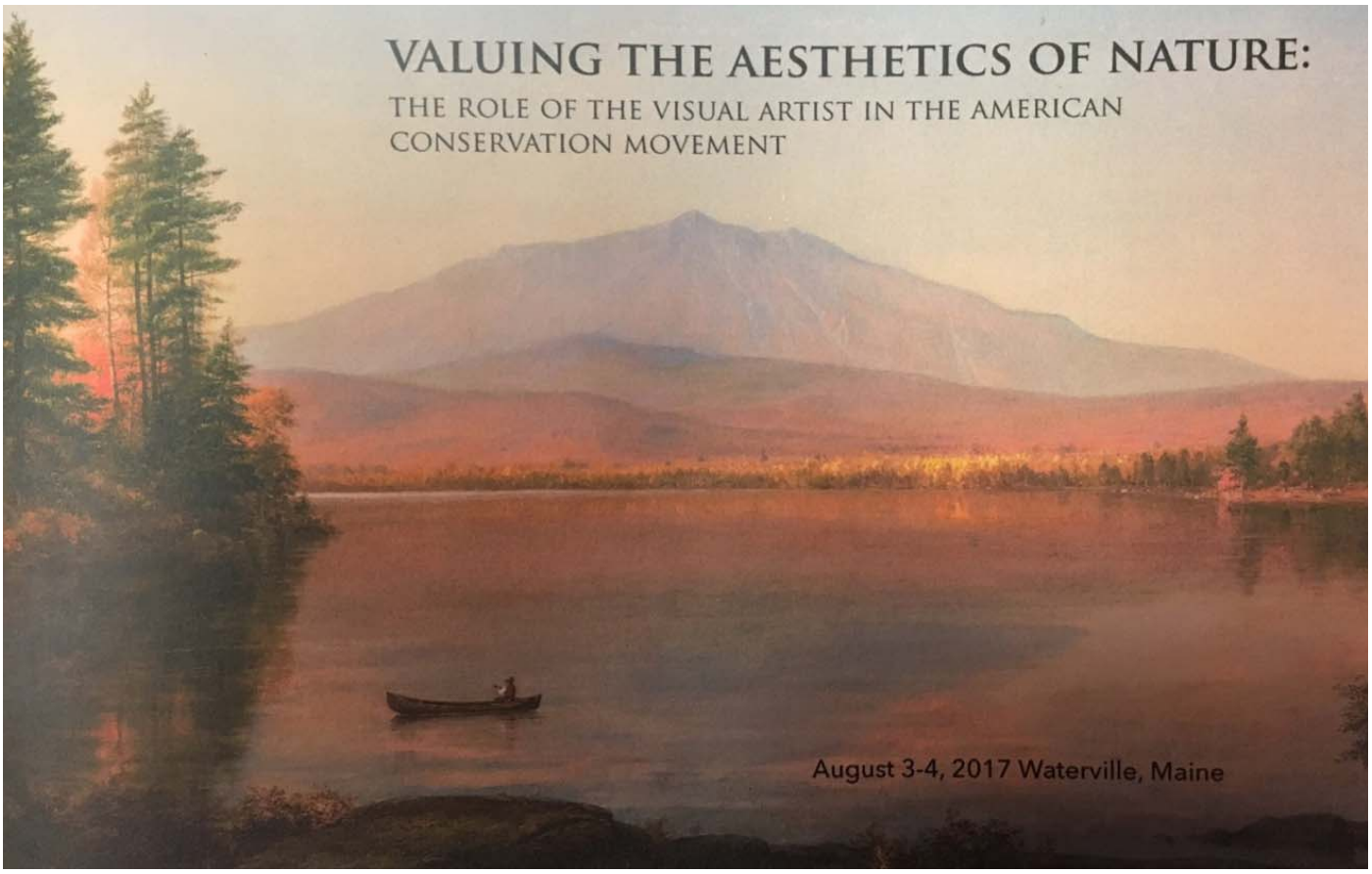


## WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

*By William L. Plouffe*

Good morning everyone and welcome to "Valuing the Aesthetics of Nature: The Role of the Visual Artist in the American Conservation Movement." I am Bill Plouffe, President of the Maine Appalachian Trail Land Trust and Of Counsel at the Portland Maine law firm of Drummond Woodsum, where I practiced law for 30 years. Probably of more interest to you, I am what you might call the "*instigator*" of this symposium.

