



The Maine Island Ecology Program that ran for 25 years on Hardwood Island immersed students in a great variety of local ecosystems. *Courtesy of Pamela Manice*

## A Kaleidoscopic View of Place: Ecological Studies and Island Conservation across the Generations

*Marina Schauffler*

For a quarter-century leading up to 1995, Hardwood Island in Blue Hill Bay operated in its own time zone two months each year. Clocks and watches were set one hour ahead to Atlantic Time. During their stay on Hardwood, high-school students participating in the Maine Island Ecology Program simultaneously advanced an hour and retreated to a nineteenth-century lifestyle unlike anything they had ever known.

The time zone change was a concession to adolescents, few of whom are naturally early risers. The rigorous program began each day at sunrise, but teenagers consider themselves too old for a nine o'clock bedtime. By jumping a time zone, participants could go to bed at ten—and rise at six, which sounded far better to them than five.

The rustic lifestyle came with the place, a 188-acre island with two main buildings. There were two dorm areas (divided by gender), a

laboratory, a five hundred-volume library, and three boats—but no electricity, no telephone, and none of the ubiquitous screens that define life today. It was a “lifestyle of an earlier time,” says Peter Blanchard, a conservationist who taught in the program for many summers.

Each group forged a strong sense of camaraderie and created its own entertainment—watching sunrises and sunsets together, making music, reading aloud by gaslight, chatting around campfires, and stargazing. Blanchard recalls it being a “peaceable kingdom” where participants learned “what it means to be insular in a positive sense, discovering the magic of island existence.”

Therese Picard, a National Park Service employee who served as the program’s cook for seven years, was captivated by the community and the island itself. “It was incredibly simple,” she reflects; “idyllic would be the only way to describe it.”

Shortly after sunrise each morning, the instructors (typically an ornithologist, botanist, and marine biologist) and students would share breakfast together and then head off—with packed lunches—on the day’s learning adventure. In the early days of each session, they would explore the habitats of Hardwood Island: its tide pools, meadows and forests, as well as cellar holes left by nineteenth-century settlers and a great blue heron rookery. After getting to know Hardwood well, they would venture farther afield—to visit seabird-nesting islands offshore, explore ecosystems in Acadia National Park, or tour a sardine cannery or boat-building shop.

Small groups of students undertook “town studies,” interviewing local business owners, municipal leaders, and residents to learn about the similarities and differences among communities on Mount Desert Island.

When they returned to Hardwood Island each afternoon, there was time to explore on their own or work on independent research projects. This research gave them a close-up look at one small facet of the larger ecosystem. Their subjects of study ran the gamut from sea urchins and crabs to butterflies and spittle bugs.

After supper together and time spent watching the sunset, students and staff would gather to hear works read aloud by authors such as Loren Eiseley, Anne Morrow Lindbergh and Rachel Carson. At times, there might be something light-hearted like John Gould’s *The Fastest Hound Dog in the State of Maine* or even ghost stories told in the woods.

Decades later, alumni recall the power of those narratives, what one terms the “lyricism of words knitting you together.”

Each vivid day passed quickly, and students found themselves reluctant to leave when their nineteen-day session ended. The fleeting weeks on Hardwood left an indelible mark on many who entered that island time zone. For Andy Holdsworth, a science policy coordinator with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, that early experience in Blue Hill Bay was transformative. “It exposed you to so much,” he recalls, illuminating the dynamic patterns and interlinkages in ecological and human systems. “It was like a kaleidoscope—turning to reveal so many perspectives on place.”



The Maine Island Ecology Program brought learning to life for the young high school students who attended three-week sessions. *Courtesy of Pamela Manice*

### **The Vision: Learning Grounded in Place**

In 1968, C. W. Eliot Paine bought Hardwood Island from his brother, Richard C. Paine, Jr., who had purchased both Hardwood and Bartlett’s in order to protect them from clearcutting. The Paine family owned Moose Island and shoreline at Seal Cove looking out at Hardwood. Eliot Paine worked at the time with The Holden Arboretum in Ohio, and in 1969 he invited staff members of the Cleveland Museum of Natural History to join him at Hardwood for a planning retreat as they designed a new wing of the museum.

The inspirational setting prompted dialogue—not just about the museum—but about how Hardwood Island might help cultivate ecological understanding in young people. Paine, an ornamental horticulturist by training, was strongly committed to environmental education. He had two weeks of vacation each summer to enjoy Hardwood Island with his family, which—he figured—left seven weeks in which the island could host groups of students to learn about natural history.

