Two Centuries of Timber and Trampers
Where Recreation and Logging Coexist

By Chuck Wooster
my friend Dan reached out with the long hardwood branch he had found, placing it in the midpoint of the stream we were attempting to cross. He passed the pole-like branch from hand to hand, feeling its weight and gauging the amount of jump he'd need to launch himself across the stream to the far bank without getting wet.

We were standing on an old bridge abutment deep in the woods of northern New Hampshire, with the far abutment staring at us across no more than 15 feet of intervening air. Whatever logging bridge had once spanned the stream was either long rotted or long-since removed. The afternoon was warm, the bonhomie high, and the pole vault seemed, as they say, like a good idea at the time.

Dan kicked his legs out over the stream, though not quite hard enough. Several long seconds passed with Dan clinging uncertainly to the top of the pole, teetering in the middle of the brook. Then the pole pivoted 90 degrees, tilted sideways, and flipped Dan into the drink, a halo of cold water squirting out from behind his head as his body hit the water.

When our laughter subsided, I took off my boots and waded across.

This scene, which took place nearly a quarter-century ago, could not take place today, and not simply because Dan and I are more schooled in physics than we used to be. Rather, there's a permanent bridge across this same stream, and most of the people passing by these days are on skis or mountain bikes. Or in logging trucks. And therein lies the story.

Seismic shift

It's not much of an exaggeration to say that recreation in the Northern Forest has undergone a seismic shift in the past 25 years. In 1980, lightweight mountain bikes, ATVs, kayaks, and telemark skis were all new and not in wide use. Hikers, hunters, snowshoers, snowmobilers, canoeists, and cross-country skiers were all on the scene, but dressed in woolies or primitive polypropylene garments, not the Gore-Tex and Capilene of today that allow for extended trips in all manner of weather. The paucity of high-resolution maps (and the absence of GPS units to use them with) meant that only the confident and the seasoned ventured far from the beaten path for recreation's sake.

On the forest management side, the change has been almost equally pronounced in some parts of the forest. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the massive salvage of softwood that occurred across the Northern Forest as a result of an extensive spruce budworm outbreak was winding down, leaving behind a network of temporary skid roads and regrowing brush that made travel difficult for adventurers on foot. Today, however, uneven-aged forest management is the new trend, especially in hardwood forests, with thinning happening more frequently as stands are partially harvested on an ongoing basis. This has led to an increasing network of permanent, improved roads that give loggers regular and reliable access to these stands – and give recreationalists easy access to the deep woods.

Nowhere have these two trends come together more dramatically than on the lands of the Second College Grant, a 27,000-acre property owned by Dartmouth College in New Hampshire's Coos County, just south of the Quebec border. Together, new opportunities in recreation and forest management have led to an explosion of recreational use in the past 25 years. Where blackfly-bitten bushwhackers once crashed through saplings on old skid roads and tried to stay dry while pole-vaunting across brooks, whole families now go mountain biking together, or hiking, or skiing, or kayaking. Meanwhile, the logging trucks roll by almost year-round.

Recreational use of paper company lands has, of course, been going on in this region for generations. In Maine, for instance, paper companies and other landowners have joined with state agencies to form an organization called North Maine Woods to manage recreational access to the vast lands that for years have provided the fiber for Maine's paper mills.

And it's not that the Second College Grant is representative of trends across the entire Northern Forest. For one thing, the property has been owned by a single organization – Dartmouth...
College – for nearly two centuries. For another, the college’s pool of students, alumni, professors, and employees are a ready-made recreational clientele. But these factors are merely magnifying and accelerating the trends that are developing across the region as people fan out to find new places to hike, bike, fish, or ride an ATV in what used to be thought of as the “industrial forest.”

Which raises the question: can intensive recreation and logging coexist? The Second College Grant, where recreationalists and loggers have been rubbing shoulders for more than a century, provides a few answers.

Stumps and scholars

Depending on how you count, the Second College Grant was either the fourth or fifth grant of land made to Dartmouth College at the turn of the nineteenth century. The first (Lindall, New Hampshire) was declined by college officials, the second (the current campus in Hanover, New Hampshire) wasn’t technically a grant, the next two (Wheelock, Vermont, and Clarksville, New Hampshire) were sold off to cover the expenses of the fledgling school, and the fifth (always known as the Second) was too remote and remote to interest potential settlers.