I want to begin by thanking our sponsors: the National Park Service, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the Maine Arts Commission,

Drummond Woodsum, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy and the Appalachian Mountain Club. Thanks also to the sponsors of tonight's reception, Gritty McDuffs and Cellardoor Winery. On a personal level, I want to acknowledge my fellow planning committee members, Tony Barrett and Sherri Langlais, and give a special thanks to Charlie Tracy of the National Park Service and Sarah Peskin, National Park Service retired, without whom this symposium would not have happened. I should also thank the Portland Museum of Art for allowing the use of this image of Frederic Church's painting, *Mount Katahdin from Millinocket Camp.* Painted in 1895, it is believed to be Church's last studio work. Those of you who have signed up for the Katahdin Lake trip on Saturday and Sunday will visit Church's camp on Millinocket Lake.

That brings me to the Agenda for our Symposium. You all received the Symposium brochure when you checked in. It contains the Agenda, abbreviated biographies of our speakers and a map of the Colby campus. It also features one piece from each of the contemporary artists who are with us for the Symposium. Thank you to Cynthia Orcutt for the beautiful design and layout of the brochure.

Now, as the *instigator*, I want to tell you about the background for the symposium idea.

Since at least the 1970's, federal and state laws governing the siting of major projects such as wind farms and gas and electric lines require permitting agencies to evaluate the impacts on scenic resources in addition to impacts on wetlands, water quality and other environmental resources. Maine's statutory language is typical in requiring that the development "will not unreasonably interfere with existing scenic and aesthetic uses." Scenic resource protection is supposed to have standing on a par with other environmental standards. However, in my 30 years of law practice I have seen that

applying these scenery related regulations is often the most difficult of all the permitting criteria and the subject of the most public most controversy.

Why is this? Let's take the example of wetlands. Their values have been scientifically established – they purify water, provide wildlife habitat and so forth. The development's impact can be measured by the area of wetland to be filled. It is an objective analysis. But, deciding what is an unreasonable adverse effect on a beautiful view is hard. I hear from developers, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" and from their lawyers that the aesthetics of nature are ultimately subjective, not susceptible to quantitative analysis and, therefore, cannot be legitimately regulated. I also hear the question being asked not just by developers but also by some in the environmental community: "So what is the value to the environment of scenic beauty?"

It is not just regulators who struggle with the scenic protection standard. Legislators must deal with these issues when writing laws and that brings me to a personal experience that, in part, was the genesis of the idea for this symposium. A few years ago, I testified before a committee of the Maine Legislature in support of a bill to enhance the Maine DEP's authority to assess the visual impacts of proposed wind farms that would be visible from the Appalachian Trail and Acadia National Park. A legislator – apparently not friendly toward the bill – asked me (and I paraphrase): "So what are these scenic values that you are trying to protect and why should I care?" I responded that if he had an afternoon we could discuss the psychology, philosophy, theology, art theory and other disciplines that touch upon the values

imbedded in the aesthetics of nature. I don't think that he was impressed with my answer.

I knew that his question was really a statement of his opinion that the aesthetic values of nature are superfluous, ephemeral, incapable of definition and, therefore, should have minimal or no value in the calculus inherent in land use decisions – decisions which inevitably have economic implications. There was also a hint in his voice that those who care about these values are elitist. I believed that this opinion – which I had heard from others over the years - was fundamentally wrong. After all, I had stood in awe before the domes of Yosemite and been mesmerized by the fields of wildflowers below Mount Rainier. My friends had told me that these are places they go for spiritual renewal or where they feel closest to God or where they can make sense of life's challenges. I had heard from many Appalachian Trail thru-hikers, "It changed my life." My legislator friend was missing something but how do I define it and convince him to value it as I did? I could put labels on the emotions evoked by scenic beauty but he obviously wanted more.

After wrestling with this question in my own mind for some time, it occurred to me that I should "ask" the artist. Why? Because the philosophy, theology, psychology and all the rest comes together through the brush of the painter and lens of the photographer.

Although I was not a student of art history or art theory I was generally aware of the role that visual artists played in the creation and development of America's National Parks. Perhaps by examining the work of these artists which had led to what author and historian Wallace Stegner called "America's best idea," it would help me answer the question posed by my legislator friend.

Through reading, research and visiting many museums to view the works of Cole, Church, Bierstadt and others I came to understand that the American landscape artists and photographers of the 19th century were "about" much more than presenting the public with "pretty pictures." They did not just paint what they saw. They were interpreters of, commentators upon and advocates for what is beautiful in nature. These artists sought to express the presence of God in nature; the relationship of humankind and nature; the despoliation of nature through commercialization. They warned of the threats to the human psyche posed by industrialization and urbanization. Their works also touched upon themes of patriotism and "manifest destiny" and they wrestled with the profound issues of the time.

