

Burt's Maine Preserve: A state park with all the benefits

The debate over land owned by the Quimby family reignited this week. So I have to ask: Why are people opposed to a park in the Maine woods? Not a national park — there are reasonable arguments against federal control of large swaths of our state. Many of those arguments were put forward by none other than Gov. Percival Baxter. Instead, I'm asking: Why not support a state park?

We've heard many arguments for a national park from proponents, such as its significant, positive effect on the Piscataquis

County economy. The study they commissioned appeared to bolster that finding. In other areas of the country, the mere presence of a national park purportedly leads to a significant increase in available



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jobs. Who doesn't support more jobs in rural Maine?

But, as others have already pointed out, the comparisons don't quite match up; Columbia, South Carolina, is more than a touch different than Millinocket, Maine. Furthermore, the study has another significant flaw — it doesn't control for a minor variable called "Baxter." Most likely, they had no way to control for it; Baxter has few analogues. Western states have had significant federal land holdings since their inception while other states are riddled with national forests, military installations or other Washington-controlled areas.

Maine is unique, with over 94 percent of our land in private ownership and little federal intrusion. This is why landowner relationships are so crucial to our enjoyment of the outdoors — those relationships are an important part of Maine culture and one of the facets that reinforce connections within our communities. But even if the economists found an example with a massive state park co-located with a smaller national park, it would likely remain an imperfect comparison. Our 200,000-acre variable contains the major natural features of the area — the new park wouldn't have them.

If it doesn't have unique natural features, what will the draw be? Some have proffered accessibility and infrastructure will set it apart, contrasted with the "forever wild" constraint on Baxter. That would certainly be different — Baxter has been clear its founding vision will be enforced. You won't see Acadia-style carriage trails anytime soon. But there are no constraints on a new state park. Elliottsville Plantation could easily incorporate infrastructure into its land grant, especially since the company claims its endowment will be enough to manage the land in perpetuity.

Could the proponents be afraid of the political vagaries of state government? That is not unreasonable — welcome to the conservative cause! We're generally concerned about vagaries at all levels of government, but I digress. Baxter has shown a governance structure that insulates a generous donation while maintaining state control. Chandler Woodcock, Doug Denico and Janet Mills share the job today in their official roles (commissioner of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, state forester and attorney general), yet exercise independent judgment. Mainers remain in charge while the gift remains protected from the Legislature.

What about the "advertising" value of a national park? Is there a certain "je ne sais quoi" provided by federal control of land? That is hard to say. Would there be fewer visitors to the Grand Canyon or Gettysburg if the states ran them? Bar Harbor was popular before the advent of the National Park Service. If the Rockefeller family and other benefactors had

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GEORGE DANBY

A refugee's story

Syrian man came to Maine to escape war

BY MATTHEW STONE
BDN STAFF

More than half the nation's governors this week said they wouldn't accept Syrian refugees for resettlement after last week's terrorist attacks in Paris. They're powerless to stop the resettlement of refugees within their states, but they're effectively saying no to people such as Fares, a Syrian who escaped war and now lives in Maine.

'A family of refugees'

Fares and his family are no strangers to seeking safety from war.

His grandparents ended up in Syria more than 100 years ago as they sought refuge from the Balkan Wars that were roiling the then-Ottoman Empire.

In 2006, Fares was living in Beirut, Lebanon, after finishing college when war broke out there involving Israel, Lebanon

and the terrorist group Hezbollah. He left and returned to his family's home in Damascus, Syria's capital.

In 2013, Fares and his then-pregnant wife left Damascus as the Syrian civil war escalated and life became more dangerous. Today, Fares, his wife and their 2½-year-old son live in the Portland area. His mother and sister have left Syria, too.

"We are a family of refugees," Fares said this week. (Fares still has family members in Syria, so his name has been changed out of concern for their safety.)

Nearly 4.3 million people from Syria have left their country and registered as refugees with the United Nations, and the U.N. estimates nearly 11 million people inside Syria need humanitarian assistance. Of the 85,000 refugees the United States plans to admit from throughout the world over the next year, President Barack Obama's administration says it will take in at least 10,000 from Syria.

Fares, 35, is part of another group — the more than 50,000 Syrians who have sought asylum in 90 countries since the start of the Syrian civil war. But he's familiar with what refugees go through as they seek help through the U.N., apply for resettlement, then establish a new life away from home.

"It's not easy to be uprooted," he said.

A miserable situation

Fares has gone from helping refugees start the resettlement process to resettling himself.

From 2009-13, he worked for the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees' Damascus operation, where more than 300,000 Iraqis registered as refugees and started the resettlement process.

As civil war took root in 2011 in Syria, well before ISIS as we know it infiltrated much of the country, work and everyday

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How refugees make their way to Maine

BY MATTHEW STONE
BDN STAFF

Refugees from Syria have dominated the news this week following terrorist attacks in Paris and declarations by more than half the nation's governors that they won't allow Syrian refugees to settle in their states (even though they have no power to stop resettlement).

Hundreds of refugees have made their way to Maine in recent years from 15 countries, most commonly from Iraq and Somalia. Between Oct. 1, 2011, and Sept. 30, 2014, 941 refugees settled in Maine, according to the Office of Refugee Resettlement. Here's how they got here.

In pursuit of protection

Asylum seekers and refugees are both pursuing protected status in a new country. The difference? Asylum seekers have already landed in their destination country before they pursue protection. Refugees start their pursuit for protected status from



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Burundian refugees Audrey Iradukunda, 20, (left) and Chanelle Irakoze, 19, talk with friends in Portland on June 20. Both hope to be doctors. Iradukunda just graduated from Portland High School and Irakoze is working three summer jobs after finishing her first year of college.

abroad, where they register as refugees, most commonly with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees.

After registration, the agency

refers refugees to their receiving countries, often based on refugees' requests. Since 2013, that agency has referred more than 22,000 Syrian refugees to the U.S.

Applications and screening

Once it receives referrals, the U.S. relies on nine voluntary national agencies to help refugees prepare their resettlement applications. The International Organization for Migration often collects applicants' fingerprints, performing much of the groundwork for the U.S. government in advance of the security check.

The security check involves multiple government agencies: the State Department, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services within the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Defense and the National Counterterrorism Center.

"They're checking so many different databases," said Beth Stickney, a Maine lawyer who founded the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project and has recently worked with refugees who landed in Italy. "They're checking every conceivable database they can check."

This check can be complicated, especially since refugees commonly don't know their precise

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