October 1999

# The Natural

Jeff Clark

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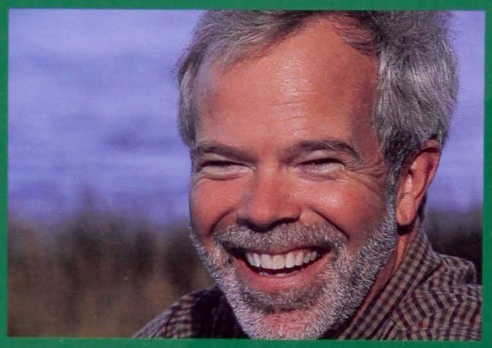
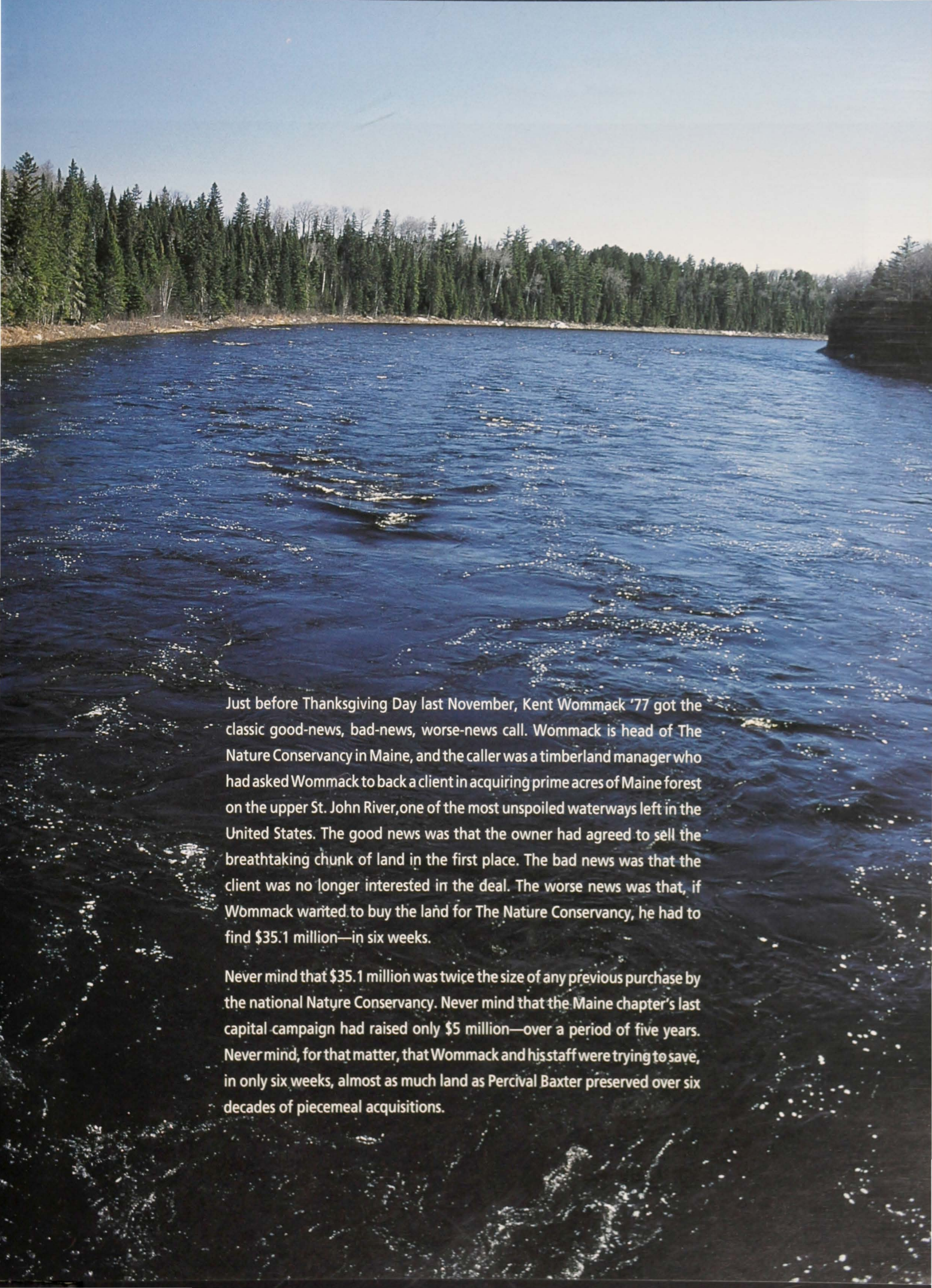


