



Building Momentum for Conservation in Focus Areas of Statewide Ecological Significance



**Beginning with Habitat Workshop
at the Maine Land Conservation Conference, April 28, 2026**

Workshop Summary

Background

Beginning with Habitat (BwH) equips Maine communities, landowners, and conservation partners with information and tools to protect, restore, and connect important habitats and ecosystems in a changing climate. Housed within the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, Beginning with Habitat staff work with a network of species experts, ecologists, and conservation partners to translate biodiversity information into conservation action at both a local and statewide scale.

One of the key conservation planning tools that the Beginning with Habitat network has developed are Focus Areas of Statewide Ecological Significance (Focus Areas). Focus Areas are areas to prioritize collaborative, non-regulatory conservation actions that benefit biodiversity in Maine. Focus Areas were mapped to highlight natural areas of statewide biodiversity importance, and contain high concentrations of at-risk species and habitats. Voluntary and collaborative conservation actions for Focus Areas are diverse, including purchasing land or conservation easements from willing sellers, aquatic or terrestrial road crossing improvements, municipal planning, public outreach and education, invasive species management, and private landowner technical assistance.

Over the past several years, the BwH team and network partners have worked to update mapped Focus Areas and companion descriptions for the 141 Focus Areas across the state. Following these updates, the BwH program is engaging with conservation partners to share information about Focus Areas, generate momentum for conservation in these important areas, and identify opportunities for collaboration. The Beginning with Habitat workshop at the 2026 Maine Land Conservation Conference was organized to advance these efforts by collaborating with and learning from the land trust community across Maine.

Workshop Objectives:

- Share information about Beginning with Habitat Focus Areas with the land trust community and conservation partners
- Discuss collaborative conservation opportunities and priorities in Focus Areas across Maine
- Foster partnerships and identify next steps for advancing conservation outcomes in Focus Areas across Maine

Workshop Structure

The two-hour workshop began with presentations from Beginning with Habitat staff, followed by breaking into four regional groups to work through discussion prompts. Presentations included background material on the Beginning with Habitat program, Focus Areas of Statewide Ecological Significance, and examples of how BwH engages with private landowners, municipalities, land trusts, and conservation partners to advance statewide conservation priorities. Following presentations, attendees broke into small groups based on four broad regions of Maine: Southern Maine, Western & Inland Maine, Casco Bay and Midcoast, and Downeast and Penobscot Bay (See Appendix A for an overview map of the four breakout groups). Each group worked through the same six discussion prompts, facilitated by a Beginning with Habitat staff member. Discussion materials at each table included 36x36-inch regional maps of Focus Areas and conserved lands, and draft Focus Area descriptions for the region. Participants signed up for the workshop when registering for the Maine Land Conservation Conference, and were assigned to geographic regions ahead of time based on their organization's service area. Participants that work statewide were divided among the four breakout groups. After working through the discussion prompts in small groups, participants reconvened and shared key themes and takeaways in a large group discussion.

Participation

- **35 total participants, including representatives from:**
 - 13 Maine land trusts
 - 4 Nonprofit conservation organizations
 - 4 Consulting firms
 - 2 Academic/research institutions
 - 2 State agencies

See Appendix B for a full list of organizations represented at the workshop



Discussion Themes and Takeaways

Discussion Topic One: High priority conservation actions

After reviewing regional maps, Focus Area descriptions, and example conservation recommendations, groups discussed high priority conservation actions in their regions. Discussions included work that was already underway at their organizations, and topics that need to be addressed. The following priorities emerged as themes across all four breakout groups during reporting back to the large group:

- **Responding to development pressure:** Although development pressures varied across regions and Focus Areas of interest, all groups identified development pressure as a high priority due to its impact on land acquisition. Concerns included the rising cost of acquiring land, and the need to quickly identify, fund, and acquire high value land at risk of development.
- **Invasive species management:** Monitoring and management of invasive terrestrial and aquatic plants, animals, and pest species was a top concern, as well as the impacts of climate change on the introduction and spread of invasive species.
- **Riparian area conservation and restoration:** Actively conserving and restoring land along rivers and streams, including acquiring land, restoring aquatic connectivity, improving drinking water quality, and protecting headwater streams and aquifers.
- **Connectivity:** Protecting, restoring, and maintaining connectivity across many land use and habitat types, including: aquatic habitat, terrestrial habitat, undeveloped habitat blocks, recreational uses, and agricultural uses; identifying key areas to protect and connect.
- **Habitat restoration:** Fish passage, in-stream restoration techniques, saltmarsh restoration, forest regeneration, and forest resilience were key habitat restoration priorities.
- Additional regional priorities identified:
 - **Collaboration** (Southern Maine): Collaboration across State, Federal, and Municipal partnerships; being active in the community; participating in community planning processes (e.g., Comprehensive Plans, Open Space Plans).
 - **Working with landowners** (Western & Inland Maine): Working with landowners to actively manage forests on their properties – expanding [land trust] impact without expanding land holdings.
 - **Forest management** (Western & Inland Maine, Downeast and Penobscot Bay): Moving from passive forest management to active forest management; reproducing late-succession forest types when possible; managing to allow for regeneration, create ecological gaps, and reduce invasives.
 - **Land trust deserts** (Downeast and Penobscot Bay): There are areas of high conservation priority and opportunities where there are no lead/local land trusts.

Discussion Topic Two: Key vulnerabilities

Participants next discussed key vulnerabilities facing conservation in their regions and Focus Areas of interest. The following vulnerabilities emerged as themes across all four breakout groups during reporting back to the large group:

- **Development pressure/high cost of land:** Across the state, development pressure, rising costs, and fast timelines are putting pressure on efforts to conserve undeveloped land with high conservation value. Some Focus Areas do not face intense development pressure; coasts and lakefronts are particularly pressured.
- **Changing demographics, politics, and cultural shifts:** Changes to Maine's demographics (aging population, increase in new residents, generational land transfers), politics, and cultural shifts were all recognized as contributing to the shifting landscape of conservation work across Maine. Second-generation conservation easement holders and landowners inheriting land were specifically mentioned as challenges.
- **Invasive species (plants, animals, pests):** Inventorying, managing, and monitoring invasive species was a top concern across all regions; along with the concern that climate change is exacerbating the spread of invasives (e.g., warming air and water temperatures, warmer winters, extreme precipitation).
- **Erosion, impacts on water quality:** Undersized stream crossings/aging infrastructure, steep topography, and erosion after storms were all identified as vulnerabilities impacting shorelines and water quality; along with a general concern that these impacts are exacerbated by climate change.
- Additional regional vulnerabilities identified:
 - **Habitat fragmentation and development-sensitive species** (Southern Maine): Related to high development pressure, vulnerabilities in Southern Maine included fragmentation of remaining undeveloped habitat, and negative impacts to species that are sensitive to dense development.
 - **Experience and knowledge gaps/knowledge loss** (Casco Bay and Midcoast, and Downeast and Penobscot Bay): Due to aging workforce and training needs for younger workforce, there are gaps in knowledge, skills, and capacity to complete projects to standards/timeline needed.
 - **Shifting forestry industry market** (Downeast and Penobscot Bay)
 - **Shifting conditions on the landscape/climate change** (Western & Inland Maine, Downeast and Penobscot Bay)

Discussion Topic Three: Key conservation opportunities and partnerships

The next discussion centered around identifying key opportunities and partnerships that could help generate conservation action in the region of interest. The theme of building new

partnerships and collaborations was identified across all four breakout groups, with many regional examples:

