FULL SPEED AHEAD

Strategic Plan of the Maine Island Trail Association

2020-2025
MISSION

Our Purpose

THE MISSION OF THE MAINE ISLAND TRAIL ASSOCIATION is to advance a model of thoughtful use and volunteer stewardship of Maine’s wild islands, creating an inspiring recreational water trail that is cared for by the people who use it.
VALUES
Ideas that drive and distinguish MITA

Serve the members
As a membership organization, the board, staff, and programs of MITA ultimately exist to serve the Association and its 6,800 members.

Complement, don’t compete
MITA pursues its own distinct mission, leaving land trusts, guides, outfitters, schooners, and others to pursue theirs. We do not own land; we do not guide. This complementary, non-competitive approach has yielded excellent partnerships for over 30 years.

Follow “SAM”
The MITA model is simple and effective: Stewardship is the key to island owners allowing Access, which is key to attracting Members. Members, in turn, volunteer and financially support the Stewardship which completes a virtuous circle: “SAM.”

Adhere to the Trail Vision
MITA is building a water trail for all recreational boaters in all regions, adding and maintaining Trail sites with a wild character where owner preferences can be honored and stewardship can be assured.

Issue guidelines and trust users to follow them
MITA conveys island owner wishes regarding the use of their property, but has no authority to enforce those wishes and thus no grounds to declare them as rules. Happily, most visitors do adhere to the guidelines, so early fears that the islands would be “loved to death” have not occurred.

Support access as an independent pursuit
Outside of organized stewardship work, Trail users may utilize MITA trip planning products but are ultimately on their own to visit the islands safely and responsibly, whether visiting independently or with a guide.

Earn trust through action
Handshake relationships, not legal relationships, are key to the Trail’s success. This uniquely Maine-style arrangement allows landowners to try the Trail experience without feeling obligated for the long term or binding their heirs or successors. By earning landowner trust each year, the Trail remains intact and continues to grow.

Stay positive
MITA is fundamentally an optimistic organization that believes in the transformative power of recreating in nature and entrusts people to behave responsibly. We aspire to have this positive attitude permeate everything we do.
AREAS OF FOCUS
2020-2025
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1. Share The Experience Of Island Stewardship

The heart of MITA is volunteer stewardship. It establishes trust with island owners and thereby sustains the Trail. We observe that the stewardship experience also benefits the volunteers who do the work, providing them with the satisfaction of caring for inspiring places and the collegiality of the MITA community. While there are other ways to engage people in MITA’s mission, taking people on stewardship outings is our most practical and impactful way of bringing people into the mission. In some cases, this may be a person’s only means to access the islands.

Despite this importance, only 12% of MITA members surveyed reported participating in MITA’s stewardship activities in 2018, and more stewardship opportunities was their #1 desire. The purpose of this initiative is to engage a broader demographic of members and non-members, including younger people (30-40s with families) and the fishing community, enhancing visibility of MITA’s mission to new constituents.

Action Items
- Increase and streamline promotion of volunteer opportunities, including ways to help MITA off the water (events, fleet maintenance, logbook compilation, data entry).
- Diversify the distribution of stewardship work across seasons and geographies, providing opportunities for summer visitors and residents alike.
- Formalize the group work day program for organizations (corporate groups, nonprofits, camps, educational institutions, etc.) and consider ways to connect the corporate donor and stewardship programs.
- Engage the fishing community in stewardship efforts, building on MITA’s history of selectively partnering in efforts to clean up marine debris/derelict traps and return intact fishing gear to productive use.
Island access is critically important to MITA members, often being the reason they first join MITA. Two-thirds of survey respondents had visited an island in the past year with many others expressing regret for not doing so.

Since its inception, MITA has advanced do-it-yourself access to the islands. It has facilitated responsible access through empowering information and education, leaving the rest to the individual. Barriers to access that the individual must overcome include knowledge, boating skills, and financial resources. Indeed, being challenging destinations to reach is part of the islands’ allure and an implicit part of their management.

This approach may not be adequate to engage future generations whose interests, skills, and resources may differ from those of MITA’s founders. National and local evidence suggests more people are accessing the water through less seaworthy recreational kayaks and stand-up paddleboards (SUPs). While powerboat sales remain steady, sales of sea kayaks and sailboats are leveling or declining. Paddlesport publications support the need for entry-level skill building to promote safety and enhance enjoyment. Meanwhile, use of outfitters for family group outings and specialty skills training appears to be on the rise.