The Swift Diamond and Dead Diamond rivers meet in the Grant before flowing into the Magalloway and Androscoggin Rivers, tying the Grant directly into the storied river-driving history of Berlin, New Hampshire. In 1888, timber harvesting began in earnest, when the legendary North Country timber baron George Van Dyke signed a contract to cut three million board feet of softwood per year for 20 years from the property, using the rivers to float the wood to market. The Brown Company in Berlin took over the cutting in the 1920s, signing a long-term deal to continue cutting the softwood on the property.

During the Second World War, the Grant’s yellow birch attracted the attention of aircraft builders, who valued the wood for airplane struts, and hardwood logging began for the first time. Since hardwood logs don’t float, rough roads were cut parallel to the two rivers, and a major bridge over the Diamond was built to link the Grant with the local highway system.

An unexpected benefit of building the bridge and roads was increased access for recreation. If log trucks could drive out, cars and jeeps could now drive in. In 1948, Dartmouth’s staff forester, Robert Monahan, wrote, “The college has available an asset never visualized when the Grant was established: a substantial area of North Country wilderness where undergraduates and alumni can live in, and learn to love, the outdoors.”

Initial improvements to attract the recreationally inclined were simple log camps that provided accommodations for the hunters, trappers, canoeists, and fishermen who made up the overwhelming majority of Grant visitors in the immediate postwar period. But overall numbers were low; the car ride to the Grant from Hanover, which even today takes three hours, was too long back in the 1950s and 60s to attract regular student traffic.

This early recreation dovetailed nicely with the ongoing logging efforts. The canoeists and fishermen were confined to the rivers, far from the upland logging and the roads that carried the wood to market. Meanwhile, everyone in northern New Hampshire, loggers included, went hunting during deer season, meaning that not much cutting overlapped with the autumn period of heaviest recreational use.

This period came to an end in the 1970s, when a spruce budworm outbreak tore through millions of acres of softwood in the Northern Forest, including the Grant. In an effort to salvage the timber – primarily balsam fir – that had been killed by the budworm and to remove living timber in advance of the pest, harvesting spiked on the property in the late 1970s and early 1980s. By the mid-1980s, amid growing concern that the annual harvest was well in excess of annual regrowth, and with growing calls from faculty and students to end the perceived stripping of the Grant’s timber, a moratorium was declared on all logging. Then the college did what colleges do best: they appointed a committee to study the issue.

Management by committee

Consisting of officials from Dartmouth’s financial, legal, administrative, and real estate offices, along with the college forester, the head of the outdoor programs office (which includes the Dartmouth Outing Club), and representatives from the faculty, student body, and alumni, the makeup of the committee suggests a bureaucratic thicket of the first order. But somehow, the Second College Grant Advisory Committee has accomplished the mathematically impossible: they maximized multiple variables at the same time.

In the two decades that the advisory committee has overseen the Grant, the amount of recreational use has increased dramatically, the annual cut has remained close to the annual regrowth, the value of the standing timber has gone up, and it’s now hard to find anyone in the college community with an unkind word to say about the management of the place.

The committee’s success suggests the first key to the management of the Grant: precedent. The property has now been managed for both logging and recreation for so long that nobody expects or demands it to be otherwise. This may seem a fine distinction, but consider other high-profile cases from across the Northern Forest in recent years in which various interests have fought for their “rights” as large tracts of property have changed hands. These arguments have pitted loggers against recreationalists, hunters against bikers, the motorized versus the non-motorized, and even skiers against hikers.

When disagreements occur among committee members – a recent debate has been whether or not to adjust annual harvest levels to time price increases in the market – they invariably occur within the framework that the Grant has been and will always be a place both to recreate and to cut trees.

The key to timber: uneven-aged management

No change in the overall management of the Grant has been more important to the peaceful co-existence of logging and recreation than the shift to uneven-aged timber management that occurred in the wake of the budworm salvage, says Kevin Evans, Dartmouth’s director of woodland operations. The essence of uneven-aged management is that timber harvests occur both regularly and partially, with the ultimate goal being to grow high-
value sawlogs in a forest that always has trees of many ages. Compare this with even-aged management, in which longer periods of time elapse between thinnings until, at some point, the entire tree canopy is removed.

