



the preserve

A letter from Tate Bushell, Director of Natural Lands, about the Preserve's new leash policy

Once or twice a week I bring my two and a half year-old daughter to Little Long Pond so she can give dog treats (she calls them “dodos”) to random dogs. She knows some dogs by name, and she is quickly learning the behaviors of some of the more common breeds. Since we lost our dog Moose, a Little Long Pond regular, one and a half years ago, this is how she connects to her puppy friends. Through the eyes of a loving father, I see the magic that dogs, both leashed and unleashed, bring to Little Long Pond, or “dodo-land” as my daughter calls it, and I know how the Preserve's relaxed dog leash policy makes this a special place.

I also know that Little Long Pond gets over 65,000 visitors each year, and about 50% of parties bring one or more dogs (we know because we've spent many hours counting!). I've seen this number of visiting dogs have negative impacts on the environment and the visitor experience. I believe that it's virtually impossible for someone to visit Little Long Pond during the summer months and not experience dogs, and I don't believe that this should be so. This compelled us to – for the first time – critically analyze our policies regarding dogs. The Preserve's mission is to *conserve* and *share* the historic lands and gardens of Mount Desert Island. We want to make sure those two mandates are balanced.

Nine months ago, we organized an eight-person group to look closely at our leash policy. The group was composed of Preserve staff, board directors, colleagues at other organizations, and community members – all of whom have walked their dogs on the Preserve's natural lands. Our process included a systematic examination of visitor and dog-related data and how this information related to the Preserve's mission, vision, and values (below). Examples of data include peer-reviewed scientific articles on the impact of dogs on wildlife and natural resources; Little Long Pond visitation records and patterns; the results of two community surveys that we conducted; formal complaints from visitors experiencing negative interactions with dogs; and recently collected botanical data. In total, sixteen considerations formed our body of information.

New policies were developed from this intensive, thoughtful analysis. They will be implemented on May 1, 2025. The policies at Harbor Brook, Hunters Cliffs and Day Mountain are stricter than at Little Long Pond to protect the sensitive and unique environments in those areas.

Little Long Pond: May 1 through September 30, dogs must be leashed between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.

Harbor Brook Trail: No dogs are permitted.

Hunters Cliffs & Day Mountain: Dogs must always be leashed.

As always, the Preserve expects that all dogs are under their owners control at all times.

With these new policies we aim to find a more peaceful balance between the types of experiences visitors can have on our natural lands and better protect our natural resources including soil, water, plants, and animals. Like other conservation organizations including Acadia National Park, the Preserve needs to make difficult decisions about how much we share versus how much we conserve. These new policies shift the scales – to a reasonable degree, we believe – in favor of conserving, while leaving ample energy for sharing.

I know it may seem impossible, but we believe that these policies will make the Preserve's natural lands an even more enjoyable place to visit and leave it in a better condition for our children and grandchildren. To achieve this, we will need your collective support. Please take note of the policies and plan accordingly. Bring a leash to Little Long Pond if you think your visit will extend into 'leash time.' Staff will be available to provide gentle reminders.

I have explained the new policy to my daughter, and she seems to intuitively understand. With a smile she said, "You are just helping people to share dodo-land?" "Yes, honey," I said. All of us at the Preserve look forward to continuing to responsibly share the natural lands, as a model for my daughter and for every other young person who will inherit these special places.