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Neighborly & Family Relations: *Benefits of Working Together*

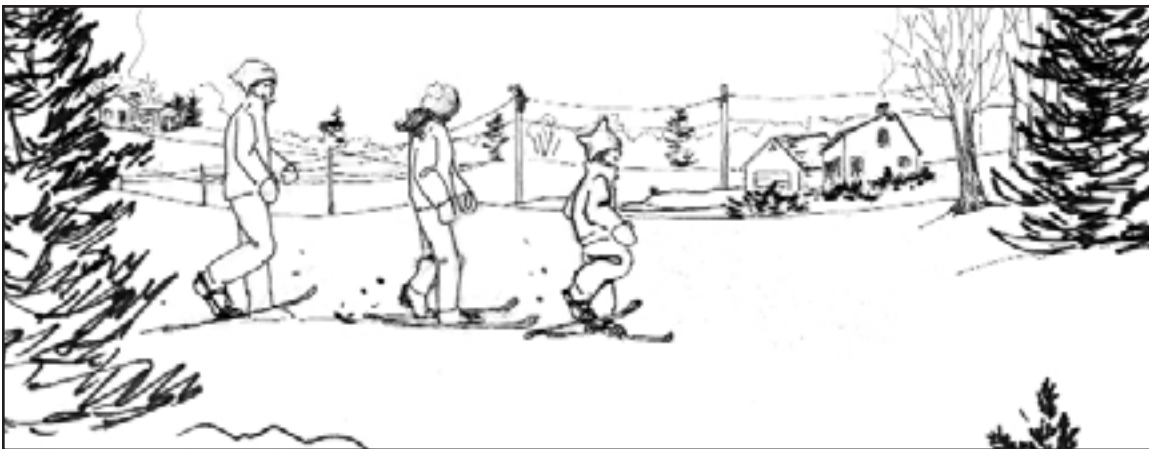
Are you interested in creating good homes for wildlife or improving your sugar maples with an eye towards making maple syrup? Then you might want to talk to your neighbors. What happens on their property may be a factor in how successful you are in being a good friend to yours. You may even find that you share some of the same values and can work together towards common goals. At the very least, it is worth letting your neighbors know what you are up to, just to keep relations friendly.

Your family is important, too. If you spend time improving your property, you will almost certainly become attached to it and want the spirit of stewardship to continue if you decide to sell it or bequeath it to your heirs. Fortunately, there are several options available that may help you reduce property and estate taxes while continuing your approach to land conservation. Some options allow for limited residential construction, agriculture, and forestry.

The Importance of Property Boundaries

If you plan to create trails, improve wildlife habitat, or cut trees for any reason, you will need to know the legal location of your property boundaries. Liability questions can easily arise if you cut a tree on your neighbor's property. This is remarkably easy to do if the boundary line is not marked or marked incorrectly. Locating property boundaries can be a bit of an adventure if an old deed is involved, though, since many deeds refer to large trees, barbed wire fences, and other landmarks that were standing a hundred years ago and are no longer around.

The best place to start is with a town tax map available at the town office. Your county Registry of Deeds is the next step. If you let your neighbors know you are looking at shared property lines, they may be able to help you out if they have had their property professionally surveyed. If you plan to do extensive work in your woods,



A neighborhood trail offers year-round recreation opportunities right out your backdoor.

you will want to consider having your property lines surveyed by a licensed surveyor. Otherwise, you can find your own property lines with help from the publications listed in the resources and the information from the town office and the Registry of Deeds.

Sharing Water, Sharing Soil

Are your neighbors uphill from you? If so, a wooded area between their property and your house may make the difference between a dry cellar in the spring or a constant battle with a sump pump to keep the furnace from drowning. Similarly, if you plan to put in a large lawn or paved area around your newly built house, consider the effects surface run-off will have on adjacent areas and waterways.

Surface run-off can also be a problem on parking lots, golf courses, agricultural fields, clear cuts, roads, trails, construction sites and other unvegetated or lightly vegetated areas. Run-off picks up soil particles as it goes, creating rills and gullies as it runs down unprotected slopes and polluting nearby waterways. It also picks up whatever else is on the ground or pavement, including motor oil, pesticides, and other contaminants. Conservation measures, like buffer zones with trees and shrubs to catch surface run-off, will keep the soil where it should be: on the ground instead of in the water.

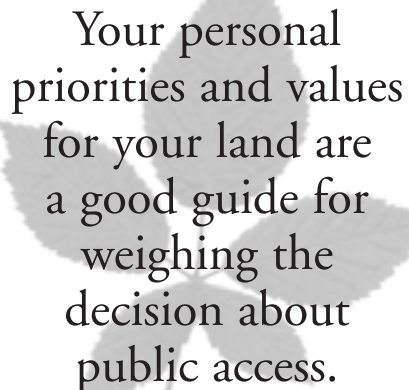
If your neighbor's practices are affecting your property, it might be prudent to share some written information with them on how they can benefit from soil and water conservation measures.

