



BATES COLLEGE

Bates-Morse Mountain Conservation Area: A Partnership in a Shared Conservation Effort

By Shuyi Lin



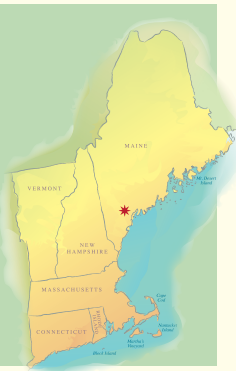
Academic Conservation Briefs



This aerial view of Bates-Morse Mountain Conservation Area shows the coastal and forest habitats that are protected by Bates College and its partners.
Credit: Bates College

At a glance:

- 600-acre parcel
- Conservation easement
- Leased to the college
- Used for research & education



“The Bates-Morse Mountain Conservation Area has played an important role in protecting coastal and forest habitats and providing research and educational opportunities for Bates students and the general public.”

Founded in 1855, Bates College is a private four-year liberal arts college located in the twin cities of Lewiston and Auburn, Maine. Bates College’s main campus consists of 133 acres that are in close proximity to a number of parks and walking trails, along with nearby Lake Auburn and the 357-acre Thorncrag Bird Sanctuary. The college also maintains and conserves the Bates-Morse Mountain Conservation Area (BMMCA) in Phippsburg, Maine, in cooperation with a local family and members of the community. The college collaborates with local organizations to use, maintain, and conserve the BMMCA.

The BMMCA consists of 600 acres of coastal uplands and salt marshes. The BMMCA is owned by the Bates-Morse Mountain Conservation Corporation (BMMCC), a nonprofit organization that includes as trustees two representatives of Bates College, two members from the Phippsburg community, and one member of the St. John family, who previously owned the land. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) holds a conservation easement on the property that protects it from future development.

The property is bounded on the east and west by the Morse and Sprague Rivers and includes salt marshes surrounding the two rivers. A walking path leads to Seawall Beach from the entrance, which is owned and managed by Bates College. Seawall Beach is the longest undeveloped beach in Maine and is managed by the Small Point Association, a locally-based corporation. Seawall Beach and a portion of the Sprague River dune area are the property of the Small Point Association, whose mission is to preserve the wild and unspoiled character of the beach, its ecology, and its endangered species habitat.

Because of the proximity of BMMCA to Seawall Beach, the overseers of the BMMCA formed an informal but tight cooperation with the Small Point Association. The two organizations work together in promoting public education and habitat protection of Seawall Beach. Since its establishment in 1978, the BMMCA has played an important role in protecting the coastal and forest habitats and providing research and educational opportunities for Bates College students and the general public.

History

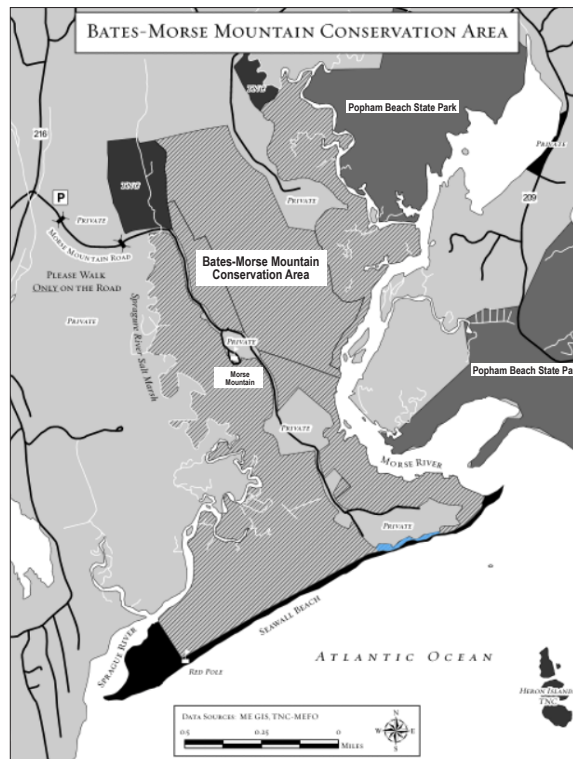
Between the years 1938 and 1950, George St. John acquired the 800 acres of land that are now the parcels of Seawall Beach and Morse Mountain. Because the area includes 1.5 miles of beach, it was a unique and commercially desirable piece of land, but St. John wanted to see it protected from development. For St. John, who was the headmaster of the Choate School in Connecticut for 40 years, education and conservation were important and meaningful long-term uses of the land.

