

The Maine Trust Project

“We need people in our lives with whom we can be as open as possible. To have real conversations with people may seem like such a simple, obvious suggestion, but it involves courage and risk,” wrote 18th-century Irish poet, singer and songwriter Thomas Moore.

In this mistrust-filled world full of political contention and both fake and devastating news, mustering such courage is challenging. Finding common ground and engaging in civil conversations about important issues facing our communities, our state, our country and our world can seem elusive, if not sadly impossible.

This concerning state of affairs prompted Pine Tree Watch to examine the concept of trust. And thus, we’re launching a new series called “The Maine Trust Project.” Each month, we’ll sit down with a Maine resident to discuss this precious commodity. We’ll see which people and institutions Mainers trust and how the concept of trust drives their thought processes and actions.

<https://pinetreewatch.org/embracing-trust-in-the-most-basic-yet-meaningful-relationships/>

Embracing trust in the most basic — yet meaningful — relationships

By Stephanie Bouchard | February 20, 2020

Get to know Ann Rivers

Age: 64

Hometown: Bar Harbor

Religious affiliation: None

Political affiliation: Democrat

How she describes herself: I’m stubborn. I’m persistent. I’m not fancy. I just like to be with my kids, and I like to walk and be with the animals and watch TV and go to bed. I’m very glad to be doing work that, for me, makes a difference in the world because so many people don’t have that chance.

How she defines trust: I define it as having known a person or animal long enough that their behavior makes sense to me. I know what they’re going to do or not do. So, a reliability built up over time.

BAR HARBOR – When wildlife rehabilitator Ann Rivers takes in three-week-old bobcats, their eyes are a bright blue and they look pretty similar to our pet cats, but make no mistake: these kittens are not tame. There is, however, a trust that develops between human caregiver and wild kitten, Ann says. “It’s a mother-baby bond.”

To acclimate them to their natural environment and prepare them to be successful on their own, Ann walks with the growing kittens through the woods on paths that surround her Bar Harbor

home. She has operated Acadia Wildlife Center — a nonprofit wildlife rehabilitation and nature education facility set on 15 acres of wooded land adjacent to Acadia National Park — since 1997.

The kittens, unleashed, follow her wherever she goes just as they would their bobcat mother. Out in the woods at night, she watches them reacting to sounds only they can hear. It's a wondrous feeling, she said, to be out in the dark with these babies who will grow up to be skilled hunters and survivors.

“The fact that I turn around and decide to go home and they turn around and come with me — there's just this amazing relationship that I realize most people don't get a chance to experience,” she said.

She knows her time with these wild creatures is short. In just a few months, they go off on their own and don't look back. But during those nighttime walks, “I'm getting to peek into their otherhood,” she said. “All the things that they can do that I can't do — I'm getting to see a little bit of it, and they trust me to let me go along for the ride, to be the shepherd for a little while.”

Q&A:

Pine Tree Watch: Who meets your definition of trust?

Ann: There's a certain level of trust that's reserved for a very small circle of people — those that I can trust with my life and with my heart — so my children and a small circle of friends. Then there's another level of trust, and from that perspective, generally, I basically trust everybody when I first meet them, because I think people are good for the most part.

Pine Tree Watch: Who doesn't meet your definition of trust?

Ann: I interact with the public a lot — they bring me injured animals. Sometimes they are uneducated about things and so may be making choices that aren't the best because they don't know better. If I correct them but they continue to behave in a manner that is damaging, I think those people are untrustworthy. It's one thing to be doing something harmful out of ignorance but something else entirely to know and yet continue to do harm.

The other thing I would say is that I don't trust the government any more — politicians at the federal level. I can't say that I distrust Donald Trump, because he's never hidden what he is. So what's disappointing me the most right now at the federal level is that I depended on the rest of the government to act in a moral manner, and if that meant damaging themselves, so be it.

