

CO-ENVISIONING FOREST FUTURES: PARTICIPATORY WORKSHOP RESULTS

Between May 2025 and January 2026, our team of researchers from the University of Georgia, the University of Maine, and Harvard Forest organized participatory workshops in Maine to understand the hopes, priorities, and barriers facing future forest management in different regions. These workshops brought together 69 participants representing various Wabanaki Tribes, government agencies, conservation groups, forest managers, forest landowners, and forest user groups.

WORKSHOP SUMMARY

METHODS AND STUDY AREA

We used the Three Horizons Framework – a method for envisioning future conditions – to co-design desirable and imagine undesirable future scenarios for Maine’s forests. We held a statewide workshop, a Wabanaki workshop*, and three community-scale workshops. The Western Woods workshop focused on areas around the town of Carrabassett Valley; the Katahdin Region workshop focused on areas near Millinocket; the Downeast Region workshop focused on Hancock and Washington counties; and the Wabanaki workshop focused on the entire state except the south-central counties.

EMERGING FUTURE NARRATIVES

Our analysis identified four “narratives” or themes representing visions for the future: “Eco-Resilience,” “Economic Diversification,” “Techno-Optimism,” and “Timber Catches All.” While distinct, these narratives have some overlap between future goals such as healthy forests, a robust economy, abundant recreational access, and improved cross-sector collaboration.

The **Eco-Resilience** narrative centers on the health of forested and non-forested ecosystems. Participants envision sustainable practices that prevent soil erosion and promote natural regeneration and diversity of species in forests. Forests are open for recreational access and are managed under diverse ownerships, with increased land under Wabanaki ownership and management. Participants envision a greater role for science and research in achieving these goals. Six out of 22 desirable futures articulated by workshop participants shared this vision.

The **Techno-Optimism** future revolves around green energy infrastructure and smart development. Technological advancement over the next 25 years leads to advancements in harvesting, forest inventory techniques, and the bioproducts industry. Renewable energy infrastructure is developed within forests; traditional forestry practices are replaced by carbon forestry and opportunities to utilize low-grade wood material. Sustainable forest management practices and cross-sector collaboration ensure a climate-resilient economy and forest. This vision was shared by four out of 22 desirable futures.

**Due to data sovereignty practices, results from the Wabanaki Workshop are not shared at this point.*

In the **Timber Catches All** narrative, the economy is fueled by working forests and the forest products industry. This future has opportunities for diverse, stable markets for various wood products. Private property rights are important for the autonomy of landowners to prevent unfettered open access. Landscapes dominated by private ownership are preferred. By showcasing the ripple effects of the forest industry on economic development, people imagine a prosperous future that also supports outdoor recreation. Four out of 22 co-designed desirable futures fit into this narrative.

In the **Economic Diversification** future, the forest industry exists side-by-side with ecosystem conservation and outdoor recreation; forests are rich in biodiversity, and human-nature relationships flourish. Science and policy effectively address environmental pollution and pest outbreaks. Forestland ownership is envisioned as a mosaic of different types, including private, non-profit, community, family, state, and Wabanaki management. Cultural, motorized, and non-motorized recreational access are ensured and managed through better collaboration between landowners, land users, and land managers. Eight out of 22 co-designed desirable futures fit into this narrative, making it the most popular vision for the future.

DEMOGRAPHICS AT A GLANCE

SECTOR

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| • Conservation Organization: 16 | • Private Consulting: 4 |
| • Outdoor Recreation and Tourism: 10 | • Forester or Logger: 4 |
| • State Government: 9 | • Business/Self-employed: 4 |
| • Forest Products Industry: 10 | • Retired: 2 |
| • Municipality: 7 | • Landowner: 1 |
| • Academic: 7 | • TIMO: 1 |
| • Tribal Government: 5 | • Other: 4 |

**Participants had the option to select multiple sectors*

GENDER IDENTITY

- Male: 41
- Female: 17
- Non-binary: 1

WESTERN WOODS REGIONAL DYNAMICS

SUMMARY

Nine participants attended the Western Woods workshop held in Carrabassett Valley. Three participants identified as women, and one as Native American. Five participants cited outdoor recreation and tourism as their main area of work. The eight scenarios designed by Western Woods participants were distributed equally between the Eco-Resilience, Economic Diversification, Techno-Optimism, and Timber Catches All narratives (i.e., two scenarios per narrative). Our analysis of qualitative data from this workshop shows a local narrative molded by concerns over outdoor accessibility and environmental health for the interest of recreation and tourism.

