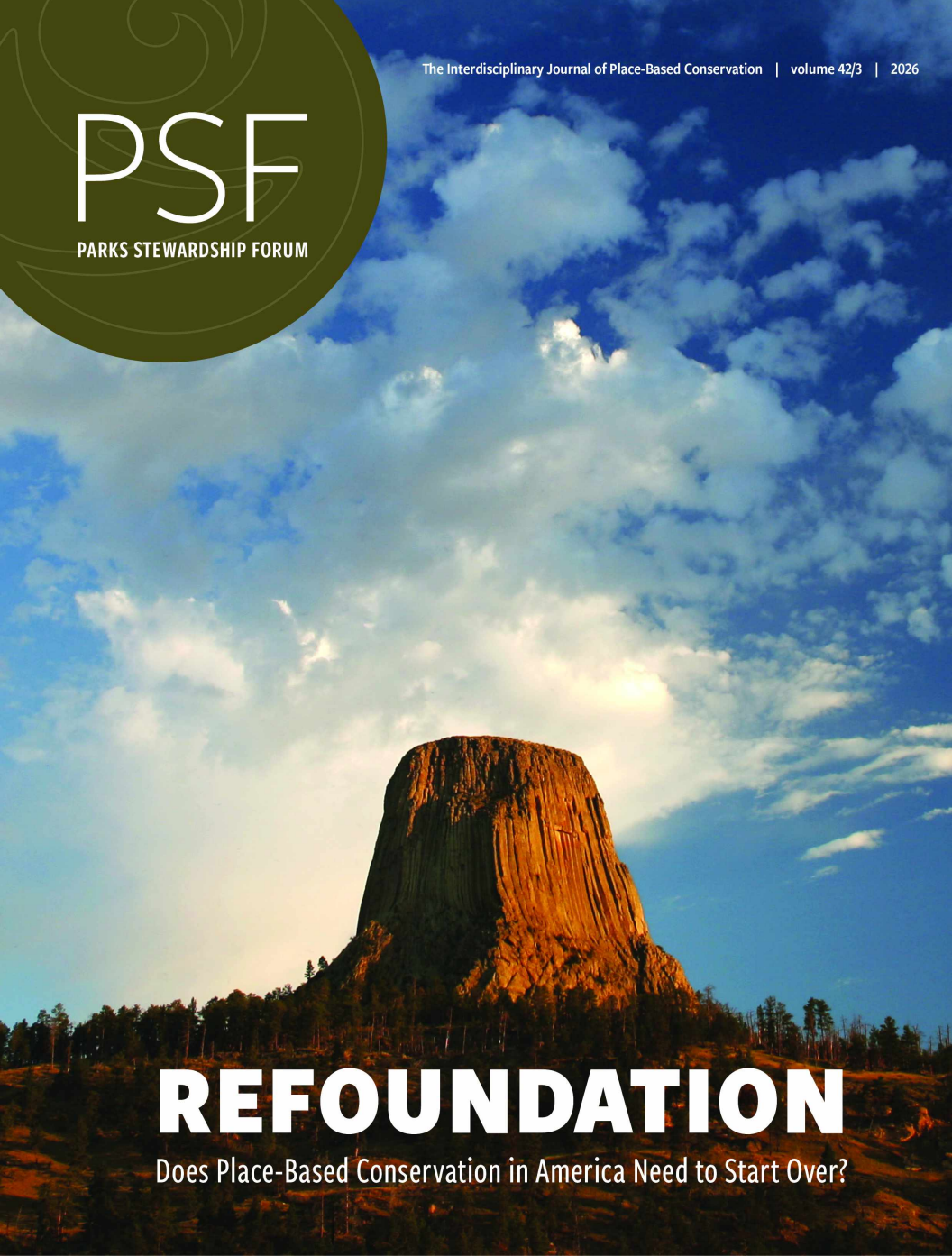


The Interdisciplinary Journal of Place-Based Conservation | volume 42/3 | 2026

PSF

PARKS STEWARDSHIP FORUM



REFOUNDATION

Does Place-Based Conservation in America Need to Start Over?



Co-published by the University of California, Berkeley, and the George Wright Society, *Parks Stewardship Forum* explores innovative thinking and offers enduring perspectives on critical issues of place-based heritage management and stewardship. Interdisciplinary in nature, the journal gathers insights from all fields related to parks, protected/conserved areas, historic and cultural sites, and other forms of place-based conservation. The scope of the journal is international. It is dedicated to the legacy of [George Meléndez Wright](#), a graduate of UC Berkeley and pioneer in conservation of national parks.

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On the cover of this issue

Sunrise at Bear Lodge, the centerpiece of Devils Tower National Monument, a unit of the National Park System. Sacred to a number of Tribes, the striking geological formation has many Indigenous-language names. “Bear Lodge” is the preferred consensus rendering in English. Devils Tower National Monument was the first to be proclaimed under the Antiquities Act, one of numerous laws that form the foundation of place-based conservation in America.

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The George Wright Society advances the scientific and cultural resource values of parks, protected and conserved areas, cultural sites, and other forms of place-based conservation. The Society promotes research and resource stewardship across disciplines; brings practitioners together to share their expertise; provides avenues of communication among scholars, researchers, educators, practitioners, and the public; and supports informed conservation decisions and management actions that embrace these values. By uniting people from many different backgrounds around a common passion for protecting Earth’s natural and cultural heritage, we create the collaboration needed to meet today’s greatest conservation challenges.

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We welcome proposals for papers in PSF’s two main departments: “New Perspectives,” for non-peer-reviewed articles that will be evaluated solely by the journal’s editors; and “Advances in Research and Management,” for articles that will undergo formal peer review. We also invite proposals for “The Photographer’s Frame,” our regular feature in which contributors tell a compelling conservation story in photographs.

We especially encourage submissions from authors who write from their perspective as members of communities of color, Indigenous Nations, and the LGBTQIA2S+ community, and from students and early-career professionals.

Submit proposals and read manuscript submission guidelines: <https://www.georgewright society.org/psfsubmissions>

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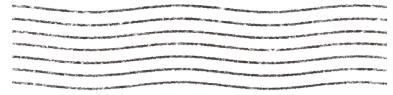
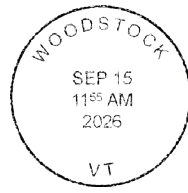
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LETTER FROM WOODSTOCK



Refoundation Resolve

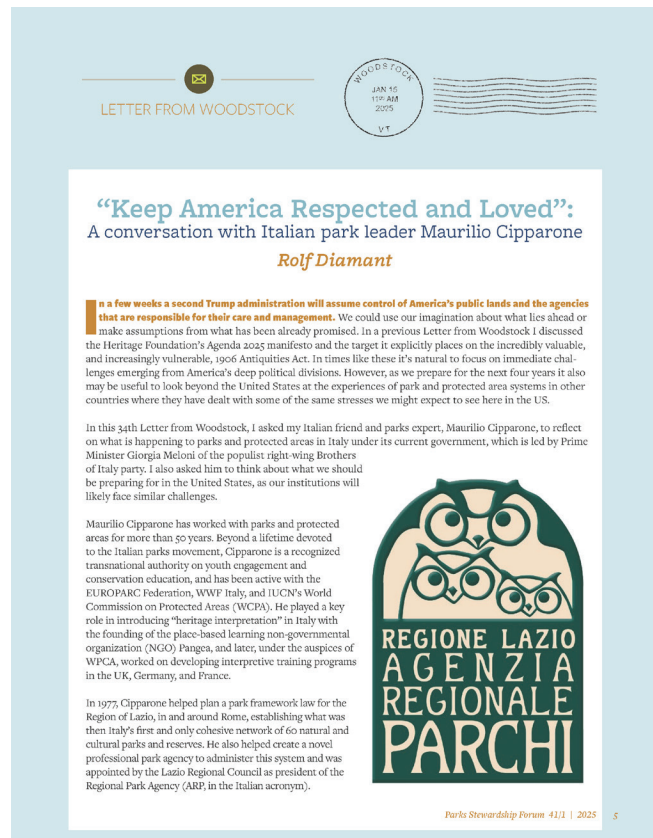
ROLF DIAMANT

The earliest mention of the word “Refoundation” in *Parks Stewardship Forum* can be traced back to my January 2025 interview with Italian park advocate Maurilio Cipparone in a Letter from Woodstock entitled “Keep America Respected and Loved.”

This issue of the *Forum* appeared just as the second Trump administration was taking power.¹ Most of Cipparone’s interview dealt with the neglect and politicization of Italy’s once-ascendant system of national parks and protected areas. However, he was also clearly worried that the US national parks were entering “uncharted territory” with the destructive empowerment of Elon Musk and his DOGE agents.

Cipparone ended the interview by offering a few prescient observations on the future of parks and protected areas on both sides of the Atlantic. Referencing his own government’s promises to revitalize Italian parks damaged by years of political manipulation and neglect, Cipparone said, “I want to be optimistic.... However, I am also realistic. If nothing comes from this, looking down the road, no doubt the whole system of protected areas in Italy will need a refoundation. *I sincerely hope this will not be necessary in the United States*” [emphasis added]. The Letter concluded with me saying that “no public institution, even our long-established US national park system, can survive intact without strong public support—and the will to continually resist efforts aimed at the system’s diminution and dissolution.”

An accelerating campaign of “diminution and dissolution” of public lands and waters was launched by the second Trump administration almost immediately. My follow-up Letter from Woodstock, in the May 2025 issue of *Parks Stewardship Forum*, was simply titled “Refoundation.”² In that Letter I chronicled the hollowing out and deconstruction of key government functions that traditionally safeguarded the stewardship of the public estate, calling these actions “the most far-reaching acts of civic vandalism in the nation’s history.” Recognizing that “even if the worst excesses are prevented” I predicted that “the human debris field already left in the administration’s wake may take a very long time to set right.” I then broadly defined the contours of a refoundation:



LETTER FROM WOODSTOCK

Humanities in Exile

ROLF DIAMANT

When I was superintendent of Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park, I was invited to a Boston event, where I received, on behalf of the park, an award from the Green Building Council (GBC). We had recently completed our education-oriented Forest Center, built with third-party (Forest Stewardship Council) certified wood from the park's historic managed forest. Our new building had been given GBC's highest LEED rating, "Platinum," and we were quite proud of and honored by this recognition. At some point during the evening, one of the GBC organizers confessed to me that his organization was somewhat ambivalent about holding such award ceremonies. What was most important about the certification ranking system, from GBC's perspective, he explained, was not just the recognition of the highest achievers—those in the vanguard of change. Rather, GBC defined success, in relation to its mission, by the extent to which the organization was able to encourage gradual improvement in green construction across the board, particularly with those builders who often lagged far behind the curve. GBC's primary objective was incentivizing incremental positive changes in the building practices of those who were not part of a vanguard of early adopters, but who were encouraged nevertheless to do better. I came away from the evening with a nice plaque for the park, but more importantly, I gained a new appreciation for GBC's strategy to reach its desired outcomes—its "theory of change."

I recall this conversation, as I sit down to write this thirty-seventh Letter from Woodstock, reflecting on the turbulent life of one of the most ambitious partnership programs in the history of the US National Park System, the National

Ballot Blocked Episode 1: Service, Sacrifice, and Citizenship



An African American soldier in a Union Army uniform stands with his family for a photograph. When war broke out, African American men served in the United States Colored Troops (USCT) during the Civil War.

To learn more about this wartime service, we interviewed Dr. Holly A. Petersen, Jr. in this forthcoming book, *The Freedom's Call*, a volume co-edited with the University of Georgia Press. Dr. Petersen's scholarship is focused on the African American living in Pennsylvania between about 1850 and 1880. It examines the full that settlement in the Union Army took on soldiers and their families. His work also highlights the ways that Black women claimed civil and political rights, despite being denied access to the ballot.

Ballot Blocked Episode 1: Service, Sacrifice, and Citizenship

0:00 / 22:47



"Ballot Blocked" Mellon Humanities Fellowship Program podcast

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To "refund" something means to lay its foundations anew—not simply restore the status quo. The extent of the damage being done, and the rapidity with which it has been accomplished, have exposed critical vulnerabilities.

Such vulnerabilities can only be fixed by a thoroughgoing reconsideration of the laws and funding mechanisms that govern our public lands and waters, followed by (and the metaphor is especially apt) concrete actions—a process that we in the George Wright Society are now referring to as "Refoundation" with a capital "R."

It was soon apparent that Refoundation meant more than statutory or budget reforms. In my January 2026 Letter from Woodstock, "Humanities in Exile," addressing the beleaguered National Park Service (NPS) Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellowship Program, I revisited Refoundation in the context of incorporating humanities knowledge and expertise into the stewardship of public lands and waters.³ Centering humanities scholarship in this stewardship mission, I proposed, "is a refoundation undertaking of the highest importance."

There are moral and ethical dimensions to Refoundation as well. The May 2026 Letter from Woodstock, "Stress

LETTER FROM WOODSTOCK

STRESS TEST

How the National Park Service Responded to a Directive to Erase History and Silence Science

Rolf Diamant

In the spring of 2025, Department of Interior (DOI) Secretary Doug Burgum issued Secretarial Order (SO) 3431, "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History." This Orwellian-titled directive gave all DOI land management bureaus, including the National Park Service (NPS), 90 days to "conduct a review of all public monuments, memorials, statues, markers, or similar properties on lands within its jurisdiction to identify whether any such properties contain images, descriptions, depictions, messages, narratives or other information (content) that inappropriately disparages Americans past or living (including persons living in colonial times), or, with respect to content describing natural features, that emphasizes matters unrelated to the beauty, abundance, or grandeur of said natural feature."

One might think with all the professional editors at DOI, the secretary might have gotten help with this maladroit and painfully longwinded edict, but perhaps most of them had already been fired. In any case, Burgum's SO 3431 repeated almost word for word Executive Order (EO) 14553 (aimed at both NPS and the Smithsonian Institution) issued by President Trump several months earlier.

Implementation of the SO in the National Park System has been met with a chorus of public protest, congressional criticism, and several lawsuits. Much has been written and said about how the SO flouts up-to-date scholarship and science, existing statutes, established administrative procedures, and long-standing relationships and agreements with partners and communities. Less commented upon—but perhaps, ultimately, the most consequential impact—

2027 Emergence from a slide deck that was sent to the field instructing all parks to report "inappropriate content" as defined by EO 14553 and SO 3431. 2028 The administration ordered every park to post signs with a QR code encouraging visitors to send in examples. The signs were widely denied and the effort largely halted.

5.b. Review for Inappropriate Content

- All public-facing content for "images, descriptions, depictions, messages, narratives or other information (content) that:
 - inappropriately disparages Americans past or living (including persons living in colonial times), or
 - with respect to content describing natural features, that emphasizes matters unrelated to the beauty, abundance, or grandeur of said natural feature."
- Response Deadline: July 15, 2025



U.S. Department of the Interior

Wilcox Creek National Battlefield

belongs to the American people, and the National Park Service wants your feedback. Please let us know if you have identified (1) any areas that need repair; (2) any services that need improvement; or (3) any signs or other information that are negative about either past or living Americans or that fail to emphasize the beauty, grandeur, and abundance of landscapes and other natural features.

To make a submission, please visit go-nps.gov/ep14253 or scan QR code.

*Reporting other park resources and visitor information to the National Park Service is encouraged. Reporting other park resources and visitor information to the National Park Service is encouraged. Reporting other park resources and visitor information to the National Park Service is encouraged.

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Test," looked at how a public work force, in this case NPS, behaves when subjected to relentless political pressure.⁴ In that Letter I specifically assessed the response of agency leadership in carrying out executive orders aimed at erasing history and suppressing science in the national parks. Suggesting something akin to a post-administration truth and reconciliation process, the Letter concluded that an honest reckoning and self-assessment, closely bound up in any Refoundation, would help employees and allies of public land agencies be better prepared—legally, ethically, and psychologically—should they again have to navigate trials of a similar magnitude.

It has become self-evident to many people that a considered rethinking and rebuilding of our national conservation framework has emerged as a complex but necessary task. We have seen new organizations arise, such as Ground Shift (<https://www.groundshift.us/>) and Next Interior (<https://www.nextinterior.org/home>), with this purpose specifically in mind. The essays on Refoundation in this special issue of *Parks Stewardship Forum* aim to advance and enlarge this essential conversation.

Rolf Diamant

ENDNOTES

1. “‘Keep America Respected and Loved’: A Conversation with Italian Park Leader Maurilio Cipparone,” Letter From Woodstock, *Parks Stewardship Forum*, Volume 41, Issue 1 (2025); <https://doi.org/10.5070/P5.41996>.
2. “Refoundation,” Letter from Woodstock, *Parks Stewardship Forum*, Volume 41, Issue 2 (2025); <https://doi.org/10.5070/P5.47428>.
3. “Humanities in Exile,” Letter from Woodstock, *Parks Stewardship Forum*, Volume 42, Issue 1 (2026); <https://doi.org/10.5070/P5.62072>.
4. “Stress Test: How the National Park Service Responded to a Directive to Erase History and Silence Science,” Letter from Woodstock, *Parks Stewardship Forum*, Volume 42, Issue 2 (2026); <https://doi.org/10.5070/P5.65805>.

The views expressed in Parks Stewardship Forum editorial columns are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official positions of the University of California, Berkeley or the George Wright Society.

REFOUNDATION: DOES PLACE-BASED CONSERVATION IN AMERICA NEED TO START OVER?
REBECCA CONARD, ROLF DIAMANT, DAVID HARMON & JOHN REYNOLDS, THEME EDITORS



Refoundation: What It Means, Why It Is Needed, Where It Is Going

REBECCA CONARD, JOHN REYNOLDS, ROLF DIAMANT, AND DAVID HARMON

WHAT DOES “REFOUNDATION” MEAN?

We have used the word “Refoundation” to describe our collective efforts to identify and fix systemic vulnerabilities that have been relentlessly exploited to undermine conservation in the United States. (For more on the origins and development of Refoundation, see “Refoundation Resolve,” Rolf Diamant’s Letter from Woodstock column in this issue of Parks Stewardship Forum.) We are convinced that trying to go back to the previous status quo is no longer enough. We also believe in exploring new ideas and approaches that can significantly improve how place-based conservation work is carried out in the 21st century. Therefore, while we remain hopeful that whatever administration comes next can rebuild battered federal resource-management agencies, we also hope that Refoundation will also serve as an opening to renew and expand multi-sector collaboration that will significantly strengthen place-based conservation as a whole. One question frequently asked is: How far do we need to go with Refoundation? All the way down to the foundations? And if so, what does that mean? This is the basic question we posed to our contributing authors.

The focus of many of our invited essayists is the future of place-based conservation in the US. However, there is certainly a global dimension to Refoundation because the actions of the current administration are reverberating around the world. The word “Refoundation,” in fact, first appeared in *Parks Stewardship Forum* in the context of revitalizing Italy’s troubled system of national parks and protected areas. The decline of nation-state support for conservation is a growing threat internationally. As one of our authors presciently points out, “We have been forced to learn in public what happens when place-based conservation loses its most powerful institutional patron. That is not a comfortable lesson, but it’s one every country will eventually need, given how fragile national commitment to conservation can be even in what would have been considered to be one of the most stable of all democracies.”

WHAT IS THE FOUNDATION OF AMERICAN PLACE-BASED CONSERVATION?

Our nation’s commitment to protecting what we value of our environment and culture and history to benefit the common good for future generations has a long and inspiring history. Early preservation influences often reflected Romantic ideals of nature and the built environment. Writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau emphasized the moral and spiritual value of nature. Landscape artists such as Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand promoted the beauty of the American landscape.

Early efforts that birthed the movement to protect historic places began to take shape in the first half of the 19th century. Ann Pamela Cunningham, the founder of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association (1853), is often called the “Mother of American historic preservation,”

even though Independence Hall was protected earlier, in 1816. Other leaders founded a variety of organizations that set the stage for the modern movement, blending activism, philanthropy, and cultural ideals.

Preserving both natural and historic sites linked to the founding era reflected civic pride and launched a movement to create a protected national identity and heritage.

As the ideal of preservation and conservation and action to reflect these drives continued to mature, federal actions began to set precedents.

The tenets and principles related to federal conservation activities evolved from the work and advocacy regarding the environment of George Perkins Marsh, John Muir, Frederick Law Olmsted, Gifford Pinchot, Congressman John F. Lacey, Robert “Bob” Marshall, and many other politicians and citizen activists.

The period between 1864 and 1916 saw the foundations of the nation’s conservation and historic preservation aspirations begin to be established in law and presidential action. It began with the Yosemite Land Grant in 1864, and includes the establishment of Yellowstone National Park, the Lacey Act protecting wildlife and plants, the first bird refuge at Pelican Island, Florida, the Antiquities Act and its use to create Devils Tower National Monument, the forerunner agencies that would become the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and both the US Forest Service and the National Park Service. The nation was learning what it cared about in its environment and history, and taking action to show it.

More progress was made in the decades following, and another seminal moment came in 1962 when Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*. People were instinctually and instantly distraught and angry.

And they acted, resulting in, between 1962 and 1976, a tidal wave of environmental, historic preservation, and public participation laws that established, in less than a decade and a half, a set of aspirational and specific foundations addressing our future environment. It was another period of the nation learning what it cared about, and acting on that. These laws, combined with the conservation and environmental actions taken earlier, became the basis for what seemed to be, until less than two years ago, an enlightened and largely solid and seemingly impregnable foundation for federal conservation and historic preservation in the United States.

WHY HAS THE FOUNDATION FAILED?

It is important to be clear about what we mean by “failed.” The governance systems and underlying laws to protect and manage the federal public lands and waters nominally remain in place with physical boundaries largely intact (except for Trump’s evisceration of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monuments, now being litigated). But the basic functioning of these systems is in tatters. Direct, honest communication with the public: muzzled. Requirements for consultation: jettisoned. Climate science: denigrated and defunded. History: whitewashed and bowdlerized. Staff morale and professional integrity: decimated. Already-scarce funding: funneled to vanity projects. The list goes on and on—and the next two years could see a concerted effort to get rid of large swathes of the federal estate and many small historic sites.

The foundation we thought was solid, the assumptions we thought were unbreachable, have instead been proven astonishingly fragile, for several interlocking reasons.

The administration has taken full advantage of the slow accretion, over several decades, of legislation and loop-

holes that give the president broad powers in very specific circumstances — but which, crucially, rely on an understanding that the incumbent will exercise self-restraint in the interest of the national good. No one anticipated the degree to which this assumption now doesn’t apply. So it is that Trump has been able to assert the right to disregard a broad range of laws under the guise of open-ended phony “emergencies” or for vague and questionable “national security” reasons—two tactics straight out of an autocrat’s playbook. And he also has exercised legitimate broad powers Congress handed to the Executive branch that allow the Department of Homeland Security to waive environmental laws in the name of border security. All this has been abetted by conservatives pushing a highly dubious “Unitary Executive” theory of presidential power.

That the administration has been able to pursue these actions almost unchecked is because the Republican-controlled Congress has abdicated its responsibility to provide any meaningful oversight. With that off the table, all kinds of previously unthinkable stratagems became possible. (In fairness to Congress, it has stepped up, in bipartisan fashion, to oppose Trump’s draconian budget cuts to federal resource management agencies and to stop a Republican senator’s proposal to sell off large segments of public land.)

The other branch of the federal government, the Judiciary, has also proven to be flat-footed in responding to a “move fast and break things” strategy that “floods the zone” with legally questionable actions being launched in short order. By the time plaintiffs can prove standing to sue (if they can at all) and get cases in front of a judge, the damage is irreversible. And the conservative majority on the Supreme Court has proven highly receptive to arguments from the administration. Most recently, the Supreme Court has moved to severely limit the definition of who holds “standing” to sue—a serious reduction in the power of citizens.



The other branch of the federal government, the Judiciary, has also proven to be flat-footed in responding to a “move fast and break things” strategy that “floods the zone” with legally questionable actions being launched in short order.

Behind all this are deeper systemic problems with American democracy and its electorate, which are explored in several of the essays that follow. Our conservation community bears a measure of responsibility, too. Too many of us were too complacent, thinking that the legal system would protect against the worst excesses. And many of us also never imagined that an administration would dare mount an across-the-board assault on all aspects of public lands and waters given their bipartisan popularity.

WHAT ARE OUR AUTHORS SAYING?