MITA’s work with intermediary Trail access partners should increase the capability of a larger and more diverse group of people to enjoy coastal recreation.

**Action Items**
- Enhance strategic partnerships with outfitters, tour operators, boating programs, and other skill-building educators to increase awareness of island access opportunities and the confidence of new boaters.
- Expand educational and skill-building events, including those at MITA’s Portland office venue, with some content targeted at new boaters of all types.
- Ensure our products (guidebook, app, etc.) reflect the evolving needs of new members.
The quality of the Maine Island Trail experience is dependent on the wild character and natural and cultural resources of the Maine Coast. Maintaining that wild character is a challenge in the face of a seemingly unending presence of marine debris—particularly plastic—that makes its way into the waters of Maine. Beyond being unsightly, recent science is revealing the persistence and toxicity of plastic particles as they enter the environment and food chain.

In addition, MITA’s stewardship programs are increasingly called to address invasive species that alter and sometimes overwhelm upland ecosystems. On the other hand, species loss occurs too. Shellfish that were once common to the islands and ubiquitous to the island camping experience, such as clams and mussels, are increasingly scarce. And at a most basic level, we are compelled to consider the potential effects of sea level rise on the future integrity of the individual islands and the Trail itself.

While we will not tackle these issues as MITA’s core mission, 85% of MITA members responding to the 2019 survey want the organization to be more involved in environmental issues that affect the islands. Others urged caution. MITA will therefore adopt new roles to witness and communicate conditions observed along the Trail, perhaps sharing this information with partners, but leaving responses to the discretion of individuals.

**Action Items**
- Model positive environmental behavior, being aware of MITA’s own “footprint.”
- Incorporate factual observations of the state of the Maine coast and the Trail into MITA communications, allowing readers to choose independently whether/how to respond.
- Consider supporting other environmental organizations’ policy work based on MITA’s “boots on the ground” experience in formal partnerships that benefit both organizations.
- Participate in strategic conversations about environmental, economic, or policy issues that affect the Trail, including with the fishing community.
Without cooperative island owners, there is no Trail. MITA must continue to serve and earn the trust of its island owners via stewardship, and also seek new ways to add value in mutually beneficial areas. Supporting the generational transition of ownership of private family-owned islands (which constitute about 25% of trail sites) is one potential example.

Although MITA does not directly conserve land, it has connected private landowners to land trusts and facilitated conservation efforts on numerous occasions. In recent surveys, MITA’s efforts to support coastal conservation was supported by 90% of island owners. MITA will work to deepen its relationships with island owners, striving to be an indispensable partner in the myriad issues they face.

**Action Items**

- Serve as an entry point for island owners concerning public recreational use of private land, becoming an indispensable resource to island owners on issues identified by them or MITA.
- Assist interested landowners with generational ownership transition decisions in order to ensure continued island access.
- Lead big-picture conversations at the intersection of recreation, stewardship, conservation, and access.

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The Maine Island Trail is an example of sustainable recreation that truly special: A small, grassroots community successfully established a largely-private, nationally-known recreational asset. The Maine Island Trail has grown steadily for over 30 years, demonstrating that the model envisioned in the 1980s works. The result is a spectacular wilderness resource for outdoor forays and adventures with no equivalent in North America. MITA will do more to tell this story beyond its own members and supporters.

**Action Items**

- Better understand, define and communicate the value of island visitation as a wilderness experience.
- Tell the story of the Trail/MITA and its significance in Maine and beyond through new and existing media targeting both MITA members and a broader audience.
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JEWELL ISLAND LOGBOOK
We Appreciate Your Input

This plan was informed by:

- A detailed online survey completed by 1,177 people in April 2019.
- Eight focus groups, including three Monitor Skipper groups, totaling several dozen participants.
  - 30 individual interviews with the Board of Trustees and six island owners.
- Outdoor recreation trends as documented by industry participation surveys, boating industry publications, and internet sources.
  - Multi-day staff and board planning retreats, including a combined retreat on Hurricane Island on July 19-20, 2019.
THANK YOU

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