By keeping a river as it is

Kent Wommack has changed

conservation in America

By Jeff Clark



Just before Thanksgiving Day last November, Kent Wommack '77 got the classic good-news, bad-news, worse-news call. Wommack is head of The Nature Conservancy in Maine, and the caller was a timberland manager who had asked Wommack to back a client in acquiring prime acres of Maine forest on the upper St. John River, one of the most unspoiled waterways left in the United States. The good news was that the owner had agreed to sell the breathtaking chunk of land in the first place. The bad news was that the client was no longer interested in the deal. The worse news was that, if Wommack wanted to buy the land for The Nature Conservancy, he had to find $35.1 million—in six weeks.

Never mind that $35.1 million was twice the size of any previous purchase by the national Nature Conservancy. Never mind that the Maine chapter's last capital campaign had raised only $5 million—over a period of five years. Never mind, for that matter, that Wommack and his staff were trying to save, in only six weeks, almost as much land as Percival Baxter preserved over six decades of piecemeal acquisitions.

Among U.S. rivers, the St. John holds a special mystique. Above the village of Allagash it has the longest stretch of wild and natural waterway (130 miles) east of the Mississippi. The river gained national attention in the 1970s when construction of a dam—the Dickey-Lincoln project—threatened to make a lake of a substantial section of the free-flowing river. More recently, sales of timber company lands for recreational lots in the North Woods threatened to break up the heretofore undeveloped riverbanks. Led by Kent Wommack '77, The Nature Conservancy spent $35.1 million to preserve 40 miles of the upper St. John River and is interested in protecting more of the unspoiled land between its current holding and the first settlement, at Allagash.

Incredibly, Wommack did it. And in swinging the biggest single conservation land acquisition in Maine since Baxter created his namesake park, Wommack changed Maine, The Nature Conservancy, the nature of land preservation and himself. He raised the bar on what was thinkable and changed the scale of conservation—not just in Maine but in the nation.

And, he says, this is only the beginning. There are still another 90 miles of undeveloped land along the upper St. John to protect, as well as other watersheds in Maine. He doesn't expect to do it all himself—there are other groups and other methods besides outright purchase. Indeed, only 10 weeks after the Conservancy announced its acquisition, timberland owner Pingree Associates sold the development rights to more than 754,000 acres of its North Woods holdings to the New England Forestry Foundation of Groton, Conn., for $28 million. Significantly, some of the acreage abuts the Conservancy's land on the St. John.

"I don't think there's another place in Maine that equals the St. John," Wommack mused. "It's not just any river; it is a nationally significant resource, the longest, largest, most remote wilderness river left east of the Mississippi. It's clear that The Nature Conservancy and those of us closely associated with it are never going to be the same after this. Once we finish this project there's no going back to the way we used to work and the scale we used to work at."

From its headwaters at Baker Lake to its junction with the Allagash a few miles west of Fort Kent, the upper St. John is arguably the wildest, most unspoiled river in the Northeast. For some 130 miles the river runs unfettered between rocky banks and towering stands of spruce. Unlike the more popular Allagash River to the east, the St. John doesn't attract thousands of day-trippers and overnight trekkers because it lacks the lakes that guarantee summer-long high water. The easy canoeing season lasts from ice-out in late April or early May to early or mid-June.