St. John thought to engage Bates College in the effort, but worried about the college's long-term commitment to its permanent protection. As a result, in 1977, he decided to create the nonprofit BMMCC, consisting of the St. John family, Bates College, and members of the local community; he structured the group so that no one entity had control over or ownership of the land.

The BMMCC continues to be the oversight mechanism that carries out the mission of conservation and education. The BMMCC structure will continue even if Bates College no longer wants to be involved with the conservation of the property. The corporation will then work with another college.

A total of three easements on the BMMCA and Seawall Beach properties were donated to The Nature Conservancy in 1977, 1983, and 1991. Together, the terms of the three easements reinforced a central mission, which is to use the land "only for scientific study, research, and protection of the natural ecosystems indigenous to the protected property"¹ with public access as a subordinated purpose. Even though the members of the BMMCC have differing interests, all the members, as well as the neighboring organizations, strongly value conservation and education.

In 1978, the BMMCC issued a 50-year lease to Bates College that permitted the college to conduct research activities and manage public access to the area, including the parking lot and trails. Since the initial easement, Bates has formed an important relationship with other members of the BMMCC and acted as a central communicator for the larger organization. The lease to Bates College will end in 2028, but it is likely that the lease will be renewed given the commitment that Bates continues to display concerning conservation and stewardship of the property.



This map shows the Bates-Morse Mountain Conservation Area. Credit: Bates College.

Coastal Center at Shortridge

In 1996, Bates acquired the Bates College Coastal Center at Shortridge (BCCCS), an 80-acre parcel adjacent to the BMMCA that consists of varied woodlands, wetlands, and ponds, along with several residential buildings. Shortridge is located about one mile from BMMCA, allowing easy access for environmental research on salt marshes, coastal woodlands, and a large barrier beach system.

With the completion of building renovations in 2008, the combined sites of BMMCA and the BCCCS have increasingly served faculty, students, and researchers, producing over 100 publications, theses, and reports. In addition, the Shortridge Summer Residency Program was initiated in 2009. This program has provided opportunities for students, faculty, and researchers to work in a unique coastal setting over the course of a summer season, enabling them to do field work; engage with state agencies and community members regarding coastal change, sea level rise, and public policy; serve as interns in local conservation organizations; and work as artists-in-residence.

¹Nathaniel St. John, Personal interview, September 21, 2020



Conservation Effort

Conservation of the BMMCA property has always been the primary goal and top priority of the BMMCC. Morse Mountain, the tidal marshes, and Seawall Beach provide crucial habitat for migrating shorebirds and songbirds and support a variety of plant species and wildlife. Therefore, conservation efforts focus on both preserving the overall ecological health of the property and single-species protection of the flora and fauna located there.

To do this, Bates College cooperates with the Small Point Association, The Nature Conservancy, and the Maine Audubon Society to conserve habitat for migrating shorebirds and songbirds on the BMMCA and Seawall Beach properties. The entire area is under strict regulations that prohibit camping, dogs, and bicycles on the beach area. Annually, to facilitate bird protection, The Nature Conservancy and the BMMCA director collaborate to host public events that set up fences to protect shorebird nesting sites.

Research and Education

Since the establishment of the BMMCA, education has been a crucial mission and a priority, in addition to conservation. Since 1978, professors and students from Bates College have been conducting research in the BMMCA. In the last five years, student and faculty research at BMMCA has focused on geological studies, emphasizing salt marsh biogeochemical cycling, carbon sequestration and storage, and sediment transport. This work has produced 14 senior theses and many publications by Bates College faculty and colleagues. In addition, the diverse ecosystem supports a variety of research and monitoring projects. In the face of



This map shows the forest types within Bates-Morse Mountain Conservation Area. Credit: Bates-Morse Mountain Conservation Corporation

climate change, the BMMCA provides students with the opportunity to study the impact of climate change on coastal and forest ecosystems.

Bates College students also conduct projects regarding forest protection in the face of significant die-off due to Hemlock Woolly Adelgid infestation. In the fall of 2017, seven permanent vegetative survey plots were established in the upland, forested regions of BMMCA adhering to the Maine Natural Area Program's Ecological Reserve monitoring protocol. The Ecological Reserve Program protects and monitors conserved lands all over Maine. The program aims to document baseline conditions in natural ecosystems. This data shows trends in growth and health in response to climate change. Findings from research conducted at the BMMCA can be found on their website (see *More Information* at the end of this case study for the link).