Remarkably, within a year of those initial discussions, students were ferrying out to Hardwood for the Maine Island Ecology Program’s first season. Paine supplied boats, all the needed equipment and building renovations, as well as ongoing maintenance—charging only \$1 each summer for use of it all.

Paine and his colleague Dennis Wint, a naturalist and environmental educator who would direct the Hardwood Island program for its first seven seasons, shaped a summer session for high-schoolers that offered a memorable immersion in place. The Maine Island Ecology Program was no typical summer camp, recalls alumnus Jon Allan, who directs Michigan’s Great Lakes Office: it was “an exercise in building community and understanding ecological principles in that context.”

Living on an island was an added bonus, being—as Wint notes—“a great metaphor for how one needs to live today,” mindful of limited resources. So much learning came “just through spending time on an island—and the joy, contemplation and solitude that entails.”

The islands of Blue Hill and Jericho bays that students visited provided cameos of the region’s settlement history through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with a few reminders—in shell middens—of even earlier human habitation. Participants learned about the breadth of natural resource industries—from fishing and farming to shipbuilding, and the boom-bust cycles that occur.

While being far ahead of its time in its whole-systems approach to ecology, the Program also drew on the wisdom of early naturalists, who carefully observed and recorded the behavior of other species. Students at Hardwood, Wint reflects, “had to function like scientists—look, see, and understand.”

Like College of the Atlantic (COA), which took form concurrently just a few miles to the east, the Hardwood program emphasized “human ecology,” the complex connections between people and place. COA



faculty frequently visited Hardwood to discuss their research into seabirds, whales, and local ethnography.



For more than a decade, Director Russ Hansen shared his passion for nature with Hardwood Island students, helping ignite a lifelong interest in ecology for many participants. *Courtesy of Pamela Manice*

From the outset, the Program drew a cohesive, committed staff and what Peter Blanchard calls—with the perspective of a long-time teacher—an “exceptional” group of students. Students were selected based on their interest rather than their academic credentials, as the Program sought to extend and deepen their fascination with nature. The students’ dedication and enthusiasm made teaching there a joy, recalls Russell Hansen, who directed the Program for more than a decade. “I’ve never had a job closer to Paradise. It was a wonderful experience being in a setting where people cared so much about each other.”

Many participants came from urban or suburban settings around Cleveland and Philadelphia. Blue Hill Bay was a world apart from their home communities, and they were captivated by the dynamism of its ecosystems. The students often had strong science backgrounds but few had experienced field ecology. Andy Holdsworth grew up watching nature shows, sharing in the vicarious thrill of biological detective work

they depicted. Hardwood Island, he says, “became the place where I could begin to be that field scientist.”

Students were pushed to observe closely and draw inferences, “teasing out the interplay between humans and the natural world,” recalls Hillary Oppman, who returned for a second season to help coordinate the Program as an assistant (a role that two former students were selected for each summer). Instructors would take students to a setting and ask, “What happened here? Why does this landscape appear as it does? What is missing?”

A final “exam” challenged students to piece together the complex backstory of a pond that had unusually high cuts on the stumps of surrounding trees—reflecting periods of fire, tree harvesting, beaver dams, and a drop in water level (when the dams broke). Students had to see beyond what looked like a static landscape and identify wave after wave of ecological change that had transformed the place through the years.

One student wrote, in a post-summer reflection in the 1970s, “This program, above all, gave me a sense of the scientific process and a real feel for the incredible intricacy of . . . nature that can never be gotten from a book. Nowhere could I have gained as much understanding of the interdependence of organisms, and the fragility of that interdependence.”

### **Ripples Forward**

More than seven hundred young people spent time at Hardwood Island over the Program’s twenty-five-year tenure. Their immersion in island culture and ecology, while relatively brief, had profound and lasting repercussions—defining their understanding of community and forging a kaleidoscopic perspective on place.

“Those Hardwood Island days were magical for every teacher and every student,” recalls Pamela Manice, who served as a staff naturalist in the Program and then created a similar model to introduce inner-city children to a Connecticut forest environment. “I hold those precious memories very close to my heart as what we learned there deeply affected how we came to see the world and the tremendous beauty of nature. So many focused days together on the islands of Blue Hill Bay, each of us asking and investigating as many questions as our combined curiosity

and time would allow, was a truly extraordinary gift! It changed all of us.”