Community Relations

What is your reaction when you see a sign that says "No Trespassing: Violators will be Prosecuted?"

There are costs and benefits of keeping your land open to public access, particularly if you move to a property that has historically been open to the public for hunting or other recreational use. If you don't post it, your land may be open to abuse. On the other hand, if you do post it, you may cut off friendly relations with your neighbors and not be effective in keeping persistent trespassers off your property, anyway.

Your personal priorities and values for your land are a good guide for weighing the decision about public access.



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Another option is to control who goes on your property and when they do so. Allowing your neighbors access by written permission may encourage good will and help you reach some of your goals. For example, a property owner that has no

interest in hunting may allow adjacent neighbors written permission to hunt in return for year round access to their property for other recreational opportunities like cross country skiing, mountain biking, or hiking.

Cooperating with your neighbors and allowing controlled public access may also offer you more privacy than expected, since you can ask your neighbors to let you know if they see someone who doesn't have permission to be on your property. In this way, members of the neighborhood look out for each other.

Some landowners are wary of opening up their land for recreational use because they fear getting sued if something goes wrong, but landowner liability is well protected under Maine law as long as landowners do not charge a user fee. In fact, Maine has one of the strongest landowner liability protection laws in the country. The rule of thumb is that there is no cause for concern if someone gets hurt on your property unless money is somehow involved.



Clearing a neighborhood trail

However, the final decision on whether to allow public access always rests with you, the owner.

Working Together to Provide Homes for Wildlife

Remember that all wildlife need food, water, cover, and space to meet their daily living requirements. Perhaps your neighbors have a good water source and you have good food sources for a variety of wildlife. You can still develop essential cover for many species that visit your neighbors for a drink. Between the two properties, you may be able to provide all the habitat requirements for a variety of species, including migratory songbirds who need refueling stops on their travels.

Better yet, let your neighbors in on your plans and see if they are interested in a joint effort. If they become interested in improving wildlife habitat, your combined efforts will likely have an even bigger impact — particularly for species that need more than ten acres to survive. Requesting permission

from your neighbors to venture beyond your own property boundaries into their backyards will also help further neighborly relations.

Neighborhood Trails

If your property is adjacent to property with existing trails, or is a piece of a larger woodland, your neighbors may be interested in working together to create a longer community trail for use by participating landowners.

Neighborhood trails are like hidden treasures. Instead of walking your dog or running on the side of the road, your daily exercise takes you into the peaceful beauty of the woods for a long walk. Neighborhood trails also have the advantage of not being known to those who live outside the neighborhood and are unlikely to attract wider use. Existing trails indicate that vandalism tends to go down after the trail is put in place, since neighbors watch out for each other's property.

Community Timber Harvest

If you decide to cut some trees on your small property in order to meet the other goals for your land, you may not have enough wood to make it economically worthwhile to have a logger cut and haul it out. Instead of making money off the sale, you may have to pay the logger! If several of your neighbors want to work together towards common goals such as recreational access or wildlife habitat improvement, there may be good reason to do a community timber harvest. The income from the wood will probably cover the costs of the work and may provide some income for participating landowners, depending on the size of the combined properties and how many trees are removed. If you decide to pursue a community timber harvest, it is essential that you work with a licensed professional forester who has your best interests in mind and will guide the logger's work. The forester will keep your personal goals, the health of the land, and your legal interests in mind. The forester will also facilitate the details of the harvest from beginning to end.

Contact the Maine Forest Service for a list of licensed professional foresters in the state.

Planning for the Future

Many landowners face the prospect of increasing property taxes and high estate taxes that will prohibit their heirs from keeping ownership of treasured property. Some people think that giving their property to their children now will ease the future estate tax burden. This may not be the case. Fortunately, options exist that allow landowners to preserve undeveloped parts of their property if it has scenic or open space values, or is important to rare wildlife species. Larger properties can be preserved under a continuing use agreement for agriculture, forestry, or ranching. Today, hundreds of thousands of acres of privately owned Maine

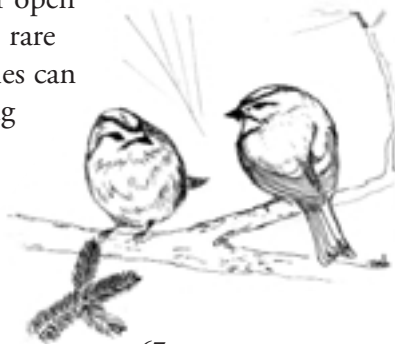
land are under some kind of long term protection from development.