The essays that follow reference these failings, but that is not their primary aim. We sought a wide range of perspectives from people with collectively broad experience in stewarding protected lands and waters. The goal was to summon many and varied ideas for further discussion, not choreograph a suite of essays examining a particular proposal or plan. We did not give authors much time to ruminate, nor did we allow time for sharing ideas either in a virtual forum or by circulating drafts. Accordingly, the essays, as a group, present an array of penetrating ideas about how we can get to a better place. Some authors focus their thoughts on the agency or organization they know best; others cast their gaze across the expanse of place-based conservation. Some offer a historical perspective; others point to emerging trends.

Regardless of approach or perspective, the essays gathered here represent thoughtful consideration of the challenges to and opportunities inherent in rebuilding after catastrophic loss. Amid the abundance of ideas, some commonalities of thought also emerge. Several people comment on the leadership role the United States has played in place-based conservation worldwide and the need to re-establish these credentials. For

some, Refoundation begins with rationalizing and strengthening the legal and legislative apparatus undergirding place-based conservation. For others, the central task of Refoundation is expanding the institutional structure, or ecosystem, which funds and manages conservation areas—in a sense, democratizing place-based conservation in ways that invest more citizens in stewarding America’s heritage. Among those who argue for expanding or decentralizing management, a few point to the recent emergence of co-stewardship arrangements with Indigenous Peoples and see co-stewardship as a general guiding principle for the future. Recalling blows that have fallen particularly hard on the sciences and the humanities, others point to the need and opportunity to create a truly interdisciplinary approach to managing natural and cultural resources. One author imagines an integrated approach that establishes permanent links between agency professionals and outside scholars. Finally, as one author asserts, “the idea of setting aside land ... for the permanent benefit of all people was, when it was first proposed, genuinely radical.” In this vein, one group of authors sees conserved, preserved, or protected areas as both a concept and a reality central to American identity and, as such, places of opportunity for civic engagement, civics education, and public service.

WHAT’S NEXT FOR THE REFOUNDATION CONVERSATION?

This is the beginning of what we hope will be an expanding dialogue on Refoundation in the pages of *Parks Stewardship Forum*. Going forward, we anticipate one, if not two more features, dedicated to bringing additional voices to this urgent conversation. We wish to thank our invited essayists for their excellent contributions to laying the groundwork in the pages that follow.

REFOUNDATION: DOES PLACE-BASED CONSERVATION IN AMERICA NEED TO START OVER?
REBECCA CONARD, ROLF DIAMANT, DAVID HARMON & JOHN REYNOLDS, THEME EDITORS



Mystic Chords of Memory

BRENT A. MITCHELL

Stone cairns, granite ledges, 3,500-foot elevation gain—I started writing this essay on a ten-mile birthday/Father’s Day hike with my daughter. As we sheltered from strong winds behind a pile of stones atop South Baldface Mountain (Evan’s Notch, Maine/New Hampshire border), I meditated on how lucky we are to have a national forest a few hours’ drive away. And I appreciated that we have federal agencies charged with stewarding such places where we can go to disconnect from the troubles of the world. An opportunity to re-create ourselves in nature, as Thoreau would say, if only for a day.

My meditative mountain moment was snapped by the sudden memory of the deadline for this essay.

I had puzzled for months about how to open this piece, how to entice you to continue reading one of many essays on the same topic in the same volume. What opening lines might capture your attention? Suspecting that my international experience is part of the reason I was invited, I had sought inspiration in Central Europe on a return trip in May. (In the 1990s my wife and I played a small role in helping the “refoundation” of land stewardship in the region, after the collapse of Soviet control.) Back in Czechia, I gazed up the long Wenceslas “Square” at the commanding neo-Renaissance National Museum, which Soviet tanks had attacked during the 1968 Prague Spring, mistaking it for the Parliament. I could not find my intro in that first attempt at freedom, but I did recall that moment recently while watching news of the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool, and the damage done by a similarly incompetent and autocratic government.

These essays look forward to a better political climate for place-based conservation. (Such a corrective course cannot be taken for granted, but the prospect of continuing the current descent is too terrible to contemplate.) I assume others in this volume will catalogue the toll that a “unitary executive” has taken on resource management agencies. I will just say that it will take a generation to recover from the demolition of federal programs and structures committed in just the last 18 months.

My mind immediately looked for prescriptions of how to prevent such depredations in the future, and as recently as two years ago I might have suggested institutional adjustments. But now I conclude that resilience cannot be built at the agency level, not when Congress abdicates its role to check the executive and the highest judiciary tips the balance towards another “co-equal” branch of government. More on that later, but here in the middle I offer some observations on what to retain, what to restore, and what to change in a future refoundation.

RECOVERING LEADERSHIP

First, it is fundamentally important to restore and maintain the reputation of the United States as a leader in the stewardship of conservation areas, at home and abroad. I need not repeat the famous quote of Wallace Stegner; it is known around the world. American conservationists have a proud history, and thus a responsibility to maintain it.

Second, a word on terminology, which I hope will not cause you to stop reading further! This issue is on *place-based conservation*. I write in terms of *conservation areas*, a term not yet in systematic use, but that I find simpler than terms in vogue around the world. For example, in 1962 and 1972, the US hosted the first World Conferences on *National Parks*. The fourth such conference was on *national parks and protected areas*, while the 2003 and 2014 titles moved to World Parks Congress. We are currently planning the next iteration, to be hosted in 2027 by Panama, with the unwieldy name of World *Protected and Conserved Areas* Congress. If negotiations on the Convention on Biological Diversity continue their current trajectory, the next congress might be on *protected and conserved areas and indigenous and traditional territories*. (To be clear, I actively support recognition of conservation by people who identify as Indigenous and/or from traditional communities. But we need a new vocabulary.) Perhaps more important than simplicity, the term *conservation area* infers that conservation is ongoing in a place. *Protected* and *conserved* suggest a state of completion, but conservation is never done. We are part of an ongoing struggle, a struggle that is intense at this moment in the United States.

WHAT TO RETAIN

In the United States we tend to take for granted that natural and cultural heritage are managed together, or at least by the same institutional divisions of government. This is particularly evident in the National Park Service (NPS), but increasingly has been true in other agencies, or at least it had been. Canada is similar, and to some extent Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom.

But in most other countries cultural conservation areas are managed by entirely separate agencies, usually within different ministries (departments). Our combined approach is profoundly important, as it provides mechanisms for coordinated action and opportunities to address multiple human interests under the same administrative roof. Recall that passage of the Antiquities Act, which has led to the proclamation of tens of millions of acres of national monuments (and hundreds of millions of acres of ocean), was impelled by the need to protect cultural artifacts from looting.

We should also maintain the practice of distributing natural resource management responsibilities among different agencies and even departments. Above I argued for managing natural and cultural resources for individual sites together, but there are important advantages to keeping sites and collections of sites (national parks, wildlife refuges, national forests, marine sanctuaries) distributed across bureaucracies. For one, it makes conservation areas as a whole less of target if they are managed by different entities across the federal government.

WHAT TO RESTORE

Science: the means to pursue it and mechanisms to apply it. Full stop. (I include here traditional knowledge, as it is increasingly recognized as a kindred source of knowing.)

Somewhat relatedly, we need to manage and further promote conservation areas as places to come face-to-face with reality, with the real world. I believe the root of our current political dilemma is that many Americans perceive different realities, fed by baseless claims, monetized social media sensation, and increasingly sophisticated tools to alter images realistically. (To believe that a mysterious deep state is manipulating the weather for political advantage is to have a very tentative grip on reality.) But when you visit a natural area, unless you chose the blue pill, a tree is a tree, a stream is a stream. Your mind sharpens as you search for birds, and your attention resets in a forest bath. *Conservation areas offer a path to better distinguish reality from fiction in other aspects of our lives.*

Conservation globally, and to some extent at home, had been linked to international aid. All of our federal resource agencies had international assistance programs to varying degrees. And the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was critically important to conservation area establishment and management in many countries. These programs were a highly cost-effective form of soft power. Contrary to popular depictions, they do not involve shipping bales of cash off-shore. Most funding comes back to the US, or never leaves, in the form of purchased equipment, food and material, and salaries for Americans to provide services and administer the program. They also create laboratories for learning how we can improve management at home, and prevent contagions from reaching our people, livestock and wildlife. *Restoring these programs, and USAID, would help conserve nature and restore our reputation abroad.*

WHAT TO CHANGE

Our federal land management agencies are expected to manage resources in the public interest in perpetuity on annual appropriations from Congress. Meanwhile, it is extremely difficult for agencies such as NPS to accept gifts in service of their mission. Several years ago, NPS conducted a study on how to expand fundraising authorities. We interviewed other federal entities that had more options according to their charters. (Ironically, one of the entities we interviewed was the John F. Kennedy Memorial Center for the Performing Arts.) That exploration should be picked up as part of the hoped-for refoundation.

Similarly, our stewardship agencies need greater authority and direction to work through partnerships. We must always have federal civil servants looking after the national interest, but they do not always have to be the direct actors.

Send a message to the world that the US will again behave according to international norms by ratifying the Convention on Biological Diversity. President Bill Clinton signed this treaty from the landmark Rio Convention but, unlike the UN Framework Convention on Climate



The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was critically important to conservation area establishment and management in many countries.

Change, Congress did not ratify, the only UN member state that failed to do so. Time to make that right.

In our legal system, nature does not have inalienable rights, but why not? If corporations are granted the rights of citizenship by the Supreme Court, why not the rights of the ecosystems on which our lives depend?

I mentioned the Antiquities Act as something to retain. But one thing needs to be changed. Supplemental legislation should make it nearly impossible to un-proclaim a national monument.

RESILIENCE TO FUTURE SHOCKS

None of these things I've outlined here would have prevented the wholesale dismantling of federal stewardship of conservation areas that we are witnessing, even if all of them had been in place two years ago. If we do manage to reframe our government in the next two years to function as the framers had intended, we must build in new safeguards, not specific to conservation but across government. We've learned that too many guardrails were dependent on tradition and precedent, assuming at least some intent to govern responsibly, and thus they were easily smashed.

For conservation, the future of resilience to political shocks does not lie at the level of bureaus or technical practitioners, but in the people. It is true that nature conservation in general, and national parks in particular, have long enjoyed bipartisan support in Washington. But a unitary executive can ignore bipartisanship. Thus, the refoundation of place-based conservation must rely on the ultimate source of authority in our democracy, We the People.

So, if we accept that only through broad public support can our federal stewardship agencies continue their missions, it follows that the bedrock of refoundation should be in deepening the sense of value of conservation to and within the American people. The work of

making that case already happens, but it should be redoubled, and more.

Further, and calling back to where I started about natural and cultural resources being managed together, our federal agencies must do even more to use conservation areas to educate all Americans not only about how the planet functions, but about how our democracy works. In recent decades our federal colleagues were telling ever more complete stories about our nation, the good, bad and ugly. Recent efforts to sanitize those stories have been clumsy but still have an effect. As the Russian saying goes, "These days we live in a country with an unpredictable past."

We have an urgent need to scale civics lessons to the public, and historic sites are perfect places to do that. Ron Chernow, biographer of George Washington, is quoted recently as saying, "You can't begin to explain to [people] that the system the founders created is being trampled on if they don't have the rudimentary sense of what the whole design was supposed to be. That's why memory is so important."

Eight years ago, I tried to persuade my colleagues in the National Park Service to imagine just such a scaling of effort in advance of the semiquincentennial this year. The Mystic Chords of Memory project (named for one of my favorite examples of soaring rhetoric) never even got to the drafting board but, in hindsight, that may be just as well. It would have been aborted, and my colleagues likely would have been shown the fork in the road. But something along those lines should be a renewed priority in any refoundation.

We do have examples of hope. When I visited Czechia in May everyone I knew was elated at the recent elections in Hungary. Victor Orbán, an autocrat who ruled the country for 16 years, promoted Christian nationalism, and had the full support of the White House (the vice president even stumped for him in Budapest, a diplomatic taboo),



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was ousted in a popular election. Orbán had abolished the ministry of environment but the new government is restoring it, hiring professionals from WWF to new positions of undersecretary of state for climate change and for biodiversity and nature conservation. Salutory refoundations. The man who defeated Orbán, in a landslide, is named Peter Magyar. The name of Hungary in their language is Magyarország, “Land of the Magyars.”

An autocratic ruler was literally defeated by the people.

Two hundred and fifty years after we revolted against a “unitary executive” and loyalists fled to Canada, we are once again in a time of deep internal division, socially

and politically. So, I’ll end with a quote from yet another period of dangerous division, taken from President Abraham Lincoln’s first inaugural address,

I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

Brent A. Mitchell is a vice chair of the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas.

REFOUNDATION: DOES PLACE-BASED CONSERVATION IN AMERICA NEED TO START OVER?

REBECCA CONARD, ROLF DIAMANT, DAVID HARMON & JOHN REYNOLDS, THEME EDITORS



Advocates for Public Lands and Waters Must Help Shore Up Democracy's Foundation

DAVID HARMON

When we speak about “Refoundation,” the very first question we need to ask ourselves is: Why are we having to talk about this? What brought us to this extraordinary, dismal point in American history? And the answer is that tens of millions of voters, roughly half the number who cast ballots, in three consecutive elections, thought it was a good—or good enough—idea to invest Donald J. Trump with the most powerful office in the land. This is a calamitous failure of American civic democracy as it *should* work if you believe, as I do, that it ought to be primarily based on reason and rationality and not on resentment, grievance, and retribution.

Emotions certainly have a place in democratic decision-making. But the point of democratic governance is to produce policies and actions that improve things, and history demonstrates that you can’t feel your way to solving complicated problems. So, for democracy to function properly, the majority of voters must make their choices based on deliberation, not emotion or intuition.

Democratic deliberation—democracy’s foundation—is anchored to two pillars: critical thinking and civics literacy. Ultimately, our systems for managing the national conservation lands, forests, marine sanctuaries, parks, and wildlife refuges spring from, depend upon, and perpetuate a healthy democracy. That is why advocates for public lands and waters, and the agencies that manage them, need to become directly involved in encouraging critical thinking and rebuilding civic literacy.

It’s a big ask. Doing it would take advocates and agencies outside—maybe far outside—their comfort zones, and requires a commitment measured in decades, not election cycles.

As I see it, there are three main tasks: reviving and expanding the agencies’ existing initiatives in civic engagement, providing critical thinking justifications for interpretation in key areas, and, most importantly, driving home at every opportunity the essential insight, often implied but rarely made explicit, that America’s public lands and waters are not just amenities—they are an indispensable public institution, part of the nation’s core identity as a democracy. That is my action list for Refoundation. In the remainder of this short essay, I will review what critical thinking and civics literacy are and why they are declining, and suggest a few specific examples of how my action list can be turned into reality.

THE TWO PILLARS AND THEIR CORROSION

Critical thinking is the process of analyzing facts and arguments to reach sound conclusions. Informed choices

are made by recognizing underlying assumptions, providing (and demanding) justifications for ideas and actions, and evaluating these justifications through comparisons with varying perspectives. The final step is assessing the rationality and potential consequences of the alternatives. Critical thinking is not the natural way humans think, as many psychologists have shown; it is a competency that must be learned and then reinforced so it becomes habitual.¹

Civics literacy is the capacity to apply critical thinking skills to enable people to effectively participate as citizens in the public life of democracy. For Americans, it includes understanding the three branches of government, the legislative process, and how policies are formed. Civics-literate American citizens have a basic knowledge of world affairs and history. They are familiar with founding texts such as the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Declaration of Independence. They understand and embrace civic duties (e.g., voting, jury duty) and defend constitutional protections (e.g., freedom of speech, due process). Civics literacy imparts the motivation and skills to actively participate in public life; this may include attending and providing comments at government meetings, volunteering for community initiatives, and running for elected office. Like critical thinking, civics literacy must be learned and practiced.²

Unfortunately, critical thinking skills among the public are widely thought to be in long-term decline, accelerated now by constant exposure to clips, TikToks, reels, and other short-form digital distractions. Combined with increasing use of algorithmic news curation and generative AI assistants, more and more people are at risk of “cognitive atrophy,” the inability to think deeply and autonomously. As for the civics literacy of Americans, several studies have found that it is nearing full-on collapse. For example, in a 2024 survey, over 70% of adults failed a basic civics literacy quiz—not surprising when you consider that the time devoted to civics

education in public schools has been falling continually since the 1960s.³

This corrosion is a serious detriment to American society, and has exposed the fragility—now being ruthlessly exploited by the current administration—of the legal/social system our public lands and waters rely upon. Advocates for the public estate, both inside and outside of government, can no longer ignore these deficits. Here are three actions that can be taken under a more favorable administration. Now is the time to lay the groundwork.

ACTION ONE: REVIVE AND EXPAND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Civic engagement is “an ongoing process of public conversation that allows people to collect information, share common values, and wrestle together with tough issues where values may be in conflict.” Civic engagement “builds public knowledge and leads to better, more widely accepted decisions, more public confidence in an agency or organization’s decision making, and”—within the agencies—“a deep knowledge of the community that doesn’t go away with staff turnover.”⁴ In the early 2000s the National Park Service developed a robust program of civic engagement and involved its key on-the-ground decision-makers through an open-ended series of park superintendent roundtables. Now, this work and similar efforts in the other agencies that manage public lands and waters have been thrown into reverse.

The principles behind civic engagement can be applied to these agencies across the board. An ongoing colloquy should be convened to bring them together to create a coordinated federal civic engagement initiative. It should include an explicit civics literacy component to explain that these public service agencies are created by and answerable to the American people through Congress, operate according to laws and regulations governed by the Judiciary, and are part of the Executive branch headed by the president. Then the initiative should be incorporated into the DNA of each of the agencies by policy and, where necessary, regulation and law.

ACTION TWO: JUSTIFY INTERPRETATION

The best interpretation is founded on solid scholarship, which in turn is informed by critical thinking. However, that basic dynamic is almost never made explicit, with visitors given no justification for what they are reading, seeing, or hearing. That has to change. In key interpretive areas that are under attack by the Trump administration—climate change, the history of slavery, the struggle for civil rights, and the like—materials need to explain the difference between empirical fact and asserted belief. No longer can we afford to leave this all-important distinction unsaid.

When a brochure in Glacier National Park explains that the park’s namesake features are being destroyed by human-caused climate change, it needs to go on to say, “We know this to be a fact because thousands of scientists around the world and here in the park have conducted painstaking, critically reviewed studies that overwhelmingly point to this conclusion. Posts on social media that claim otherwise do not have this backing and that is why they are not true.”

When, someday, the panel describing how George Washington contrived to continue his subjugation of enslaved people while living in Pennsylvania is restored at Independence National Historical Park, there should be an additional context panel along these lines: “This information was taken down for a period of time because some people believe that sharing America’s flaws undermines patriotism and creates divisiveness. That is mistaken. Such information must be shared with you because, although it’s painful to point out the failings of an American hero, it’s an important part of the whole truth about George Washington the man. We know the account presented in this panel is true because it came from actual documents from Washington’s time. Historical scholarship is an ongoing effort to discover as much as we can about America, no matter where those stories lead.”



In key interpretive areas that are under attack by the Trump administration—climate change, the history of slavery, the struggle for civil rights, and the like—materials need to explain the difference between empirical fact and asserted belief.

Such justified context is, by current interpretive standards, cumbersome and obtrusive. No matter. For certain topics—the very ones targeted by Trump’s censorship campaign—it has to be done.

ACTION THREE: DEFEND AND PROMOTE THE ESSENTIALNESS OF PUBLIC LANDS AND WATERS

Advocates and the agencies themselves need to make a full-throated case that the federal public lands and waters of the United States are essential to preserving our national identity and character, one of the principal objects of national defense, and—when functioning at their best—a prime example of democracy in action.

Making such unabashed statements doesn’t exempt advocates and agencies from justifying their own decisions and actions, nor is it a permission slip to avoid self-disclosure of the failings of American conservation. It does not shut down the continuing evolution of our understanding of what constitutes genuine democratic management of these special places, such as future developments in Tribal co-management and Indigenous assertions of sovereignty. What it does do is take beliefs that many of us, in our hearts, hold to be true and make them explicit. It elevates unspoken—but viscerally powerful—ideals and put them on a rational, and ultimately actionable, footing.

One could easily imagine any number of changes to agency foundational laws (e.g., the Bureau of Land Management’s Federal Land Policy and Management Act, the National Park Service Organic Act, the National Marine Sanctuaries Act) that could spring from the full-throated case envisioned here. Instead, I want to argue for something even more far-reaching: We need a mandatory national service program with a public lands/waters option.

Critical thinking doesn’t happen in an information silo whose walls rise higher by the day through the relentless application of algorithms. People—especially young people—need to spend time with others who have different experiences and worldviews, and not just on a cursory and sporadic basis. Many observers have

proposed a mandatory national service program for 18-year-olds as a way to combat polarization and instill a shared sense of national identity. Advocates for the public estate, and the agencies themselves, need to throw their weight behind this idea. Offering enrollees the option of a one- or two-year stint working on a national forest, at a national wildlife refuge, in a national historical park, and so on—and making sure recruitment efforts reach all young people, urban or rural, and push them to serve in a location unlike their home—would create a vast cadre of citizens newly eligible to vote who have sharper tools for critical thinking *and* a deeper understanding of and appreciation for our public lands and waters.

A LOST CAUSE FROM A LOST WORLD?

As I prepared this essay I happened to read a long analysis by the media director of the 2024 Harris campaign about why it failed and what is coming next. How people find and consume information, and who they are trusting to give them the truth, is changing at such a head-spinning pace that even savvy campaign strategists can barely keep up. The conventional wisdom—I had thought—was that everything comes down to which party masters social media better. Not so:

Social media is basically over; the friend-to-friend conversations have largely moved underground to texts, Snaps, and DMs. What’s left is a series of endless, personalized feeds that filter you into interest-based niches. You’re watching content or chatting with your friends.⁵

If the author is right, Americans online are now busy walling themselves off. That would seem to dash any hope of building a broad, deliberative, civics-aware community.

But here is where our country’s public lands and waters hold (dare I say it?) a small-t trump card. I am convinced that their widespread bipartisan support, as shown in poll after poll, comes from what I think of as their “analogue authenticity.” They are non-digitized and unprogrammed, existing in palpable three dimensions where experiences flow in real time. When



Advocates and the agencies themselves need to make a full-throated case that the federal public lands and waters of the United States are essential to preserving our national identity and character.

you see a whale breach in Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary or feel a catch in your throat gazing up at the Statue of Liberty for the first time, those are experiences that can't be deepfaked. When you are standing at the trailhead and your knee is feeling a bit twinge-y and hey, those clouds on the horizon are looking a little darker than you'd like, consulting AI on your phone is not going to help you decide whether to go back to the car and grab that poncho and do three miles instead of six, or simply bag it altogether.

When you step into one of our national protected places, it's like flipping a "Be Here Now" switch. And there are glimmerings that people, even Gen Z-ers who

have "grown up online," are looking to disconnect and return to a more unfiltered, present mode of existence.⁶

So while what I have talked about in this essay will be really difficult, we have to try. I believe our public lands and waters, born of democracy, can be one of its bulwarks.⁷ It will take a coordinated and committed campaign by advocates, and some new thinking and bold actions by the agencies themselves, to achieve that goal. A more critically thoughtful and civics-literate public will help ensure a more stable, optimistic future for the federal public domain—and for the American democratic experiment.

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ENDNOTES

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REFOUNDATION: DOES PLACE-BASED CONSERVATION IN AMERICA NEED TO START OVER?
REBECCA CONARD, ROLF DIAMANT, DAVID HARMON & JOHN REYNOLDS, THEME EDITORS



Managing Parks and Protected Resources with Resilient Diversity in an Era of Changing Government

MICHAEL T. REYNOLDS

I. IMPERATIVE FOR CHANGE

I have a lifelong connection with the US national parks, Yosemite National Park in particular. The granite walls and thundering waterfalls of Yosemite Valley shaped everything I understood about permanence in my childhood and in my early career. We were told, and we believed, that the laws of the land, like the National Park Service (NPS) Organic Act, with its mandate to preserve these places unimpaired for future generations, was as enduring as the granite walls of Yosemite itself. I held onto that thought throughout a 40-year career in NPS.

But that faith has been tested in ways I did not think possible these past few months. Thousands of experienced and dedicated professionals in NPS who built careers with the intent of passing a stronger system to the next generation have been driven out. The legal architecture surrounding the National Environmental Policy Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, and the Antiquities Act—laws that are foundational to NPS—took generations to construct; all have been treated as obstacles and tested in court. Funding for parks has been slashed.