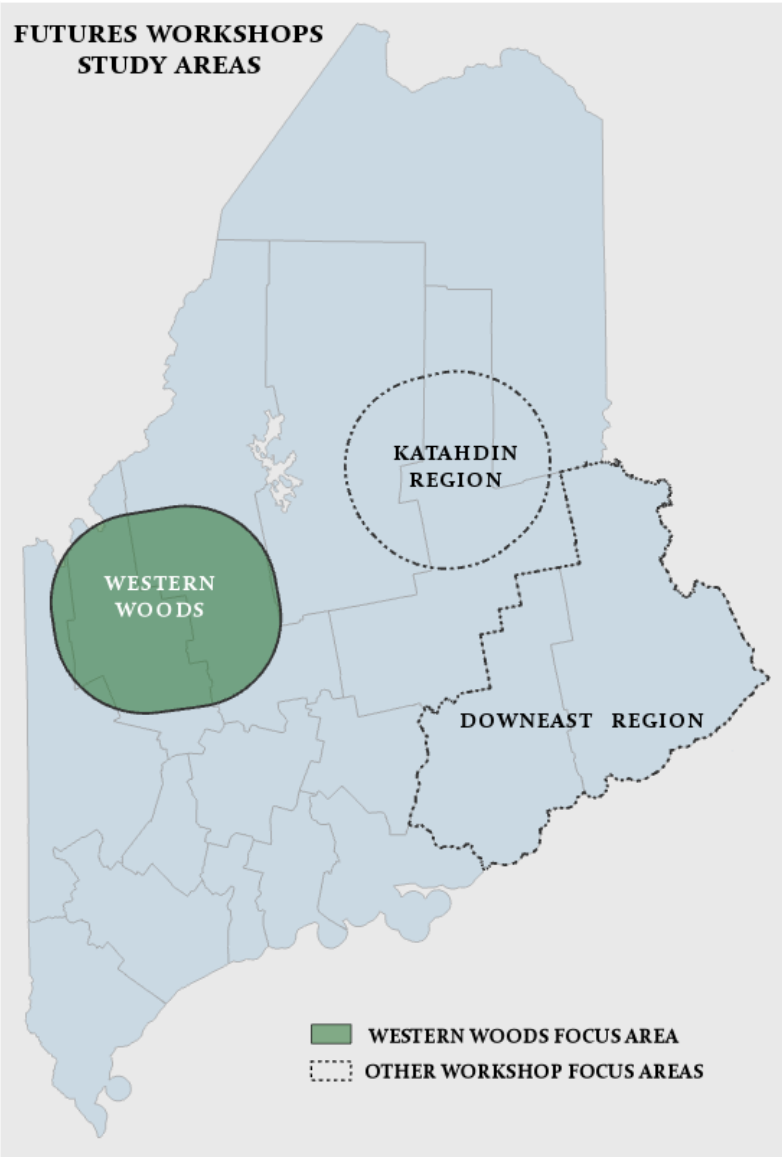
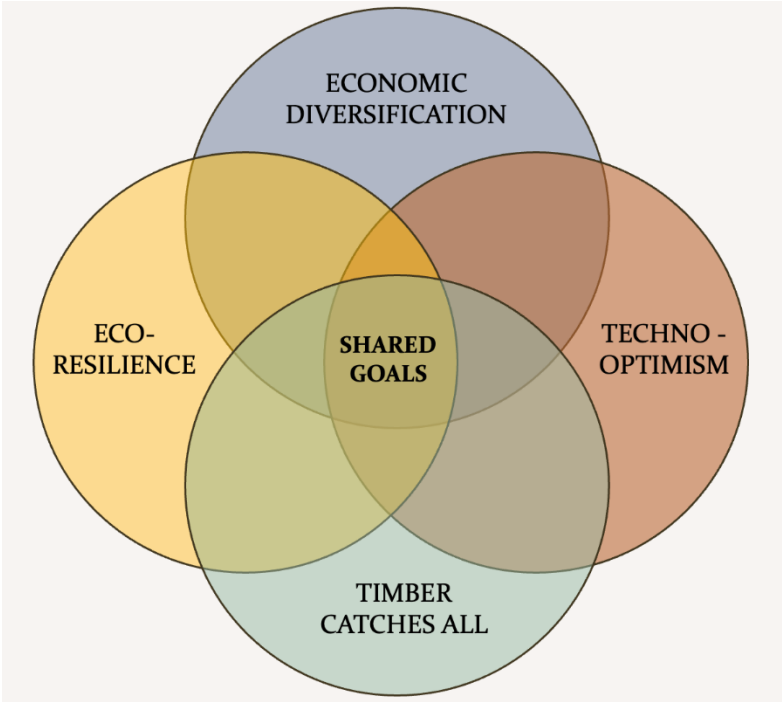
BARRIERS AND VULNERABILITIES

