



Testimony before the
Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary
By Kaitlyn Bernard, Natural Resources Policy Advisor

May 4, 2021

RE: LD 1626, An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Task Force on Changes to the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Implementing Act.

Senator Carney, Representative Harnett, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary, my name is Kaitlyn Bernard and I am the Natural Resources Policy Advisor for The Nature Conservancy in Maine. I appreciate this opportunity to testify **in support of LD 1626**, An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Task Force on Changes to the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Implementing Act.

The Nature Conservancy is a nonprofit conservation organization dedicated to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. We have been working in Maine for more than 60 years protecting land, restoring rivers and streams, rebuilding groundfish populations in the Gulf of Maine, and developing innovative solutions to address climate change. We are also part of a global organization active in all 50 of the United States and across the world in over 70 countries. The Nature Conservancy recognizes that Indigenous Peoples and local communities are some of the most important partners in the global effort to contain climate change and preserve biodiversity.

Too often when it comes to the decisions that affect their lands, waters, and livelihoods, Indigenous Peoples have been denied the opportunity to participate in meaningful ways, resulting in the exclusion of important rights-holders from decision-making processes and in management approaches that do not consider the lessons and solutions offered by Indigenous Ecological Knowledge. As an organization committed to creating a future of healthy lands, waters, and communities, we believe that one of the most effective and enduring actions we can take is to strengthen Indigenous Peoples' voices, choices, and actions in natural resource stewardship. This is a major focus of TNC's work around the world.

As an organization, The Nature Conservancy has endorsed the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). The UNDRIP describes the fundamental rights of Indigenous Peoples and supporting principles necessary to protect and fulfil those fundamental rights. 144

countries voted in favor of the UNDRIP in 2007, and the four countries that voted against it at the time have since reversed course and now affirm their support for the UNDRIP. In addition to endorsing the Declaration, TNC has committed itself to respecting its principles, using it as a reference in policy development, and serving as an ally to Indigenous efforts to grow the influence of the UNDRIP in development and policy reform contexts around the world. The Declaration is organized around the central principle that Indigenous Peoples have the right to self-determination.

Here in Maine, we continue to learn about the historical and ongoing injustices faced by the Wabanaki Tribes. We acknowledge the urgency of addressing these injustices, and we value the work of the Maine Indian Land Claims Settlement Task Force in developing a package of recommendations aimed at doing so. Our support for LD 1626 is guided by what we have learned from the Wabanaki in our past partnerships here in Maine and from other Indigenous partnerships around the globe. It is deeply rooted in our organizational understanding that Indigenous self-determination, as expressed most strongly in the UNDRIP, is the foundation for lasting, quality conservation outcomes.

The recommendations outlined in LD1626 represent an important step toward recognizing the rights to self-determination and sovereignty of the Wabanaki Tribes in Maine, which The Nature Conservancy strongly supports. We believe tribal sovereignty is critical for the Tribes in Maine to achieve in order to regain their equal status to the 570 other federally recognized tribes in the US, and to participate meaningfully in natural resource management decisions. Ultimately, long-term conservation where both people and nature thrive is not possible without justice and equity for all people.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.