- **Collaboration across organizations and scales:**

- Housing trusts
- Farm cooperatives (e.g., La Finca Cooperative)
- Municipal – Land Trust collaboration
- Regional Planning Organizations
- Collaboration between neighboring land trusts/conservation organizations
- Local outdoor/recreation clubs (Maine Guides, ATV clubs, snowmobile clubs, hunters, trappers, and anglers)
- Volunteer committees and clubs (Conservation Commissions, garden clubs)
- Lawmakers
- Land trust – developer/consultant collaboration
- Education and outreach with Realtors
- Education and outreach to DOT and DPWs
- Collaboration on projects that span boundaries – land trusts, Wildlife Management Areas, municipalities

- Additional regional opportunities and examples identified:

- **Peer landowner model** (Western & Inland Maine):
 - 7 neighbors working together on forest management planning
 - Shared interests allow them to overcome differences in values
 - Landowners becoming more independent in their forest management
 - Key player – person respected in hunting and non-hunting groups in the community
 - Possible new pathway for land trusts to have impact and conserve land without actively owning or managing it
- **Current use tax programs** (Casco Bay and Midcoast): Education and outreach opportunity to impact land use/land management.
- **Emerald ash borer model** (Downeast and Penobscot Bay): Example of an effort that was spearheaded by the State, information/techniques spread to land trusts, towns, private landowners to implement a statewide response.
- **Biodiversity and public access/food production** (Downeast and Penobscot Bay): Public messaging opportunity centered around common goals and connections between biodiversity/conservation, public access (e.g., clam flats), and food production.

Discussion Topic Four: Barriers to conservation work

The next topic discussed centered around identifying barriers to successful conservation work in the region of interest. Several overarching themes were identified across all four breakout groups:

- **Funding:** Increasing costs of acquisition and restoration projects, need for reliable/recurrent funding sources, mismatch between funding needs and funding requirements and criteria.
- **Communication and outreach:** Being able to communicate why a particular site, species, or habitat is important; why an acquisition or restoration project is important; why the work of the conservation community in general is important.
- **Second generation landowners/conservation easement transfer:** Across the state, generational shifts in landownership, demographics, cultural values, and attitudes towards conservation are presenting complex challenges for land trusts and the conservation community.
- Additional regional barriers identified:
 - **Using information to generate action** (Southern Maine): How to use information like Beginning with Habitat data to generate conservation action.
 - **Local politics/relationships** (Southern Maine, Downeast and Penobscot Bay): Local perceptions of land conservation, tax implications, and land trusts' role in general can complicate conservation work.
 - **Labor Capacity** (Southern Maine, Western & Inland Maine, Casco Bay and Midcoast Maine): Multiple limits on organizational capacity were identified, including: grant writing, time for stewardship of many properties, high volumes of requests for small parcels to evaluate for acquisition, skills and time to complete restoration projects (e.g., living shorelines, stream smart culverts).
 - **Lack of connection/sense of place** (Casco Bay and Midcoast, Downeast and Penobscot Bay): A general lack of connection to nature and conservation was discussed, as well as a lack of connection to the importance of natural resources and ecosystem services that contribute to the character and culture of a place, such as how conservation can support access for clamming or improve water quality.

Discussion Topic Five: Using Beginning with Habitat tools for conservation planning

The next question explored how participants had used BwH tools and data as part of their work, and how they planned to use BwH tools and data in the future. This question was not discussed as a large group, but feedback will be used to help inform Beginning with Habitat outreach and technical assistance. Examples of how participants use BwH data, tools, and technical assistance included:

- **Land acquisition:** BwH maps and data are frequently used to evaluate, prioritize, and justify land acquisitions
- **Planning:** BwH maps and data are frequently incorporated into land trust strategic planning, identifying regional “Focus Areas”, municipal planning processes (natural resource inventories, Open Space Plans), and informing management plans for properties.
- **Grant applications:** BwH data and Focus Area information are regularly incorporated into grant applications to justify conservation needs and meet funding criteria.
- **Stewardship:** Focus Area descriptions are used to identify priority actions aside from land acquisition, identify stewardship needs, and foster discussions around those conservation needs.
- **Outreach and communication:** Focus Area descriptions and presentations from BwH staff were mentioned as important tools in raising awareness of local/priority natural resources and generating momentum for conservation work.

