

The Magazine of Maine  EST. 1954

# Down East

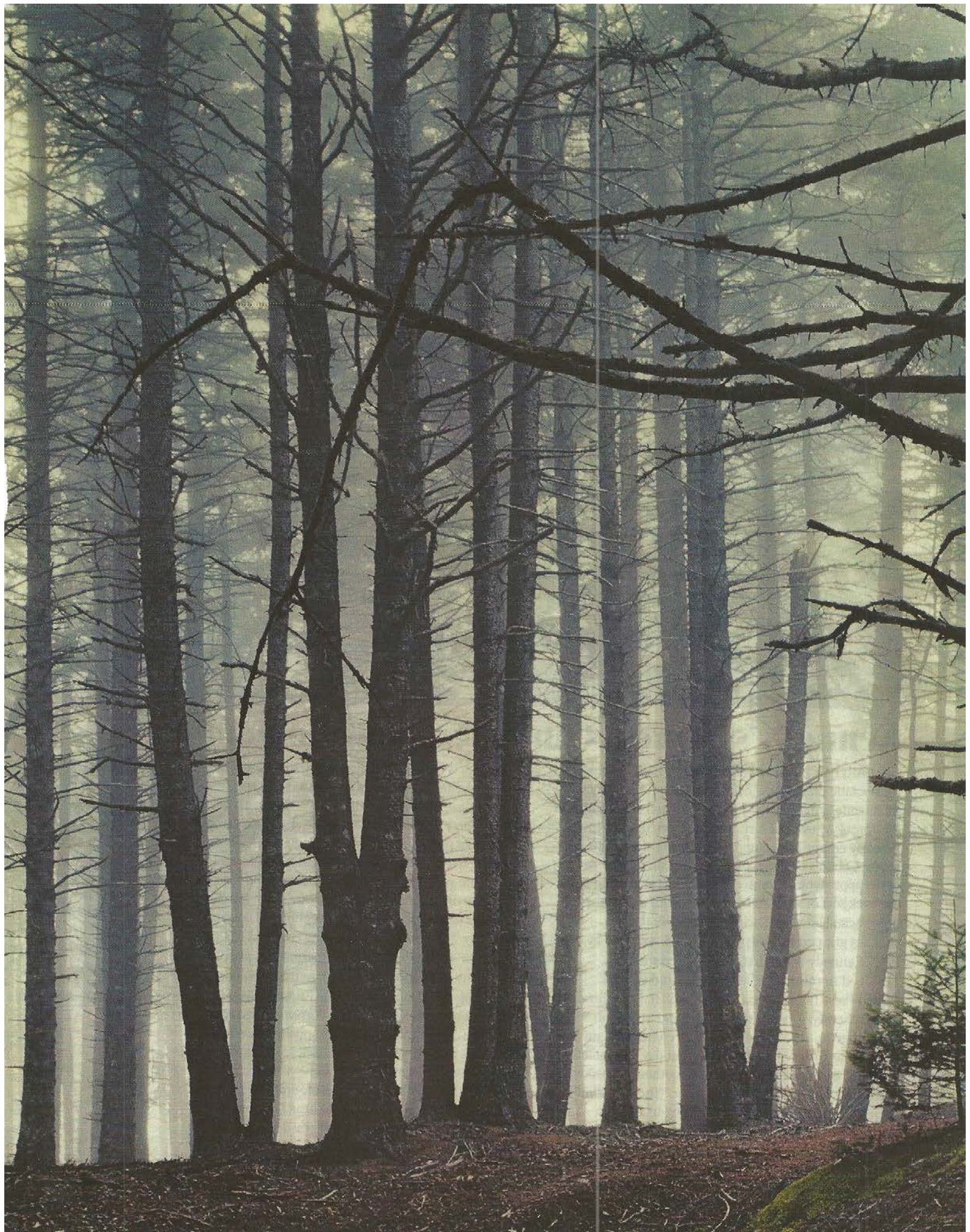
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# The Quiet Woods That Launched a Medium