Changes to recreational opportunity underpinned barriers and vulnerabilities perceived in the Western Woods region. Undesirable scenarios envisioned by participants revolved around futures where current “extreme” weather conditions are instead seen as the new normal, and where limited-to-no snowfall threatens the sustainability of the region’s forests. The most salient concerns for this region were phasing out **unfettered access, cultivating a more collaborative working environment, and stemming environmental degradation**, while loss of workforce and outbreaks of pests and disease were cited as significant regional barriers.

DIVERGENT PERSPECTIVES

Expectations for the future in the Western Woods emphasized a **mindful approach to growth** that would balance local development with ecosystem health. Participants in this workshop placed a high focus on improving collaboration, increasing education and outreach, **engaging youth, and improving perceptions of the forest industry**. Similarly, growing the region’s resource and human capacity – as well as forest and access infrastructure – were highly discussed. Compared to other workshops, this region had the **greatest demand for private ownership and landowner autonomy** and was the only region to discuss Best Management Practices (BMPs) for ecosystem management.

Despite the Western Woods’ focus on recreational opportunities and accessing the outdoors, this workshop did not outline steps towards building access infrastructure, developing shared values, or utilizing payments for ecosystem services. Unlike all other regions, the Western Woods workshop **did not discuss** affordability of equipment or housing as barriers to desired futures. Participants here also didn’t discuss diverse forest markets, funding for conservation, multi-use forest culture, or socio-ecological resilience.



KATAHDIN REGIONAL DYNAMICS

SUMMARY

Eleven participants – four of whom identified as women – attended the Katahdin Region workshop held in Millinocket. These participants designed a total of six scenarios: Three focused on Economic Diversification, two were aligned with Eco-Resilience, and one fed into the Techno-Optimism narrative. Our analysis of qualitative data from this workshop shows a local narrative around improving leadership and planning to make more responsible use of the environment.

