

NRCM 2022 Conservation Leadership Awards, Oct. 26, 2022, Hallowell, ME

Opening Remarks by Pete Didisheim, Interim CEO and Advocacy Director

Greetings everyone, and welcome to NRCM's 2022 Conservation Leadership Awards. It's great to see all of you in person, including our awardees and your families and friends; NRCM members and activists; and Board members and staff.

Thank you joining us tonight to celebrate some of the people and organizations that have committed so much of their time and talent to the protection of Maine's environment.

As your emcee this evening, I have a few jobs, including leading us in multiple rounds of applause for our awardees. Spoiler alert: We'll be clapping a lot tonight.

To get us started, I would like to do a quick practice round to see how good we are. Please join me in giving a round of applause to Justin Walton for his acoustic jazz music during tonight's reception.

One of my other jobs will be welcoming people to the stage as part of the program.

The first person I would like to welcome is our Climate and Clean Energy Coordinator Josh Caldwell. Josh is a member of our Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice Committee. Josh will be sharing a land acknowledgement.

One of my additional jobs is to share some welcoming remarks. And that's what I would like to turn to now, with the help of some images.

Let me start by saying that this is one of my very favorite events of the year.

I love this event because it gives us an opportunity to shine a spotlight on some of the people who have done so much over the past year, and their careers, working to protect Maine's environment.

This event puts people, nature, and activism at center stage. That's what we're seeing in these images: people connecting with nature. And people doing the hard work to protect it.

That's what NRCM is all about.

That's what tonight's awards are all about. People protecting what they love.

These are challenging times, with lots of reasons to be worried about the future.

But we also have a lot to be thankful for. And tonight, I would like us to be in that frame of mind –

- Thankful for the natural world that is so accessible to us here in Maine
- Thankful for the heroes who work so hard to protect Maine's environment

- And thankful for the progress we've made.

With your help, we've made tremendous progress here in Maine.

During the past four years at the State House, we passed more than 100 pro-environment bills. These have been the most successful years for environmental policy in decades:

- \$40 million for the Land for Maine's Future program
- \$50 million for Maine State Park upgrades
- New protections for 800 miles of rivers and streams
- A ban on out-of-state waste
- A plan for designing a clean energy grid for our future
- A first-in-the-nation product stewardship program for packaging waste
- Clean drinking water for the Passamaquoddy Tribe at Sipayik
- And much more.

In contrast, the previous eight years were all about stopping bad bills. We succeeded at that, too, defeating 100 proposed rollbacks.

Many of you were involved in that work.

Democrats and Republicans, young and old, from all parts of the state.

Speaking up to protect our environmental laws from being weakened.

In these partisan times, that says something.

It tells us that Maine people are committed to protecting this place.

It tells us that Maine's environment is a unifying force.

With a power that defines who we are.

A power that motivates activism.

And a power that creates conservation leaders, including many of you in this room.

Since 1987, NRCM has recognized 170 individuals and groups with an award for their conservation leadership.

Tonight, we'll add more to that list – to the Hall of Fame for protecting Maine.

We'll recognize outstanding individuals and organizations who have done amazing work, channeling their passion for Maine's environment into action.

We'll focus on leaders, recognizing that these individuals are part of a network of people who play critical roles. None of us does this work alone. Everything is in coalition.

In fact, we have a network of networks that creates a safety net for Maine's environment – involving land trusts and lake associations, large groups and small groups, volunteers, and professionals.

This safety net involves thousands of people who work to defend, protect, and restore the woods, waters, and wildlife of Maine.

Within that network, we have outstanding leaders who provide jolts of energy that bind us to each other, and to the natural world.

This brings me to the broader meaning of NRCM's Conservation Leadership Awards, and why I like this program so much.

Which is this: We firmly believe that Maine would be a different, much more polluted, and less desirable place than it is today if not for the leaders and the networks of Maine people and groups who have worked so hard for Maine's environment over the past 60 years.

Tonight, we will be recognizing a handful of those individuals and groups. But I also want us to understand that we have countless conservation leaders in Maine who do important work every day.

So, before we get to our awards, I would like to lead us in another round of applause for everyone who is involved in working to protect Maine's environment.

And now, let's move on to the awards portion of our program. Which is why we're here.