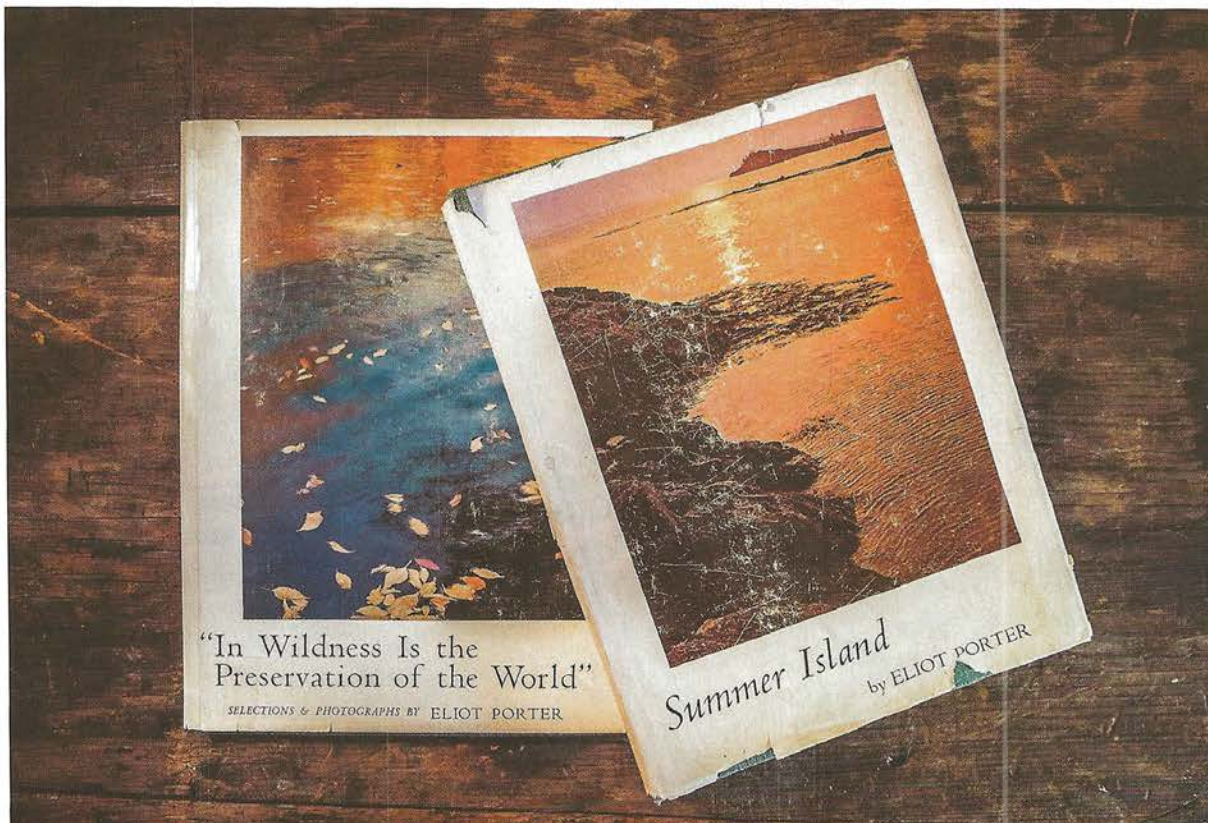
ELIOT PORTER had a knack for turning a seemingly ordinary natural encounter into an experience of extraordinary beauty and poignancy. In this photo, *Spruce Trees in Fog*, *Great Spruce Head Island, Maine*, the viewer is invited onto Porter's family island in Penobscot Bay, into his maritime forest, and as we emerge from the fog, we find ourselves in a spruce grove standing sentinel over the island. Taken on August 20, 1954 – a specific moment in time – the photograph also manages to be atemporal. This view could be of Maine in 1853, when Henry David Thoreau wandered the woods; it could be of 2017. But in Porter's work, driven as it was by a conservationist ethos, the question the viewer is being asked is whether the trees, the forest, and the wilderness will persist.

*Spruce Trees in Fog* is the closing photo in – and most renowned image from – a book that, in a sense, changed the way Americans view art. Published in 1962 by the Sierra Club, *In Wildness Is the Preservation of the World* married Porter's rich color photographs of New England woods and bogs with quotes from Henry David Thoreau in a handsome, large-format hardcover. It was a new take on publishing photography: the first modern coffee-table book. *In Wildness* sold more than a million copies, and Porter went on to serve on the Sierra Club's board of directors, alongside his friend Ansel Adams.

In an era when most serious photographers, like Adams, worked only in black-and-white, Porter revealed the wonders of ordinary and extraordinary landscapes in full color. He'd studied biochemistry at Harvard and later became a medical doctor, continuing photography as a hobby until a successful gallery show in New York inspired him to pursue it full time. Ever the scientist, he pioneered an elaborate dye-transfer printing process that produced incredibly rich and saturated color prints. As Porter's star rose, he undertook a variety of place-based ecological studies across the globe – and the resulting books helped grow the ranks of the Sierra Club. Maine and Great Spruce Head, however, remained an important touchstone each summer.

Porter used photography for advocacy around conservation issues; his images served as compelling visual arguments for preservation and legislation. He once said of his work, "My pictures are a form of editorial comment; they show the way I feel." I'm drawn to this image because to me, it *feels* like Maine. I can smell the fog, the moss, and the desiccated leaves underfoot. It makes me want to go for a long walk in the Maine woods, taking time to reconnect with the wildness that will continue to sustain us if we continue to ensure its existence. — LIBBY BISCHOF, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF HISTORY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE AND CO-AUTHOR OF MAINE PHOTOGRAPHY: A HISTORY, 1840-2015

#5



Porter and the Sierra Club followed *In Wildness with Summer Island: Penobscot County*, a similar book focused entirely on Porter's beloved Great Spruce Head Island.

Eliot Porter (1901–1990)  
*Spruce Trees in Fog*,  
Maine, 1954  
Color photograph  
17 3/4 x 14 in  
Bates College Museum  
of Art  
Gift of the Textile Arts  
Foundation, 1996.13.3