This essay raises ideas for a more resilient future to manage our nation's parks and heritage. As is the case for nature and culture, an argument can be made for a diverse ecosystem of institutions: government, philanthropic, cooperative, non-profit, and civic, each holding a piece of the stewardship mission. No single one indispensable, all of them mutually reinforcing.

II. DIVERSITY OF INSTITUTIONS FOR STRENGTH AND RESILIENCE

Conservation biology teaches us that monocultures are fragile. The same logic can be applied to institutional design.

America's public lands stewardship system is, in governance terms, a near-monoculture. Through NPS and other bureaus, the federal government manages and funds the overwhelming majority of the mission. When that government is well-funded, scientifically serious, and committed to its mandate, the system works remarkably well. When it is not, the system has vulnerabilities and is subject to funding decisions that are inconsistent and almost random on four-year increments.

This does not suggest weakening federal ownership. The parks must remain in public hands permanently; the Organic Act untouched. NPS is a critical institution supported and loved by Americans for over 100 years. But there needs to be more resilience in protection. I suggest three pillars, each filling a distinct niche, to complement the current model of near-exclusive federal government control:

- Create a new Department of Conservation and Heritage (DCH), either by carving out from the Department of the Interior the bureaus with preservation missions or replacing Interior outright. This provides the mission backbone and retains ultimate accountability to Congress and the public.
- Create an independent national trust entity that can hold long-term investment and management mandates insulated from annual appropriations and political cycles. The trust would have a board of directors with accountable members.
- Establish non-profit concession operators whose entire commercial revenues recirculate directly into the resource.

III. RATIONALIZING THE GOVERNMENT FRAMEWORK

America currently manages its natural and cultural heritage through agencies spread across multiple cabinet departments: NPS, Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, and others, each operating under its own organic legislation, budget cycle, and political principal. The result is a system structurally challenged for integrated stewardship, or at a minimum, is vulnerable to quick and politically driven swings in funding and priorities that are inconsistent with cycles of managing natural places or the preservation of history.

The creation of a new DCH would represent a consequential and generational reorganization of federal land and resource management and science. It would create a single accountable cabinet-level voice for natural and cultural heritage, science, and stewardship and allow the kind of cross-agency science and planning that the current fragmented system prevents. Stewardship must be a national priority. NPS could be a key agency in DCH with its more integrated way of managing the nation's heritage and conservation resources becoming a model for the other bureaus.

Any honest accounting of what a reorganized federal framework could contribute goes well beyond the

designated conservation units themselves. NPS carries statutory responsibility for implementing the National Historic Preservation Act across all federal agencies and to states and localities. It oversees the National Heritage Area System. NPS has the National Trails, National Wild and Scenic Rivers, the Land and Water Conservation Fund's (LWCF) state assistance programs, and a suite of Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance programs that bring federal partnership to communities across the country. These cooperative and collaborative programs are not secondary to the NPS mission; in many respects they are its broadest reach, touching landscapes, communities, and heritage resources that no park unit boundary could ever encompass. They have been chronically underfunded and could be critical community conservation multipliers. The LWCF state assistance side, the heritage area system, the trails and rivers programs are precisely the kind of multi-governmental, cooperative stewardship mechanisms that a distributed institutional model is designed to strengthen, not absorb or eliminate. They would be elevated as Congress intended with a new DCH.

IV. AN INDEPENDENT NATIONAL TRUST: THE FIREWALL MODEL

Federal ownership of public lands should be non-negotiable. But federal ownership and politically vulnerable federal management are not the same thing. The current crisis has proven that management can be catastrophically disrupted by a single administration, a single budget resolution, or a single ideologically driven appointment.

The solution is not to remove management from the public sphere; it is to insulate it from partisan political cycles through a distributed institutional structure. The precedents are already here.

The Presidio Trust, established by Congress in 1996 to manage the former Army base in San Francisco, is an instructive proof of concept. Created as a federal government corporation with a mission-driven board of directors, the Trust was required to become financially self-sufficient by 2013—a goal it met. By fiscal year 2025 it was generating over \$230 million in earned revenue annually, reinvesting 100% of its net operating income

into Golden Gate National Recreation Area, the park of which the Presidio is a part, and had leveraged more than \$750 million in private investment since its founding. It operated without annual federal appropriations while remaining a federal entity, fully accountable to Congress and open to the public without charge.

The Presidio model demonstrates that an independent federal corporation, properly structured, can be both self-sustaining and deeply public in character.

The United Kingdom's (UK's) National Trust, founded in 1895, is Europe's largest conservation charity. With over 5.3 million members, an annual income exceeding \$907 million, and stewardship responsibility for more than 618,000 acres of farmland, 890 miles of coastline, and 500 historic properties, it operates almost entirely independently of government. Its governance is democratic in the most direct sense: the board of trustees is overseen by a council of which half are directly elected by the membership, and members may propose and vote on motions at the annual general meeting. The organization is not immune to controversy, but its independence from government appropriations and its mass membership base make it structurally resistant to political capture in ways that federal agencies simply are not.

The National Trust for Scotland operates on a similar model, with trustees directly elected by members who must themselves be Trust members. Both Trusts operate independently of government, but constructive working relationships have developed a unique system over time. These can be models worth adapting alongside the current philanthropic organizations already supporting parks.

I propose an American Park Stewardship Trust chartered by Congress as a public benefit corporation with a board of trustees drawn from three streams: representatives nominated through the philanthropy and conservancy ecosystem (organizations like the National Park Foundation, regional conservancies, and friends groups would hold seats proportional to their investment and demonstrated stewardship record); a public nomination



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process giving civil society organizations, Tribal Nations, and local communities the ability to propose trustees; and a set of seats reserved for scientific and cultural heritage expertise, nominated by the National Academy of Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Senate confirmation of all trustees would provide democratic accountability.

The Park Stewardship Trust could hold long-term management authority over designated natural lands and wilderness areas within the new DCH structure, and be empowered to accept philanthropic gifts, issue conservation bonds, enter into long-term partnership agreements, and maintain a multi-year capital investment fund. The annual appropriations process as a mechanism for long-lived infrastructure stewardship has proven to be problematic. The Park Stewardship Trust model offers a structural path out of that trap. It could also complement NPS-authorized programs that often match funds.

The National Park Foundation and dozens of park friends groups and conservancies nationwide are doing extraordinary work, but they operate as fundraising and program delivery partners, not as governance entities as well with membership-elected boards and civic ownership of the mission.

A consolidated Park Stewardship Trust, drawing on the UK model, could become the civic institution that binds together the philanthropic, cooperative, and government structures described above. A membership of millions would not only generate sustainable revenue; it would create a constituency for public lands stewardship that crosses political lines, because it is built on direct personal connection to place rather than on partisan identity.

Public lands are among the most tangible expressions of American culture and common ownership. They are places that a family from any zip code, any background, any income level can experience and connect to their many stories and lessons, knowing that these lands belong to everyone.

The Park Stewardship Trust model could be designed to enhance this connection to people and transcend the federal-versus-local argument that has often made public land management controversial. By giving communities, conservancies, friends groups, and Tribal Nations genuine governance roles, the Park Stewardship Trust could create stakeholder investment across a wide political spectrum.

V. NON-PROFIT CONCESSIONAIRES: RECIRCULATING THE REVENUE

Every year, concessionaires operating inside national parks generate hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue from the privilege of providing commercial access to and services within America's most beloved places. Under the current system, a fraction of that revenue flows back to NPS while the bulk leaves the National Park System entirely, enriching private corporations at the public's expense.

Benefitting NPS and the new Park Stewardship Trust, all NPS concession franchises should be restructured as non-profit entities supporting the parks completely. These entities would retain the operational expertise and hospitality talent of their predecessors, but would be structured so that net revenues, after operating costs, capital reinvestment, and reasonable reserves, flow directly to the park through the Park Stewardship Trust. Friends groups and park conservancies would be eligible to hold governance seats on these non-profit concessionaire boards, creating direct alignment between visitor experience, operational quality, and conservation re-investment. The Park Stewardship Trust itself could manage retained revenues on behalf of the parks and places.

This is not a radical idea. The model exists in the non-profit hospital sector, in community development financial institutions, in the cooperative grocery and utility sectors, and in the public radio and television ecosystem. What it requires is the institutional will to insist, at the moment current concession contracts expire, that the public's lands deserve a public return and to take on a byzantine set of laws around concessions in NPS.



Benefitting NPS and the new Park Stewardship Trust, all NPS concession franchises should be restructured as non-profit entities supporting the parks completely.

VI. WHAT THESE PLACES ARE FOR—AND WHAT WE OWE THEM

It is worth pausing, in the midst of structural argument, to remember why any of this matters.

All of the above describes what could be built. But the parks and the people who care for them need help today. Whatever administration follows must immediately undertake a restoration of the National Park Service to operational health: re-instating the thousands of employees driven out; restoring the science and data infrastructure that has been dismantled; lifting political censorship of interpretation, science, and history; and re-establishing where lost the collaborative relationships with Tribal Nations, academic institutions, and non-profit partners that have been severed. This is not a return to the status quo; it is a bridge to Refoundation and new models.

The idea of setting aside land not for extraction, not for private wealth, not for the advantage of any single class or generation, but for the permanent benefit of all people was, when it was first proposed, genuinely radical. The Yosemite Grant of 1864, the establishment of Yellowstone in 1872, the NPS Organic Act of 1916: these were acts of institutional imagination and gifts to the people. The United States invented the democratic park, the place that belongs to everyone. That invention inspired the world.

Parks have an economic reality as well. National parks alone generate more than \$50 billion in economic output annually and support nearly 400,000 jobs in gateway communities across the country. The return on the public investment in these places in tourism

dollars, in ecosystem services, and in climate resilience dwarfs what any private extraction could yield. Like any sound investment, it compounds with time rather than depleting.

A new institutional model, one that distributes the stewardship mission across a diverse ecosystem of government, trust, non-profit, and civic institutions, is not a retreat from that founding vision. It is its logical extension.

The granite walls of Yosemite will still be standing when the current political moment is a footnote. The question is whether the institutions we build now will still be standing with them and supporting them. As the NPS Organic Act requires, leaving them unimpaired for the generations that come after us is the core mission. We know how to do this. We have the models, the precedents, the partners, and the knowledge. What is required now is the courage to act beyond the horizon of the immediate, on behalf of people not yet born, for places that have no voice of their own.

The lands and resources themselves are older than the nation. The stories they hold, of geological time, of Indigenous and later people who fought to protect them, of the struggles and triumph of a nation and its people, are not the property of any administration. They are the common inheritance of a democracy that has not yet finished becoming what it promised to be. It is our story unfolding. We owe future generations a system that is resilient so parks, trails, history and waters remain so. The brilliance of their creation could be the long luminescence of our future.

Michael T. Reynolds has worked to achieve place-based conservation in a variety of positions over a long career.

REFOUNDATION: DOES PLACE-BASED CONSERVATION IN AMERICA NEED TO START OVER?
REBECCA CONARD, ROLF DIAMANT, DAVID HARMON & JOHN REYNOLDS, THEME EDITORS



Dear Tracy, Dear Tim: Transatlantic Reflections on Refounding Conservation

TIM BADMAN AND TRACY FARRELL

The editors invited two leaders from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Tracy Farrell, director of IUCN North America, and Tim Badman, IUCN's director of protected, conserved and heritage areas, to reflect on the connection of US and international perspectives on Refoundation. Their correspondence is shared here.



Tim to Tracy, Paris, 3 June 2026

Dear Tracy

Well here we are! We agreed together offer a transatlantic correspondence in response to the invitation from the George Wright Society (GWS) to contribute on the question of “Refoundation: Does Place-Based Conservation in America Need to Start Over?” I hope that we will enjoy finding out our answers to this big question ... we are going to write each other each week throughout June 2026, so let's see what happens.

I guess we should start out to tell the readers where we are coming from. I am IUCN director of protected, conserved and heritage areas. My history in IUCN dates back over 20 years, mostly, since 2007 as the IUCN director for World Heritage, which is where I have had regular contact with US practice down the years. Before IUCN I worked on the ground mainly in local integrated coastal zone management (ICZM) and environmental programmes in the UK, coordinated a World Heritage nomination, and worked in a national centre for environmental interpretation.

A sense of US foundations (whatever we think might need to be refounded) has been ever present through my career. The founding thinking on environment interpretation (with Freeman Tilden, and then Sam Ham) was American. As a young ICZM manager we were conscious of working on leading ideas pioneered in the USA. The organisation that I worked for managed for a time the US:UK Countryside Stewardship Exchange—recognising a special relationship for shared learning. I'll get into the IUCN years later, but have been actively engaged with GWS and US practitioners through the last two decades.

If you agree, our exchange could move on to how US contributions to place-based conservation (we should talk about this phrase) have changed over time—a trajectory that sees US work as foundational, but with more questions on the fundamentals of the US model for both Indigenous Peoples and local communities, and a seeming growing tendency of the US to self-sabotage its international leadership.

So yep, there are things to talk about, and keen to hear where you are coming from.

Good wishes, Tim

OVERLEAF Satellite image (with color-enhanced features) of San Francisco Bay—the largest estuary on the American Pacific Coast, now ringed by dense urban areas. The San Francisco Estuaries Initiative has developed the “Making Nature’s City Toolkit,” which the authors of this essay hold up as a model for Refoundation. EUROPEAN SPACE AGENCY



Tracy to Tim, Washington DC, 15 June 2026

Dear Tim

I grew up within driving distance of the Adirondacks, the largest state park in the country. From an early age, I saw the challenges and opportunities of patching together private and public lands, and balancing multiple uses, while still protecting roughly 6 million acres—about the size of Vermont.

Later, during my PhD at Virginia Tech, an early hub for the emerging discipline of recreation ecology, I did part of my dissertation in Big Cypress National Preserve, exploring how dune buggies, tracked vehicles, airboats, and other off-road vehicles could keep accessing treasured places while minimizing impact on the fragile karst ecosystem. This was my first firsthand look at how national preserves differ from national parks in management—and my first exposure to a hunting and fishing community with a deep, place-based attachment to its wetlands. Later work supporting visitor-impact planning in Mexico, Costa Rica, and Chile showed me how similar and different these challenges are across protected areas, with human dependency and emotional attachment at the center of it all. From there, I moved into broader biodiversity work—ecosystem services, freshwater protection, wildlife trade, nature finance—always with protected areas as a core part of the solution.

When I think about foundations, I go back to graduate school at the SUNY [State University of New York] College of Environmental Forestry, and think about how fortunate I was to have learned the history of how the US park system came into place, and to be inspired by the deeper philosophy and value of wilderness and relationships between humans and nature from giants like Aldo Leopold, Henry David Thoreau, Roderick Nash—the list goes on.

And what also came to mind, and was already making its way to graduate schools in the US in the early nineties, was the importance of examining how a place-based conservation model has an inherent challenge in that by defining requirements, rules, and regulations, protection itself could be exclusionary or limit certain kinds of engagement, with examples of Indigenous Peoples and local communities coming to mind. Was it truly possible for protection of places that accommodate biodiversity and species conservation, and ecological integrity/function, to meet the needs of people as well? With “people” being inclusive of communities, Indigenous people, and others from further afield? Much later the broader field of conservation, inspired by economists, would talk about the impossibility of having true win-wins, and the need to consider instead who is making decisions about how to place and manage parks, and what kind of willingness there is and from which constituents regarding accepting the various trade-offs that have to be made once a park is designated.

Warmly, Tracy



Tim to Tracy, Lausanne, Switzerland, 23 June 2026

Dear Tracy

Great to hear of those personal foundations, and they make clear how the US was both a founder of nature conservation practice, especially with the identification of protected areas, and in the vanguard of realising the great challenges and injustices created for Indigenous Peoples and local communities due to actions in the name of conservation.

This reply takes us to the invitation from GWS, and how US contributions have been changing over time. My thoughts from many years of engaging with GWS were already put in an article in *The George Wright Forum*, the predecessor to *Parks Stewardship Forum*—albeit pre-COVID.¹ I was recalling the inspiration of US leading practice showcased at the big biennial GWS meetings, including the strong caucus of Indigenous Peoples. And the surprise at how little of this was regularly broadcast to international audiences, and the experience of US government dysfunction when a government finance shutdown in 2013 wiped out half of the GWS conference participation.

The story of the World Heritage Convention also tells of the changing foundations of the national and international leadership of the US. The US founded—with a subvention given through IUCN from 1966—the ideas for World Heritage. This included its name, its connection of nature and culture, and its focus on a list defining international concern for our most outstanding places. The US was the first Convention signatory and led by proposing Yellowstone and Mesa Verde amongst the 12 very first listed sites in 1978. The USA sat almost continuously as a decision-taker in the World Heritage Committee in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s. But its most recent mandate is now distant at 2005–2009, so approaching 20 years in the back seat. Nevertheless it is a reality that the US continues to nominate World Heritage Sites, with the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge currently up for listing, and with a positive IUCN recommendation this year.²

The elephant in the room has been the larger US relationship with UNESCO [the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization] as a whole, and the fact of the US withdrawing this year (at the same time it withdrew from a host of international organisations, including IUCN). But, for perspective, it's important to note that the relationship has been fraught for a long time, spanning different political colours. The United States is a founding member of UNESCO and had withdrawn once before, in 1984. Then the US withdrew from funding UNESCO in 2011 and rejoined in 2023.

Right now it is easy to be baited by the conscious “shock-jock” tactics of US politics, and the basic immorality of seeking division, but I don't think much is served by indulging a reaction to the obvious extremism of some of what we currently see. People are turning off from that more and more. My sense is that history tells us that, if we look at the national government, we are at a long-term low in US international conservation leadership (and now even participation). Whilst we expect and hope that re-engagement will follow, it is hard to see a reliable and constant federal contribution. So, perhaps we need to look past the federal government for a new view of the

potential for Refoundation, and look to individual states, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and Indigenous People Organisations for a more consistent and grounded approach. In the real world, regardless of political colour, people need to live together, and in healthy and beautiful places that they call home. It is clear that some of the best conservation science and on-ground knowledge and practice is American, so any Refoundation has strong and deep roots to build on. And a free and open society means political correctness—of any colour—cannot avoid engaging with the facts and realities experienced on the ground. The real world of nature, culture, and people will win out eventually.

I am wondering how you see these last decades, and if you agree that Refoundation would bring together a different coalition, from the ground up, and not the top down? Where shall we take this correspondence next ... what does the world need from the US experience now, and how could we imagine the next steps?

All the best, Tim



Tracy to Tim, Washington DC, 25 June 2026

Thanks Tim,

I see the last decades as ones of growth and building, but also ones where we perhaps put too much faith in federal or national oversight and agency structures. The United States birthed the concept of national parks as a public trust, separated and protected from private exploitation, which was genuinely novel when Yellowstone was established. And this suggested a need for defined and empowered public institutions able to ensure protection, as well as strong legislation, policies and standards.

And for many years, this model remained fairly solid—by the 21st century, significant portions of the Earth's land surface were under some form of protected status, many modeled after the US park system while also making advances in co-stewardship and even Indigenous Peoples' governance and ownership. Global aspirations advance towards protecting 30% of our lands and waters by 2030— all of which can be linked back to the foundations provided by the initial American parks concept. Place-based conservation has a legacy of both safeguarding key areas for biodiversity as well as a dark side of keeping people out (fortress conservation).

When the federal government is a committed conservation actor, the public agencies and policies we have in place in the US are a strength. When it is not, as the past several years have demonstrated, it is a vulnerability. Drilling approvals in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the shrinking of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monuments, and multiple withdrawals from international environmental commitments such as the 30x30 target—or outright rejections, as with the US's refusal to ratify the Convention on Biological Diversity—have greatly weakened protection.

Refoundation, if it is serious, must be honest about what it is refounding from. If we are refounding from federal, large-scale, expert-managed, people-

free—a new American contribution could have four key elements that I would love to hear your perspective on:

The first is subnational leadership. The federal retreat from conservation has, paradoxically, created space for a remarkable proliferation of state, local, and Tribal conservation initiatives. California's 30x30 executive order, the growing network of state biodiversity partnerships, the urban conservation programs emerging from cities across the country—these are not merely stopgap measures. They represent a genuine experiment in what conservation looks like when it is accountable to proximate communities rather than distant federal agencies. The California Global Biodiversity Alliance, which brings together 63 cities, counties, Tribal governments, NGOs, and elected officials, is one model of this emerging subnational architecture.

The second element is Indigenous co-stewardship as the norm, not the exception. Bears Ears National Monument, co-managed through a historic agreement between the Bureau of Land Management, the US Forest Service, and a commission of five Tribal Nations—the Hopi Tribe, Navajo Nation, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, Ute Indian Tribe of the Uintah and Ouray Reservation, and the Pueblo of Zuni—demonstrated that Indigenous governance of land is compatible with, and indeed enhances, conservation outcomes.³

The third element is connecting the coasts and the interior through a shared story. One of the most damaging features of recent American political life has been the framing of conservation as a coastal, elite, anti-rural project. A refounded American conservation must recover the narrative thread that connects the Yellowstone grizzly to the urban forest restoration project in Detroit, the coastal wetland in Louisiana to the farmland easement in Iowa. A network of influencers sharing these experiences and stories, could be one means of rewriting, modernizing, and diversifying the parks narrative.

The fourth element is connecting to the multilateral system at the state and city level. No reason to wait for the United States. With the US withdrawal from multiple international environmental bodies, documented extensively in recent years, American influence has been weakened. And yet the global architecture on which all of conservation depends is still in place and has openings and opportunities to offer to cities and states. States and cities for example can proudly commit to and advance their own results towards the Global Biodiversity Framework targets.

From your perspective, Tim, is what I propose as next steps for refounding sensible? Is there more to add from a global perspective and from your experience working with World Heritage/UNESCO? Perhaps there are other countries who have leap-frogged over some of the US growing pains in moving away from a heavy top-down model?

Warmly, Tracy



Tim to Tracy, Lausanne, Switzerland, 1 July 2026

Dear Tracy

Thanks for the reply, and taking us to the sharp end of this correspondence ... the short answer is yes, those ideas don't just make sense, they resonate with the experience across many countries and communities. And they speak clearly to IUCN's values and its own journey towards locally owned, culture-centred, and rights based approaches, and away from the discredited model of fortress conservation. The other good news is that I think these are also approaches that are gaining traction with different countries in the international frameworks that guide our work.

To address the specifics, for subnational leadership, fully agreed, and furthermore we need to distinguish subnational government at all levels—the big states/provinces/regions, some of whom have economies and populations that are bigger than most individual countries—but also recognising more local—counties and parishes. And non-state actors that organise subnationally are also important, as you note with Indigenous and NGO organisations and federations. Local governments can also have an important role in facilitating those local partnerships. Different countries work these dynamics in different ways, but localism is relevant everywhere. IUCN can support this agenda much better now, with our new categories of membership for Indigenous Peoples' Organisations and Local Governments. This new foundation both helps as it recognises the realities of how action happens (nature is local), but also gives more resilience to a reliance on national states, as you note so clearly—including on where US international leadership can come from.

Refoundation definitely needs to be based on the rights and consent of Indigenous Peoples, and recognition and respect for Indigenous leadership. There is a need to enable a diversity of responses, which can include co-stewardship, but also full stewardship, and with action to redress the issues created by unjust past practices. I would also add the importance to look at traditional management systems that may not only involve Indigenous Peoples. Recognising where local land, water, and sea management has led to co-evolved natural and cultural values needs to be universal as the approach. We recognise this in IUCN's new Global Standard for Protected and Conserved Areas, and the IUCN Green List programmes, but we still see many gaps in knowledge understanding and capacity of the cultural connections to nature. An additional point is also the role of the private sector where landowners can be supported to make a more direct contribution.

Your point on coastal and inland linkage sounds a bit more uniquely American, but makes sense both in terms of the realities of linkage between ecosystems (“ridge to reef”), and the need to push back actively on the idea that a good environment is some kind of elite project. Poor environments hit poorer communities the hardest—though we all lose from them. But the refoundation to focus on nature and cities is clearly a compelling priority, and a place where the US has leading practice to share. For the proof look no further than the nascent IUCN Urban Programme, which has much of its roots in US practice, such as the brilliant “Making Nature's City Toolkit” developed by the San Francisco Estuaries Initiative. We need to move beyond the idea though that the focus is

on nature *in* cities, and see the connections from cities to the nearby protected and conserved areas that are their recreation areas, as well as the source of their water and environmental quality. There are challenges here too, such as fire impacts, which we can see call out for new practices and approaches.