The American public – at least the educated and well-to-do of eastern cities - was much "taken" by the works of these artists. Thousands of people paid admission to view the latest works of Church and others at New York's National Academy of Design, the epi-center of American art in the mid 1800's. Early photographers of the West, such as Carleton Watkins, and early painters of Yosemite and Yellowstone such as Bierstadt and Moran, captured the American imagination by taking them to spectacular places they had never seen and, for most, would never see.

Importantly, the works of visual artists greatly influenced national decision makers.

* It can be said that had not Thomas Cole and Frederic Church's paintings of Mount Desert Island been viewed by "people of influence" in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia there would be no Acadia National Park today. John Wilmerding will tell you more about Church later this morning.

* Did you know that Watkin's Yosemite photographs were critically important to Abraham Lincoln's signing the 1864 legislation (think of it -

in the midst of the Civil War) that preserved the Yosemite Valley for the use and enjoyment of the public? This was the beginning, if you will, of the national park "idea" not just at the national level but at the world level. This morning, you will hear more about Watkins from Tyler Green.

* Did you know that Fredric Law Olmsted, the designer of Central Park as a place of respite from urbanization also wrote the first "master plan" for the management of Yosemite? The plan was so conservation oriented that it was shelved by the California politicians who oversaw Yosemite Valley at the time. You will hear more about Olmsted tomorrow from David Schuyler.

* We all know that Theodore Roosevelt is one of the giants of the American conservation movement. But did you know that Roosevelt's boyhood home was only a few blocks from the National Academy of Design or that Roosevelt was one of the early members of the National Arts Club or that Roosevelt was friends with Albert Bierstadt and recruited him to be a member of the Boone and Crockett Society which was so influential in the early days of the American conservation movement?

* Did you know that Sara Delano Roosevelt, FDR's mother and a dominant force throughout his life, studied landscape painting under Frederic Church?

Although the popularity of Cole, Church, Bierstadt and others of the Hudson River School waned by the turn of the century, the visual artists' advocacy for conservation of beautiful places did not. Here is just one example. In his book "Rightful Heritage," historian Douglas Brinkley relates how during a luncheon in January 1939, Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes showed FDR Ansel Adams' book of photography entitled, *Sierra Nevada: The John Muir Trail*. Brinkley reports that FDR was "mesmerized" by the photos of Kings Canyon in

California and that FDR insisted on keeping the book. In March 1940, just over a year later, FDR signed legislation makng Kings Canyon a National Park, thus ending a battle over National Park status for Kings Canyon that had gone on for almost 60 years. You will hear more on Ansel Adams from Ron Tipton tomorrow morning.

I contend that because of the audiences they reached and the resonance of their "message" – perhaps because of the medium of expression - the role of visual artists in the creation of the National Parks and, more broadly, in development of the American conservation movement was as important as if not more important than the writings of early conservationists such as Emerson, Thoreau and Muir. I further contend that the aesthetics of nature as expressed by the visual artists of the 19th and 20th centuries as well as by contemporary artists need to be acknowledged and valued. I am calling for a reawakening of appreciation for the values inherent in the aesthetics of nature.

So, what about this symposium? It obvious from the Agenda that it is more than an art history lecture. You may have looked at the eclectic group of presenters and asked yourselves: What do art historians, landscape architects, practicing artists, a law professor, a Marine Corps combat veteran, a clinical psychologist, a scientist from the Argonne National Laboratories and senior National Park Service personnel have in common? Answer – they all have something important to say about the questions that are at the heart of this symposium:

- Is there intrinsic beauty in the natural landscape?
- What is it about a natural landscape that evokes aesthetic pleasure in many of us?
- Can scenic quality be reduced to a formula of lines, forms and color or does it necessarily include a spiritual dimension and is therefore not susceptible to complete definition?

- What are the values inherent in the aesthetics of nature and are they essential to human wellness?
- What weight should be given to scenic values in making land use decisions which invariably have economic implications?
- What should be the role of the visual artist in the contemporary American conservation movement?

I do not expect that at the end of this symposium we will have definitive answers to these questions. I do hope, however, that what we learn from the visual artists – past and present - will enrich the conversation around these questions.

The world has changed much since the time of the Hudson River School artists but the concerns they expressed about the impacts to the human spirit of industrialization, urbanization, commercialization and, to that I would add today's "digitalization", are still with us.

Now, back to the dialogue with my legislator friend: I wish I had remembered a quote from John Muir that you will find at the entrance to the visitors center at Acadia National Park:

> Everyone needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in . . . where nature may heal and cheer and give strength to the body and soul.

I doubt that this would have satisfied the legislator but, for me, it is the truth.