



Acres for Wal-Mart

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My local newspaper, the *Portland (Maine) Press Herald*, reported last week, in glowing front-page coverage, that an effort to protect a tract of northern forestland from development had "taken a huge step forward" thanks to Wal-Mart.

Similar stories of treasured lands gaining protection with help from Wal-Mart ran in hundreds of newspapers across the country under such headlines as, "Wal-Mart grant will help fund Squaw Creek conservation plan," and "Wal-Mart to aid in effort to protect Grand Canyon."

Known for squeezing every last dime out of employees and suppliers, Wal-Mart has even managed to get a rock-bottom deal on corporate green-washing. For just \$35 million--less than one percent of last year's profits--the world's largest corporation has burnished its environmental image and garnered a cascade of laudatory press coverage.

Under the deal, dubbed "Acres for America," Wal-Mart will donate this money--doled out over the next 10 years--to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, an outfit created by Congress that counts among its "partners" ExxonMobil and Alcoa. NFWF will use the funds to purchase land or secure conservation easements on wildlife habitat across the country.

"Acres for America will permanently conserve at least one acre of priority wildlife habitat for every developed acre of Wal-Mart's current footprint, as well as the company's future development over the next 10 years," NFWF's press release said.

One acre conserved for every acre developed. That's a clever construction, designed to leave the impression that Wal-Mart's donation fully mitigates its environmental impact.

The press release goes on: "This puts the minimum total acres to be protected at 138,000." If it's one-for-one, then this is also how many acres Wal-Mart intends to occupy by 2015. That's an astounding figure. Currently Wal-Mart's 3,600 U.S. stores and 100 distribution centers, including their parking lots, occupy roughly 75,000 acres. Apparently the company intends to almost double its footprint over the next 10 years.

In Maine, even as Wal-Mart secures easements on northern forest land, it's also cutting down forest and filling wetlands elsewhere in the state. In the town of Scarborough, Wal-Mart plans to abandon one store--leaving a carcass the size of two football fields

surrounded by acres of asphalt--and clear-cut a wooded site across the street to build an even bigger supercenter. The "old" Wal-Mart opened in 1993.

"Protecting our environment is simply the right thing to do," Wal-Mart vice president Mike Duke said in announcing the Acres for America deal.

This from a company that spent the last few years trying to pave the Penjajawoc Marsh in Bangor. Identified by state officials as "the single most significant emergent marsh for waterbirds in Maine," the Penjajawoc is home to numerous rare and endangered birds. Wal-Mart fought hard to develop the marsh, but was ultimately blocked by a tenacious citizens group that persuaded the state to intervene.

But even more than the individual examples, it is the totality of Wal-Mart's impact on our environment that must be weighed against its \$35 million donation. No other company has done more to make running our daily errands an ecologically hazardous activity.

Wal-Mart has destroyed tens of thousands of neighborhood and downtown businesses. Situated in multi-story buildings that did not require acres of parking, these stores took up comparatively little space and provided goods and services a short distance from homes and apartments.

Today, even the simplest of errands, like picking up a gallon of milk or a box of nails, often requires driving several miles to a big-box store. Indeed, American households log 50 percent more vehicle miles each year for shopping than we did in 1990.

In addition to the damage to our air and climate, polluted runoff from parking lots now ranks as a top threat to rivers and lakes. According to the Center for Watershed Protection, no other land use produces a larger volume of toxic runoff than big-box retail.

It's not that excessive land consumption is simply a side effect of the growth of companies like Wal-Mart, Target and Home Depot. It's a core part of their business strategy. Bulldozing undeveloped land is not only cheaper than adjusting their cookie-cutter stores to fit an infill site or, worse, an existing building, but flooding the market with excess capacity by erecting multiple giant stores also makes it easier to capsize smaller competitors.

Since Wal-Mart opened its first store in 1962, the amount of retail store space per capita in the U.S. has grown tenfold. We now have five to six times as much store space as other industrialized nations.

Do we really need all of this retail? Hardly. A staggering amount of it now sits empty. Hundreds of vacant strip shopping centers and malls, and thousands of abandoned big-box stores now litter the landscape.

Wal-Mart alone has more than 300 empty stores nationwide. Most were abandoned after the company opened larger stores in the same market. Wal-Mart's annual report says that it plans to "relocate" (i.e., vacate) up to 150 stores this year.

Environmentalists are not the only ones sounding the alarm about this fast-spreading blight. In a recent advisory report to real estate investors, PricewaterhouseCoopers declared, "The most over-retailed country in the world hardly needs more shopping outlets of any kind."

Yet they continue to build. Wal-Mart, Home Depot, Target, Lowe's and other big-box retailers plan to unroll thousands of new stores in the coming years, many slated for fields, forests and wetlands. It's high time we put a stop to this.

Some communities already are. They're adopting planning and zoning policies that limit large-scale, auto-oriented development and channel investment into downtowns and walkable business districts.

As consumers, we can back a greener economy by doing more of our shopping at local businesses, especially those that source goods locally. We ought to strongly object to Wal-Mart's propaganda and to NFWF's shameless assertion that Wal-Mart is "raising the bar in conservation." Acres for America is less about conservation than it is about smoothing the way for many more acres for Wal-Mart.

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