Roughly 60 percent of the Grant’s forest is northern hardwoods, primarily yellow birch, beech, and maple. These trees are shade-tolerant species that don’t require large, sunny openings for regeneration. This type of forest is ideal for uneven-aged silviculture. Rarely do patch cuts exceed a few acres on the Grant, and small-group selection is the most common harvesting technique.

Only 16 percent of the Grant is in pure softwood stands (the remaining 25 percent is a mixture of hardwood and softwood). If the forest consisted primarily of softwood species, uneven-aged management would be difficult to pull off because maturing softwood stands are susceptible to wind throw following partial harvests. Dartmouth continues to use even-aged management techniques in the larger softwood stands, but these stands are widely scattered across the property and tend to be found in places that don’t see much recreational traffic.

Evans oversees a forest management plan that calls for each

Cross-country skiing above a log landing
stand of timber to be visited by loggers once every 15 to 20 years. "This year, for the first time, we'll be cutting mature timber on a stand that was thinned back in 1986." Evans, a graduate of the forestry program at the University of New Hampshire, has been managing the Grant's timber program since 1993. His monthly check-in trips to Hanover require a necktie, but most of his time is spent in rougher clothes, marking the timber and overseeing the logging contractors on the property.

Evans says that in 1986, at the start of the uneven-aged regime, the Grant's timber inventory was 16 million board feet of sawlogs and 330,000 cords of pulpwood. In 1999, during the last complete tally, the inventory of sawlogs had risen to 40 million board feet while the pulp had been reduced to 275,000 cords. For the past 30 years, the College has cut between 7,000 and 9,000 cords annually, which Evans feels is close to but below the total annual regrowth on the property.

Besides improving the long-term value of the timber, uneven-aged management has had several direct effects on recreation. In 1986, total road mileage was about 18 miles. Today, more than 60 miles of improved road are maintained annually, primarily through mowing. These are exactly the places where people love to walk, ski, or bike. Says Evans, "roads provide a great family experience – people can walk side by side as they go."

The second benefit of the grassy roads is that they have greatly increased the diversity of wildlife in many parts of the property. As part of its management, Dartmouth has worked over the years with New Hampshire Fish & Game and The Nature Conservancy on key wildlife issues. "The Grant, like much of the Northern Forest, is lacking in open land and grassland," says Evans. "Seeding the landings and winter roads to grass has helped improve that." Wildlife, after all, is one of the chief reasons why people are attracted to the Grant in the first place.

A final benefit of uneven-aged management for recreation is purely aesthetic: to many people's eyes, a forest full of trees of many ages just looks better than one full of only same-aged trees. There is also continuity of forest cover over time. For people who view forests primarily as cathedrals, uneven-aged cutting can be rationalized as maintenance. Even-aged management, on the other hand, with its heavy cuts in the later stages, can look a lot more like demolition.

The key to recreation: education

Back on Dartmouth's campus, Kathy Decato oversees rentals of the Grant's 11 cabins from her office looking over the College green. "We're full every weekend, just about all year. August, we're full every night of the week. Bird season, too. Deer season hasn't changed at all – people still line up at 5 a.m. when the rental season opens," she said. The newspaper and a cup of coffee, waiting to see which cabins are available to rent."

And just how do these users feel about the logging on the property? "The important thing is managing expectations," says Decato. "Everyone who goes to the Grant knows in advance that logging is always going on. Kevin has a map that says where logging is happening, and I can show that to people before they go up. People even ask to see the map before they rent the cabins so they can decide where they want to be. This helps avoid conflicts."

Logging continues year-round, except during spring and fall mud seasons. "We try to keep a crew working 40 to 44 weeks per year," says Evans. "We shut down from mid-March to mid-May and then again in October and November." Though several areas of the Grant have been set aside from logging because of their unusual plant communities or natural features, none have been set aside solely for wilderness or recreation. Logging comes first, with recreational access modified as needed.

Bernie Waugh, a Dartmouth alumnus from the early 1970s and frequent Grant visitor, sums it up this way: "My personal view is that, because logging has always been part of the Grant, it doesn't bother me. In fact, it's now part of the fun of exploration – to see what's been happening since I was last there."