I am wondering what is missing from this list; one point is the need to bring technology and innovation into our work—another place where IUCN is acting, but the US could be leading. And putting the decision-taking in the hands of the next generations ... I am going to be interested to see what this GWS volume brings forward as perspectives from young leaders and practitioners. And the big one is securing consistent, directed-to-ground-level action; the US philanthropy sector, and perhaps especially the smaller funds, is important. We need to have a conversation about avoiding the reliance of conservation on the small ground of the very wealthiest private individuals. Localism is about accountability.

But let me wrap up here, and hand you the last word, before we hand this correspondence over to our friendly editors in GWS. I guess the summary is that we can see a Refoundation coming, one that can benefit not only the US, but also reposition the US contributions internationally as more of a celebration of local leadership and results. Ideally this local leadership will work hand in hand with local, state and federal governments, with a realistic level of expectation on consistent national leadership. I'll close with one question to you: in just over a year, IUCN will host our most critical event for the future of protected areas, the World Protected and Conserved Areas Congress, happening in Panama in 2027. Formerly the World Parks Congress, this is an event that sets the agenda. So, what are your hopes for how the Congress can learn from, and help, Refoundation of conservation in the US?

Thanks again for this last month of being my new American pen-pal, and looking forward to reading your reply.

Good wishes, Tim

Tracy to Tim, Washington DC, 6 July 2026

Dear Tim

What a correspondence we have had! I think we've done what GWS asked of us and what we agreed to do—which was to show what Refoundation looks like from an international to US perspective and vice versa.

You're right that subnational leadership needs the fuller texture and we need to be careful to not infer that the national government does not continue to play a critical role in our protected areas in the US, while also recognizing states, counties, parishes, and the non-state actors, Indigenous and NGO, who organize below and across those federal lines. I take real encouragement from IUCN's newer membership categories for Indigenous Peoples' Organisations and Local Governments. That's not a technical fix to our statutory rules for membership, it's an admission that the old assumption, that nation-states are

the only actors who count, was always partial, and now needs to be corrected in practice, not just in aspiration.

On Indigenous co-stewardship, I want to hold on to your caution against making this only about Indigenous Peoples, important as they are. Traditional and local management systems such as the ranching families in the American West, the watershed associations, the fishing communities, and so many others have vital natural and cultural values too, and they deserve the same seriousness we're finally extending to Tribal Nations. Refoundation has to mean a diversity of arrangements, not a new orthodoxy to replace the old one.

Your point about the private sector is also one I'd like to reinforce. Land-owners from family forests to corporate lands are a constituency we haven't included in our dialogue as we've included governments—though they are increasingly finding roles within our broader membership and partners. If Refoundation is about resilience beyond the federal government, it has to include the diversity of actors who own and manage US lands and waters.

And yes, cities. Ridge to reef, and reef to rooftop. The Making Nature's City Toolkit is proof that American practice has something to teach the world here, but you're right that we've been too quick to stop at "nature in cities" instead of asking how cities connect back out to the protected and conserved areas that supply their water, their fire resilience, their weekend escape. The fact that a degraded environment impacts heavily the communities with the least power to address impacts related to degradation is a reality we also need to keep presenting, as it stands against a tired caricature of conservation as an elite hobby. It never was, nor will it ever be.

On technology, generational leadership, and philanthropy—you're naming other critical areas underpinning Refoundation that I wish we had more time and space in our exchanges to unpack. Refoundation must consider innovative financing, where there have been significant advances over the years, as part of expanding prior philanthropic and tax-based models. And we must pay more than lip service to involving youth in decision-making such that they can have true leadership and impact. Both deserve more room than a closing letter allows—but they belong on the list.

Now, to your question about the World Protected and Conserved Areas Congress 2027. My hope is twofold in ways that might seem contradictory, but perhaps this is the only way to reflect the long history of protected and conserved areas in the US.

First, I hope that Panama becomes a place where the US story is told honestly, in its own diversity, rather than as a single national position, or worse, offered only as a single snapshot in time given the long history of accomplishments and firsts. National agencies have historically had a hard time keeping pace with the needs of protected areas in the US, supplying steady funding and other means of support, while states, Tribal Nations, cities, and NGOs are able to be more nimble and responsive, doing some of the most consequential conservation work anywhere. By way of a few examples of successes and potential future directions, I'd like to see examples where the US is advancing towards models such as Canada's Indigenous Guardians program, where co-

stewardship, traditional ways of knowing, and data collection become integral components of managing lands and waters falling within and adjacent to protected and conserved areas. I'd like to see models of larger scale protection models, such as large land-, water-, and seascapes under protection to allow for flows of ecosystem services to, within, and outside of areas under formal legal protection. These could include OECMs,⁴ as well as other areas not yet recognized as OECMs. I'd also like to see models presented where river management organizations, land trusts, and other bodies contributing to protection are doing work that supports US conserved and protected areas, even if they are not yet widely recognized as such.

And on the flip side, it would not be right to not acknowledge what American conservation has experienced in the short term, somewhat contradicting what I said earlier, but we do need to show how, within a very short period, we have been forced to learn in public what happens when place-based conservation loses its most powerful institutional patron. That is not a comfortable lesson, but it's one every country will eventually need, given how fragile national commitment to conservation can be even in what would have been considered to be one of the most stable of all democracies. Taking this thinking further, if Congress can take our reckoning and treat it as an early warning rather than an American peculiarity, then Refoundation stops being a US story and becomes a global one—which, I think, is where you started this correspondence back in June, and where it should end.

Thank you for your letters, Tim. I hope our editors—and our readers—find as much in this exchange as I have.

Warmly, Tracy



Tim Badman is IUCN's director of protected, conserved and heritage areas.

Tracy Farrell is regional director of IUCN North America and chief executive officer of the IUCN US Fund.

ENDNOTES

1. Tim Badman, "A Road to Better Futures: Thoughts from an International Perspective," *The George Wright Forum* 35:3 (2018), 282–285.
<https://www.georgewright.org/353badman.pdf>
2. *Ed. note:* In July 2026, after these letters were written, Okefenokee was named a World Heritage Site at the World Heritage Committee's annual meeting.
3. *Ed. note:* In July 2026, after these letters were written, Trump rescinded the co-management agreement.
4. Other Effective Conservation Measures that exist outside of protected areas, but which now can attain formal recognition as such through IUCN.

SREFOUNDATION: DOES PLACE-BASED CONSERVATION IN AMERICA NEED TO START OVER?
REBECCA CONARD, ROLF DIAMANT, DAVID HARMON & JOHN REYNOLDS, THEME EDITORS



Beyond Whiplash: Advancing Durable, Place-Based Ocean Conservation in the United States

LAUREN WENZEL

Even before the current Trump administration launched a full-scale assault on America's public lands and waters, protecting our ocean places faced a host of challenges. These include the invisibility of ocean life to much of the public; fragmented governance among many federal, state, Tribal, and local government agencies; legal authorities often lacking a strong conservation purpose; agency budgets lagging far behind those of land-based programs; lack of sufficient spatial data on marine biodiversity; and a wide range of climate and non-climate threats to species, habitats, and the communities that depend on them.

These challenges have been exacerbated by this administration's widespread cutting of civil service jobs and protections; targeting of public engagement efforts derided as "DEI" (diversity, equity and inclusion); canceling of government grants and contracts with partner scientific and non-profit institutions for a wide range of marine management, science, and education activities; and disregard for science-based decision-making, as evidenced by the erasure of climate change information from government websites.

In the wake of this widespread disruption, advocates for ocean conservation have an opportunity to step back from current efforts and review them with a critical eye. Our need for effective ocean conservation has never been more urgent: the oceans' ability to buffer climate impacts, sustain economically and culturally important species, and provide a host of other ecosystem services is increasingly threatened. This paper identifies actions in support of a common vision to elevate and advance effective ocean conservation while working to address the longer-term challenges of fragmented governance, underfunding, and building public trust.

CONTEXT

The US exclusive economic zone—where the US has sovereign rights to explore, exploit, conserve, and manage natural resources—extends out to 200 nautical miles and is larger than the nation's land area. This vast area, over 11,351,000 km² (4,383,000 sq mi), is a vital ecological, economic, and strategic resource, sustaining coastal communities and economies, and providing meaningful outdoor experiences for millions of visitors.¹ Yet despite strong public support for ocean conservation,² marine and coastal areas often remain an afterthought in the national conservation dialogue based on the longer and more extensive history of land-based conservation as well as access barriers to coastal and marine areas.

Marine protected areas (MPAs) are key tools for conserving and restoring marine life and the benefits

it provides to coastal communities and economies. Decades of research have allowed us to identify key design features for MPA performance (no extraction, well-enforced, well-established, larger than 100 km², and isolated)³ and criteria for effective MPA networks (inclusion of ecologically and biologically significant areas, representativeness, connectivity, replication, and sufficient size and level of protection).⁴ Moreover, the Global Conservation Framework, adopted by parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in 2022, recognizes the critical importance not only of protected areas but also of "conserved" areas that may not have biodiversity conservation as a primary goal, but contribute to its outcomes. Taken together, these findings can support a framework for US place-based ocean protection that can be adapted to meet regional and national needs.

GETTING PAST THE WHIPLASH EFFECT

One key global driver for MPAs is "30x30"—the goal established under the Global Conservation Framework to conserve, by 2030, 30% of the planet's lands and waters for nature and its benefits to people. While the US is not a signatory to the CBD, the Biden administration committed to its own version of 30x30 in the US in 2021 with Executive Order 14008, "Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad." This order was immediately rescinded by President Trump upon taking office in January 2025, an example of the "whiplash" effect affecting national climate and conservation planning efforts and the divisiveness of climate change within US politics, despite the overwhelming scientific evidence documenting it.

US MPAs include areas managed through federal, state, Tribal/Indigenous, and local authorities for long-term conservation. Federal and partnership programs include marine national monuments, marine sanctuaries, national estuarine research reserves, and the marine components of national parks, national wildlife refuges, and national conservation lands. Yet US MPAs do not represent the

nation's diverse habitats—approximately 96% of the ocean area under protection is in national marine monuments in remote Pacific Islands established by presidential orders under the Antiquities Act.⁵ And, because of lingering legal uncertainties regarding the limits of presidential power under the act,⁶ these monuments are particularly vulnerable to the whiplash effect.

This was demonstrated early in the second Trump administration. In April 2025, President Trump eliminated protection from commercial fishing from the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument in the Central Pacific.⁷ The Northeast Canyons and Seamounts (NECS) Marine National Monument, the only monument in the Atlantic, has experienced even more severe management pendulum swings. NECS was proclaimed in 2016 by President Obama, who banned commercial fishing to protect fragile deep-coral habitats. The monument was opened to commercial fishing by President Trump in 2020; the fishing ban re-instated by President Biden in 2021; and commercial fishing re-opened by President Trump in 2026. This policy inconsistency undercuts stable management and engagement with stakeholders about long-term solutions.

The legal dispute over whether a president can undo a previously established monument's protection jeopardizes the future of marine national monuments as a conservation tool at a time when all tools are critically needed. If monuments are perceived as an insecure legal mechanism, MPA advocates will increasingly need to look at other options, including national marine sanctuaries.

National marine sanctuaries (NMSs) are multiple-use protected areas created for conservation of natural and cultural resources and managed by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Unlike marine national monuments derived from the Antiquities Act, NMSs are authorized under the National Marine Sanctuaries Act (NMSA), which has less legal ambiguity with respect to presidential power. Some, like Channel Islands NMS in southern California, have broad ecosystem-level protections, while others, like the Monitor NMS (off the Virginia coast), have narrower protections focused on conserving historic shipwrecks. Fishing regulations in sanctuaries are gen-

erally established by the National Marine Fisheries Service within NOAA, and commercial and recreational fishing are allowed in nearly all sanctuaries. Some sanctuaries prohibit fishing in specified zones using their own regulations. In practice, sanctuaries have a mixed and complex record of conservation success.⁸ Condition Reports produced every decade for individual sanctuaries summarize conditions and trends for key resources, but don't make the link to how these conditions are changing as a result of management actions.⁹ However, the current shortcomings of NMSs do not diminish their potential as a more durable form of marine conservation designation.

REALIZING THE POTENTIAL OF DIVERSE MARINE PROTECTED AREAS

The scientific guidance cited above is a starting point for an effective US ocean conservation network. Moreover, research by Gill et al. (2017) found that adequate staffing and funding for MPAs were the strongest predictors of conservation outcomes.¹⁰ The authors also found that multiple-use MPAs performed poorly when there is high pressure on resources, but could deliver similar outcomes to no-take MPAs when adequately staffed and appropriately regulated.¹¹ In areas where no-take MPAs are not feasible or ethical, well-designed multiple-use MPAs can be an effective and equitable solution. The following recommendations, based on lessons learned by MPA programs in the US and other countries, highlight ways to strengthen MPAs in the US.

Connect protected sites across programs into effective and representative conservation networks

While 26% of US waters are currently within an MPA, coverage is not representative of diverse marine habitats. Several regions have very low coverage of MPAs, including Alaska (less than 1%) and the Gulf of Mexico/Caribbean (2%).¹² Moreover, only 3% of US waters are covered by fully protected areas.¹³ A national system of connected regional networks that include existing and new MPAs focused on areas of high biodiversity, as well as the recognition of conserved areas, would provide a more coherent and effective approach.

Be accountable in reporting on MPA effectiveness

Few US MPA programs systematically demonstrate how their management is leading to conservation outcomes.



In areas where no-take MPAs are not feasible or ethical, well-designed multiple-use MPAs can be an effective and equitable solution.

Among them is the California state network of MPAs, which was designed to be ecologically connected and representative and to offer a high level of protection in order to safeguard and restore marine ecosystems. California's network recently conducted a decadal review to assess progress and identify potential needs, finding that species and habitats were responding to MPA management, particularly in areas of high human pressure.¹⁴ US MPA programs need to provide resources to monitor and assess conditions and trends, commit to using an adaptive management framework based on realistic and measurable objectives, and adjust management approaches in light of findings and changing conditions.

Explicitly address climate change and adaptively manage for climate impacts

Climate change is affecting marine ecosystems globally, and its drivers—human emissions of greenhouse gases—are largely outside the control of MPA managers. However, managers can increase ecosystem resilience by understanding climate impacts, potential future scenarios, and vulnerabilities of species and habitats. When establishing or updating management plans, managers should consider MPA goals, boundaries, and regulations that address not only current but also future conditions and challenges. Tools like the RAD (Resist, Accept, Direct) Framework can help MPA managers consciously and transparently consider management alternatives and trade-offs.¹⁵ Equally importantly, the ocean is a critical buffer in mitigating climate impacts by absorbing excess heat and carbon dioxide, but is being overwhelmed by these stressors, as evidenced by the growing occurrence of ocean heat waves and acidification. However, protecting and restoring marine ecosystems can help the ocean continue to mitigate climate change.

Step up habitat restoration efforts

Habitat restoration adds to the ocean's capacity to provide natural solutions to climate change and other challenges. Restoring habitats such as coastal wetlands, mangroves, and seagrasses adds biodiversity value while

also sequestering and storing carbon. These habitats—along with others such as coral and oyster reefs—also protect vulnerable shorelines and nearby communities from the growing intensity of storms due to warmer oceans. Protected areas are ideal places for habitat restoration because they already have long-term legal protection and public support. Major investments in MPAs for coral restoration in the Florida Keys and kelp restoration in California have relied on partnerships with research institutions and fishers to identify restoration areas and implement activities. Habitat restoration often garners support from across the political spectrum, as fishers and coastal communities see direct benefits.

Establish new authorities and processes to facilitate

Tribal co-management and co-stewardship

Tribes and other Indigenous Peoples have lived in and cared for their lands and waters for many generations and have knowledge systems that can inform management of special places. While the Department of the Interior has authority to establish co-management agreements for national parks and self-governance annual funding agreements with eligible Tribes,¹⁶ NOAA lacks similar authority. Co-management allows federal agencies to share or delegate management responsibility to Tribes, helping facilitate the application of Indigenous Knowledge and build cultural resilience and food security, alongside biodiversity conservation.

Engage with coastal communities

MPAs are needed to provide spaces for nature in the crowded coastal zone, and for larvae and juveniles to disperse from one protected area to another. These areas can also provide much valued spaces for recreation. But MPA programs must engage closely with local communities if they are to succeed in providing meaningful protection. In addition to California's state-wide MPA network, Oregon, Washington, and Hawaii have worked with local communities to develop MPA systems that include highly protected areas.



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Rebuild international partnerships

The ocean is an interconnected system, with species migrating across the globe, and larvae and other genetic materials distributed widely through ocean currents. Effective conservation of shared species and habitats in the US depends on the conservation efforts of other nations, just as conservation overseas depends on US efforts. Yet the Trump administration has withdrawn the US from dozens of international treaties and programs focused on climate and conservation. As a result, staff are barred from scientific, technical, and policy discussions with their counterparts in other countries, sweeping away decades of US leadership. The US needs to re-engage and rebuild these relationships to address increasing environmental threats to our shared ocean.

Reauthorize the National Marine Sanctuaries Act

The NMSA has not been updated since 2000, and annual funding is guided by legal language that is now nearly 30 years old. Legislative changes are needed to give NOAA the tools to effectively manage this MPA system, particularly in light of political and legal threats to national marine monuments. These changes include: strengthening the priority, purpose, and scope of biodiversity conservation over all other uses in sanctuaries; requiring fisheries management decisions to prioritize conserving the integrity of protected ecosystems and resources over fisheries objectives in sanctuaries; requiring monitoring and evaluation to assess and adapt management; requiring the consideration of climate mitigation, adaptation, and resilience in management; and (as discussed above) authorizing Tribal co-management.

Build capacity for effective MPA management

Sufficient capacity is the primary factor in an MPA's ability to deliver conservation results.¹⁷ NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries lost approximately 20% of its staff through firings, buyouts, and early retirements in 2025, and losses were similar within the National Park Service and US Fish and Wildlife Service. Based on statements by Trump administration leadership,¹⁸ the reductions in force and threats to federal workers are part of a systematic aim to reduce agencies' capacity to perform their public service duties.

Moreover, capacity had been eroded in some areas well before 2025. For example, the National Marine Protected Areas Center, which was established by executive order in 2000 to be the “connective tissue” across MPA programs, has been weakened over the years through budget cuts, staff losses, and reorganization. Agencies will need to work with Congress to rebuild capacity, using this opportunity to address long-term issues that have hindered effectiveness.

Rebuild trust with the public

With the Trump administration's removal of scientific information from public websites, applying a political lens to censor public outreach material at national parks, and the disregard for requirements in many existing environmental laws (e.g., the destruction of the White House East Wing), there is a critical need to rebuild trust with the public. Rebuilding public trust in ocean conservation will require more than restoring programs—it will demand a fundamental shift toward transparency, accountability, and shared governance. Across the federal government, Congress and agencies must establish robust systems to protect scientific integrity and prevent political interference with the conduct and communication of federally supported science. Independent scientific oversight, stable policy frameworks, and honest reporting on both successes and failures are essential to restoring credibility. Moreover, agencies will need to empower coastal and Tribal/Indigenous communities as co-creators, and demonstrate tangible local benefits from conservation efforts. Ultimately, trust will be rebuilt not through rhetoric, but through consistent, inclusive, and evidence-based actions that visibly improve both ecosystem health and community well-being.

Given the ocean's critical importance to human well-being, the US urgently needs a stronger, more resilient system of MPAs. Getting past the whiplash effect requires public support that can be built through transparency, inclusion, and demonstrating results. The recommendations above offer guidance for a “big tent” approach to strengthen existing MPA programs with diverse governance and scope and weave them into an effective national system that can evolve to address our ocean conservation challenges.

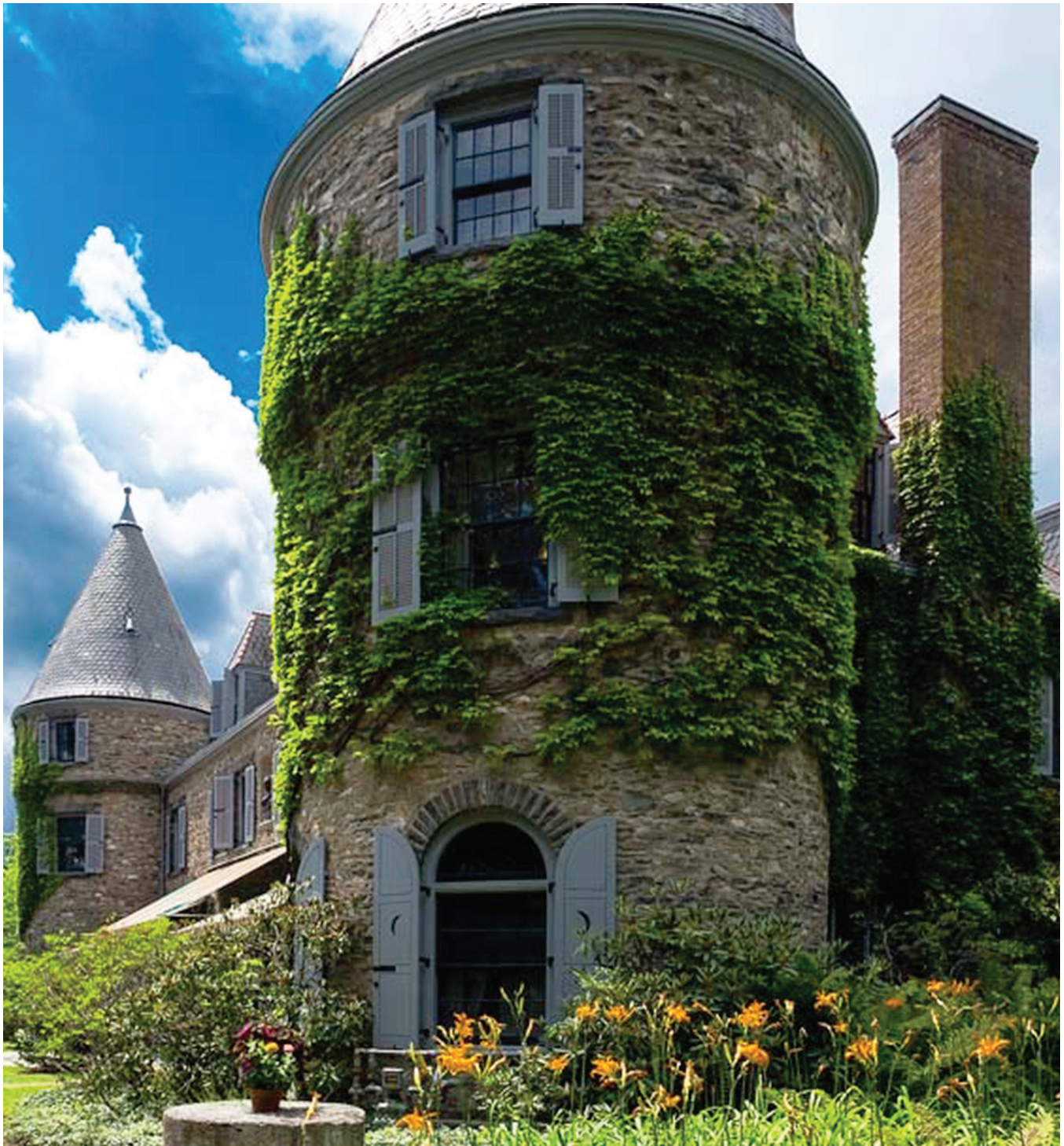
Lauren Wenzel served as the director of NOAA's National Marine Protected Areas Center from 2015–2025. She now serves on the Board of the George Wright Society, as a co-chair of the IUCN's World Commission on Protected Areas Climate Change Specialist Group, and on the Executive Committee of the US IUCN National Committee.

