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# Couple Makes Case for North Woods National Park

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LEWISTON — Magnificent scenes flashed across the movie screen as the room filled with the sounds of loons, coyotes and rushing waters. Vivid images and recordings of moose, bear, deer, loons and an array of other wildlife were captured by the photography team Thomas and Lee Ann Szelog.

The couple have spent the last 25 years documenting some of Maine's most majestic scenery through photography and writing. And their lifelong passion leads their effort today to capture hearts and minds as they call for the creation of a new national park right in Maine's vast northern woods.

"The wildlife has no voice and no choice, but we as humans have a powerful voice and a powerful choice," Lee Ann Szelog said Monday night as she addressed the crowd of nearly 100 people attending the Stanton Bird Club's 93rd annual dinner. "It's about protecting this ecosystem for our future. Each one of us has the power to influence others."

The couple brought their ongoing effort to preserve 3.2 million acres in Maine's North Woods as the nation's newest national park. The idea — introduced more than 20 years ago by Restore: The North Woods — has drawn both interest and criticism over the last two decades.

The Szelogs spent the last five years documenting the splendor of the proposed Maine Woods National Park in an effort to raise awareness about the rich wildlife and delicate ecosystem existing there. The Maine Woods National Park Photo-Documentation Project is also showcased in a compelling book and traveling fine-art photography exhibit.

"Nature doesn't need the human species. The human species needs nature," Thomas Szelog said.

In 2011, businesswoman Roxanne Quimby proposed a smaller-scale version of the original plan. Over the years she used proceeds from the sales of her highly successful business, Burt's Bees, to buy more than 100,000 acres of Maine timberland. She announced plans to donate 70,000 acres along the Penobscot River's East Branch bordering on Baxter State Park to form the nucleus of a new national park.

The Szelogs' presentation showcased the wildlife of the proposed park and discussed the ecological benefits the preservation effort would provide.

"I think you're going to have a difficult time in the state of Maine when you talk about no hunting," said Dana Little of Auburn, a member of the Stanton Bird Club and a board member of the Androscoggin Land Trust. "I support the idea of a preserved park, but I don't know if it's ideal in Maine." Little said his concern comes from the fact that designating the project as a national park would prohibit hunting and other popular land uses such as snowmobiling. He agrees with preserving the land, but points out that groups such as hunters or snowmobile enthusiasts might feel excluded from the land they love as much as conservationists on the other side. "I support the idea of a preserved park," Little said, adding, "You've got to work with people."