"If you go in right after the ice-out and ride the high water, you'd better know what you're doing," Wommack warned, "and if you wait until after Memorial Day you'd better have a high tolerance for blackflies." Eighty percent of the scant traffic on the river happens within a week of Memorial Day. After that, the St. John is reserved for the purists who are willing to trade low water for outstanding fishing, a noticeable lack of motorized boats, and glorious isolation.

Kent Wommack has had his eye on the St. John River since 1981, when he was a summer intern in the Maine office of The Nature Conservancy. A native of Cincinnati, Ohio, Wommack, now 44, had discovered Maine when he attended Colby College. "In high school, I was looking for a small liberal-arts college in New England," he explained. "I had never been to Maine before, but I happened to visit Colby on a bright sunny day. In the end, it was the only school I applied to."

He majored in government and joined the Woodsman's Team, "a bizarre little group of people who competed in contests of sawing logs and throwing axes at targets," he recalled with a grin. That exposure to the woods was enough to send Wommack on to graduate school at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and two summers intern-

## the growth of environmental studies

When Kent Wommack '77 combined a Colby degree in government with a master's degree from the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, he anticipated the type of interdisciplinary grounding that Colby now offers in its environmental studies programs.

In the 1980s and early '90s, "We were a real oddity" among undergraduate programs, said David Firmage, Clara C. Piper Professor of Environmental Studies and chair of Colby's interdisciplinary studies division. "We were the environmental *science* program." Where other colleges tended to have less sharply focused environmental studies majors, Colby offered biology, geology and chemistry majors an environmental science concentration. An environmental studies minor was added in 1990, and when a major was added in 1995 it was in environmental *policy*, drawing heavily on social sciences, especially government and economics. "Students need tools rather than simply an appreciation for the types of problems we face and a desire to contribute," Firmage said.

The policy angle is appealing to prospective students because it is an unusual major and because students are attracted to the notion that, through policy, "I can change things; I can make a difference," Firmage said. The capstone Problems in Environmental Science course, a group research project for seniors, has been held up as a national example of the value of real research in the undergraduate learning process.

"Another part of it is our location," Firmage said. "Colby's place provides us with a student body that's really interested in the outdoors and the environment. We're lucky to be where we are."

Last year more than five percent of Colby's undergraduates had a major, minor or concentration in one of the environmental programs. There were 36 environmental policy majors and 16 environmental studies minors whose majors ran the gamut from anthropology to French studies to natural sciences. In addition, 42 science majors carried a concentration in environmental science.

ing at the Maine Nature Conservancy's offices, then in Topsham. (It is now in Brunswick.)

He hasn't strayed far from Maine—or The Nature Conservancy—since. Wommack joined the Conservancy full time in 1983 after graduating from Yale. He canoed the upper St. John in 1984, just a week before he married Yale classmate Gro Flatebo. (The couple now has three children: two boys, 7 and 9, and a daughter, 12, all of whom have been taught to paddle in the canoe Kent and Gro received as a wedding present.) In 1991 he became executive director.

And in all that time, the St. John was never far from his mind, although perhaps not in the context and on the scale that later developed.

From its founding in 1951 in Washington, D.C., as an outgrowth of the old Ecologists Union, The Nature Conservancy has always prided itself on being a science-based conservation organization. It was in business to save unspoiled parcels of land and the environment's biodiversity, its broad range of plant and animal life, but the emphasis was always on quality rather than quantity. "Historically we've tended to be drawn to relatively small sites," Wommack said. "That's partly because that's where the science was—we could know for sure something was rare. The Conservancy focuses on biodiversity protection, and historically that has meant particular sites or habitats with particularly rare plants or animals."

Until recently, the Maine chapter's acquisitions—always from willing sellers—tended to be along the lines of 15 acres here and 200 there. The Big Reed Forest Preserve in Aroostook County, at 4,800 acres, was the chapter's largest holding among its 22,000 acres of preserves in the state. "It was in that context when I started here that the St. John River was Number One on my priority list," Wommack said. "But even then it was primarily because of the Furbish lousewort and a number of other rare plants along the upper part of the river."