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REFOUNDATION: DOES PLACE-BASED CONSERVATION IN AMERICA NEED TO START OVER?
REBECCA CONARD, ROLF DIAMANT, DAVID HARMON & JOHN REYNOLDS, THEME EDITORS



Refounding National Public Lands: The Future of Place-Based Conservation of National Forests

EDGAR BRANNON

INTRODUCTION

Franklin Roosevelt's secretary of the interior, Harold Ickes, was charged with reorganizing the nation's natural resource agencies into a single department in 1935. He hoped to persuade Forest Service Chief Ferdinand Silcox, a progressive Republican, to lead it under the secretary of the interior. The Forest Service was viewed as the model, and Ickes wanted to wrap the other agencies into the Forest Service as a new, more effective Department of Natural Resources. Silcox balked and instead recruited the Forest Service's founding chief, Gifford Pinchot, to oppose the plan. Decades later, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter,² and Ronald Reagan all tried versions of the same idea, but those efforts pale beside the Trump administration's actions. Can Humpty Dumpty be put back together? Can the Forest Service be built back on the existing legal foundation and mission? If not, who decides? What would happen to the century of laws tying the Forest Service specifically to the Department of Agriculture?

My response to *refounding* is rooted in my experience as a forest supervisor and line officer—someone who worked in the trenches for 40 years. I dealt firsthand with the daunting challenges of coping with external and internal demands, and at times, dysfunction in the Forest Service. The agency had, and still has, things that work, and others that do not, which is not unusual for a federal agency. The administration has decided to approach the government's reorganization with a chainsaw. The United States Forest Service is in crisis as a result. It is looking to me like a major rebuild will be needed. My questions: What matters? What should be brought forward, what needs to change, how should it be done, and who should do this?

TO BEGIN: MARSH'S INFLUENCE

Shortly after arriving as director of Grey Towers National Historic Site, and its associated Pinchot Institute for Conservation Studies, I found myself alone in the library. I lifted from the shelf Pinchot's copy of George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature; or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action*. First published in 1865, Marsh's work is regarded by historians as "the fountainhead of conservation."³ Pinchot took Marsh's observations and further defined *conservation*, in part by situating forestry at its center. Through skillful public relations, Pinchot placed Conservation, with a capital C, into the public lexicon.

Marsh described conservation's central challenges: *overcoming ignorance* and *overcoming greed*. His work resonated deeply with Pinchot, who often referred to *Man and Nature* in his early lectures. Pinchot added a third warning, a moral and ethical imperative: confronting the *evils of concentrated wealth*. He grew up in

the Gilded Age. To him, the federal government's work was not just scientific or administrative; it was ethical and moral. Modern forestry rests on a belief system. That belief system gives the profession its motivation and, I believe, its *esprit de corps*. I believe that spirit remains in place—damaged and dinged up, perhaps, but still there.

My approach is to ensure that decisions, to the extent possible, be grounded in science, scholarship, and experience and be substantiated by data whenever possible. We must use the best science and scholarship available. The process must be transparent, open to review, and amenable to change. These are public lands, and the public must have a role in deciding how they are managed. Career civil servants—not political appointees—should lead the agency. We learned this lesson more than a century ago. The administration sets direction and priorities; Congress appropriates funds, writes laws, and provides oversight; and, in the end, courts adjudicate disputes.

OBSERVATIONS FROM THE INSIDE

My experience tells me that the conservation of national forests, grasslands, monuments, and historic sites depends on *how* it is carried out and *who* carries it out. As important as organizational models are, the credibility of outcomes is not determined by organization structure. Countless officials have focused on organization charts as if they were the determining factor. The culture of an institution has more impact than its structure. In the end, it is the people who do the work and form relationships with the public and partners that make the most difference.

A few observations from my experience:

1. Over the past 30 years, the agency assumed that consolidating national forests and ranger districts would save money and allow needed staff specialist positions to be filled. Money was a problem, and often the driver. However, there was a non-monetary cost. An unintended consequence of ranger district and national forest consolidation was, in my opinion, the *loss of one-on-one connections with many communities*. The agency moved out of small towns across the country. This needs to be fixed in the present and future Forest Service. The public is more supportive when they understand the reasons for actions.
2. *We live in an increasingly interconnected world. Every land manager knows forest ecosystems are the lungs of the planet, and in more ways than I can define, provide for the quality of human existence.* What we do in North America affects the Earth's ecosystems, and what happens elsewhere affects the United States. We are isolated only by limited thinking. We must remain active participants in the worldwide forest management community. The Forest Service role in land stewardship is extensive—so much more than the national forests—and includes 138 million acres of urban forests whereby most of our “lungs” live.
3. *Forest research is a long-term, not short-term, commitment.* Knowledge matters. Our research advances and complements what others are learning. It shapes decisions at all levels. Moving scientists a thousand miles away to a “centralized” location “to be more efficient” undermines the quality and usefulness of research for scientists and resource managers alike. The notion that small units are costly is false.
4. *Supporting state foresters and private forest landowners is not “nice to have”; it is essential.* Teamwork has made a profound difference. A few states have strong forestry organizations and capable staffs, but many operate with skeleton crews. I hosted many meetings and workshops with state foresters, and I witnessed the benefits of their interacting with

their counterparts and federal officials. Without the Forest Service leading and convening, it would not have happened. The proposed elimination of the state and private forestry component of the Forest Service mission will prove to have serious negative consequences to forestland stewardship.

NUTS AND BOLTS

If an almost complete rebuild is needed, what changes make sense? Here is my short list—not a blueprint etched in stone, but a starting point for rebuilding an agency whose strength has always depended on professional judgment, public trust, and durable connection to place. The goal should not be to rearrange boxes on an organizational chart to appear bold. It should be to restore capacity where it matters, clarify accountability, reduce unnecessary layers, and protect the work from day-to-day political interference that thwarts the greater good.

- Political oversight belongs in the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) secretary's office, not inside the agency's chain of command. The Forest Service chief's relationships with elected officials, non-governmental organizations, other agency heads, and the secretary's staff are essential. Success is based on trust relationships, built personally over time.
- If the Forest Service is put under another department, such as Interior, then almost every law for the past 125 years needs to be re-written. Nice idea, but a political non-starter in my opinion. The agency's mission reaches far beyond timber production, though timber remains important in some places. Its work sits at the intersection of water, fire, climate, biodiversity, rural economies, recreation, Tribal relations, and community safety. A Department of Natural Resources could make sense, but only if it strengthens professional independence rather than creating another political perch.
- The chief and the national headquarters must be in Washington, DC. The chief's office sets national policies, defends administrative policies, and advances the mission by building support with



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Congress. It is not meant to manage every national forest from a distance. Decisions made closer to the land and affected communities are more likely to be understood, tested, and improved. The chief and senior leadership need regular access to elected officials, the secretary's staff, other agency leaders, non-governmental organizations, and the broader policy community. That will not happen by walking the streets of Salt Lake City. It is not the chief who needs to be closer to the people and resources, but rather district rangers and forest supervisors. The chief needs to be closer to the secretary and Congress as well as national interests that influence policy decisions.

- The National Forest System has four line-officer levels: chief, regional forester, forest supervisor, and district ranger. The Trump administration is moving to close Regional Offices, but the key question is how their essential functions would be replaced. Regional Offices are costly, and many forest supervisors and district rangers would welcome a smaller regional layer—or none at all. But if regional foresters are eliminated, their responsibilities do not simply disappear. Budget coordination, litigation support, fire and aviation coordination, engineering, human resources, civil rights, grants, quality control, and technical review must be preserved in a form that serves the field units and adds consistency as well as efficiency.
- Local support is earned over time through action, not pronouncements. District rangers and forest supervisors therefore determine much of the agency's success. In his autobiography, Pinchot noted that field leadership depended less on technical knowledge and more on personal character: "Thenceforth, the success or failure of Forest Reserve administration would be almost entirely in the hands of the Supervisor and his Rangers, where it properly belonged. It was radical, but it was right, and it worked." He added, "the first condition of success in any job is not brains but *character*. Over and over again I have seen men of moderate intelligence come to the front because they had courage, integrity, self-respect, steadiness."⁴ Rather

than pulling decisions upward to headquarters, the agency's historic bias was to push them down to the lowest competent level.

- Every national forest has a role in State and Private Forestry, the Forest Service's extension arm. Every national forest can support cooperative forestry, fire assistance, watershed work, urban forestry, forest health, and support for private landowners. The Forest Service has made major contributions to urban forests—Central Park in New York City, Chicago Wilderness, and World Trade Center memorial plaza tree planting are contemporary examples of an expanded role. These are not side assignments; they are connective tissue between federal lands and the larger landscape. It is the State and Private Forestry programs that have linked up all firefighting agencies. The coordination efforts have evolved, and the mechanisms are tested and proven. The focus has always been competence, fairness, justice, equality, and I would add, compromise.
- Research positions should be, as they have been, primarily co-located within universities and tied closely to experimental forests and working landscapes. Forestry research requires a long view. Short-term studies matter, but the most valuable knowledge often comes from decades of observation: fire behavior, watershed response, silviculture, regeneration, insects and disease, carbon sequestration, recreation impacts, and climate change. Once dismantled, that capacity cannot be rebuilt easily or quickly. The importance of keeping Forest Service researchers connected to independent scholarship, graduate education, field application, and the next generation of conservation professionals cannot be overestimated.
- I served on a ranger district that had fewer than six full-time employees and a dozen seasonal workers. That district was later consolidated with two others and its headquarters moved. Now these communities no longer personally know the district ranger—or any employee. As forest supervisor, I solved more public issues at Rotary Club than in formal meetings. Forest supervisors and district rangers need protection from political pressures



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and special interests, not the public.

- Lastly, the administration's actions to stand up a new federal agency that would be responsible for all firefighting is a huge mistake. The problem is not, and has never been in my opinion, the organization.

WHO WILL DO IT, AND HOW WILL IT BE DONE?

The task of refounding the Forest Service is too large and complex to be done by the agency itself, the current administration, or a congressional committee working through ordinary partisan machinery. Maybe what is needed is a 9/11-style bipartisan commission with the credibility, independence, and patience to do the hard work. There may be no perfect answers, but there are better answers, and the country should insist on finding them. The principal laws affecting national forest management now fill a book four inches thick in tiny type face. I do not know enough about the law to prescribe every answer, but as a field manager I know where the problems live. Field officers must be trusted, and they can and should be held accountable. That balance—trust with accountability—is exactly what a serious refounding effort must restore.

We must guard against political and economic interests that seek to turn the mission away from the common good and justice for all. We assumed protections were in place; we were wrong. In a matter of months, the Trump administration has ignited a crown fire that is burning through century-old policies and norms. A line scratched in the dirt is not enough.

The American public, in my opinion, does not realize what an outstanding civil service it has at present.

Edgar Brannon retired in 2005 as director of Grey Towers National Historic Site, Milford, Pennsylvania, after a 40-year career with the USDA Forest Service.

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1. According to the Kübler-Ross model of grief, the stages are “denial,” “anger,” “bargaining,” “depression,” and “acceptance.” I had hoped to reach “acceptance” before writing. I keep lapsing back to “anger.”
2. See Dennis LeMaster, *Decade of Change: The Remaking of the Forest Service Statutory Authority During the 1970s* (Durham, NC: Forest History Society, 1984).
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5. As of July 1, 2026, according to the Office of Personal Management.

Most are unaware of the work done, how it benefits them, how much effort goes into every decision, how dedicated so many of the civil servants are, how they protect us, and maybe as important, how they protect our world for future generations. Does anyone know we have 138 million acres of urban forests and that the Forest Service has a role in Central Park and the 9/11 Memorial? How about the urban wood waste program in Baltimore or a huge role in the Chesapeake Bay?

Prior to the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act of 1883, every new administration was staffed based on patronage and political loyalty. Corruption was the norm, and public service was at best a secondary consideration. Do we really want to go back? Assertion of a manipulative un-elected *deep state* is, frankly, a myth. There is no such thing. To claim otherwise mischaracterizes the work of professional civil servants.

We live in a country with more than 300 million people. We have a non-military federal civil service workforce of 2 million employees.⁵ Treating our public workforce as expendable chattel will only discourage our most talented and capable individuals from choosing challenging careers in public service where their skills are most needed. Nowhere is this more critical than in the Forest Service and other agencies that sustainably manage the nation’s natural resources for essential goods and services, for this and future generations.

America has always risen to meet difficult challenges, and we can do so again. But we must be measured and thoughtful. This current haphazard approach will haunt us for decades to come.

REFOUNDATION: DOES PLACE-BASED CONSERVATION IN AMERICA NEED TO START OVER?
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Toward a Landscape-Scale Conservation Network

ROBERT B. KEITER

Landscape conservation has emerged as an essential approach to the conservation challenges confronting the nation in today's rapidly changing and politically fraught world. To meet the challenges posed by climate change and biodiversity loss, it is apparent that conservation efforts must surmount existing boundary lines to accommodate migratory species, ecological processes, climate perturbations, and the like to preserve any semblance of the natural world that has inspired and shaped the conservation movement for centuries. This necessary expansion of the conservation vision builds upon the dominant place-based conservation model that prevails in the United States and elsewhere, manifested on the federal public lands in our protected national parks, wildlife refuges, and wilderness areas—which are the subject of this essay. But it will require vision and persistence to legitimize this emergent landscape-scale model that already has roots in the ground.

BACKGROUND

The American conservation system has been built upon the idea that we can preserve our natural heritage by designating specific protected areas and then managing them to safeguard the objects, wildlife, and values found there. Yellowstone National Park, established by Congress in 1872, was the nation's first official federal nature reserve, soon followed by other national parks as well as legally designated forest reserves, wildlife refuges, and eventually wilderness areas, along with an array of other protective designations. Under the Constitution, Congress has power over the nation's public lands, giving a distinctive political aspect to their shape and evolution, a reality not likely to change as we face today's nature conservation challenges. The upshot is a four-dimensional public land system that includes national parks, national forests, national wildlife refuges, and other public lands, each overseen by a different land management agency operating under a different organic legal mandate.¹

Despite current upheavals, this expansive 619-million-acre public land system is not likely to change irreversibly in the foreseeable future given the political gridlock that grips Congress and that accounts for decades of flip-flopping presidential administrations. The critical question, therefore, is how to advance preservation policy within this institutional framework and political atmosphere.²

Due to the significant damage the Trump administration is wreaking on the nation's public lands and the agencies overseeing them, any meaningful conservation proposal must first repair this damage while also promoting more profound changes to the conservation agenda. This will entail rebuilding the four main land management agencies in terms of personnel, capacity,

and fiscal resources, as well as restoring trust, morale, institutional knowledge, and mission priorities within each agency. It will also entail undoing such Trump administration changes as National Environmental Policy Act and Endangered Species Act regulation revisions, the cancellation of the national forest roadless rule and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) conservation rule, the executive orders regulating off-road vehicle use, the Utah national monument modifications, and development-driven resource management priorities in order to reinvigorate a science-based conservation agenda.³ Notwithstanding the current administration's shortsighted policies, the nation's public lands and resources are not mere assets on a balance sheet. Rather, nature conservation has long occupied a prominent role on the public domain and continues to enjoy broad public support.

The primary task is to reinvigorate and expand a robust conservation agenda that extends across the landscape, building upon the considerable momentum achieved over decades before the second Trump administration took office. The history of nature conservation on the public lands reflects unmistakable and relatively consistent congressional, presidential, and judicial support, including key policy advances within each of the responsible agencies. In fact, roughly half—310 million acres—of the public lands are presently in some form of legally protected status, mostly by congressional designation, some by presidential action, and some by administrative rule. However, existing national monuments and national forest roadless lands are at imminent risk and will likely require congressional or executive remedial action to restore and ideally expand protections.

By legislation, Congress has extended legal protection to millions of acres in the form of national park, wildlife refuge, wilderness area, and other place-based protective designations. Congress has also adopted keystone laws that have incorporated express science and conservation responsibilities into agency management obligations. These include the 1970 National Environmental Policy Act, the 1973 Endangered Species Act, the 1976 National Forest Management Act with its diversity provision, the 1997 National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act with its “biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health” management standard, the 1998 National Park System Omnibus Management Act that explicitly incorporated science into park management policy, and the 2009 National Landscape Conservation System Act, giving BLM clear conservation management responsibilities for its protected lands. By law, the public land agencies also must engage in interdisciplinary planning, coordinate with one another, and take science and public opinion into account in their decision processes. Several recent presidents, moreover, have aggressively employed the Antiquities Act to establish large, ecologically defined national monuments, further expanding the nation’s protected acreage. While fidelity to these laws and their conservation obligations has waxed and waned when the presidency has changed partisan hands, the overall trajectory has reflected an ever-increasing commitment to conservation and preservation policies on the public lands. That momentum, despite the Trump administration’s contrary policies, will likely be re-established and continue in the years ahead.⁴

DE FACTO LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION

In response to these conservation-oriented designations, laws, and related policies, the federal land management agencies have embraced critical aspects of an ecological approach to resource management that focuses on maintaining ecosystem integrity, including biodiversity and natural processes on their lands. This ecological approach has seen land managers, often prodded by scientists and conservation organizations, looking

beyond their boundaries to better coordinate among themselves to achieve mutual conservation goals. This approach is most evident in locations where national parks, wildlife refuges, wilderness areas, and national monuments adjoin one another. What have emerged are de facto multi-agency efforts, often of diverse origins and generally informal, toward maintaining and restoring a region’s ecological integrity and natural features through collaborative efforts while still meeting multiple-use and other statutory obligations. These efforts, though imperfect at times, are nevertheless embedding place-based ecosystem management approaches on the ground that transcend conventional boundary lines.⁵

The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) provides a prime example of an evolved, unmandated, multi-agency effort to promote a transboundary approach to conserving the region’s ecological integrity and natural heritage. Conservation groups, embracing the GYE concept, led an effort beginning in the 1980s to convince the responsible land management agencies and local residents to prioritize ecosystem protection, focusing heavily on the region’s grizzly bears and other charismatic species, along with its scenic, watershed, and geothermal features. Within a couple decades they succeeded in significantly reducing industrial-scale activities on the multiple-use lands and refocusing the federal agencies on collaborating to preserve the region’s charismatic wildlife, vital waterways, and stunning natural beauty. Along the way, the Greater Yellowstone Coordinating Committee, composed of the region’s federal land managers and now expanded to include state wildlife officials, has provided noticeable support for the effort. Meanwhile, economic priorities in many of the GYE communities shifted noticeably toward recreation, tourism, and real estate, bringing additional support for the transition toward nature conservation. Drawing upon new scientific information about ungulate migration patterns and ongoing climate change impacts, conservation efforts in the GYE are now shifting toward a broader landscape conservation



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approach, effectively expanding the informal GYE boundaries. This development has brought private landowners into regional nature conservation efforts through conservation easement transactions, habitat leases, and other incentive-oriented programs. One prominent example is the High Divide Collaborative, which involves federal, state, and private landowners and others working together to preserve the region's ranching heritage and natural character while connecting the GYE with central Idaho wilderness areas and more distant wild lands.⁶

Something similar is evident elsewhere on the western public lands. In the Crown of the Continent Ecosystem (which includes Glacier and Waterton Lake national parks and surrounding public lands), US and Canadian land managers have joined together along with state, provincial, and Tribal officials, to form the Crown Managers Partnership. The group's aim, abetted by conservation advocacy groups, academic institutions, and federal legislation, is to curtail timber harvesting, oil and gas activity, and mining to protect the region's natural qualities. In the Pacific Northwest, an intense litigation campaign curtailed timber harvesting on the region's federal public lands to protect the northern spotted owl, culminating with the Northwest Forest Plan, which formally embraced a multi-state ecosystem management approach to protect regional biodiversity and watersheds. In California's Sierra Nevada mountains, the Forest Service has implemented ecologically based, multi-forest management plan amendments to safeguard the California spotted owl population, restore native forest conditions, address wildfire concerns, and protect critical water supplies. In northern Washington state, the 504,700-acre North Cascades National Park is flanked by two national recreation areas, multiple wilderness areas, and extensive national forest lands, as well as Canadian provincial parks and recreation areas, creating what is often referred to as the Greater North Cascades Ecosystem. Moving southward, other multi-jurisdictional, large-scale conservation initiatives have taken hold in multiple locations, including the

California Desert area, the Grand Canyon–Colorado Plateau region, the Moab to Mojave Conservation Corridor, and Colorado's San Luis Valley.⁷

In fact, large landscape conservation initiatives are being promoted by the conservation community across the country, generally working with governmental entities in an effort to tie public and private lands together to protect wildlife and natural systems. The aptly named Center for Large Landscape Conservation supports such efforts and serves as a clearinghouse for these initiatives. One well-known example is the Yellowstone to Yukon (Y2Y) project that is working to connect protected areas situated along the spine of the Rocky Mountains to safeguard the region's charismatic wildlife populations. In central Montana, the American Prairie Reserve (now American Prairie) represents an innovative private conservation initiative that envisions a multi-million-acre grassland conservation area connecting public and private lands to restore bison and other native species while maintaining the rural setting. Similar initiatives are underway in south Florida's Everglades ecosystem, the southern Appalachian Mountains, and central Maine with establishment of the Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument adjacent to Baxter State Park. Together, these landscape complexes and conservation initiatives represent an impressive ongoing commitment to preserving the nation's natural attributes and heritage.⁸

CONTEMPLATING A LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION NETWORK

This distinct trend toward large-scale nature conservation on federal public lands, while undeniable, remains ad hoc in origin and design. These expansive complexes containing formally protected federal lands complemented by adjacent areas containing conservation values have emerged organically, representing a significant yet unofficial national commitment to more fully protect our natural heritage. The number and scope of these informal protected area complexes speak to the recognized need to expand our conservation efforts and an evident level of political support for such an approach. While built upon different levels of formal and informal relationships,



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these diverse initiatives constitute a significant initial step toward legitimizing a landscape-scale conservation approach on select federal lands and beyond.

What steps, then, might we contemplate to further formalize landscape conservation as this new era in public land management unfolds? Several options merit consideration, though each must also be weighed against the political realities that have long shaped public land policy.

One option would be to do nothing and permit these organic landscape conservation initiatives to evolve on their own. The appeal of doing nothing rests on the fact that the concept is taking hold on the ground while largely escaping the controversy that inevitably arises when protective public land designations are proposed. Multi-jurisdictional landscape conservation as a resource management policy, while well supported in theory, remains relatively nascent and is taking somewhat different form in each location in terms of the involved lands and underlying institutional structures, providing valuable information on what works and does not work. Given the diverse origins and structure of these protected area complexes and the still-tenuous political climate surrounding them, this option would enable them to continue evolving without shining a political spotlight on them.⁹

Another option would involve seeking place-based legislation individually for these formative landscape conservation initiatives. This alternative tracks the well-established model of individual congressional bills designating special places for additional protection, albeit at a much-expanded scale. Congress is well-steeped in the process for designating national parks, national wildlife refuges, and wilderness areas, generally responding to a clear political consensus to protect these special places. In several instances, Congress has legislatively modified legal standards on multiple-use national forest or BLM lands to establish protective management requirements and collaborative transboundary entities. One example is the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, which is responsible

for instituting and enforcing environmental standards for the Lake Tahoe watershed straddling California and Nevada. Another example is the Columbia River Gorge Scenic Area Act, which established the multi-member Columbia River Gorge Commission to oversee this river stretch that borders two states and includes both national forest and private landholdings. Because such a place-based approach to landscape conservation would only affect a specific region, political attention would focus only on that particular landscape, likely limiting any political fallout. Over time, this approach could cohere into a more complete landscape conservation network.¹⁰

A third option would involve comprehensive congressional legislation to establish a National Landscape Conservation Network, putting a powerful stamp of approval on this evolutionary development in public land policy. Indeed, national legislation legitimizing a landscape conservation network to more fully protect the nation's natural heritage would represent the natural outgrowth of our existing public land systems and better reflect ecological realities on the ground. A National Conservation Network Act (NCNA) might overlay existing protected areas, creating Protected Area Complexes (PACs), without changing the agency responsible or management standards, similar to Wilderness Act designations. Congress could reserve to itself the power to establish such PACs, or it could delegate that authority to the agencies, effectively endorsing their efforts to date. The NCNA would mandate landscape-level planning through a rigorous interagency coordination process that also ensures public participation and perhaps utilizes advisory councils. The NCNA also would encourage private, state, and Tribal landowners to affiliate with the PACs through incentive conservation payments, technical assistance, and the like. This arrangement would recognize what is true on the ground in many locations, where land trusts hold conservation easements on strategically located private lands, many landowners are committed conservationists, and state and Tribal wildlife agencies are already engaged in conservation efforts. Other NCNA features should include transboundary wildlife migration corridors and national restoration area designations to repair damaged ecosystems.¹¹



A National Conservation Network Act might overlay existing protected areas, creating Protected Area Complexes, without changing the agency responsible or management standards, similar to Wilderness Act designations.