The time at Hardwood led Manice to teach science in a whole new way—following the lead of students’ interests, facilitating their explorations, and helping them learn to think for themselves by asking more and more questions. In many school systems now, she says, it’s “amazing how little thinking is asked of students.”

The focus at Hardwood, Manice adds, was not—as it is in some outdoor programs—on understanding and developing oneself. The Maine Island Ecology Program put the focus on community—your responsibility to the larger whole and what you can learn from that system. Many of the students who came had little sense of community back home, Manice recalls, and “it was so exciting to see them create their own world—in a way that can only be done on an island.”

There is “nothing as magical and inspiring as a Maine Island,” echoes Hillary Oppman: “my dive headlong into ecology there had a deep impact on the later arc of my professional life.” In her case, the island experience also transformed her personal life—as the student with whom she worked in her second year, Andy Holdsworth, became—years later—her husband.

Jon Allan sees lessons of the Hardwood program play out routinely in his Great Lakes job. “It taught about systems and connectivity through an observational lens, giving students a way to interrogate and understand,” he recalls. “I’ve brought this forward in my career,” he continues, citing a recent comprehensive water strategy in which his agency went into communities to ask how people use, think about, and value water, “listening for voice and observing and recording their stories.” That careful listening, he says, “ties directly to what I learned at age 14.”

While the Maine Island Ecology Program ended two decades ago, many of the alumni now work in fields related to ecology, education, and conservation. Pamela Manice would like to find another island setting where a summer program for high-schoolers could happen again. It’s even more important now, she reflects, to invite students to put away their electronics and learn “how to look closely, noting what’s fascinating around them.”

Allan hopes that those who went through the original program can “come together and give back in some way. We were given a lot.” He

remains a strong proponent of experiential education, convinced “it is where care comes from.”

### **And Echoes Back...**

At the time the Maine Island Ecology Program launched in 1970, no one realized how closely it mimicked the Champlain Society, a group of adventurous Harvard students who pursued natural history studies on Mount Desert Island nearly a century earlier. The Champlain Society logbooks (described in detail in *Chebacco XV*)<sup>1</sup> were uncovered in recent years and donated to the MDI Historical Society and the Gray Herbarium at Harvard University. When Eliot Paine learned of those logbooks, he was struck by the remarkable parallels with the program he had founded. More surprising still was the fact that the Champlain Society had been founded and led by his grandfather, Charles Eliot.

Charles Eliot first organized the extended camping expeditions on Mount Desert Island when he was a student at Harvard (where his father was President). Years earlier, he had spent weeks each summer camping with his father, younger brother, and occasionally other relatives on Calf Island in Frenchman Bay. He had developed a passion for investigating the local geology, flora and fauna, and wanted his classmates to share in that joy of discovery.

Nearly a dozen students camped on the shores of Somes Sound (and later Seal Harbor), and spent their days exploring, observing, and collecting as they completed many of the island’s first natural history surveys. The “Captain,” as they called Eliot, continued to lead the Champlain Society between 1880 and 1889, even after he began work as a landscape architect.

Charles Eliot was among the first visitors to the island to articulate a conservation vision for the region. During the early years of the Champlain Society, he wrote, “scenery of Mount Desert is so beautiful and remarkable that no pains should be spared to save it from injury—to the end that many generations may receive all possible benefit and enjoyment from the sight of it.”<sup>2</sup> Grounding Eliot’s idealism was a clear plan of action, modeled after his successful launch of the Trustees of Reservations in Massachusetts, the nation’s first land trust. “It is time decisive action was taken,” he wrote, “and if the State of Maine should encourage the formation of associations for the purpose of preserving chosen parts of her coast scenery, she would not only do herself honor,

but would secure for the future an important element in her material prosperity.”<sup>3</sup>



Charles Eliot, 1897. From Charles W. Eliot, *Charles Eliot, Landscape Architect* (1902).

Before he could help form such an association for the MDI region, Charles Eliot died at age thirty-eight. His father carried out his vision, however, establishing the Hancock County Trustees of Reservations. With George Dorr at its helm, that dedicated group went on to secure many of the critical properties that now constitute Acadia National Park.