Then, several years ago, the national Nature Conservancy undertook a serious internal evaluation. For decades, the strategy of saving bits and pieces of wilderness had never been questioned, but now a special Conservation Committee was asking whether the tactics were really effective.

"We were winning a lot of good battles, but we were not winning the war working at the scale we had been," Wommack explained. The Conservancy decided to adopt a large-scale strategy—"buy wholesale instead of retail," as Wommack puts it—and take a regional approach to conservation that followed biological and ecological boundaries rather than political ones.

Wommack served as national chair of the Conservation Committee. "It gave me the opportunity to think about how we could implement this kind of vision," he said. "I began to look at what we had done in Maine. When you look at a map of Maine, for instance, the work of The Nature Conservancy barely shows up."

More to the point, Wommack questions whether creating tiny islands of biodiversity amid the huge stream of development makes sense. "If one of our preserves ends up surrounded by K-Marts, it probably won't be viable in the long run," he pointed out, "and it's not going to serve the biodiversity goals that we have."

In the spring of 1998 Wommack approached his board of directors with a proposal. Wagner Woodlands, a highly reputable timber management firm that had worked previously with the Vermont Nature Conservancy, had a client interested in bidding on 185,000 acres of International Paper (IP) forestland in northwestern Maine. The tracts included 40 miles of the upper St. John River. Essentially, the investor was willing to trade the river frontage for the Maine Conservancy's support in the expected bidding war for the land.

The board agreed, and over the summer Wommack worked with Wagner in evaluating the land and putting together a proposal that ultimately came in third when IP opened the bids a year ago. "We were about 15 percent below the top bid," Wommack said.

Over the next two months, however, both the winning bidder and the runner-up dropped out. In November, IP notified Wagner that the $35.1-million offer it had brokered was acceptable if they could close the deal by the end of the year. But Wagner's client had by then moved on to other properties. That was when Wommack got his good-news, bad-news call.

"Our first reaction was, 'Right, how can we possibly do that?'" Wommack remembered. "Then it just occurred to me, how can we possibly *not* do this?"

The issue of woodland preservation was high on everybody's radar screen by the end of last year. Starting in the summer of 1998, an unprecedented series of massive forestland sales was announced among the major timber companies. Eventually, almost 15 percent of Maine changed hands—more than 2.5-million acres. Priceless water frontage and mountains were bought and sold throughout the North Woods while state government and conservationists watched, helpless for lack of money.

That was the atmosphere in which Wommack met with his executive committee and won their enthusiastic approval to try to pull off the biggest deal in The Nature Conservancy's history. Then he flew down to Washington, D.C., and met with John Sawhill, the national president, and his staff.

"I said that I recognized that this is not a project that we've been talking about for the past year," he said. "I recognized that at $35.1 million this would be the largest financial commitment ever undertaken by The Nature Conservancy anywhere in the world, by a factor of two—and we needed the money in six weeks. But if I can raise $10 million in the next six weeks in pledges for this acquisition, I asked, will you loan us the money? Much to their credit, they said yes."

To hear Sawhill tell it, the answer was not only yes, but hell, yes. "We were very excited about protecting that much habitat in such a vitally important region all at once," he recalled. Nor was Sawhill buying a pig in a poke when Wommack made his pitch. The Nature Conservancy had already identified the St. John River as a prime candidate for conservation. "The fact that

## an award and a quest

On July 21, Kent Wommack '77, executive director of The Nature Conservancy's Maine chapter, received the *Down East* magazine 1999 Environmental Award from Dale Kuhnert '68, editor of *Down East*, and Governor Angus King H '99. Kuhnert compared Wommack's bold initiative to save the upper St. John River with the late Governor Percival Baxter's efforts to preserve Mt. Katahdin and what is now Baxter State Park. Governor King, in his remarks, praised Wommack's vision and placed him in the pantheon of Maine environmentalists alongside Baxter and the conservationists who created the Allagash Wilderness Waterway in the 1960s.