The proposed NCNA should not generate conflict within the federal family since it does not alter existing designations or responsibilities, and the four main land management agencies have, until recently, each endorsed landscape conservation in one form or another. Because private and other non-federal landowners can voluntarily choose to affiliate with PACs, their property rights are acknowledged while incentives would be available to encourage affiliation. The NCNA proposal should ordinarily align with the land trust movement's conservation goals as well as state and Tribal wildlife agency policies. The costs are modest, primarily the expenses attached to new planning and coordination requirements, which the PAC agencies might pool among themselves, along with

private land incentive payments that could replace existing farmland conservation payment programs.

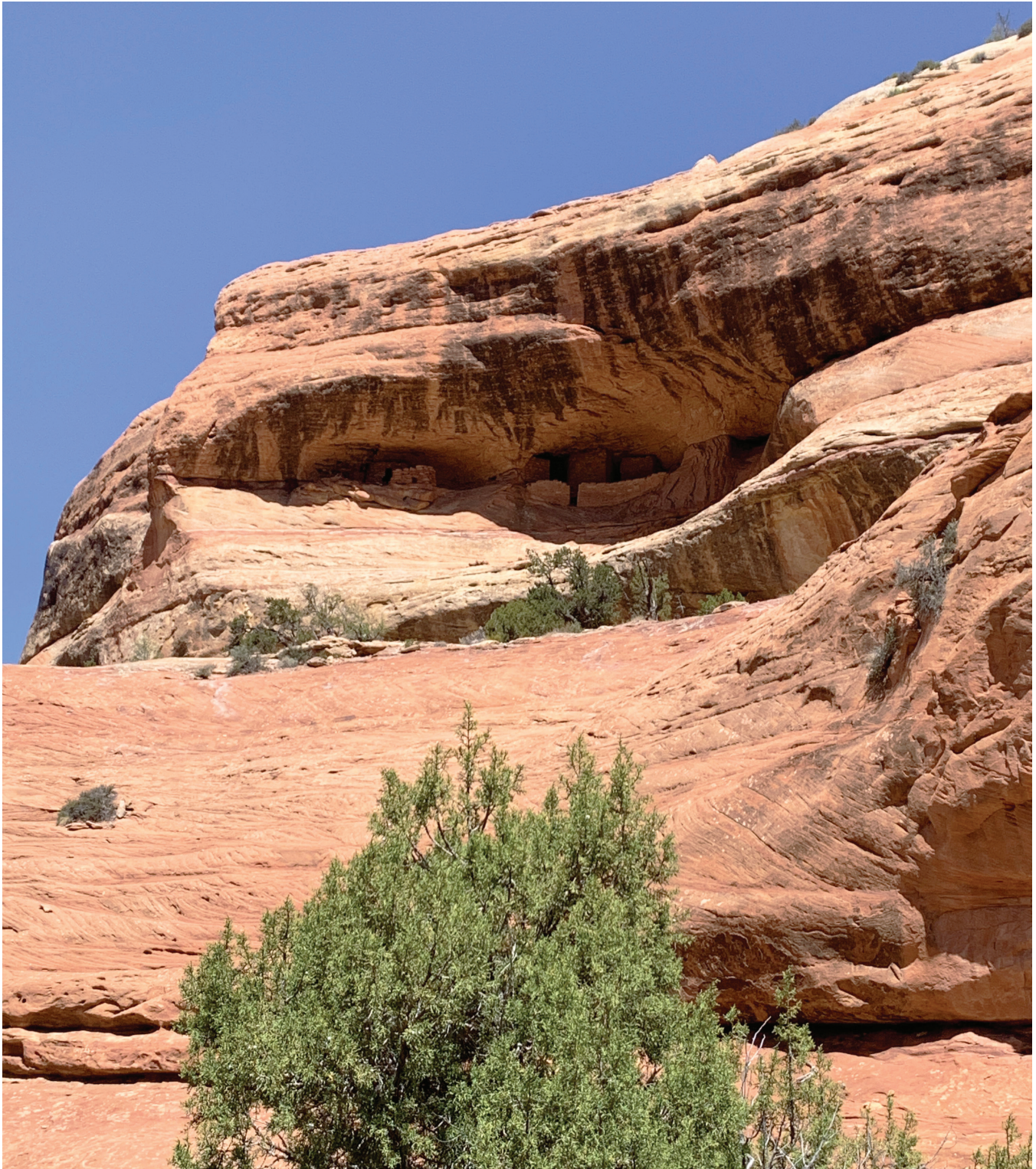
In sum, the proposed NCNA represents a next logical step in our efforts to safeguard the nation's natural heritage by connecting existing protected areas and engaging non-federal lands in these efforts. With de facto PACs already in place and with the significant progress achieved in private land conservation, the stage is set for a more formal approach to the emergent landscape conservation movement. Adoption of the proposed NCNA, while politically challenging at present, would legitimize existing ad hoc landscape-level conservation initiatives, which already enjoy considerable national and local support.

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ENDNOTES

1. For a comprehensive history of the US public land systems, see John D. Leshy, *Our Common Ground: A History of America's Public Lands* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022). Notably, the public land system addressed here is complemented by the National Marine Sanctuary System, essentially a saltwater counterpart overseen by the Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.
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7. For a brief description of these various initiatives, see Robert B. Keiter, "Toward a National Conservation Network Act: Transforming Landscape Conservation on the Public Lands into Law," *Harvard Environmental Law Review* 42: 61ff. (2018).
8. For more information on these initiatives, see Keiter, "Toward a National Conservation Network Act," 120-121, 125-126.
9. See Joseph L. Sax and Robert B. Keiter, "The Realities of Regional Resource Management: Glacier National Park and Its Neighbors Revisited," *Ecology Law Quarterly* 33: 233ff. (2006).
10. Gary Spradling, "Regional Government for Lake Tahoe," *Hastings Law Journal* 22: 705 (1971); Michael C. Blumm and Nathan J. Baker, "The Struggle over the Columbia River Gorge: Establishing and Governing the Country's Largest Scenic Area," *Washington Journal of Environmental Law & Policy* 4: 287ff. (2015).
11. For more detailed analysis of the National Landscape Conservation Network Act proposal, see Keiter, "Toward a National Conservation Network Act," 127-136.

REFOUNDATION: DOES PLACE-BASED CONSERVATION IN AMERICA NEED TO START OVER?
REBECCA CONARD, ROLF DIAMANT, DAVID HARMON & JOHN REYNOLDS, THEME EDITORS



A Better Path to Tribal Stewardship of Public Lands

CARLA CHUNG MATTIX

In the 1990s, calls for Tribal stewardship and co-management of public lands attracted the attention of lawmakers, executive branch policy-makers, and federal land managers. These initiatives gained ground during the early 2000s and reached a new apex under the Biden administration. Joint Secretarial Order 3403, issued by the secretaries of the interior and agriculture and later joined by the secretary of commerce, directed agencies to work with federally recognized Tribes and Native Hawaiian communities to implement collaborative and cooperative stewardship arrangements. The national monuments created under the Antiquities Act during the Biden era provided the strongest language to date for Tribal inclusion in planning and management activities.

Despite these significant forward steps, the current framework to incorporate Tribal stewardship is fragile. Implementation is dependent upon a complicated patchwork of laws, policies, and legal doctrines. Terms such as “co-management” and “co-stewardship” do not have statutory or regulatory definitions, creating confusion and uneven expectations among Tribes and land managers. Federal agency institutional cultures and discretion may also contribute to inconsistent measures for shared decision-making.

The current greatest threat to widespread and committed implementation is political. Secretarial Order 3403 remains in effect, but there is no indication that the Trump administration or any future administration will give Tribal stewardship directives the same priority. The inclusion of Tribes and Native Hawaiian communities in place-based conservation needs a new approach.

During my 26-year career as an attorney advising the National Park Service (NPS), I encountered the complexities of the current piecemeal approach. National park units have historical links to Native Americans, Native Alaskans, and Native Hawaiians. The lands and resources within parks were once, and in some cases may still be, the homes, hunting and gathering grounds, and sacred sites of Tribes. Yellowstone National Park, for example, is culturally associated with the Blackfeet, Confederated Salish and Kootenai, Crow, Eastern Shoshone, Gros Ventre and Assiniboiné, Nez Perce, and Shoshone-Bannock Tribes. Additionally, the park consults with 54 other federally recognized Tribes on various matters. In this respect, Yellowstone is not unique.

Many parks include Tribal trust lands within their boundaries. Other parks share borders with Native American reservations. In 1987, NPS established a Native American Relationships Management Policy. Soon after, the NPS

American Indian Liaison Office worked in earnest to establish collaborative arrangements with Tribes. NPS recognized that partnerships with Native Americans enrich interpretation efforts, assist park management responsibilities, resolve disputes, and help fulfill the federal government’s trust responsibility.

Some partnerships with Tribes involving NPS units and other public lands are the result of legislative requirements. For example, legislation that established or expanded Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area, Badlands National Park, and Grand Canyon National Park necessitated the development of agreements to address issues involving Tribal lands within park boundaries. Other relationships evolved from policies, such as President Clinton’s executive order to promote access to sacred sites on federal land. As these relationships matured, efforts to enhance Tribal involvement and co-management grew.

The Department of the Interior Office of the Solicitor worked with NPS to identify the legal authorities and instruments available to facilitate these relationships. At times, we had to be creative and unorthodox in our approach. We used general and cooperative agreements along with legislative authorities and treaty rights applicable to specific parks. NPS has had some success using annual funding agreements under the Tribal Self-Governance Act for non-Bureau of Indian Affairs programs, but these can only be entered into with Tribes that have a compact with Interior under strict requirements.

Many of these measures are now captured in the 2022 Solicitor’s Office *Current Land, Water, and Wildlife Authorities That Can Support Tribal Stewardship and Co-Stewardship Final Report*. This comprehensive guidance is an important resource for land managers seeking to implement collaborative and cooperative

partnerships with Tribes. Yet, it is careful to identify legal limitations, distinguishes “co-stewardship” from “co-management,” and still reflects the agency-by-agency patchwork nature of legal authorities.

One of the most promising and ultimately frustrating opportunities for collaborative Tribal management that I worked on involved Badlands National Park. In 1968, Congress authorized the return of 133,000 acres of former Air Force bombing range land abutting the park and within the Pine Ridge Reservation boundaries to the Oglala Sioux Tribe. At the same time, the legislation expanded the boundary of the park to include this area, known today as the South Unit of Badlands, and instituted perpetual NPS management under an agreement with the Tribe.

The circumstances surrounding the creation and subsequent management of the Tribal lands within the park have been the subject of continual controversy. In the early 2000s the situation presented the possibility of a new paradigm for the National Park System. Together with the Oglala Sioux Tribe, NPS leadership explored the idea of turning the South Unit into the first Tribal National Park. Following a decade of negotiation and planning, including the development of a general management plan for the South Unit, NPS supported Tribal management of the unit in accordance with the laws governing the National Park System.

Delegating this level of authority over a park unit to a Tribe required congressional approval. After further negotiations, NPS and the Oglala Sioux developed draft legislation and found a sponsor in the Senate. At this point, the effort stalled. Political changes in Congress, the federal government, and the Tribe dampened the momentum and the Tribal National Park did not materialize.

Even if Tribal management of the South Unit had come to fruition, the 15 years of dedicated work and significant

resources expended for this project are simply not feasible for most Tribal stewardship proposals. Neither is the square peg-round hole approach of using existing authorities that are not designed to address the unique needs of land-managing partnerships with Tribes.

Is there a different approach? Yes, there is. As a start, when there are opportunities to reset major environmental and cultural preservation laws and agency organic acts, language regarding Tribal involvement should go beyond consultation requirements and incorporate stewardship authorities. Though not ideal—the scope of Tribal involvement might vary from law to law or by agency—such measures would still provide agencies much-needed clarity.

But since we are thinking in terms of a “Refoundation,” I submit that an overarching legislative framework is needed to integrate consistent and effective Tribal co-management into the future of our public lands. To do this, federal agencies need flexibility and discretion to delegate a reasonable level of authority to Tribes. Crafting such legislation to apply to a multitude of federal agencies and 575 federally recognized Tribes will be a challenge. One model similar in scope that had bipartisan support and has achieved tangible results is the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA).

Enacted in 1990, NAGPRA provides for the respectful protection and return of Native American human remains and cultural items from federal holdings to Tribes. The statute and implementing regulations uniformly apply to all federal agencies. In 35 years, it has produced a sea change in attitudes toward science and museum collection practices involving Native Americans. The Native American scholar, David Treuer, has noted that since the passage of NAGPRA, “tribes and parks (not to mention museums, galleries, and private collections) have drawn closer together in their efforts to preserve Native spaces and objects.” During my years in the Solicitor’s Office advising the NPS National NAGPRA Program



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and the NAGPRA Federal Advisory Review Committee, I witnessed this strengthened relationship and shift toward collaboration among many federal land managing agencies and Tribes.

The legislative development of NAGPRA forged its path to broader stewardship. In 1986, the US Senate Indian Affairs Committee and a group of bipartisan US senators and representatives from disparate regions of the nation began an exploration of the complicated topic of repatriation. Following several draft bills that fell short, the museum community requested a one-year period to provide museums and Native American communities time to initiate a dialogue on crucial matters. With the encouragement of the Senate committee, The Heard Museum, a respected Native American art museum, accepted the responsibility for organizing and sponsoring the dialogue. An initial planning meeting brought together national leaders of the Native American, museum, and anthropology communities to select a dialogue panel. The ensuing Panel for a National Dialogue on Museum/Native American Relations included broad representation of Native Americans (not just federally recognized tribes), prominent museum officials and recognized scholars. A facilitator and congressional staff also participated in the discussions.

After convening five meetings during the year-long initiative, the Panel produced a report that formed the framework for the final language of NAGPRA. In their report, they attributed their success to a candid and extended exchange of views and mutual education. The involvement of key congressional staff members also proved critical to the effort. Senator Daniel K. Inouye, one of the sponsors of the statute, called this level of cooperation which fostered ongoing discussions with Congress as “unprecedented.”

A similar process could be used to develop comprehensive Tribal stewardship and co-management legislation. National and regional Tribal organizations, as well as Tribes with a stake in co-management, can direct this effort by engaging amenable sponsors in Congress and hosting a national dialogue on Tribal participation in

the stewardship of public lands. To be successful, this dialogue will need to include the committed participation of representatives from Tribes, federal and state agencies, environmental, historic preservation, conservation and sporting organizations, and other stakeholders with informed perspectives. While all 575 federally recognized Tribes could not manageably have a seat at the table, regional meetings would provide venues for their inclusion.

Legislative proposals to incorporate meaningful Tribal stewardship into public lands management need not start from scratch. In recent years, the work completed to implement Secretarial Order 3403 and other initiatives has created a body of reports and agreements with valuable legal analysis and experiential information.

The aforementioned 2022 Solicitor’s Office report offers specific definitions that provide helpful guidance, but these terms are not defined in any law. Clarifying the terms “co-management,” “co-stewardship,” and similar terminology would be a fundamental starting point in any dialogue and proposal.

Members of the dialogue also have 400 co-stewardship agreements signed during the Biden administration from which to draw. These agreements span multiple federal agencies, Tribes, and geographic regions. A review of the strengths and weaknesses encountered during the implementation of these partnerships can inform future legislation.

In 2023, the Congressional Research Service, the non-partisan public policy research arm of the US Congress, published a lengthy examination of the varying degrees of Tribal influence in federal decision-making. This thorough report makes it clear that the issues are complicated. But, as the report suggests, Congress has the ability, and I would stress the responsibility, to consider the suitability and effectiveness of federal–Tribal co-management, and the scope of activities on federal land allowed under agreements, including whether agencies should delegate certain activities to Tribes.



National and regional Tribal organizations, as well as Tribes with a stake in co-management, can host a national dialogue on Tribal participation in the stewardship of public lands.

Most recently, in January 2026 the Government Accountability Office, the independent, non-partisan investigative office of the US Congress, also issued a report to examine issues related to agencies developing shared decision-making agreements with Tribes. The report found that limited federal agency understanding of legal authorities and incomplete guidance impeded the development of agreements, and the significant federal workforce reductions that began in 2025 have diminished planning to make strategic use of partnerships with Tribes. Among other things, the Accountability Office recommended that Congress authorize additional federal agencies, beyond Interior and Agriculture, to enter into self-governance type agreements with Tribes, “to the extent legally permissible.”

We are at a critical juncture for capitalizing on the momentum to clarify and strengthen Tribal stewardship. It is time to move beyond a piecemeal approach. There is a general sense that federal–Tribal co-management on public lands may help federal agencies achieve congressional priorities. Attitudes toward integrating Tribal traditional knowledge with contemporary resource management policies to meet mutual objectives are becoming more favorable. The opportunity exists to overcome challenges that agencies have faced when trying to balance various Tribal interests with other statutory mandates and mission. That opportunity can take the form of a comprehensive legislative initiative that ushers in a new era of public land management.

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REFOUNDATION: DOES PLACE-BASED CONSERVATION IN AMERICA NEED TO START OVER?

REBECCA CONARD, ROLF DIAMANT, DAVID HARMON & JOHN REYNOLDS, THEME EDITORS

**Re-examining Place-Based Conservation:
Co-Governance and Co-Management as the
Foundation for, and Future of, Parks and Protected Areas**

LYDIA A. KIEWRA

Recent political assaults on natural resource management, scientific integrity, and historical memory by the United States' current administration have exposed some of the brittle foundations of “America’s best idea” within place-based conservation. Incremental fixes and a return to the status quo will not suffice to save our nation’s parks and protected areas (PPAs). What is needed is a deliberate refoundation, or establishing and building something anew after substantial disruption, of legal authorities, institutional design, and political coalitions so that beloved PPAs are co-governed with shared authority, durable legal protections, and reliable funding. This essay argues that co-governance and co-management can and should be the cornerstone of that refoundation, but only if they are paired with clear legal reforms, redesigned institutions, and a pragmatic political strategy.

Co-management and co-governance go beyond conventional stakeholder engagement by redistributing authority while allowing agencies to retain operational roles. In this way, they offer a viable path for agencies seeking to rebuild relevance and more sustainable resource use. Graham and colleagues define natural resource governance as “the interactions among structures, processes and traditions that determine how power and responsibilities are exercised, how decisions are taken, and how citizens or other stakeholders have their say” (2003: ii). Historically, that definition has been operationalized through state-based, hierarchical models that concentrate centralized power (Scott 1998; Lockwood 2010; Lockwood et al. 2010). However, over recent decades, many protected places have shifted toward collaborative management, formal co-governance arrangements, and community-centered strategies (Gokhale et al. 1998; Ramakrishnan et al. 1998; Lockwood et al. 2010; Borrini-Feyerabend et al. 2012).

For example, Canyon de Chelly National Monument illustrates how co-governance works in practice. The land is held by the Navajo Nation (Diné) and co-governed with the National Park Service. Diné families continue to live, farm, and practice culture within the monument while NPS manages visitor services and funding, with both parties collaborating on protection and interpretation (NPS 2024a). In Florida, after decades of exclusion, the Miccosukee Tribe and the Seminole Tribe were formally recognized as co-managers and co-stewards of Everglades National Park in 2024; the agreements give Tribal partners a formal role in stewardship and interpretation while NPS retains responsibility for visitor services and federal funding (NPS 2022a; NPCA 2024b; NPS 2024d; NPS 2024e). Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary,

designated in 2024, is the first national marine sanctuary to embed Tribal collaboration in the final management plan and to include Indigenous partners from the outset; Tribal advisors will guide federal management across 4,543 square miles of ocean and 116 miles of coastline (Ding 2024; NOAA 2024; NPR 2024). These examples show how shared authority can preserve cultural practice, improve stewardship, and legitimize federal action in the eyes of local communities.

At the same time, recent events show that the stability of place-based conservation rested on assumptions that were less secure than they appeared. Statutory protections, bureaucratic norms, and scientific authority are not guaranteed during political shifts. Those assumptions failed, in part, because legal authority and decision-making are concentrated in centralized hierarchies that are vulnerable to rapid capture. Moreover, governance arrangements too often treat communities and knowledge systems as consultative afterthoughts rather than co-equal partners. When legal protections are contested, when scientific findings are censored, and when historical narratives are erased or reframed, the formal levers managers rely on such as organic acts, regulatory systems, and agency procedures can offer little resistance and strip authority from agency decision-making. Governance theory illuminates this fragility: state-centric, top-down models can deliver consistency in stable times but lack the distributed legitimacy and adaptive capacity needed under seismic shifts (Scott 1998; Dovers 2005; Howlett and Rayner 2006; Lockwood et al. 2010).

Emergent co-governance shows both promise and limitations for addressing such issues. Examples from Canyon de Chelly, the Miccosukee co-stewardship in the

Everglades, and the Chumash sanctuary demonstrate that shared authority can sustain some stewardship when federal protections falter (Ding 2024; NPR 2024; NPS 2024a; NPS 2024d). Yet many co-stewardship agreements remain informal or depend on executive discretion, leaving them exposed to legal challenges, funding shortfalls, and political rollbacks (Nadasdy 2003). NPS reported more than 80 co-stewardship agreements with Indigenous groups in 2022, but the scope, legal standing, and resourcing of those agreements vary widely, from binding management roles to advisory memoranda (NPS 2022a; US Department of the Interior 2021). Within the Great Smoky Mountains, partnerships can operationalize governance principles for problems like air quality, aligning actions with the Clean Air Act and making monitoring data public, but also reveal how cross-sector collaboration depends on sustained funding and inter-agency coordination to be effective (NPCA 2024a; NPS 2024b; NPS 2024c; USGS 2024).

Moving forward, place-based conservation should champion shared sovereignty, durable legal protections, institutional redesign, and funding stability. That means moving beyond partnering consultation toward legally recognized, enforceable roles for Indigenous nations, local communities, and other rights holders in decision-making (Graham et al. 2003; Lockwood et al. 2010). Co-governance and co-management should be the organizing norm rather than an ad hoc accommodation.

LAW AND POLICY REFORMS

Legal reforms should begin with targeted amendments to foundational statutes, including the 1916 Organic Act (16 USC § 1 et seq.), which established the US National Park Service; the 1905 Transfer Act (33 Stat. 628; 16 USC §§ 472, 524, 554), which established the US Forest Service; and the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 (16 USC § 742a et seq.), which established the US Fish and Wildlife Service, to explicitly include statutory co-stewardship authority. This would grant co-managers decision rights on specified matters, protections for scientific integrity and interpretation that make political interference reviewable in court, and procedural standing for co-managers in rule-making and enforcement. A model co-management clause should be drafted that specifies scope, dispute resolution, data sharing, and termination

conditions so agreements are consistent and legally durable (Nadasdy 2003; Lockwood et al. 2010). Then, permanent institutional units should be created to make co-governance routine: Tribal liaison offices, joint management boards with equal representation, and co-stewardship units embedded in regional offices. These units should have delegated authority for routine decision-making and a clear chain of accountability for agency leadership. Formal dispute resolution mechanisms ought to be built, such as mediation panels or binding arbitration, to prevent ad hoc breakdowns like what we are presently witnessing. Requiring agencies to externally publish co-management agreements, decision records, and monitoring data to ensure transparency and legitimacy would be the next step in rebuilding the relevancy and stewardship necessary to save PPAs (Scott 1998; Graham et al. 2003; Lockwood 2010). However, secure and stable funding also are needed in order to enact such policy shifts.

FUNDING AND CAPACITY

Securing predictable funding through a mix of dedicated appropriations, conservation trust funds, and statutory protections that shield core stewardship budgets from political reallocation will be an uphill, yet necessary, battle. Just compensation for knowledge holders and community participants for time and expertise is critical in this model, including payment for Traditional Ecological Knowledge contributions and capacity building. Establishing grant lines for co-management implementation, training programs for joint governance, and seed funding for pilot sites that can demonstrate scalable outcomes will be critical so that a national model could then be adopted (NPCA 2024a; NPS 2024b).

Tying funding and authority to measurable outcomes, such as ecological indicators, governance equity metrics, and/or engagement metrics such as stakeholder satisfaction, as well as requiring periodic independent reviews of co-governance arrangements and publishable findings, is needed. Although this could make funding somewhat challenging, such measures are critical to prevent funding and staffing removals during times of political chaos, and to leverage best management practices of PPAs into the future. Together, these legal, organizational, and fiscal reforms would convert



Moving forward, place-based conservation should champion shared sovereignty, durable legal protections, institutional redesign, and funding stability.

promising co-governance experiments into the norm in future place-based conservation, thereby becoming capable of withstanding political assaults while improving ecological and social outcomes for all.