But they haven't, and they aren't. They didn't over (Supreme Court Justice Brett) Kavanaugh and they didn't over all of Trump's stuff. So, it's not him in particular that I distrust — although I wouldn't trust him any farther than I can throw him — but it's the people around him that are not standing up and saying, “Wait a minute — this is wrong.” Why aren't they?

Pine Tree Watch: What breaks trust for you?

Ann: When somebody you knew inside and out acts in a way that is totally different and totally more hurtful than they acted ever before. Not only is trust broken with that person, that broken trust makes me feel that I can't trust myself and my judgment.

Pine Tree Watch: Can broken trust be healed and if so, what has to happen for healing to take place?

Ann: I think it's possible if people put the work in, but I've never had somebody who I was really close to who I had a falling out with say, "I'm really sorry. Let's talk through this," so I do not know how I would act. I think I would be forgiving under those circumstances, and I would try. But if they have not even tried to get trust back, have not even made any effort? Then I'm pretty much done.

Pine Tree Watch: How does trust work between you and wild animals? Do you think they trust you?

Ann: While they're in here, there's a real special kind of trust that goes on. I prove my trustworthiness to them by doing a series of behaviors: I clean. I feed. I do some things that they don't like but they let me do because they know who I am basically from the minute they come in here. I do what I do, and I don't change the routine. I don't suddenly freak them out.

And I can trust them because I know for each species and for particular individuals that they have a certain set of behaviors. I know what they will and won't do. I can trust them to act as I expect them to act for their species; they aren't suddenly going to become ax murderers.

Now, it's a different thing entirely if the animals have been taken in by humans as "pets," which is illegal but still happens. You can't trust those animals because their natural behaviors have been altered because of their contact with people. A few years ago, I had a great horned owl here that somebody had as a pet. I never knew what it was going to do. It had lost its balance. That's what people do to animals when they take them out of the wild and tame them.

A lot of people will come through the door and they'll have a baby bird sitting in their hand, and they'll say, "Look, the baby bird loves me!" Well, no. It's either got a concussion or it's really young and doesn't know any better.

Wild animals take each moment as they come and do the best things for themselves in that moment. So, if trusting is to their advantage while they're here, then yes, they will trust me. "She is trustworthy because in this moment she will give me things that I need." That doesn't mean they love or even like me. I've raised a lot of babies from birth, and they're not all trying to come back. They've got their own lives to live. The minute they're ready, they go and they never look back.

Pine Tree Watch: What worries you?

Ann: The thing closest to my heart is how badly things are going environmentally. I have a lot of faith in animals and plants rejuvenating or adapting and surviving through an awful lot of things, but some of the things that are going on environmentally feel too big for that faith any more. It feels like it's not going to work out. I think for the climate issues we are facing now, they can't

be solved just by individuals doing their small part. I think governments have got to get involved, but I don't have a lot of faith in governments, especially my own, which has been going backward on so many things lately.

Pine Tree Watch: What inspires you?

Ann: My kids inspire me a lot. They're persistent, even when facing a lack of encouragement. Individuals who do amazing things, like (climate activist) Greta Thunberg, inspire me. The Earth inspires me. I'm just amazed every day at what animals and plants can do. They're much more complicated and deeper than we can imagine.

Pine Tree Watch: What issues do you think are important today?

Ann: Besides climate change, I'm extremely disturbed by the fact that we seem to be pulling away from being a community with the rest of the world to being out for ourselves. Everything is global now, and we've got to be thinking globally. We're making a lot of mistakes and cozying up to a lot of people we shouldn't be cozying up to.

And the upcoming presidential election. I don't like any of the Democratic candidates. There's nobody that shines. I don't know who to vote for. It seems like Donald Trump will once again manage to wiggle his way through when nobody else could, so I'm worried. The policies that he's doing bother me tremendously, but the fact that he's an ass really bothers me. He treats everybody so poorly, and he's so rude. Is this what we're doing now? It's really hard to swallow.