"There's a fine line between 'vision' and 'catastrophe,'" a smiling Wommack said at the ceremony. He earned the "visionary" label, in part, because his gamble paid off. Twenty-four million of the necessary $35 million for the St. John project was raised in the first nine months of the campaign. Though the general solicitation from Conservancy members hadn't begun, "we have a couple of hundred unsolicited gifts from members *and* non-members," Wommack said.

That early success shows the enormous popular appeal of the initiative, but challenges still ahead highlight the way Wommack's vision has raised the stakes in the land conservation game. The Conservancy must raise another $11 million for the St. John parcel—more than twice what the chapter's last five-year campaign raised—*plus* additional capital to carry on with plans for other important conservation initiatives in Maine—Cobscook Bay, Mt. Agamenticus, Merrymeeting Bay, Mt. Abraham, the Saco River, the Camden Hills and offshore islands among them. "We're in completely uncharted territory for conservation groups," Wommack said. "There's no formula to follow."

we could accomplish that much that quickly was very appealing," the president of the national organization added.

Still, there was that little matter of $10 million in pledges that Wommack had promised. "Keep in mind that during our last capital campaign, over a period of five years, we raised $5 million," he explains. "So I was promising to raise twice that much money in six weeks. To make a long story short, by the time we closed on December 30 we had just over $10 million pledged in hand."

Some $3 million came from the Rockefeller family—Richard and his father, David Sr., and other family members. Bert's Bees, a North Carolina honey and beeswax company that got its start in Maine, promised another $2 million through the North Woods Wilderness trust in Rockwood. Other leadership pledges came from Leon and Lisa Gorman, of L.L. Bean; Maine Conservancy board chairman Joe Wishcamper and his wife, Carol; Sherry and David Huber and the Huber family; and the Sweetwater Trust, a Massachusetts-based foundation interested in northern forestland preservation. Several other major contributions came from anonymous donors.

"These people stepped forward with pledges far beyond any philanthropic gift they've made in the past," Wommack said with a touch of wonder. "I think people did that because they saw that we have an opportunity here to leave a legacy in the northern forest as large in scale as Baxter State Park at a site that is just as important."

For the immediate future, Wommack's focus will be paying off the $35.1-million loan. He has five years and expects to raise 80 percent of the money from private individuals, 10 percent from foundations and 10 percent from corporations.

But he also recognizes that "the project is not done when we pay off this loan. It's clear that nothing will be the same after this." Last year's deal protects only a third of the undeveloped portion of the river, and Wommack admits to a certain urgency to shield the rest. "Once a site is developed, there's no turning back," he reasoned. "Think about this. You can canoe 130 miles down the St. John to Allagash, and you will not pass a single development or settlement. If we hadn't bought this land, was it all going to get developed? No, not in the foreseeable future. But what happens if the next landowner chooses to put in the first subdivision here? It's gone. That quality is gone forever."

Eventually, Wommack would like to see the entire upper St. John protected, "and if we can do that here, there are a lot of other watersheds in Maine," he observed. "I really feel we have an obligation to do everything we can to protect the Maine we all know and love. That's our responsibility, not only as an organization but as a generation. I think this is going to be a legacy that all of us will be really pleased and proud to leave. I can't think of anything I'd rather leave my kids."



Besides moose, which are plentiful, land purchased by The Nature Conservancy on the upper St. John River is home to dozens of endangered plant and animal species, Kent Wommack '77 says. In July he reported that the second confirmed sighting in Maine of a breeding pair of Canada lynx was made on the 185,000-acre tract, which is the Conservancy's biggest landholding. Wommack's leadership in purchasing a tract that immense launched a new era in land preservation. "We were winning a lot of good battles, but we were not winning the war working at the scale we had been," he said.