POLITICAL STRATEGY AND COALITION BUILDING

Such refoundation could be met with initial unease, because it asks for both stronger legal protections and a redistribution of authority. There is a certain degree of resistance to be expected, from three sources. First, bureaucratic inertia within agencies often resists changes that alter chains of command or require new capacities (Lockwood 2010). Second, partisan actors who view federal land management as a site of cultural contest will most likely oppose reforms that constrain executive discretion or shift narratives about history and science. Third, private interests that profit from extractive uses or regulatory uncertainty will likely lobby against statutory protections and stable funding. Historical grievances and mistrust also complicate coalition building; for example, Marginalized and Indigenous communities may be reluctant to engage because of past dispossession and exclusion from resource management and decision-making with federal partners (Kosek 2006; Finney 2014).

To remedy these issues, framing co-governance as a bipartisan solution that advances public safety, economic resilience, and local stewardship would combine principled reform with broad, practical coalitions. Additionally, this would emphasize job creation from restoration projects, improve visitor experiences that boost local economies, and reduce litigation costs due to clearer governance. Local champions, such as Tribal leaders, county officials, and park superintendents, should be recruited at the forefront of such efforts as they can demonstrate pilot successes like the Miccosukee co-stewardship in the Everglades and the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary (Ding 2024; NPS 2024d). Using non-governmental organization or academic partnerships to provide independent evaluation and translation of Traditional Ecological Knowledge into policy-relevant evidence without erasing its cultural form will be key in ensuring future mandates are adhered to (Nadasdy

2003). For example, start with pilot projects that codify co-management clauses, document ecological and social outcomes, and then scale up through model legislation and targeted appropriations. Where Congress is slow, pursue executive action and agency rule-making to institutionalize co-stewardship while working in parallel to secure statutory change. Investing in public communications that highlight shared stewardship successes at places like Canyon de Chelly and beyond to normalize co-governance as both practical and patriotic, especially during these unprecedented times, may be enough to propel PPAs into a more sustainable future (NPS 2024a).

RISKS, VULNERABILITIES, AND METRICS FOR SUCCESS

Refoundation carries real risks that must be acknowledged and mitigated. Co-governance can be reduced to tokenism if agreements are symbolic rather than binding. Informal arrangements dependent on goodwill are vulnerable to political rollback, executive discretion, and funding shortfalls. Undercompensating knowledge holders reproduces extractive dynamics by asking communities to contribute expertise without payment or capacity building (Nadasdy 2003). Legal uncertainty is another vulnerability: co-stewardship that lacks statutory backing can be overturned or ignored in litigation. Unequal capacity among communities can produce uneven outcomes, leaving some groups marginalized even within co-governance frameworks (Kosek 2006).

To manage these risks, we must adopt clear metrics and monitoring systems. For example, legal durability can be measured by the number of statutory co-stewardship clauses enacted and by the presence of procedural standing for co-managers in rulemaking. Funding stability can be tracked by the share of core stewardship budgets protected through dedicated appropriations or trust funds. Governance equity should be assessed with indicators such as the proportion of joint decisions, compensation paid to Traditional Ecological Knowledge holders, and participation rates across demographic groups. Ecological outcomes should use standard resource condition indicators, for example air quality trends in the Great Smoky Mountains, where



Framing co-governance as a bipartisan solution that advances public safety, economic resilience, and local stewardship would combine principled reform with broad, practical coalitions.

cross-sector partnerships have aligned actions with the Clean Air Act (NPS 2024b; USGS 2024). Finally, measuring community impact and legitimacy through periodic independent surveys and independent reviews of dispute resolution outcomes, where funding and authority are tied to these metrics so that co-governance arrangements that fail to meet basic legal, fiscal, and equity thresholds are reformed.

INTERNATIONAL IMPLICATIONS AND SCALING

The Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary highlights how Indigenous partners can be included from the outset of designation and planning, and the Miccosukee agreements in the Everglades demonstrate how formal co-management can help correct long histories of exclusion and create durable local custodianship (Ding 2024; NPS 2024d). By codifying model costewardship clauses, protecting scientific integrity, and securing predictable funding, the United States can offer legislative and administrative templates that other nations can adapt and adopt to meet their needs. Comparative models from countries with longer histories of statutory Indigenous rights and co-management can inform US design choices (e.g., Canada), and international partnerships can provide technical assistance, comparative evaluation, and support for transboundary conservation challenges. Elevating Indigenous leadership in US protected areas positions the United States to be a credible partner in Indigenous-led conservation initiatives worldwide (Borrini-Feyerabend et al. 2012; NPR 2024). In time, hopefully the US will facilitate a reciprocal sharing of this knowledge beyond national boundaries as part of an organizational learning effort with other governing systems.

CONCLUSION AND CALL TO ACTION

The urgency of refoundation is immediate within US PPAs. Incremental adjustments and a return to the status quo will not protect these landscapes from future political failures, nor will they address the structural

inequities embedded within existing systems of governance. This essay proposes a set of interlocking pathways forward:

1. Legal changes that establish statutory co-stewardship and co-governance authority, safeguard scientific integrity and interpretation, and grant procedural standing to co-managers;
2. Institutional changes that create more resilient Tribal liaison offices, joint management boards, and formal dispute-resolution mechanisms; and
3. Fiscal changes that secure predictable appropriations, establish conservation trust funds, and compensate community members and Traditional Ecological Knowledge holders for their expertise and contributions.

The path forward begins with action at manageable scales. State-level and site-specific pilot programs can test co-management frameworks, codify model governance provisions, and generate evidence for broader implementation. Coupled with independent evaluation and dedicated statutory drafting efforts, these initiatives can lay the groundwork for meaningful legislative and institutional transformation.

Refoundation will not be simple. It requires governments, conservation organizations, Indigenous groups, scientists, and local communities to share authority in ways that challenge longstanding assumptions about who governs, whose knowledge counts, and what conservation should achieve. Yet the alternative, and our current reality of maintaining systems, remains vulnerable to political instability, exclusion, and declining public trust. By embracing co-governance and co-management, we have a novel opportunity to rebuild and better protect our conserved areas in ways that are not only ecologically resilient, but also more just, legitimate, and capable of serving future generations.

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REFOUNDATION: DOES PLACE-BASED CONSERVATION IN AMERICA NEED TO START OVER?
REBECCA CONARD, ROLF DIAMANT, DAVID HARMON & JOHN REYNOLDS, THEME EDITORS



Reimagining America's "Best Idea": Indigenous Stewardship and the Next Era of Conservation

KATIE SHEA

The national parks are often celebrated as America’s “best idea,” yet their foundation was shaped by a conservation model built on the exclusion of Indigenous Peoples and their stewardship practices. As the country imagines the next era of conservation amid renewed attacks on public lands, this essay argues that reform cannot mean simply rebuilding the old system. It must move beyond preservation through federal control toward increased partnership with Tribal Nations, grounded in Indigenous-led stewardship, shared decision-making, and Tribal governance. Tribal co-stewardship and co-management offer holistic solutions that are already emerging across federal land management. The question now is whether these approaches will remain exceptional arrangements or become foundational to the future of public land policy.

On a bluebird day beneath the great sequoias, I lay on my back in the hush of Mariposa Grove, looking up into branches that had been reaching toward the sky for centuries. I wondered what they had witnessed ... the hands that once tended this place, the fires carefully set, the songs carried through the trees, and the footsteps of Indigenous Peoples who knew these grounds not as wilderness, but as home.

I was 17 then, a young Bodewadmi Kwe (Potawatomi woman), working on a trail crew with dirt beneath my nails and wonder in my chest. Each day, as I maintained those paths, I found myself asking a question I could not put down: Where are my Native brothers and sisters? Why are we not here working alongside these crews, caring for these places openly, visibly, and with authority?

I had always known that we were still here. What I did not yet understand was why we had been made absent from the very places our people had long known, loved, and cared for. That question stayed with me because it was never only about who was missing from a trail crew. It was about who had been made absent from the story of conservation itself, and what it would mean to bring Indigenous stewardship back to its center.

At their foundation, national parks, along with other places under the jurisdiction of federal land-managing agencies, were conceptually flawed from the beginning because they were built on removal rather than relationship. This includes both the forced displacement of Indigenous people to establish parks like Yosemite or Yellowstone,¹ and the enduring barriers that continue to limit Indigenous stewardship today.²

If that is the legacy, then the question becomes how to move forward. As the country considers the future of

public lands amid renewed extraction, deregulation, and political instability, the path forward may be clearer than it seems. It could be a return to what has long worked: Native-led stewardship.

One practical pathway toward this transformation is the expansion of Tribal co-stewardship. While not synonymous with full land return or exclusive jurisdiction, it offers a scalable model for sovereignty-informed governance within existing legal and administrative frameworks. It provides a bridge between current federal systems and a more fundamentally relational approach to conservation.³

With the growing success of Tribal co-stewardship, it should not remain peripheral, but become a defining principle of public land policy, grounded in sovereignty, shared governance, and enduring relationships to place. What began as a question beneath sequoias is ultimately a question about power: who holds it, who has been excluded, and how it must change.

Since time immemorial, Indigenous Peoples have lived in reciprocity with the land. It is where languages and identities are born, economies sustained, ceremonies practiced, and ancestors laid to rest. These connections remain, but they were severely disrupted through forced removal to make way for what became known as “America’s best idea.” It is no coincidence that many national parks sit on sacred Indigenous homelands.

Crucially, the “pristine” environments early conservationists sought to protect were often shaped by generations of Indigenous stewardship. Yet the model that followed emphasized removing people so others could recreate. That model has failed. Lands are over-traveled, agencies have more acres and deferred maintenance than staff to care for them, and dominant frameworks

continue to marginalize the knowledge systems that shaped these ecosystems.

Understanding this failure requires examining the origins of American conservation. Over the course of a fraught and often violent history, the idea of conservation emerged as a project of protecting and preserving lands. But for whom? And is it preservation, or control?

This logic mirrors broader patterns in the legal relationship between Tribes and the federal government. The United States has often prioritized control and ownership at the expense of stewardship, from manifest destiny and resource extraction to paternalistic policies that assumed federal authority knew best.

In contrast, many Indigenous frameworks emphasize balance rather than dominion. As Robin Wall Kimmerer describes, Indigenous stewardship is grounded in reciprocity.⁴ Land is not an object to manage but a living relative with whom humans share obligation. Stewardship is therefore ethical, rooted in responsibility and continuity.

In Tribal communities, conservation is not abstract. It is a responsibility to home. Homelands shape language, ceremony, governance, and future generations. Caring for them is inseparable from caring for people. This stands in sharp contrast to federal systems that treat nature primarily as a resource.

The consequences of that disconnect are visible on the land itself: overused trails, stressed ecosystems, and landscapes managed without the relationships that once sustained them.

Seen through this lens, the public land turbulence of the Trump administration reads not as an anomaly, but as a predictable outcome of a system governed by ownership and control. Rollbacks of land protections, diminished agency capacity, and eroding public trust reflect a pattern as old as the United States itself. Native communities have lived with these disruptions for more than two centuries, often at the cost of land,

language, culture, and life. For many Americans, this moment represented a crisis. For Tribal nations, it was a continuation.

The same pattern appears in everyday public land administration. One persistent failure in federal land management is the inability to relinquish control even when federal systems fall short. If the government truly prioritized stewardship over jurisdiction, it would adequately fund and equip the agencies and systems needed to care for the millions of acres entrusted to them. Chronic understaffing, deferred maintenance, and workforce attrition show what happens when governance emphasizes authority without accountability.

This dilemma is not new. By the late 20th century, Indigenous advocacy and federal policy failures converged to produce a philosophical shift toward self-determination. With support from President Nixon,⁵ the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (ISDEAA) recognized that paternalistic governance was both ineffective and incompatible with Tribal sovereignty. Though applied first to social services, this reorientation toward increasing Tribal authority became a catalyst for co-stewardship thinking, extending naturally to the governance of lands central to Indigenous lifeways.

Most importantly, Tribal approaches to land are often grounded in relational and cultural responsibility rather than purely economic valuation, reflecting governance systems that tie land, identity, and continuity together. If the federal government has acknowledged profound failures in Indian policy—including removal, termination, relocation, and the separation of Native children from their families—then it must also confront why land stewardship has been exempt from similar accountability.

Taken together, these structural, ecological, and political failures place the United States at an inflection point in public land management. If the next conservation era is to be more durable than the last, it must move co-stewardship from the margins of federal practice into the fabric of public land policy.



Seen through this lens, the public land turbulence of the Trump administration reads not as an anomaly, but as a predictable outcome of a system governed by ownership and control.

This evolution is not theoretical; cooperative management is already emerging in federal land policy, though unevenly and often as an exception rather than a norm. At Bears Ears National Monument, for example, a coalition of Tribal Nations has helped shape both designation and ongoing management,⁶ strengthening protections for cultural and ecological resources. Similarly, Tribal-led bison restoration efforts in the Greater Yellowstone region have demonstrated how Indigenous stewardship can support both ecosystem health and long-term conservation goals.⁷

With more than 400 co-stewardship and co-management agreements already in place across the United States, these examples are far from isolated.⁸ They demonstrate that when tribes are treated as governing partners, outcomes improve for ecosystems, communities, and the public. They also raise a larger question: will co-management remain an exception, or become a guiding principle?

The task now is not to re-invent co-management, but to strengthen it by making it more durable, better resourced, and more expected.

This transformation does not require dismantling existing agencies but strengthening them through localized, place-based expertise grounded in enduring relationships to land. Incorporating Indigenous stewardship therefore enhances, rather than replaces, existing institutional capacity. In many cases, it can also result in stronger and more consistent protection for the places people care most about.

Tribal involvement in land management exists along a spectrum, but co-management occupies a critical middle ground. It allows Tribes to exercise meaningful authority while working within, and gradually reshaping, existing federal management regimes. For that reason, it offers a pragmatic entry point for embedding sovereignty into public land governance.

This same principle of grounding stewardship in approaches that produce mutually beneficial ecological and governance outcomes extends beyond co-stewardship agreements. It

also invites reconsideration of the durability of the policies that structure public lands. Foundational frameworks such as the Wilderness Act, the Roadless Rule, and the Public Lands Rule play a central role in shaping conservation outcomes, yet their implementation and interpretation can shift across administrations, as is now being demonstrated with the Trump administration's push to rescind the latter two. Embedding sovereignty-informed stewardship within these systems offers a path toward greater continuity, strengthening both ecological protection and institutional stability over time. It could also correct a longstanding absence by creating space for Tribal Nations to help shape policies that have had lasting impacts on their communities, whether intentional or unintended.

What makes Tribal co-stewardship particularly durable is the legal and governance structure behind it. Tribal nations are sovereign governments with treaty-backed relationships to the United States, giving them a degree of continuity that federal agencies often lack. While federal priorities can shift across administrations, Tribal governance is grounded in long-term responsibility to land, water, and resources that sustain cultural life. This creates a form of stewardship that is less reactive and more consistently protective.

Still, this potential is not always obvious, nor will it be realized automatically. Much of the polarization surrounding Tribal policy stems from misunderstanding, particularly the tendency to conflate co-stewardship with broader calls for "land back." While these efforts may overlap or share underlying principles, they are not interchangeable. Terms like "land back" are often mischaracterized as wholesale dispossession, prompting fear rather than informed debate. In practice, many Tribal priorities focus on access, stewardship authority, and shared governance. When policy discussions are grounded in outcomes and capacity rather than caricature, opposition can soften.

This is especially clear in the context of agency capacity. In this administration, the National Park Service alone faced a sharp reduction in workforce,⁹ in addition to long-standing problems of deferred maintenance, chronic housing con-



Much of the polarization surrounding Tribal policy stems from misunderstanding, particularly the tendency to conflate co-stewardship with broader calls for "land back."

straints, and growing visitation pressures. Framing Tribal co-management as a way to expand stewardship capacity, rather than as an ideological project, reveals its mutual benefits: Tribes regain connection to homelands, agencies gain expertise and continuity, ecosystems receive more attentive care, and the public benefits from lands managed with more holistic, place-based knowledge.

Building support will require tailored messages without diluting Tribal sovereignty. Rural communities may respond to stable local stewardship, jobs, wildfire resilience, and healthier landscapes. Recreation users may respond to continued access paired with deeper responsibility. Conservation organizations must move beyond symbolic inclusion toward actual power-sharing. Congress and agency leadership should understand co-management as a matter of legal obligation, administrative efficiency, and durable outcomes. Tribal communities must see consent, adequate funding, respect for data sovereignty, and assurance that co-management will not become another unfunded mandate.

Translating this vision into practice requires institutional pathways. The Department of the Interior is uniquely positioned to expand co-management because of its land-management authorities and government-to-government responsibilities.¹⁰ In many cases, existing structures could remain intact while administration or management authority is shared through Tribal self-governance agreements. Similar models already operate within the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Bureau of Indian Education, showing that such arrangements are possible, though not without coordination challenges.

Yet co-management must not become a mechanism for the federal government to offload responsibility without resources. Tribal capacity varies widely, and sustainable funding remains the most significant hurdle, particularly because many Tribes remain structurally dependent on federal dollars by design, not by choice. Any expansion of co-management must therefore include reliable funding, technical support, and true power-sharing.

These implementation questions matter because the next era of conservation cannot rest on aspiration alone. If co-management is to become foundational, it must be funded, staffed, legally understood, and protected from reversal when administrations change.

Despite these challenges, Tribal co-management remains one of the most credible paths for place-based conservation in the United States. Its promise lies not only in improving policy outcomes, but in changing the premises beneath conservation itself—from protection through exclusion to protection through relationship, accountability, shared authority, and sovereignty-informed stewardship.

At its core, any effort to rebuild conservation must confront a simple truth: public lands cannot be fully protected while Indigenous Nations remain peripheral to their governance.

This is what “refounding” should mean. It does not require abandoning the idea that these lands are worthy of care, nor ignoring that co-management has already begun. It requires learning from where partnerships and shared authority are working and asking why those models remain exceptions. The next era of conservation cannot rest on the myth that land is best protected when Indigenous peoples are kept on the sidelines. It must be built on the older truth that land endures when people live in right relationship with it.

Tribal co-management offers one pathway toward that refoundation. Not as a symbolic gesture, but as a structural shift in how authority, responsibility, and knowledge are distributed. It asks the public to love these places more honestly. To recognize the histories beneath the trails, the responsibilities beyond recreation, and the Indigenous Nations whose relationships to these places predate, and persist beyond, federal designation.

When I think back to Mariposa Grove, I still see the sequoias reaching upward, patient and immense, holding centuries in their rings. I also hear the question



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that first came to me there: Where are we in this story? A refounded park system would answer differently. It would recognize Tribal nations as governing partners, cultural knowledge holders, and original stewards whose authority is essential to the future of these lands.

If America's national parks are to remain one of its "best ideas," then the idea itself must grow. The future of conservation will not be secured by restoring the old system after political damage has been done. It will be

secured by building something more durable. A public land framework grounded in Tribal sovereignty, shared authority, and restored relationship.

And perhaps, someday, a young Native person standing beneath those same trees will not have to ask why we are missing.

They will already know we are home.

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REFOUNDATION: DOES PLACE-BASED CONSERVATION IN AMERICA NEED TO START OVER?
REBECCA CONARD, ROLF DIAMANT, DAVID HARMON & JOHN REYNOLDS, THEME EDITORS



Renewing the Promise: The Humanities, Higher Education, and the National Park Service

ANNE MITCHELL WHISNANT

Fifteen years ago (2011), three other historians and I released *Imperiled Promise*, a study commissioned by the National Park Service (NPS) and the Organization of American Historians (OAH) to assess the “state of history” in NPS. *Imperiled Promise* identified barriers preventing the agency from realizing its potential to be the nation’s premier place-based classroom for historical and cultural learning. Over 100 recommendations suggested how NPS and OAH could buttress, expand, and enhance park-based historical work and better connect it with new scholarship and the larger history community. We urged dramatically increased hiring of qualified cultural resources staff, expanded interpretive frames and boundaries, attention to the dynamism in history and conflict and controversy in and about the past, and openness about “contested and evolving understandings of American civic heritage.”¹

The study has been widely read and influential, helping NPS pry open doors between internal interpretation and cultural resources silos, and empowering staff to move from “fixed and fearful” interpretation into bolder work presenting historical dilemmas and elevating all Americans’ stories and voices.² Despite chronic understaffing, things have been moving in the right direction.

For example, an ongoing appropriation for civil rights projects, created by Congress in 2016, has sparked innovative scholarship around Black, Indigenous, LGBTQ, disability, and other marginalized histories related to the national parks. The Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellows Program, inspired by *Imperiled Promise* and profiled in a recent issue of *Parks Stewardship Forum*, began to infuse new energy into cultural resources preservation and interpretation.

In 2025, as we all know, much of this progress crashed to an ungraceful and cruel halt, with the arrival of Trump, Musk, DOGE (the self-styled Department of Government Efficiency), Burgum, and silly but deeply pernicious ideas of “restoring truth and sanity” to history. NPS lost 25% of its staff and cut off the Mellon Fellows. Signs, waysides, and exhibits “disparaging” Americans got flagged or removed. After the hard-won progress of the last 15 years, this careless and wanton destruction of NPS is shattering.

And yet, resistance is popping up everywhere, often feeding on the connections and collaborations between professionals within NPS and NPS-oriented scholars outside the agency that *Imperiled Promise* (and other efforts) urged and facilitated over the last 15 years.³ Here is where I find inspiration for the vision I’d like to focus on for the rest of this essay.

Two sets of concerns have driven my professional life for 30 years: one has had to do with the history of the national parks, and the other revolves around graduate education in the humanities and interpretive social sciences, the crisis in employment for PhDs in those fields, and the need for radical reform of systems in academia.⁴

Here, I’d like to weave these threads together to imagine what a robust future for cultural and historical engagement and lifelong learning with public lands and the national parks might look like, and how reforms and better collaboration with a re-thought world of academic humanities might help bring that future about. The vision involves making fundamental reforms in graduate education that could prepare a new generation of flexible, collaborative cultural and interpretive professionals for parks-related work, and then committing to employing them to rebuild and expand the educational and enrichment reach of our national parks.

Because the fact is, in this country, we have the talent, we have the educational resources, we have the places and sites, we have publics who hunger to explore. Perhaps the current breakdown—which of course is also affecting academia deeply—could let us abandon outmoded practices and obsolete structures, and invite us to *invest* (#taxtherich) in something new that could be rooted in optimism, hope, and trusting people.

Let’s start with graduate education. I earned my PhD in History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1997. My program, like most, was structured to prepare us for careers as university faculty working with the protection and job security of tenure. Never mind that since the 1970s, the availability of tenure-line faculty positions has been unstable and increa-

singly insufficient to provide full employment for humanities PhDs.⁵

From the late 1990s on, numerous initiatives emerged to support doctorate holders in identifying “transferable skills” to help them find jobs in other sectors. They met with mixed success, and many humanistic researchers found reasonably satisfying work. But the fact remained that the PhD was generally not the best path to any of these other jobs. And as the 1990s and 2000s wore on, many scholars languished—their doctorates a liability rather than an asset.⁶

And yet, universities resisted making foundational changes that would have improved the situation for their doctoral students. Some graduate programs tweaked requirements and incorporated skill development like digital humanities, GIS, or even public history. But on the whole, humanities doctoral programs today look much like the one I completed: disciplinary coursework, comprehensive exams, and dissertations designed to morph into the book generally needed for the imagined later tenure process. Few include courses on historic preservation, museum studies, conservation, or place-based interpretation or public engagement. Their faculties, meanwhile, know little about other work environments and are poorly equipped to advise about options, or to imagine how advanced history training could be differently structured or deployed. Professional development for most graduate students keeps them firmly in the academic orbit, doing teaching or research assistantships. Neither faculty nor graduate students have much opportunity to move back and forth between higher education to other employment sectors.

The upshot of these problems with academia is a generation of scholars with few viable paths to do the research and teaching they were trained for, and who have also found that their specialized training has not equipped them with essential skills and credentials to move into related work outside of academia. For their part, academic institutions with libraries, buildings, and highly qualified and bright people remain constrained by faculty “lines,” rigid gatekeeping, financial inaccessibility, and systems that tend to separate them from the broader community. Under the same withering right-

wing political attack currently squeezing and starving the federal civil service, universities struggle to connect with a public that could rise to their defense.

