



Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs
% Legislative Information Office
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

April 22, 2025

RE: LD 1474, An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in Maine Schools

Dear Sen. Rafferty, Rep. Murphy, and Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee:

My name is Ania Wright and I am Maine Audubon's Policy Advocate, presenting testimony on behalf of our Director of Education Eric Topper. Maine Audubon fulfills our mission to conserve Maine wildlife and wildlife habitat by engaging people of all ages in science-based education, conservation, and advocacy. On behalf of Maine Audubon and our 30,000 members, supporters, and volunteers, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of LD 1474, *An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in Maine Schools*.

The Abenaki, Penobscot, Mi'kmaq, Maliseet, and Passamaquoddy have been stewards and advocates for wildlife and habitat here for more than ten thousand years. Generations of Wabanaki youth have been shaped to act and think with future generations in mind. Leaders and elders instill values such as respect, relationship, reciprocity, and responsibility, especially with regard to the natural resources around them. While terms such as environmental literacy, sustainability, community science, phenology, climatology, etc. are much newer, those ways of knowing have been here as long as people have. Too many Maine students have not had the opportunity to learn about Wabanaki history *or* the place-based practice of these essential concepts, despite it being a legal requirement since 2001.¹ LD 1474 aims to address barriers to full implementation of the law by supporting a permanent position at the Maine Department of Education (DOE), support ongoing funding for contracted Wabanaki advisors, and funding for SADs to support Wabanaki Studies activities and resources.

For the past five or so years, Maine Audubon has worked closely with Wabanaki experts and advisors to integrate indigenous knowledge (IK) among environmental education programs for people of all ages, especially for Maine youth. Wabanaki led IK curricula has become an integral part of our ongoing work with Portland, Falmouth, Lewiston, and Bangor schools, as well as at Washington Academy in East Machias. In Portland, we have helped to integrate Wabanaki Studies, particularly the experiential fieldwork, districtwide, for every elementary school student in Maine's largest and most diverse school district.

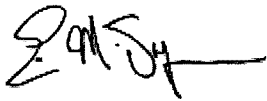
¹ The Wabanaki Studies Law - 20-A M.R.S. § 4706(2), was passed in 2001 but has not been meaningfully enforced across the state. www.wabanakialliance.com/wabanaki-studies-law/

By blending indigenous knowledge with the Western sciences of biology, botany, ornithology, etc., these programs focus on a broadened notion of ecology that is more inclusive of people and our communities. Studying Wabanaki culture helps connect Maine kids to this place – the lifeways, the food, the medicine, the climate, the relationships with plants and animals which have helped our species thrive here for millennia. Just as important for us, however, is for Maine youth to gain from reflecting on how Wabanaki people and communities have been treated, their resilience, and how we continue to benefit from those people, communities, and cultures. Though we remain committed to this work, it could be greatly enhanced, disseminated, or taken over by what this legislation proposes. Support and resources for teachers will help ensure that all Maine youth and districts gain the additional perspective and tools they will need to tackle the environmental, economic, and social challenges they will inherit, while also instilling the pride and confidence that this place we now call Maine has what they need to thrive.

We honor the Wabanaki and Abenaki people among us today, and express our deepest gratitude for their knowledge, legacy, and continued resilience, all of which guide and inspire Maine Audubon's own mission and work. It is our responsibility to ensure current and future generations receive the highest quality education. Frankly, that cannot be done without thorough and consistent teaching of Wabanaki Studies in all Maine schools.

We urge this committee to support LD 1474. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "E. Topper", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Eric Topper | Director of Education