### **The Ongoing Work**

Park lands on Mount Desert Island were protected in the early decades of the twentieth century, but many outer islands were—by mid-century—still vulnerable to clear-cutting and large-scale development. Not long after Eliot Paine acquired Hardwood Island, he was

approached by Margaret M. (Peggy) Rockefeller. She had recently founded, with Thomas D. Cabot, Maine Coast Heritage Trust (MCHT), a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting the scenic, ecological, and recreational value of Maine's coastal lands and islands.

This fledgling group sought to fulfill its ambitious mission by pioneering use of a relatively new approach to land conservation. The Trust helped secure passage in 1970 of a Maine law that allowed landowners to donate conservation easements, voluntarily restricting their future building rights through a legal agreement with a nonprofit organization or governmental agency. MCHT did not hold such easements initially, but helped numerous landowners transfer easements to entities such as Acadia National Park and The Nature Conservancy. In 1971, Peggy and David Rockefeller were the first landowners to exercise this new legal option, donating to Acadia National Park a conservation easement on Buckle Island, off Swan's Island.

Eliot Paine was receptive to Peggy Rockefeller's request that he ensure long-term the wild character of Hardwood Island. Land conservation was a perfect complement to the educational philosophy of the Maine Island Ecology Program. Paine believed in the "importance of showing people that conservation is something everyone can do," and had put that belief into practice—not just through the Hardwood program—but through his work at The Holden Arboretum and his ongoing volunteer service with the Student Conservation Association, a national organization that engages young people in hands-on service to the land. In 1973, he donated a conservation easement on Hardwood Island to Acadia National Park.

A year later, Peggy and David Rockefeller purchased Bartlett's, the nearest island neighbor to Hardwood. Their family subsequently placed two conservation easements on Bartlett's, keeping more than 90 percent of the island completely undeveloped. (An article on Bartlett's Island in this issue of *Chebacco* further describes them.)





Many islands in Blue Hill Bay's Casco Passage have been protected in recent decades, thanks to the efforts of Peter Blanchard and Maine Coast Heritage Trust. *Courtesy of Bridget Besaw*

Over the next decades, more and more islands in the vicinity were protected in perpetuity, including a conservation easement on forty-four hundred acres of Long Island in 1995. An MCHT easement (on the southern end) and purchase (of the northern end) preserved the entirety of Tinker Island in 2000.

Several conservation successes link directly back to the Maine Island Ecology Program. Inspired by his experiences on Hardwood, Peter Blanchard took a lead role in protecting multiple islands in Blue Hill Bay's Casco Passage. He acquired Black Island to protect it from an eight-lot subdivision, and placed it under a "forever wild" conservation easement. He also helped ensure the transfer of conservation easements on Sheep and Eagle Islands to MCHT.

More than two decades ago, Blanchard invited Eliot Paine and Lulu Brown to join him in acquiring Pond Island, a wild, 241-acre gem in the western Bay traditionally enjoyed by cruisers, schooner guests, and picnickers. (Mrs. Brown transferred her undivided ownership, upon her death, to Captain Bill Brown.) In 2014, all three owners donated Pond Island to MCHT to ensure that those traditions would continue through time. "Part of the charm of the Maine coast," Paine says, "is having access to places like this."

Eliot Paine is impressed and relieved by how little development has altered Blue Hill Bay since his youth: “Amazingly, the area has stayed in a relatively pristine state.” As more and more of the Maine coast is built out and posted against trespassing, he believes, these relatively wild settings will be of even greater value.

The ongoing conservation of area islands affirms the continuity of an ecological worldview that has played out through the generations around Mount Desert Island. The Maine Island Ecology Program stood out as an innovative approach to environmental education, even as it echoed the naturalist explorations of the Champlain Society a century earlier. MCHT pioneered use of conservation easements to sustain the Bay’s islands, drawing inspiration from the early successes of the Hancock County Trustees of Reservations.

For more than a century, visionary individuals around Mount Desert Island have studied the region’s unique qualities and fostered a shared commitment to protecting its lands and communities. That conservation ethic honors the past and bodes well for the future: the place inspires people, who in turn do their utmost to uphold the character of place.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Schmitt, “Visionary Science of the ‘Harvard Barbarians,’” *Chebacco* 15 (2014): 17-31.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Eliot, unpublished journal, 1883-1884, Loeb Library Special Collections, Graduate School of Design, Harvard University.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Eliot, *Garden and Forest, A Journal of Horticulture, Landscape Art and Forestry* (New York: Garden and Forest Publishing Co., 1890), 3: 87.