

Resilience: Artists and Ecologists Documenting Decades of Recover of the Wildlands of Monhegan Island



Young Spruces, Rockwell Kent

Rockwell Kent first visited Monhegan Island in the early years of the 20th century, just as a decades-long period of intensive sheep farming was coming to an end. Kent and his contemporaries depicted a Monhegan landscape in the earliest stages of recovery from its greatest disturbance, much as, with his words a half-century earlier, Henry David Thoreau captured the period of most significant forest conversion to farmland near Concord, MA. Kent painted five decades of forest succession on Monhegan Island and helped inspire a renowned on-island artistic tradition thriving to this day. Over nearly 120 years, artists have observed pastureland recolonized by white spruce, those white spruce devastated by parasitic dwarf mistletoe infestation, and, today, deciduous trees -birch, aspen and maple- coming to dominate declining white spruce woodlands. Scientists, too, have documented change on Monhegan Island, drawing upon the methodologies of forest and historical ecology to describe what came before and to elucidate mechanisms shaping forest succession. The extraordinary natural resilience displayed by the Monhegan Wildlands is only possible thanks to conservation-minded islanders, no one more so than Theodore Edison, who acquired much of the island outside of the village and conveyed it back to island residents with the formation of the Monhegan Associates. The broad arc of events on Monhegan Island – the formation and abandonment of pastureland, forest recovery, and the critical importance of land conservation – are mirrored elsewhere along the Maine coast and the greater New England region. The story of Monhegan Island, however, is uniquely well told by artists, ecologists and community members alike.

Monhegan Island's history offers lessons for us all. This exhibit intermingles artistic works, objects and representations of ecological inquiry, and historical documents and photographs to chart forest conversion and recovery on Monhegan Island. Milestone stewardship decisions animate the timeline as they set the island on the course to its present state of incipient deciduous stands set off against stately old-growth conifer forests. When given the opportunity, New England forests exhibit a remarkable ability to renew themselves; this is perhaps nowhere better demonstrated than Monhegan Island.