



Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs
% Legislative Information Office
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

January 9, 2024

RE: LD 1642, An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in Maine Schools

Dear Sen. Rafferty, Rep. Brennan, and Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee:

My name is Francesca “Ches” Gundrum and I am Maine Audubon’s Policy Advocate, presenting testimony on behalf of our Director of Education Eric Topper. Maine Audubon fulfills our mission to conserve Maine’s wildlife and wildlife habitat by engaging people of all ages in nature through a science-based approach to education, conservation, and advocacy. On behalf of Maine Audubon and our 30,000 members, supporters, and volunteers, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of LD 1642, *An Act to Strengthen the Teaching of Wabanaki Studies in Maine Schools*.

The Abenaki, Penobscot, Mi’kmaq, Maliseet, and Passamaquoddy have been stewards and advocates for wildlife and habitat here for more than ten thousand years. Generations of Wabanaki youth have been shaped to act and think with future generations in mind. Leaders and elders instill values such as respect, relationship, reciprocity, and responsibility, especially with regard to the natural resources around them. While terms such as environmental literacy, sustainability, community science, phenology, climatology, etc. are much newer, those ways of knowing have been here as long as people have. Too many Maine students have not had the opportunity to learn about Wabanaki history *or* these essential concepts. The Wabanaki Studies Commission should be reestablished to address current barriers and challenges to fully implementing the 2001 Wabanaki Studies law and provide dependable and expert guidance on what resources exist to teach Wabanaki Studies in Maine schools.

For the past five or so years, Maine Audubon has worked closely with Wabanaki experts and advisors to integrate indigenous knowledge into environmental education programs for people of all ages, especially for Maine youth. We have also collaborated with Portland Public Schools to help integrate Wabanaki Studies, particularly the experiential fieldwork, at landscape scale, for all K-12 students in Maine’s largest and most diverse school district. By blending indigenous knowledge with the Western sciences of biology, botany, ornithology, etc., these programs focus on a broadened notion of ecology that is more inclusive of people and our communities. Studying Wabanaki culture helps connect Maine kids to this place – the lifeways, the food, the medicine, the climate, the relationships with plants and animals which have helped our species thrive here for millennia. Just as important for

us, however, is for Maine youth to gain from reflecting on how Wabanaki people and communities have been treated, their resilience, and how we continue to benefit from those people, communities, and cultures. The creation and regular convening of a Wabanaki Studies Commission and resources for teachers will help ensure that all Maine youth and districts gain the additional perspective and tools they will need to tackle the environmental, economic, and social challenges they will inherit, while also instilling the pride and confidence that this place we now call Maine has what they need to thrive.

We honor the Wabanaki and Abenaki people among us today, and express our deepest gratitude for their knowledge, legacy, and continued resilience, all of which guide and inspire Maine Audubon's own mission and work. It is our responsibility to ensure current and future generations receive the highest quality education. Frankly, that cannot be done without thorough and consistent teaching of Wabanaki Studies in all Maine schools.

We urge this committee to support LD 1642. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eric Topper", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Eric Topper | Director of Education