You don't need to give your land away to protect it. Nor do you have to give up all rights to build new buildings or add on to existing ones. Under a conservation easement, for example, your tax burden is reduced based on a plan to limit development on the property. You still retain ownership of your property, but trade some rights to build new structures in return for lower taxes and the assurance that undeveloped areas will stay largely undeveloped — even if you or future owners decide to sell the property. Nonprofit land trusts help landowners with information and planning on conservation easements. Contact them for more information on your options.

Working Together

A small house lot with a few trees is not a very big piece of the forest, but it is an important piece. If your neighbors on either side and in back also have a yard and some trees, you probably have enough area between you to provide habitat for some species of birds and other small wildlife like butterflies and moths.

If you have several acres, you and your neighbors have even more options if you work together. People working together can make a difference. You can create or conserve wildlife habitat and open up recreational opportunities. You can also get to know your neighbors better and build a sense of community, without giving up the privacy your wooded property affords. And a sense of community is something that is dearly missing from so many of our busy lives. Who would think that we would find it right outside our back doors?



Golden-Crowned Kinglets are one of the many species that rely on you to be a good friend to your woods.



What kind of tracks are these?

RESOURCES

Land Trusts and Conservation Easements

Forest Legacy: Protecting America's Private Forest Heritage. A brochure explaining the Forest Legacy Program and conservation easements. American Forestry Association. Contact: Maine Forest Service, Department of Conservation at 800-367-0223.

Coastal Mountains Land Trust. A non-profit organization that works with landowners who live on or near the coast of Maine. Contact: CMLT, P.O. Box 101, Rockport, ME 04856 or 207-236-7091.

Maine Coast Heritage Trust. Provides conservation advisory services to landowners, local land trusts and state and community officials free of charge. Contact MCHT at 169 Park Row, Brunswick, ME 04011 or 207-729-7366. Or P.O. Box 426, Northeast Harbor, ME 04662 or 207-276-5156.

Schauffler, F. Marina. 1994. *Conservation Options: A Guide for Maine Landowners.* Maine Coast Heritage Trust with Land Trust Alliance. Offers techniques for preserving property and ensuring long-term protection. Contact: Maine Coast Heritage Trust, 167 Park Row, Brunswick, ME 04011 or 207-729-7366.

Landowner Liability

Maine: Landowner Liability Explained. (Brochure) Androscoggin Land Trust, et al. September, 1996. Contact: Landowner Relations Coordinator at the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife at 207-287-8091.

Maps

Topographic Maps. These geographically detailed maps are available from many outdoor stores. All maps in the state are also available by mail. To order: DeLorme Map Store, 2 DeLorme Drive, P.O. Box 298, Yarmouth, ME 04096 or 207-846-7100.

Trails

The Complete Guide to Trail Building and Maintenance. A comprehensive How-To manual for trail builders. Appalachian Mountain Club. \$14.95. Order through bookstores or from Acorn Naturalists (#IN-3029). To order: 800-422-8886 or the Internet at <http://www.acornnaturalists.com>

Fazio, James. 1983. *Nature Trails: Guides to Environmental Understanding.* Suggests locations for nature trails, what to look for and an overall concept for a trail. New York State College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Cornell University. 4-H Leaders' Guide L-5-4. #147L54. \$2.25. To order: 607-255-2080.

Newman, Laura. 1998. *Trails as Classrooms: Resource Guide.* A teacher's guide for using trails in experiential learning. Contact: Laura Newman, Education and Community Outreach Coordinator, Portland Trails, 1 India Street, Portland, ME 04101 or 207-775-2411.

Protecting Water Quality *(during trail or road construction in forested areas).*

Morten Moesswilde, Water Quality Coordinator, Maine Forest Service. Personal contact: 207-287-8430 or e-mail at morten_moesswilde@state.me.us

Natural and Human Communities

Berg. *Discovering Your Life-Place: A First Bio-Regional Workbook.* Designed to work with younger people to construct a map that shows the natural features of an area (or bioregion), followed by an exploration of ways to make their community a more livable place. Includes wildlife habitat improvement and community gardening as examples. \$9.95. Available through Acorn Naturalists (#EE-4902). To order: 800-422-8886 or the Internet at <http://www.acornnaturalists.com>

Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac.* The conservation classic by the father of ecology is a beautifully written natural history that promotes an ethical approach to the land as an extension of our ethical community relations with our fellow humans. Eloquent, thought provoking, and still timely, it has stood at the top of conservation writings for over half a century. Available at bookstores or through Acorn Naturalists. \$6.95. (#EE-6183). To order: 800-422-8886 or the Internet at <http://www.acornnaturalists.com>

Malone. *Wild Adventures: A Guidebook of Activities for Building Connections with Others and the Earth.* 1999. A field guide that integrates nature with cooperative team building. Geared towards parents (or educators) of children 9-12, but easily modified for older and younger people. 40 Activities. \$22.95. Available from Acorn Naturalists (#EE-7115). To order: 800-422-8886 or the Internet at <http://www.acornnaturalists.com>

