



Spirit of the

There's an ancient magic in Maine's highest mountain.

BY COLIN W. SARGENT

MODERN MYTHS

WHETHER OR NOT they've heard the song "Climb Ev'ry Mountain," some Penobscot natives are shy about climbing to the top of Mount Katahdin.

That's because it's holy ground.

Is it *Wuchhosen*, the wind bird, who lives up there, flapping his wings to create great storms? Or is it the Spirit of Katahdin, jealous of his solitude. Or is it the dominion

of Gluskap, creator of the Earth? Whatever your choice of spirits, the aspect of the supernatural is strong.

In a piece for *Sierra Magazine*, Jason Mark points to Robert Moor's book *On Trails* for an elevated example of the sublime as well as the tension that existed between Penobscot guides and the rustivating explorers who employed them. "In 1846, Henry David Thoreau made a failed bid to climb Mount Katahdin, the highest peak in the state of Maine. He and two companions

made their way to its base by canoe, guided by an old Indian man named Louis Neptune, who advised Thoreau to leave a bottle of rum on top of the mountain to appease the mountain spirit."

Thoreau and his party "got lost in the fog and never made it to the summit," according to Moor.

Time has erased the trifling detail of who ended up with the rum.

But Moor notes that while descending, alarmed by the savage majesty of the



Mountain

Ancient Connections

Barry Dana grew up on the Penobscot River and currently works to teach Wabanaki culture to native youth to preserve the traditions of his people. We talk to the tribal leader about the spiritual significance of the mountain for the Penobscots.

mountain's hunched shoulders around him, Thoreau experienced a 150-proof insight. *Sierra Magazine* calls it a "meltdown":

"This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man's garden, but the unhand-selled globe. It was not lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor woodland, nor lea, nor arable, nor wasteland...Man was not to be associated with it. It was Matter, vast, terrific...rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid earth!* the *actual world!* the common sense! *Contact! Contact!*"

What was your first impression of Katahdin, and why is the summit so spiritually significant to Penobscots?

I first visited Mt. Katahdin as a freshman in high school on a class trip. I was blown away with what I saw and have returned every year to maintain that connection. Why would I agree to give, convey, or teach about that which is sacred to me and my people, the Wabanaki? Because if I don't, it will be even more likely that people will continue to disrespect the mountain. When I say mountain, it's not just the top but the

entire area that makes up the mountain, from the top down to as far down as the blueberry ledges, including all the designated campgrounds.

What are your personal feelings about the top of Katahdin? Have you ever been there?

Yes, I've been to the top of Katahdin. I've climbed it in search of enlightenment, guided by my intuition. Indigenous cultures all over the globe look to the mountains for spiritual insight. Too many explorers and climbers confuse this inner voice of mountaintop connection with a need to "conquer" the mountain. I think this to be unfortunate because, should they not reach the peak, they feel as though they have failed. Too much ego robs one of spiritual happiness.

(Continued on page 128)



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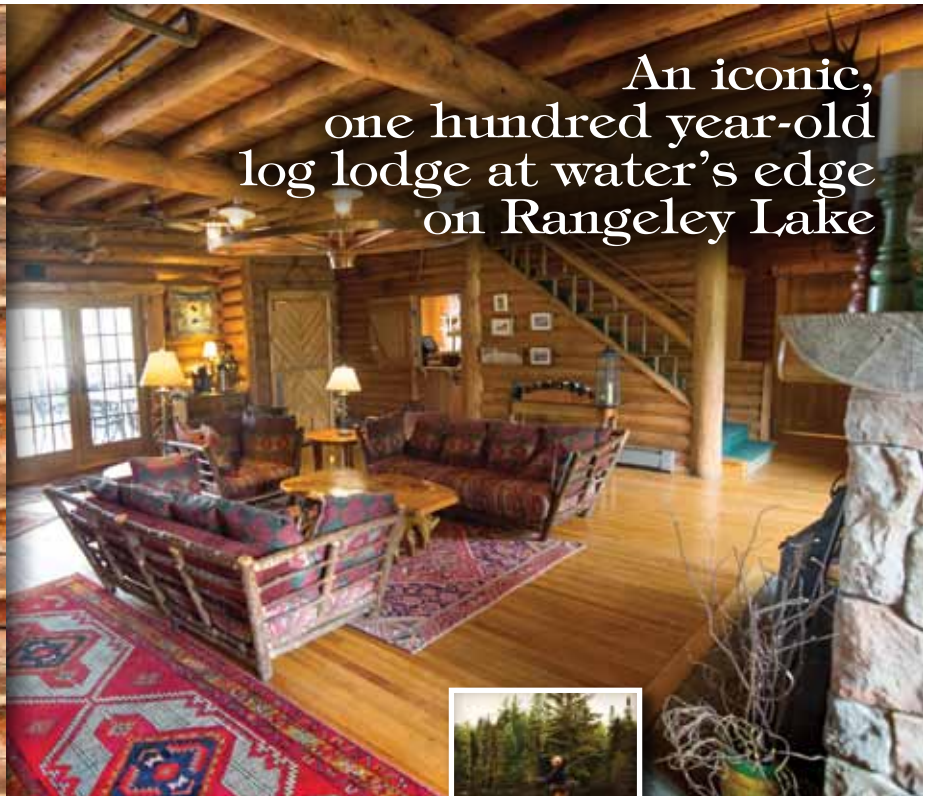
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OUTLOOK