Discussion Topic Six: How can Beginning with Habitat best support your organization’s conservation work?

The last discussion topic asked participants to identify ways that the Beginning with Habitat network could best support their organization’s work. Feedback will be used to help inform Beginning with Habitat’s planning for data, outreach, and technical assistance needs. Several overarching themes were identified across all four regional groups:

- **Linking BwH information more directly with funding and conservation priorities**
- **Making sure maps and data are current and accurate**
- **Connecting with conservation partners:** Directly engaging with partners to generate momentum for conservation and inform recommended actions
- **Outreach:** in-person events, regional outreach events
- **Training:** Demonstrations and trainings on BwH tools and products
- **Case studies:** Linking BwH information and conservation priorities to examples of on the ground projects and actions
- **Public lands:** Inventorying and evaluating uses and resources on public lands
- **Keep doing what BwH is doing**

Priority Focus Areas and conservation needs identified by regional groups

- **Kennebec Estuary** (Casco Bay and Midcoast): impacts of sea level rise on habitats, and restoration needs
- **St. George River** (Casco Bay and Midcoast): freshwater mussel conservation, invasive species management, grassland habitat management
- **Cobscook Bay** (Downeast and Penobscot Bay): aquatic connectivity for sea-run fish
- **Bold Coast** (Downeast and Penobscot Bay): aquatic connectivity for sea-run fish
- **Machias Bay, Machias River, East Machias River** (Downeast and Penobscot Bay): aquatic connectivity for sea-run fish
- **Bagaduce River** (Downeast and Penobscot Bay): fish passage
- **Penobscot Bay and Islands** (Downeast and Penobscot Bay): Stonington-working waterfront resilience
- **Meddybemps Heath** (Downeast and Penobscot Bay): Fish passage, land conservation

Summary and Next Steps

The workshop discussions identified many statewide and regional conservation priorities and needs from the conservation community, and ways that BwH can support these needs. This workshop summary will be made available to workshop participants, and through the Beginning with Habitat network. The Beginning with Habitat team is interested in continuing to build momentum for conservation in Focus Areas by holding additional regional workshops, collaborating to plan field trips to Focus Areas, and supporting partners' requests for presentations, data, and assistance with funding opportunities.

To learn more about the Beginning with Habitat program or reach out to a member of our staff, visit our About page at: [About the Beginning with Habitat Program](#)