In addition to research projects, the BMMCA is part of the curriculum at the college. Currently, over 10 courses from Bates College use the BMMCA as an educational resource and an outdoor classroom. Because of this, during the 2017 and 2018 school years, more than 1,220 Bates students visited the conservation area, according to the BMMCA 2017–2018 annual report.

To further accomplish the mission of education and research, the college focuses on providing funds and opportunities for students. Currently, grant funds from



The endangered Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus*) will benefit from Bates College's conservation program.



The Morse River, one of two rivers within the Bates-Morse Mountain Conservation Area, flows into the ocean near Popham Beach.
Credit: Brittney Lohmiller for Bates College

the U.S. Forest Service and others are directed toward hydrology research and recovery of the Sprague Marsh. In addition, the Small Point Association has awarded funds for student research in geology.

The educational value of the BMMCA also goes beyond the Bates community. Between 2017 and 2018, Bowdoin College, Maine College of Art, University of Maine, and Colby College have used the area for lab activities and research projects. Also, approximately 845 students visited BMMCA from local elementary and secondary schools, according to the BMMCA 2017–2018 annual report.

In the future, Bates College plans to increase the use of BMMCA by students in other disciplines, beyond the sciences. BMMCC also plans to increase public access while maintaining its priority of conservation and education. The overarching goal of this plan is to maximize the value of the conservation area and coastal center to the college community. More specifically, goals envisioned in the future, which are explained in more detail in the BMMCA 2017–2018 annual report, include to:

- **educate** students in field methods for coastal, marine, and climate studies;
- **enhance** meaningful research and educational opportunities at BMMCA;

- **leverage** current student and faculty research through collaboration and partnerships;
- **contribute** to a regional database of longitudinal coastal observations;
- **offer** opportunities for relevant community engagement and citizen science; and
- **offer** opportunities for artistic inquiry and pursuit.

Public Access

Even though public access is a secondary goal in managing the BMMCA and is limited for environmental reasons, public visitation is welcomed so long as it does not interfere with conservation or education.

There are approximately 20,000–25,000 visitors to the BMMCA each year. BMMCC attempts to reduce the impact of this level of public access in several ways. BMMCC controls the number of visitors allowed at a given time by limiting number of cars allowed in the parking lot, and Bates College also provides a one-page description of the mission and purpose of the area and its current restrictions that is available at a kiosk in the parking lot. Visitor containment, which is achieved by using fencing that protects sensitive species and habitat, and the educational outreach efforts by Bates College



also help reduce the impact from visitors. All of these actions also benefit Seawall Beach, since the only way to enter the beach is located within the BMMCA.

Lessons Learned

The conservation success story of the BMMCA showcases how a community can work together to conserve sensitive lands and educate the entire community on the importance of the land and its conservation. Interestingly, instead of donating the land to a college directly, St. John chose to make conservation a collective effort by forming the BMMCC. In this way, the St. John family, as well as members of Bates College and the local community, collaborate to preserve the land together. This is a unique approach to both land conservation and education.

There are several key takeaways from the establishment of BMMCA and BMMCC:

- The collaboration between different organizations relies on constant communication and shared values. As Nathaniel St. John, a member of the BMMCC, said, “The current success of BMMCA would not have been possible without the excitement and enthusiasm of everyone in the community.” When there are several stakeholders in place, keeping each member engaged and actively involved in decision-making is crucial to

establishing a meaningful collaboration. Therefore, constant communication and shared goals for the land is especially important.

- Public access and involvement with a protected area call for environmental education and strict implementation of regulations. As a place that is ecologically important, having public access facilitates the appreciation for nature and commitment to preservation. However, the balance between conservation and visitation must be carefully maintained. By limiting daily visitors and placing strict regulation on public behavior at the beach, the BMMCC is able to accomplish its goals of research and educational use for college students and preservation of the property while allowing the public to enjoy its beauty as well. Overall, the method of protecting a space as an LLC that includes multiple parties is a unique way of promoting public involvement and bringing in diverse perspectives and expertise regarding land conservation.

More Information

Bates College Coastal Center at Shortridge
<https://www.bates.edu/bates-morse-mountain-shortridge/>

Bates College <https://www.bates.edu/about/>



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