

# Forest Reserves in Massachusetts

Massachusetts forests are special places. In the East, the Plymouth area is home to an expanse of globally-rare pine barrens. In the West, the vast forests of the Berkshires harbor the black bear and bobcat, and provide the scenic beauty and peaceful solitude sought by residents and visitors alike. Across the state, forests maintain our supply of clean drinking water by capturing rainfall and filtering it the rivers and streams that feed our reservoirs.

The forests we enjoy today are relatively young; during the 1800s much of the forest was cleared to create pastures and to fuel the region's iron industry. The forests have returned, but because most are just 100 years old, they lack the diversity that very old and very young forests provide to wildlife. To ensure the economic and biological health of our forests, a balance between working woodlands and preservation is needed. We can help by promoting sustainable harvesting and establishing forest reserves on select state lands.

## *What is a forest reserve and why do we need them?*

Forests are more than trees. They include a complex web of interacting species in both the trees overhead and the soil below. Some of these functions we are only now beginning to understand, and each element may perform a role central to the viability of the entire forest system. A *reserve* is an area that is managed to support the range of animals, plants, and natural communities found there. Reserves are also places where the forest is set aside from commercial harvesting, and thus can retain or restore the species, soils and processes of the original forests of Massachusetts. A network of effective reserves will include both small reserves – ranging in size from tens to hundreds of acres – and large reserves, which may be up to 15,000 acres in size.



- Reserves are an essential part of a comprehensive and balanced sustainable forest management plan. They serve as research and reference sites that help improve sustainable forestry in the working woodlands outside of reserve areas.
- Through careful stewardship, reserves can develop unique characteristics such as *nurse logs* (fallen trees), a thick *duff* (the forest floor), old trees, and unique assemblages of species in the forest understory – all of which provide habitat for uncommon

species and communities. The presence of these features in reserve areas can help stabilize neighboring working woodlands, improving the health of the entire forest.

- Massachusetts forests are home to a wealth of animals and plants, from songbirds and salamanders to ladyslippers and mountain laurel. Because many animal species benefit from large areas of old, undisturbed forest to breed, forage and migrate, reserves enhance habitat for the thousands of species that call this area home.
- Reserves offer peaceful outdoor settings as well as a wide range of recreational activities, from hiking and cross-country skiing to hunting and fishing. All current recreational activities permitted on specific state lands will be allowed on reserves. By establishing reserves, we help to ensure our continued enjoyment of these activities.



### *What is being done to create reserves?*

Staff members from the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (EOEA), the Department of Conservation and Recreation and the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife were assisted by The Nature Conservancy and other forest experts in analyzing data helpful in evaluating locations for forest reserves on state lands.

Using eleven different scientific measures – such as the amount of existing old growth forest and the numbers of rare species and natural communities – the group analyzed current forest conditions across the state to find the best candidate sites for forest reserves. Following a thorough public review process with input from local communities, the general public and organizations interested in Massachusetts’ forests, state agencies hope to decide on the best location for forest reserves on state lands. The goal is to

dedicate 10% of state lands to large reserves, and EOEA also hopes to work cooperatively with non-profit, municipal and private landowners adjacent to these state lands where reserve management could be enhanced. Our forests are part of history as well as our future. Preserving these remarkable natural areas for ourselves and our children is a goal we can achieve together.

To find out more about reserves, visit the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs’ website at <http://www.mass.gov/envir/forest/default.htm>.