Barry Dana with his daughter, Maulian Dana-Smith. "This is taken at Katahdin Stream Campground. We'd just finished our annual ceremonial run to the mountain. Maulian did a relay run with her husband, Sean, from Indian Island. I hiked 100 miles from Monson to Katahdin. We finished at almost the exact same time. Maulian has made this annual ceremonial journey to Katahdin her entire life."

Spirit of the Mountain (continued from page 125)

In 1846, Louis Neptune advised Thoreau to bring a bottle of rum to place for the spirit at the top of the mountain. Why?

We'll never truly know why Louis Neptune told Thoreau what he did, but I see it as a word of caution. And a bottle of alcohol as an offering? I have no idea! That makes no sense and is definitely not in keeping with true native religious thinking. But Penobscots are really good at playing tricks and pulling your leg...

Can you tell me if it's true that many members of the Penobscot Tribe refuse to climb to the very top of Katahdin?

Why do we natives say not to go there? Think about who we say it to: white people who need to conquer a sacred place. That does not lead to good karma. For my tribe, we see Katahdin as the place of our birth, where life began. It can't get any more special than that. We still live within its shadow and honor our birth by returning to the mountain. We go to the top if need be for spiritual enlightenment and ceremony, some simply for the pleasure that comes from looking out across so many hundreds of miles. It's medicine for the soul. But we recognize that it is a mountain with an angry mood at times. It has its own weatherstorms that can pop up without warning.

Mount Katahdin

Elevation: 5,269 feet

Northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail

23 fatalities since 1963

63,000 **visitors per year** to Baxter State Park

The name **Katahdin** comes from an **Abenaki** Indian word that means "main mountain."



Katahdin Calls

BY HALEY SNYDER

Waking up **early** is the name of the game when **hiking to the top of Katahdin**. Parking spots are first come first serve, so a **5:30 a.m. departure** from your campsite is a necessity, as it's a **45-minute drive to the base of Katahdin** from the **entrance to Baxter State Park**.

If you're looking for a relatively **easier hike** (rare as that is on Katahdin), park your car at **Roaring Brook campground**, where a **three-mile hike** to the **breathtaking Chimney Pond** provides access to the **2.2-mile Saddle Trail**, the least strenuous of all the trails. The most popular routes for day hikes are up the Cathedral Trail and down the Hunt Trail, or just up and down the Hunt Trail, which is also part of the Appalachian Trail. **The most famous-and dangerous-hike** is known as the **Knife Edge**: a 1.1-mile scramble between Pamola Peak and Baxter Peak on a trail that in certain sections is only **3 feet wide**. It is this precipitous traverse that has claimed the most lives to date. In all, since 1963, there have been 23 recorded deaths.

The weather is unpredictable, the terrain is demanding, and carrying a large amount of water is crucial, but the **sweeping views** from the top of Mount Katahdin are truly incomparable.

The old stories about not going to the top of Katahdin were more of a caution. Be mindful of why you feel the need to be there. Keep an eye on the weather.

What exact place in Maine is most authentic to you, and why? If there's such a thing as a cradle of authenticity in Maine, where and what would that be? I do not view Katahdin as part of Bax-

ter State Park, nor do I view my homeland as "Maine." So when asked, I can't say what or where is "authentic." Maine is not a place unto itself. This area that includes the ocean, rivers, lakes, and mountains is all one living ecosystem dependant upon the whole in order to thrive. It's one living organism. We call it *Wabanakigok*: Land of the Rising Sun. ■


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