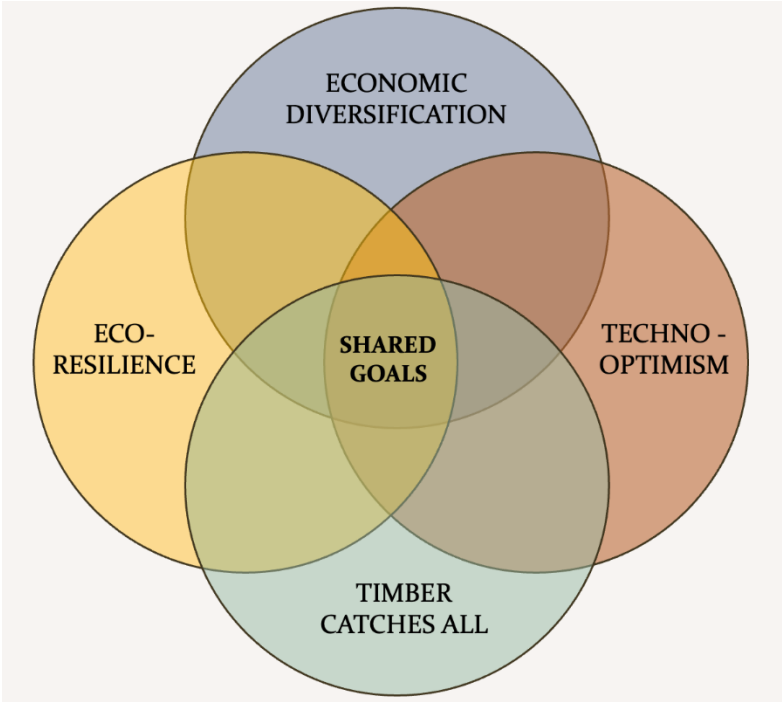
BARRIERS AND VULNERABILITIES

Perspectives on barriers and vulnerabilities of the Katahdin Region revolved around **community leadership and environmental stewardship**. Participants envisioned two undesirable scenarios: One where less snowfall leads to more frequent fire events, and one where threats presented by invasive species go unaddressed. Phasing out overly competitive or uncollaborative work cultures and encouraging cooperation across sectors – as well as stemming environmental degradation – emerged as high priorities for the region. Participants also cited mismanagement of ecosystems, lack of investment in public infrastructure, restricted access, and a lack of communal connectedness as undesirable vulnerabilities of the region.

DIVERGENT PERSPECTIVES

The Katahdin Region’s expectations for the future heavily promoted **profitable yet sustainable use of forests**. Compared to other regional workshops, participants here focused most on **multi-level collaboration and bolstering communities’ social and financial support systems**, followed by open access, forest infrastructure, multi-use forest culture, and planning and preparedness. This was the only region to outline specific steps for building infrastructure to support outdoor access, with heavy focus on creating pathways to investment as well as raising institutional and technological capacity. Compared to other regional workshops, the Katahdin Region most heavily touted developing and improving the **affordability of socio-economic infrastructure**, as well as integrating research and scientific support.

On the other hand, the Katahdin Region was the only region which **did not discuss** increasing education and outreach or improving perceptions of the forest industry. Although management concerns were evidenced during discussion of threats and vulnerabilities, this workshop was the only one not to mention short-term planning as a specific barrier. It was also the only region that didn’t discuss Wabanaki land-use sovereignty and collaborative management, or mention maintaining forest cover and connectivity.



DOWNEAST REGIONAL DYNAMICS

SUMMARY

Seventeen participants – two of whom were women – attended the Downeast Region workshop held in Machias. Out of four scenarios designed by the participants, two aligned with Eco-Resilience, one focused on Timber Catches All, and one focused on the Economic Diversification narrative. Stakeholders across all workshops shared a core vision for the future: structurally complex, healthy and resilient forests that support thriving rural communities. That said, our analysis of qualitative data from this workshop specifically reveals a local narrative shaped by deep economic anxieties and urgent demand for practical, market-driven tools.

