

March 20, 2023

Kaitlyn Nuzzo, Government Relations Director
The Nature Conservancy in Maine
kaitlyn.nuzzo@tnc.org



Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

RE: LD 988 - Resolve, Directing the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry to Conduct an Accessibility Study of All Maine State Parks and Historic Sites and to Develop a Plan to Remove Access Barriers

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Kaitlyn Nuzzo and I am the Government Relations Director for The Nature Conservancy in Maine. I appreciate this opportunity to testify **in support of LD 988, Resolve, Directing the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry to Conduct an Accessibility Study of All Maine State Parks and Historic Sites and to Develop a Plan to Remove Access Barriers.**

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a nonprofit conservation organization dedicated to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. Guided by science, we create innovative, on-the-ground solutions to our world's toughest challenges so that nature and people can thrive together. TNC has been working in Maine for more than 60 years protecting land, restoring rivers and streams, rebuilding groundfish populations in the Gulf of Maine and developing innovative solutions to address climate change. Conservation is at our core, and we are proud to be the 12th largest landowner in the state, owning and managing over 300,000 acres.

LD 988 is an important opportunity for Maine to conduct an accessibility study of every Maine state park and historic site to identify barriers to access for all Maine people and visitors with disabilities. The bill directs the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry to specifically engage the disability community to conduct a study to identify access barriers and develop a remediation plan.

Access to nature and outdoor spaces provides many benefits to people, including improvements to our physical and mental health as well as overall quality of life. Maine's state parks and historic sites offer these benefits and more – and represent iconic landscapes and experiences. LD 988 recognizes that not everyone has the same level of access to these public natural spaces, and we must take concrete action towards removing barriers since these places belong to us all.

We know that making something "accessible" is not as simple as removing a locked gate or adding trail signage. Universal design requires understanding how people with disabilities find, enter, and navigate these outdoor places, and then acting thoughtfully to remove obstacles to access. TNC Maine is currently navigating this same question. We are working to develop an accessible "All Persons Trail" on a TNC preserve in the Katahdin region as a first step toward making the lands we steward more accessible for enjoyment, recreation, and cultural uses by all.

We urge this committee to pass LD 988 and take action to improve accessibility.