municipalities, businesses, fish and game clubs, camp associations, nonprofit conservation organizations, and chambers of commerce work together, it is “a collaborative conversation about how conservation can be a part of their future,” said Nancy Bell, who is managing the Success project as director of the Northeast Field Office for the Conservation Fund.

“People have been really thoughtful, exuberant, and excited about the possibility of controlling their futures,” she said. “The folks who are advocating for this aren’t going to see the benefits of the forest growing back or the economy altering soon, but they still have a vision of what’s possible, and feel it’s worth taking action on.” Through public “visioning” forums, small group meetings, and one-on-one talks, people become aware and engaged. An idea gestures toward a reality.

The importance of the Success project is found in a play on the word “community,” as “a common unity of landscape and its relationship to people living there, of working farms and forests, of livelihood defining life,” Bell wrote in a recent grant application. She added that citizens are taking a stand, joining personal values with hard work as the area faces threats of “mills closing, a changing economy, shifts in land ownership, and an aging population. The citizens of the area are taking a stand to keep the landscape, communities, and values intact, and to create a future of their own invention.”

What’s emerged in the century since the Weeks Act is a loud cry from citizens to be engaged and part of directing what the future might look like. The Northern Forest mosaic increases in size and complexity, exploding with colors, shapes, and patterns. It is easy to become overwhelmed with choice, buried under the weight of the task at hand, which is nothing less than the salvation of a unique landscape and its human communities. It is far more productive to appreciate the nuances of choice and collaborations. The salvation of an ecosystem and a society is at stake in this Northern Forest.

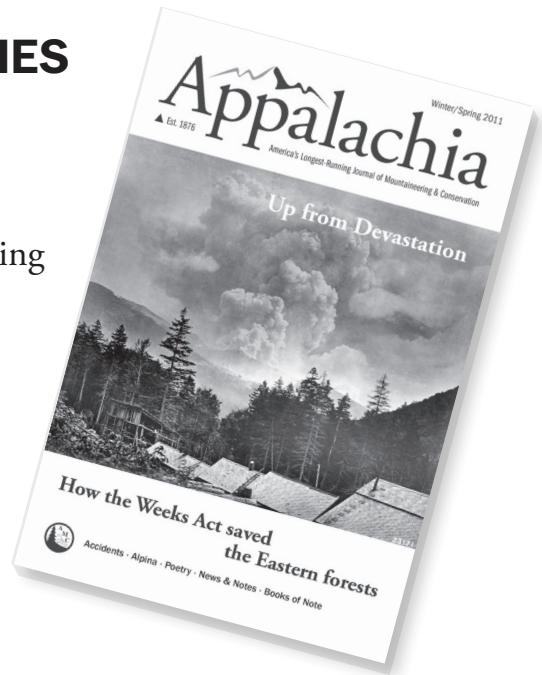
SALLY MANIKIAN, who has written for *Appalachia* twice before, believes in forests as a social and economic force. She has worked in the backcountry of New Hampshire for several years and currently is the backcountry resource conservation manager for the Appalachian Mountain Club. She serves on the boards of directors of the Randolph Mountain Club and the Berlin (New Hampshire) Industrial Development and Park Authority. She lives in Berlin.

"I started reading Appalachia for the accident reports, but I kept reading for the great features."—Mohamed Ellozy, subscriber

SUPPORT THE STORIES YOU LOVE!

Start or renew your *Appalachia* subscription today, and keep reading America's longest-running journal of mountaineering and conservation.

Visit outdoors.org/appalachia for a special offer: 36% off the journal's cover price. That's three years of *Appalachia* (6 issues) for only \$42. Or choose a one-year subscription (2 issues) for \$18—18% off the cover price.



Inside every issue, you'll find:

- inspired writing on mountain exploration, adventurers, ecology, and conservation
- up-to-date news and notes on international expeditions
- analysis of recent Northeastern mountaineering accidents
- book reviews, poetry, and much more

Subscribe today at outdoors.org/appalachia or call 800-372-1758.



Subscription prices valid as of June 2022. Prices and offers subject to change without notice. For the most up-to-date information, visit outdoors.org.