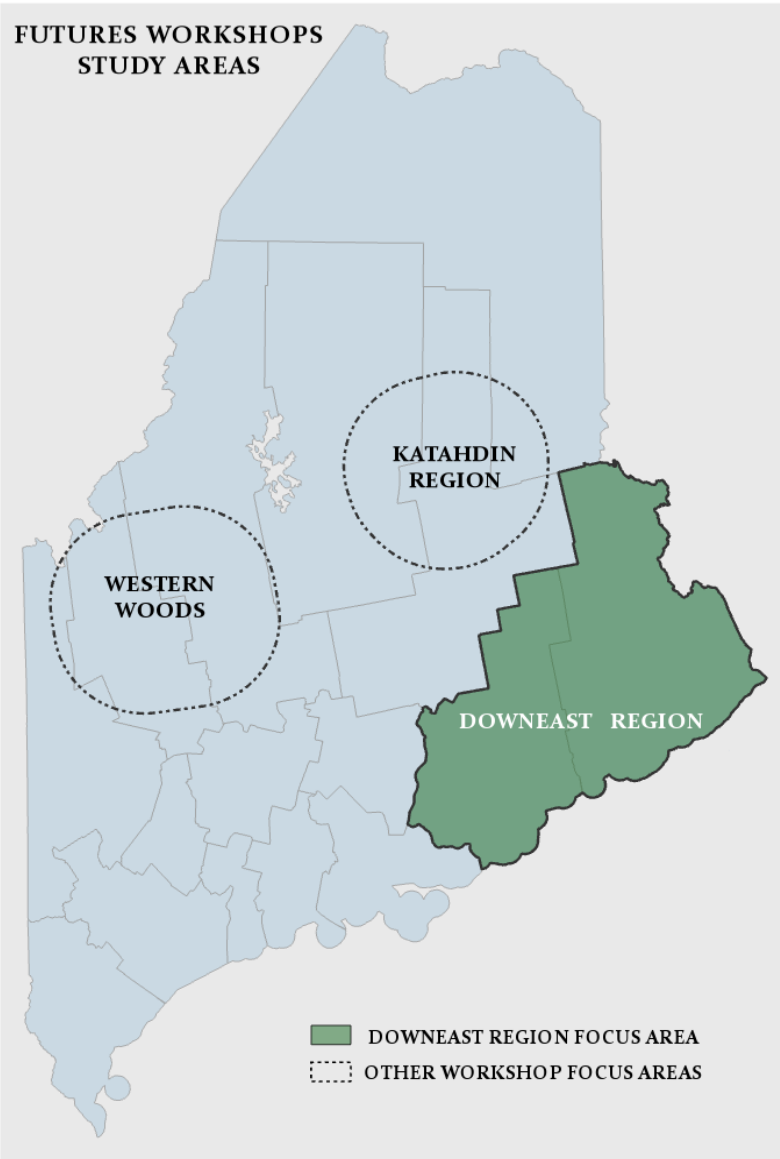
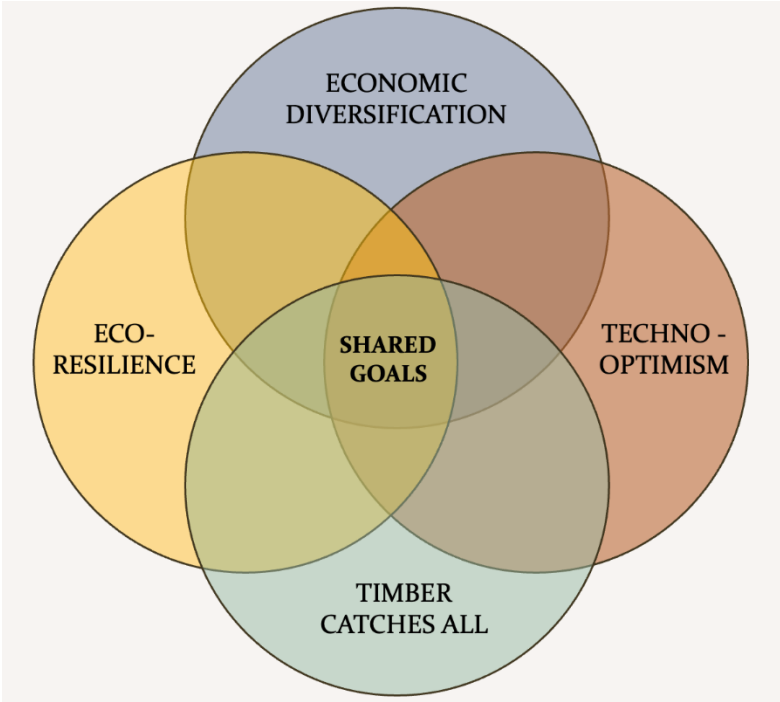
BARRIERS AND VULNERABILITIES

