

Testimony of the Committee on Indian Relations of the Episcopal Diocese of Maine

In Support of LD 294 An Act to Include a Tribal Member in the Baxter State Park Authority,
introduced by Rep. Collings of Portland

Presented for the Public Hearing Before the Maine Legislature's Committee on Agriculture,
Conservation and Forestry, February 13, 2023

Sen. Ingwersen, Rep. Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry; my name is John Maddaus, and I serve as chair of the Legislative Committee of the Committee on Indian Relations of the Episcopal Diocese of Maine. The Episcopal Committee on Indian Relations was formed by resolution of the Diocesan Convention in 1991. For over 30 years, we have lived into our mission "to deepen our relationship with the Wabanaki of Maine, to stand with the tribes in the pursuit of justice, to affirm their inherent sovereignty, and to support the preservation of Native languages and culture."

LD 294 would add a citizen of the Wabanaki nations located in Maine to membership of the Baxter State Park Authority. The Authority currently consists of three members, the Attorney General, the Commissioner of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife and the Director of the Maine Forest Service. The addition of a citizen of the Wabanaki nations would recognize that Katahdin stands in the traditional territory of the Wabanaki nations and that Katahdin is the most sacred place in that territory to the Wabanaki peoples. Yet the Wabanaki peoples have been excluded from decisions about care for the mountain and the surrounding lands for generations.

For many years, citizens of the Penobscot Nation have organized the Katahdin 100 (or K100) on Labor Day weekend. This event consists of a spiritual run and paddle from Indian Island to Katahdin, ending with spiritual ceremonies at Katahdin. Members of the other Wabanaki nations also participate in this event. For at least 18 years, the Episcopal Diocese of Maine, at the request of the Committee on Indian Relations, and in keeping with our mission, has paid the campground fees in Baxter State Park for the K100. In 2011, we appealed to the Baxter State Park Authority to stop charging fees for this Wabanaki spiritual event. In response the Authority reduced the fees, but did not eliminate them. Those fees are currently \$704 per year. We think that the continued charging of fees for the Wabanaki to conduct their spiritual ceremonies on the mountain that is sacred to them is a grave injustice. The ancestors of today's Wabanaki citizens have lived on and cared for this land for over 12,000 years. Can you imagine what it would be like if your place of worship were taken by some newcomers, who then charged you fees for the opportunity to worship there once a year?

On September 13, 2007, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which declares in part that "Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practice, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions customs and ceremonies; the right to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites..." On April 15, 2008, the Maine Legislature passed a resolution in support of the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Yet here we are, over a decade later, with the Baxter State Park Authority still denying those rights.

Across North America, there is a growing movement of Indigenous peoples working with public agencies toward arrangements for Indigenous involvement in the management of public lands, sometimes referred to as co-management. Three years ago, Maine Public's program *Maine Calling* featured a discussion of the topic "Katahdin: The Historic Role and Cultural & Economic Importance of Maine's Highest Peak." At the conclusion of that program, Barry Dana, one of the panelists, a former chief of the Penobscot Nation and an organizer of and participant in the Katahdin 100, said, "I'd like to extend the offer to have all the powers that be come to the table and see how the original people of the area can become more a part of the mountain, other than just visiting for our ceremonies. I'd like to reopen the dialog .. as to what the Native involvement is. Some sort of co-partnership in terms of bringing the land back to the Native people. I think it's time to reopen that dialog."

The members of the Episcopal Committee on Indian Relations agree that it's time -- in fact, it's long overdue -- for the Wabanaki peoples to have a voice in decision-making about their most sacred site, and we believe that adding a Wabanaki citizen as a member of the Baxter State Park Authority would be an important step toward the original people of this land having a voice at the table. Passage of this bill would be a good step toward accepting Barry Dana's offer.