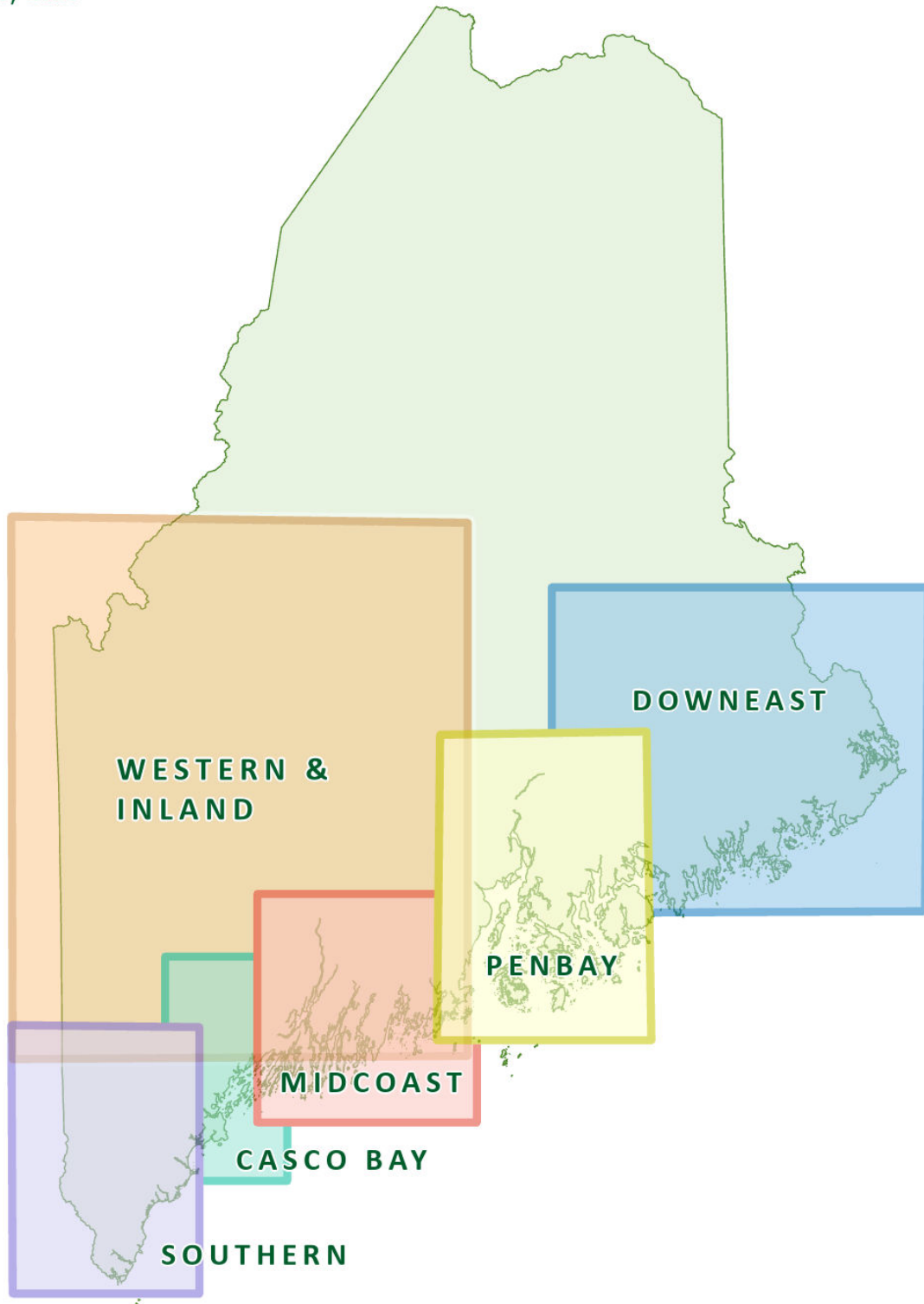
More information on Focus Areas of Statewide Ecological Significance is available online at: [Beginning with Habitat Focus Areas of Statewide Ecological Significance](#)

Focus Areas of Statewide Ecological Significance and many other mapped resources can be explored using our online Map Viewer at: [Beginning with Habitat Map Viewer](#)

Break Out Groups By Region

Beginning with Habitat

Maine Land Conservation Conference Workshop
April 28, 2026



Appendix B: List of Participating Organizations

- 7 Lakes Alliance
- Downeast Coastal Conservancy
- FB Environmental
- Flycatcher LLC
- Francis Small Heritage Trust
- Freeport Conservation Trust
- Georges River Land Trust
- Great Works Regional Land Trust
- Kennebunkport Conservation trust
- Maine Coast Heritage Trust
- Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry
- Maine Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife
- Maine Land Legacy
- Mousam Way Land Trust
- Natural Resources Council of Maine
- Northeast Wilderness Trust
- Schoodic Institute at Acadia National Park
- Sebeccook Regional Land Trust
- Somerset Woods Trustees
- SWCA Environmental Consultants
- The Nature Conservancy
- University of New England
- Western Foothills Land Trust
- Zoo New England

Appendix C: Next steps shared by participants

In closing, we asked each table to share some actions or next steps they were excited about taking after attending the workshop, and participants shared the following action items:



- Site visit!
- Using BwH tools to justify needs in grants
- Building new trails while balancing ecological significance
- Volunteer!
- Excited to use/explore BwH tools
- Familiarize myself with my town owned lands