Economic vulnerability was central to the Downeast Region’s outlook; three out of four undesirable scenarios envisioned by participants focused squarely on the **collapse of the forest products industry**, which was not a concern highlighted in other regions in the study. Downeast participants clearly view industry decline as a primary threat to their communities and forest management goals. Local concerns also included phasing out **restrictive or unstable policies, preventing ecosystem mismanagement**, and improving affordability in housing and healthcare to address workforce shortages.

DIVERGENT PERSPECTIVES

Expectations for the Downeast Region’s future focused on immediate, operational solutions. For example, this region promoted **advancements in ecological monitoring and management techniques** at nearly double the rate of any other region. Additionally, participants placed greater emphasis on **increasing consumption of wood-based products** and creating diverse markets for them. To overcome barriers and **achieve desirable future goals**, participants emphasized improving cross-sector collaboration, creating investment pathways, reducing land management costs for landowners, engaging youth in outdoor learning, and developing shared values around ecological management.

Our analysis also revealed local perspectives that deviated from broader patterns. Unlike in other regions, workshop participants here **did not discuss** a robust recreational industry, support for scientific research, or resilient rural communities as desired future outcomes, despite a stronger focus on economic revival. Importantly, the Downeast Region **heavily contributed to Wabanaki land-use sovereignty efforts**, accounting for five of the seven total mentions across the four workshops. Participants also prioritized expanding human capacity, building resource capacity, and creating direct financial incentives for the wood products economy.



STATEWIDE DYNAMICS

SUMMARY

Twenty-two participants attended the Statewide workshop held in Newport. Eight of these participants identified as women, one as non-binary, and one as Native American. Four desirable scenarios were designed by Statewide participants: two focused on Economic Diversification, one fed into Techno-Optimism, and one aligned with the Timber Catches All narrative. Our analysis of qualitative data from this workshop reveals a statewide narrative concerning community growth and development in the face of changing environments and populations.

BARRIERS AND VULNERABILITIES

Demographic changes and landownership were at the heart of the Statewide outlook on barriers and vulnerabilities. Of the four undesirable scenarios imagined by participants, two focused on the prospective impacts of urbanization and population growth, such as more limited land access arising from new ownership. The other two undesirable scenarios envisioned futures shaped by climate change, with large-scale wildfires, changing land ownership, and insurance market collapse. Major concerns included phasing out short-term planning and economic overspecialization, unfettered private land access, and making greater investments in public infrastructure.

DIVERGENT PERSPECTIVES

Statewide expectations for the future focused on **long-term pathways for socio-economic development**. For example, this workshop touted short-term planning as a barrier more than any other regional workshop. Participants placed high emphasis on **diverse markets, open recreational access to private lands, and economic opportunities**, along with redefining resource governance and creating more ways to invest in forest conservation. In the same vein, the Statewide workshop was one of two workshops that mentioned **conservation funding** (alongside the Downeast Region) and **opportunities for innovation** (alongside the Katahdin Region).

Across all regions, participants in the Statewide workshop most heavily discussed **improving cross-sector collaborations, growing resource and workforce capacity, and increasing education and outreach**. Participants also frequently discussed the state's ownership mosaic, policies to support the forest industry, and shared values for ecological management. However, our analysis revealed less of a focus on human connections to the environment in the Statewide workshop when compared to the other regional workshops. Notably, this was the only workshop in which participants did not discuss community engagement and learning in the outdoors, or infrastructure that could facilitate recreational access to forests.