Hart. *Children's Participation: Involving Young Citizens in Community Development and Environmental Care.* Successful models, practical techniques and resources for involving young people, ages 7 and up, in projects of direct benefit to the local community and the environment. \$37.95. Available from Acorn Naturalists (EE-5008). To order: 800-422-8886 or the Internet at www.acornnaturalists.com

How About a Community Trail? *Working with Your Neighbors*

A trail through your property can easily be hooked up with your neighbor's property to create a place to cross-country ski, walk the dog, or simply enjoy a leisurely stroll through the woods. Details of trail planning and maintenance must be worked out among neighbors, but most simple walking or skiing trails require little construction time or maintenance since they are not intended for heavy use. A neighborhood work day, twice a year, combined with a summer barbecue or a winter sledding party would be sufficient for most trails. It is also a fun family activity that will give you a chance to get to know your neighbors and work towards a goal that benefits all.

Many community trails in the state that cross private property are based on agreements that are not legally binding. Often, agreements are made with a handshake. This simple approach seems to work, since landowners have the option to change their minds about access at any time. This rarely happens. Neighborhood trails build community ties so that neighbors tend to look out for each other and for the trail as a whole. The surprising result has been reduced vandalism in many areas.

This project focuses on planning a neighborhood trail. See the Resource list for more complete information on trail design and building.

GETTING READY

1. Getting to know your neighbors is the first step. Invite the neighborhood children and their parents to join you in *Backyard Family Project #2: A Wildlife Safari in Your Woods*. Or invite everyone over for a neighborhood potluck cookout to get acquainted.
2. Review *The Woods in Your Backyard: Safe, Safer, Safest!* for information on avoiding woodland hazards.

TOOLS

For Planning a Trail

- * Map of your property and adjoining properties. (Photocopy available from town office)
- * USGS Topographical Map of your area. (Available at local outdoor stores)
- * Trail building guide that addresses erosion control.
- * *Landowner Liability Explained* Brochure. (Available from the Maine Forest Service)
- * *How to Prune Trees* Brochure. (Available from the Maine Forest Service)

For Building a Trail

- * Colored flagging. (Available at hardware stores)
- * Bow saw and/or pruning shears
- * Brush clearing tool
- * Work gloves
- * Eye protection (cheap, light colored plastic eye glasses will work)

DOING THE ACTIVITY

1. Read trail building brochures to get an idea how to design a trail. A simple design will work well for a neighborhood trail. A walking trail rarely requires cutting live trees. If the trail will not see heavy use, you can route it through existing openings and clear a path of branches and underbrush just wide enough for one person at a time. You'll want to consider what is best for wildlife when you plan your trail location, too. If you plan more ambitious work like excavation, moving rocks, or building bridges, you will also need to plan the trail to prevent erosion.
2. Write a simple letter to introduce the trail idea to your neighbors. Include the benefits that you feel a trail will bring to the neighborhood and a photocopy of the section of the topographical map where the trail would go (with a proposed trail sketched in) and a copy of *Landowner Liability Explained*.
3. Call the neighbors to see if they have any questions and if they want to get together to look at the map and see where a trail might work.
4. With permission from your neighbors, scout out their land to see a good place to locate a trail. On your land and theirs, look for different features in the landscape that you can take advantage of when laying out the trail. Curving trails are much more appealing than straight ones, so consider curves when you do your reconnaissance. Take flagging along to mark appealing spots so you can easily find them again.
5. Once an agreement is reached between neighbors, organize the tools and set a work party date. If the proposed trail is flagged in advance, and children are given specific tasks such as hauling brush or limbing trees, trail building should be fast and efficient. See who wants to volunteer to provide food for the hungry trail workers at lunch time and at the end of the day.
6. When the trail building crew is assembled, review safety, pruning techniques, width you want the trail to be, what to cut and what to leave. Be sure to assign children specific tasks to be responsible for, like clearing brush and hauling it away. Crews may be most efficient if divided into teams of three or four that are spread out along the length of the trail and work towards each other. Be sure to acquire the right number of tools so every team has what they need.

RELATED ACTIVITIES

Create A Nature Trail.

The maps and checklists in *Backyard Family Project #2: A Wildlife Safari in Your Woods* will help in planning if you decide to create a nature trail in your woods, or cooperate on a trail with your neighbors.

Interpretive nature trails with numbered stops along the way and a companion trail guide are an excellent way to get scout troops or youth groups involved and personally invested in trail design and maintenance. Picking interpretive stops that change seasonally will keep the interest of those who travel the trail regularly. Safe snag trees, vernal pools, woodland edges, streams, and simple historical features like stone walls or old cellar holes are a few good choices for interpretation.