Waugh, who grew up in Colorado, where recreation and logging were, by and large, segregated into distinct areas of public lands, says, "The logging doesn't seem to interfere with the particular type of wilderness you find in the Grant." It's the lack of people in the Grant, not the lack of undisturbed forest, that creates the sense of wilderness for Waugh, who, as a hiker, runner, and bushwhacker, has visited almost every nook and cranny of the Grant at one time or another.

Says Evans, "We do try to keep a large section of the property gated at any one time so that people can go there on foot and know they won't come across a log truck or motorized vehicle." That section may shift around from year to year as logging progresses, but with the logging plan well publicized, users can plan in advance. That brings up a major source of potential conflict in recreation these days: motorized access. By and large, the Grant Advisory Committee has severely restricted motorized use on the property, both for safety and aesthetics. ATVs and dirt bikes are prohibited, and snowmobiles are limited to unplowed roads only. The topography of the Grant is roughly hilly-like, and on the 27,000 acres, there are only three major access points. With gates across all three of these approaches, enforcement is easier than it might be on other, similarly sized properties.

Which isn't to say that conflicts don't develop, says Evans. "With a winter like this past one [with a shallow, hard snowpack providing easy access], there were snowmobiles everywhere. It's a hard issue to patrol. But most of your snowmobile users these days want groomed trails, and we don't groom."

The key to compliance: access control

Underpinning Dartmouth's success in managing the Grant for both recreation and forestry is that access to the property is strictly controlled. Though anyone is welcome to enter the property on foot at any time, and many members of the general public do indeed walk or bike in during the warmer months, motorized access by vehicle is through prior arrangement only. The gates are locked and require a key that must be picked up in Hanover.}

Earl Hette, a retired forester and former director of outdoor programs at Dartmouth, the department that oversees both recreation on the Grant and the activities of the Dartmouth Outing Club, says, "An important part of the Grant's success is that it's a closed community. Everyone understands that it's a
privilege to be there. People pay attention to the information they get, and that's why it all works.”

Though many students and alumni do find time to visit the Grant, it’s the college’s administrators and staff who make up the majority of the users, along with their guests. “There are also day-use keys available for residents of the local communities around the Grant,” says Kevin Evans, though he concedes that they aren't often used. “Most locals view the Grant as a locked place where only a privileged few get to go.”

In the larger picture, however, it isn’t the fact that the users are privileged that is making the difference. It’s that they are relatively few. Overnight stays in the Grant are restricted to one of the 11 cabins, with camping not permitted except by special permission. All users must sign up in advance, which sometimes makes it difficult even for people with college connections to find a bed on the weekend. But by limiting the number of users of the property, the Advisory Committee is also limiting the potential for conflicts between recreationalists and loggers.

A look to the future

The simple lesson of the Second College Grant is that it can be done — intensive recreation and forest management can indeed coexist on the same property at the same time. But the larger lesson is more subtle and goes beyond the details of how recreation and logging coexist. “I think recreationalists and loggers could work more closely together in today's world, especially if they come to understand they have a common enemy,” says Jette.

That common enemy is forest fragmentation. With former industrial forestlands being sold and re-sold into ever-smaller parcels, and with prime waterfront being developed for second homes, recreationalists and loggers need to be allies because they both need the same thing: an intact forest.

“It sure would be interesting if more people started thinking that way,” says Jette, whose training as a forester and career as a recreation manager put him in a good position to make such observations. “I’m not sure how much they do yet. But they should. It just makes a lot of sense.”

If you were to assemble a demographic of people likely to find logging offensive, say a group of people raised primarily in urban and suburban settings who have moved around often and don’t have much direct connection to any specific piece of land, you could scarcely do better than the collected students, alumni, faculty, and staff of Dartmouth College. Most of these people aren’t dyed in the wool — they rarely wear wool at all. But if you want to find a place where this demographic not only tolerates active forest management but also takes a certain measure of pride in it, where these people deliberately choose to recreate in a forest that they know is being logged, you couldn’t find a better spot than the Second College Grant.

Chuck Wooster is the associate editor of Northern Woodlands magazine.

---

There are lots of reasons to visit our new store.
The best, year around!

Barbour
patagonia
TIMEX
ASOL

ORVIS
Swiss Army
Ex Officio

171/2 Lebanon Street, Hanover, NH  603-643-1263 hanoveroutdoors.com

NO SALES TAX — WE PAY REGULAR SHIPPING ANYWHERE IN THE U.S.