What a waste of talent and resources.

My more recent professional experience suggests that things don’t have to be this way. In 2019, I was fortunate to be hired to direct the interdisciplinary Graduate Liberal Studies master’s program at Duke. Serving students of all ages and backgrounds at a tuition level that is half that of other Duke master’s degrees, our program—founded in the 1980s—prioritizes student curiosity, risk-taking, and flexibility, and allows students to assemble their own curriculum from among *any courses that Duke offers at the graduate level*. A capstone project that can be either a traditional research “thesis” or an applied or creative project ends the program. Operating outside of conventional departmental structures, we can easily hire credentialed teaching faculty without the usual cumbersome hiring process. And we pay them a much higher rate (currently \$9,500 per course) than is customary for adjunct instructors.

Seeing students and faculty grow and thrive here has expanded my imagination about graduate education and inspired how I envision the new, flexible, and porous collaborations between academia and the Park Service that I suggest below.

If we as a society invested as we should in humanities-oriented work in both American universities and the Park Service (yes, it will take money, perhaps several billion dollars over a decade⁷), and if *both* institutions could shed accreted systems that no longer serve and thus collaborate more easily, we might create unparalleled spaces for networked research, free and relevant life-long learning, and civic, social, physical, and cultural enrichment for Americans and international visitors of all ages, stages, and backgrounds. What I am proposing is a National Parks New Deal that pulls together aspects of the Works Progress Administration’s (WPA’s) “Federal One” cultural programs, the GI Bill, the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, and the Cooperative Ecosystems Studies Units initiative.⁸



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The core of the suggestion is an immediate, massive hiring initiative to bring many from the lost generation of humanities-trained graduate degree holders into NPS. The second piece is purposeful reform of graduate education in the humanities to create realistic, stimulating, affordable pathways into these park jobs for the long term.

On the NPS side, doing this would require changes in both NPS culture and federal (Office of Personnel Management) civil service hiring laws, practices, and processes. Dismantle the hierarchical, military model of park management and professional advancement through expectation of constant mobility, eliminate the veterans' preference that creates perverse incentives to hire only from within, and scrap the restrictive civil service hiring questionnaires that AI will render easier to game and that deter outside talent. Create opportunities for growth and professional advancement at individual sites or programs.

The recent Mellon Fellows initiative provides a proof of concept of this idea, but for real, durable change to come, new hires need to be more embedded and permanent. Initially, scholars hired into NPS might need additional training in the applied work of the parks—preservation aspects as well as interpretive or public history elements. Over time, however, a multi-year commitment to hiring advanced cultural resource experts should feed back to academia—accelerating humanities graduate educational reform to prioritize interdisciplinary collaboration, a blend of practical and analytical skills, and experience producing scholarship in multiple formats. Conventional doctoral programs might wither in favor of master's programs or become shorter endeavors designed with parks and public lands work in mind.

Moving forward, a virtuous cycle might be imagined that continuously strengthens links between academia, independent scholars outside NPS, and colleagues within NPS by inviting professionals to move back and forth between sectors. Scholars who have worked in

(or independently with) NPS could teach in graduate programs, and academic faculty might make mid-career shifts to the parks. As we have recently seen, those connections are essential to sustaining the broader work of civic engagement and lifelong learning at which the parks excel.

This may seem like an impossible dream, with so many practical details to be addressed that change feels futile. Accreted systems of credentialing, accreditation, equal opportunity hiring, civil service classifications and levels, and career trajectory and advancement would all have to change. And yet, many of these are already so broken and ill designed to meet the current moment that maybe scrapping them is better than trying to tweak them.

How would we start?

STEP 1: EMERGENCY ACTION

This is mostly on the NPS and federal government side. Make things simple. Eliminate barriers and aim to hire 1,000 humanities and interpretive social sciences master's or PhD holders into permanent NPS jobs within three years. Create a special hiring authority, and somehow foster broad matching of background, interests, and expertise with sites or programs. Fund all new hires to complete an NPS bootcamp incorporating elements of prior training programs within the agency. Rehire experienced NPS staff who have retired or recently lost jobs under DOGE to help develop and lead this. Charge these new hires with stopping the censorship of humanities-oriented expertise and scholarship through reversion of altered signage and exhibits, protection of data, and revitalization of community partnerships and programs decimated by the current administration. Then set them loose to build out the creative, expansive program of historic preservation and public humanities engagement that is one of the parks' core promises.

STEP 2: ONGOING DEVELOPMENT

This part would be carried out through long-term partnerships between NPS and a set of academic graduate



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programs in the humanities and interpretive social sciences. Identify departments and universities that will commit to creating degree pathways for aspiring NPS cultural resources and interpretive professionals. The specific nature of the pathways could be worked out at the master's or perhaps accelerated doctoral level, but in either case should be funded programs offering opportunities for practical, applied work (ideally with NPS or other park or public cultural institutions) during a student's education. Modeling on the open inquiry of Duke's Master's in Liberal Studies and similar programs, these pathways would have a small number of core courses, but should offer students maximum flexibility to design applied curricula tailored to their interests and specific park roles. Guarantee NPS jobs to graduates who want them. Universities that want to host these initiatives, in turn, commit to hiring faculty with pertinent expertise and experience to teach core courses and advise students. Most universities have "professor of the practice"-type appointments that could be used to make these hires.

I know that many readers of this short essay will immediately think of 15 (or 40) practical or political reasons why something like this can't work. The NPS Organic Act (1916), however, is not one of them. Its mandate to conserve park resources unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations requires that we marshal our best expertise for public benefit. Elaborations of this mission—through policy declarations, memos, and legislation—have only expanded the research and educational missions of NPS. We ought to recommit to these principles, perhaps explicated as well as anywhere in Secretary of the Interior Franklin K. Lane's 1918 "Letter

on National Park Management," sometimes called the "Magna Carta of the national parks."⁹

After all, the basic problem is simple: how can we further develop and harness the deep well of talented, well-educated, creative, experienced professionals we have and the vast resources already embedded within American higher education (libraries, databases, facilities, faculty), and the beautiful and promising collection of parks and sites contained in our existing National Park System? There is no reason we could not make a case for improving and expanding these resources and making them as freely and widely available as possible to all Americans, as well as the international visitors that come to our national parks from across the globe.

In an age where educational gaps are widening, where access to humanistic higher education has become the realm of the privileged, and where AI threatens to rob us of the connections to place and to each other that help us and our planet thrive, well-supported, freely available, place-based cultural and historical lifelong learning could enrich all of our lives and help us build the empathetic, educated, thoughtful society we deserve and that will be crucial to our survival.

As historians, we often speak of the contingency of the past—the fact that outcomes are never predetermined, but are shaped by people acting when they aren't sure how everything will go. I offer this proposal in that spirit. Can we make the future different? I don't know for sure, but I think the first step to creating the world we want is to imagine it.¹⁰

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ENDNOTES

1. Anne Mitchell Whisnant, Marla Miller, Gary B. Nash, and David Thelen, *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service* (Organization of American Historians/National Park Service, 2011), 6.
2. Here I am thinking, among other things, of the "Telling All Americans' Stories" initiative, some aspects of which remain online here: <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/tellingallamericansstories/index.htm>. (Please note that as of July 5, 2026, a number of internal links from this site are dead.)
3. See, for example, the Save Our Signs project from the University of Minnesota Libraries, the Resistance Rangers, the We Need More History initiative set for fall 2026 involving several professional history organizations, and efforts of organizations like American Conservation Experience, the Mellon Foundation, and the National Council on Public History to continue to support NPS-related historical and cultural work done by scholars outside the agency when NPS efforts have been curtailed.
4. I have done over two dozen presentations or workshops on the post-PhD career process and published a dozen articles related to this in various publications. See "A Move to Bring Staff Scholars Out of the Shadows" (with Donna M. Bickford), *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 25, 2013; "In Admin: Four History PhDs Discuss

their Alt-Ac Careers” (with Lauren Apter Bairnsfather, Pam Lach, and Jason Myers), *Perspectives on History: The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association*, November 2013; “I Am Natalie Henderson: Reflecting on My ‘Nonacademic’ Career in Academe and the #alt-ac Quest,” *#Alt-Academy: A Media Commons Project*, edited by Bethany Nowviskie, 2011; “Building a Corps of Administrator-Scholars,” (with Donna Bickford), *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 14, 2010; “Trading \$80 Wine for Cheap Cookies,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 31, 2007, [under the pseudonym “Natalie Henderson”]; “Surviving a Professional Slide,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 7, 2007, [under “Natalie Henderson”]; “A ‘Nonacademic’ Career in Academe,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 20, 2005, [under “Natalie Henderson”]; “Questioning the Promise,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 18, 2005, [under “Natalie Henderson”].

5. For a recent discussion, see Karin Wulf, “Humanities and Graduate Education: The Crisis Is Real, but Not New,” *The Scholarly Kitchen*, April 29, 2022, <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2022/04/29/humanities-and-graduate-education-the-crisis-is-real-and-not-new/>.
6. There are far too many blog posts, reflections, essays, reports, and other materials discussing the PhD career crisis and individuals’ experiences over the last 30 years to even begin to list them here.
7. I am imagining 1,000 staff hired at \$125,000 annual total compensation per person times 10 years = \$1.25 billion. This is only a bald estimate that does not factor in university costs. A country that has squandered many times this amount this year on a purposeless war with Iran can certainly afford this if it would choose to do so.
8. The WPA’s Federal Project Number One included the Federal Art Project, the Federal Music Project, the Federal Theater Project, the Federal Writers’ Project, and the Historical Records Survey. See “Federal Project Number One,” *Wikipedia*, December 23, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Federal_Project_Number_One&oldid=1329108882, accessed July 5, 2026.
9. Reproduced in Lary M. Dilsaver, *America’s National Park System: The Critical Documents* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 35–39; see also Secretary Stewart Udall’s “Letter on National Park Management,” 1964 (reproduced in Dilsaver, 241–245).
10. As I was finishing this essay, my colleague Dr. Amanda Starling Gould suggested that this idea is well elaborated throughout Black and Indigenous feminist thinking, writing, and activism. Without time to delve into this literature, I would like to nod in its direction and note one recent work that draws productively upon it to consider Earth’s future: Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, *What If We Get It Right? Visions of Climate Futures* (New York: One World, 2024). The book opens with two quotations that encapsulate this idea: “What lies ahead? Reimagining the world. Only that.” (From Indian writer Arundhati Roy.) And from American activist Angela Davis: “You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time.”

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If the Humanities Are Any Guide: How the Methods and Insights of the Humanities Can Shape the Future of Public Lands

ELEANOR MAHONEY AND RONEVA KEEL

INTRODUCTION

In September 2025, an anonymous collective known as “The Secret Handshake” began installing provocative art on and around the National Mall in Washington, DC. The pieces included *A Throne Fit for a King*, a 10-foot-tall faux-gold toilet throne intended to satirize recent White House bathroom renovations, and *Operation Epic Furious: Strait to Hell*, an arcade-style video game in which players take on the role of President Trump and attempt to reopen the Strait of Hormuz. By combining guerrilla art tactics with an internet-savvy approach the installations generated immediate attention, drawing viewers from across the ideological spectrum to the incisive, albeit cheeky, mode of political commentary.¹

Though unconventional in their methods, works like those created by The Secret Handshake build on a long tradition of protest and debate on public lands. From the veterans of the 1930s Bonus Army to the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, the occupation of Alcatraz Island, the late-20th-century Redwood Wars, the AIDS Memorial Quilt, the 2016 occupation of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, and the January 6, 2021, “Save America Rally” that preceded the attack on the US Capitol, public lands have long been at the center of the country’s social, political, and economic tumult, serving as spaces of civic engagement and as sites whose own meanings remain contested.

As historians who have researched and written about the development of public lands, and as practitioners who have worked with multiple federal agencies on interpretation, preservation, conservation, and recreation initiatives, we believe that any reconsideration of place-based conservation in America must begin with an honest, thorough accounting of public lands history up to the present, including the role of public lands as spaces of displacement, dissent, conflict, and, at times, violence. This overdue reckoning can lay the foundation for a more inclusive, community-oriented approach to protected area management, one in which agencies acknowledge the many past and ongoing harms associated with the designation and management of public lands while recognizing their tremendous potential to foster community, exchange, learning, and activism.

The type of change described above will necessarily occur at multiple scales, drawing on a wide range of skills, experiences, and knowledge systems. In this article, we focus on the distinctive possibilities offered by the humanities and humanistic social sciences.

Scholars in these disciplines bring both content knowledge and extensive methodological training to their work. Though particular expertise varies widely, what unites fields such as history, geography, the arts, anthropology, and literature is an emphasis on critical thinking and inquiry, coupled with a propensity to ask challenging questions about how and why things came to be and who has benefited (and who has not) from existing power relations.

Over the past decade, a number of federal agencies, particularly the National Park Service (NPS), have encouraged such introspection by creating postdoctoral fellowship positions that temporarily place recent humanities PhDs in their workforce. As alumni and former coordinators of these programs, we are uniquely positioned to assess the promise and limitations of integrating emerging scholars into the planning and implementation of new research, interpretation, and resource protection initiatives. The following sections explore two initiatives in depth before concluding with a series of recommendations for similar efforts in the future.

THE NPS MELLON HUMANITIES POSTDOCTORAL FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

Launched in 2018, the NPS Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellowship Program placed more than 30 scholars at sites across the agency, including park units, regional offices, national heritage areas, and national program offices in Washington, DC.² The program was designed to introduce humanities scholars and their research methods to NPS and to provide Fellows with firsthand experience in interpretation and public engagement—a model intended to encourage significant learning and exchange for both Fellows and NPS staff. Examples of the wide range of projects and products

OVERLEAF Dr. Rami Stucky, a postdoctoral Fellow with the National Park Service, led a research project exploring the histories of punk and go-go music in national parks. A historian, cartographer, and drummer, Stucky demonstrates how humanities scholarship can deepen our understanding of public lands, uncover unexpected stories, and offer new perspectives on park management. ANGELA KLEINSASSER

created through the Mellon Program's work are available at <https://nowandhere.org/>.

Although not initially identified as a primary goal of the Mellon Program, Fellows and NPS host sites soon recognized that exploring the agency's own history and contemporary practices was critical to the success of their efforts. Drawing on their training and expertise, Fellows examined a range of topics, including the content of interpretive programming, institutional culture, labor policies, and the nature of NPS relationships with Tribal Nations, descendant communities, and partner organizations. Fellows visited archives, attended neighborhood meetings, spoke with local officials, conducted oral histories, completed ethnographic fieldwork, and more. This research revealed both the positive outcomes of NPS engagement with diverse collaborators and troubling examples of harm and exclusion, in which the agency failed to act with reciprocity and care in both internal and external relationships.

Reactions to these findings varied. In some cases, host sites responded with interest, engaging in critical self-reflection on how the NPS's past and present activities might have caused trauma. For example, working closely with a Fellow, one park unit introduced new onboarding materials that examined the history and ongoing impacts of settler colonialism on Indigenous peoples, including NPS's role in displacement and violence. The development of these resources coincided with a decision by park leadership to withdraw from participation in colonial re-enactments.³

In other instances, park staff reacted defensively to Fellows' recommendations, either ignoring the findings or actively resisting change. Criticism of NPS, at the unit, regional, or national level, could feel personal to those involved, and engaging with communities or individuals negatively affected by past agency decisions carried professional risk. Even before the 2024 election, politics emerged as a central concern. Across a wide range of issues, from interpreting histories of enslavement, to immigration and the border, to Tribal co-stewardship,

fear of political blowback, including censure from online commentators and scrutiny from elected officials, weighed heavily on the decision to engage with Fellows' insights. Concerns also extended to leadership's potential reaction, with staff at all levels expressing unease about how those higher in the agency hierarchy might respond to criticism of NPS and its practices.

What does the experience of the Mellon Program reveal about the potential role humanities scholarship can play in shaping the future of public lands? The results suggest tremendous possibilities for growth and change, but also significant limitations. In many cases, Mellon Fellows successfully introduced new content and methodological insights to park units. This led to internal changes in employee training, improved relationships with a wide range of partners, and the development of numerous public-facing products, including exhibits, articles on [NPS.gov](https://www.nps.gov), K-12 teaching materials, public events, and publications.

Agency-wide, assessing results is much harder. A core group of dedicated NPS staff working in cultural resources, interpretation, and partnerships regularly attended sessions organized by the Mellon Program, building a community of practice and learning from one another through program-sponsored webinars, book clubs, and workshops. However, reaching wider audiences remained difficult due to competing time demands, especially for those in the field who often lacked reliable access to a computer. Stronger, more consistent support from agency leadership, whether at the park, regional, or national level, could have made a difference, as could extending fellowships from 2 years to 3–5 years. An extended term of service would also have allowed Fellows to gain a deeper understanding of federal service in general and NPS in particular. Entering an organization with well-established norms and practices is always challenging, especially when one is expected to be a changemaker. Having more time to adjust to NPS and its structures, and, crucially, to build trust and mutual understanding, could have greatly aided Fellows.



Criticism of NPS, at the unit, regional, or national level, could feel personal to those involved, and engaging with communities or individuals negatively affected by past agency decisions carried professional risk.

Another significant impediment to sustaining the Mellon Program's impact was the lack of a viable employment pathway for Fellows. Employment opportunities proved difficult or even impossible to secure for those Fellows who wanted to continue with the agency. Of the 35 scholars who participated in the program, only one is currently employed by NPS, with the majority now in academic appointments. This illustrates not only the challenges of federal hiring but also the scarcity of positions focused on humanities research, learning and development, employee engagement, and community partnerships. Ultimately, the Mellon Program demonstrated that engaging seriously with history and its ongoing impacts can lead to institutional development, but the process is uneven, emotionally charged, and only an initial step toward more lasting growth.

LANDSCAPES OF PROTEST: PUBLIC PARKLAND AND THE FIRST AMENDMENT

In addition to large-scale, multi-site efforts such as the NPS Mellon Program, smaller initiatives placing a single scholar at a public lands host site have also expanded in recent years. One example is the 2021–2022 Landscapes of Protest: Public Parkland and the First Amendment Fellowship.⁴ Sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies, with support from the Mellon Foundation, the 12-month position set forth an ambitious research and publishing agenda. Under the auspices of the National Capital Region of NPS, the fellowship had two primary objectives: conducting archival research and oral interviews exploring the past and present of protest and First Amendment activities on park lands in and around Washington, DC, and producing a report detailing NPS's complex role as steward of these spaces.⁵

NPS has regulatory authority over First Amendment expression in some of the nation's most iconic and symbolically powerful protest venues, including the National Mall, the Lincoln Memorial, and Lafayette Park. While heavy-handed responses to protest—such as the forceful clearing of protesters by the US Secret Service and US Park Police from Lafayette Park during the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations and the park's subsequent closure, which the Secret Service justified as a matter of security and the pro-

tection of park resources—often garner the most widespread attention, the Landscapes of Protest study found that mundane administrative tasks have been equally influential in facilitating or obstructing First Amendment expression in the name of resource protection.⁶ Prior to the fellowship, little to no scholarship documented the wide-ranging impacts of this bureaucratic decision-making on protest activities in public lands.⁷

As highlighted earlier, humanities scholars are trained to apply a critical lens to their sources. They question long-standing assumptions, analyze institutional norms and practices, and trace the historical evolution of governing systems and structures. The Landscapes of Protest fellowship was designed to encourage this approach, scrutinizing NPS's actions in a region closely associated with popular political expression. By shifting focus from high-profile protests to ostensibly neutral bureaucratic processes such as permitting, the study revealed how administrative hurdles can reinforce existing disparities and harm marginalized communities.

Despite differences in its design and implementation, the Landscapes of Protest fellowship encountered many of the same challenges—sustainability, uneven reception to research findings, and lack of institutional support—as the Mellon Program did, with similarly mixed results. The research process, which included extensive interviews and archival work, initiated valuable conversations among cultural resources staff in the National Capital Region, bringing a critical historical framework into dialogue with the material conditions of park staff in the present day. However, maintaining this dialogue beyond the fellowship term was not easy. Even more difficult was translating the study's findings into tangible policy and practice. Internal agency struggles, heightened in the Washington, DC, setting, along with external forces, including political pressure and fears of increased media scrutiny, minimized the study's reach and lasting impact.

The position's even shorter term (one year) limited the Fellow's ability to develop a deep understanding of the day-to-day operations of a complex organization



Humanities scholars question long-standing assumptions, analyze institutional norms and practices, and trace the historical evolution of governing systems and structures.

like NPS and made developing proficiency in nuanced regulatory processes, such as Section 106 review under the National Historic Preservation Act, unfeasible. Being an outsider to NPS brought valuable insights to the study but also limited the Fellow's analysis of agency practices. This knowledge gap, in turn, created a barrier with field practitioners, who were understandably wary of critical assessments, particularly in an era of increased politicization of cultural resource management and public lands.

A second shortcoming was structural. The fellowship itself was extraneous to the work of the office in which it was embedded. While the study generated useful insights and provided a valuable learning opportunity for the Fellow, the position's ancillary nature made its connection to the work of the NPS regional office in which it was based more tenuous. Furthermore, the staff who designed the study and selected its focus had little say in its final use, and ultimately, the scholarship produced was not connected to any meaningful action.

CONCLUSION

For all the wrong reasons, 2025 and 2026 have been historic years for public lands in the United States. The Trump administration has moved quickly to reshape the country's protected areas, elevating its own priorities over the many, often competing values that have long shaped the management of these special places. In addition to unprecedented staff attrition, established regulatory protections, from roadless areas to endangered species habitat, are under threat from an executive branch seeking to "unleash" American energy. History, historic preservation, and interpretation are also targets. Numerous NPS units have removed exhibits and digital content from public view and severely limited the scale and scope of new research proposals. And, in a potentially devastating step, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation has sought to make sweeping changes to the administration of the National Historic Preservation Act, endangering the protection of historic sites across the United States, including on public lands.

It is impossible to predict the future. What seems certain, however, is that the skills and insights of the humanities will be essential to addressing the profound upheavals of

this moment and the ongoing repercussions of 250 years of American history. The case studies in this article illustrate both the promise and the limitations of integrating cutting-edge scholarship into public lands management. Whether working through a cohort-based model or individual research appointments, humanities scholars can expand not only how public lands sites interpret the past and present but also how these agencies engage with their own fraught histories and contemporary management practices. As the Landscapes of Protest project demonstrates, even seemingly mundane activities—training, permitting, licensing—merit scrutiny owing to their power in shaping who has access to institutional resources and sanction. The ethics and methodologies of the humanities can also guide the building of relationships with diverse communities, especially when earlier actions have resulted in harm and distrust.

Incorporating the humanities into protected area management at NPS and other agencies will not be easy. To be effective, fellowship programs need to be meaningfully and consistently integrated into the basic programming and management of host sites, not treated as an ancillary activity or a one-off project. Leadership at the highest levels needs to make a sustained, serious commitment to this work, demonstrating tangible "buy-in" through increased funding and meaningful commitments to internal cultural change. These actions provide a foundation for ensuring that research and recommendations reach a receptive audience, rather than one that is surprised and perhaps even dismayed by the work of a Fellow.

Support must also include creating viable pathways for scholars seeking to transition from temporary fellowships to permanent employment. Many public service programs impose age limits, requiring participants to be under 30, which excludes the majority of PhD holders. Absent changes to hiring rules, public lands agencies should explore partnerships with non-profit organizations and corps networks to create alternative pathways into long-term positions. Extending appointments in this way is essential. The longer a scholar works at a site or within an agency, the deeper their institutional knowledge becomes, and, by extension, the more credible their suggestions and critiques are likely to be. Openness to change depends on trust, and trust can only be built over time. By investing in longer-term employment, public lands



For all the wrong reasons, 2025 and 2026 have been historic years for public lands in the United States.

agencies can foster a culture in which critical reflection is grounded in deep institutional knowledge and viewed as an opportunity for growth and improvement.

Heightened media scrutiny and mounting political pressure have undeniably raised the personal and professional stakes for the serious analytical engagement proposed here. For that reason, it is all the more essential that leadership stand up for this type of inquiry, recognizing it not as supplemental to their agencies' missions but as core

values they are meant to uphold. Scholars, too, will face challenges as they move from the norms and rhythms of academia to settings where public engagement and political involvement are far more widespread. At this moment, even with the success of efforts like the NPS Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellowship Program, it's not altogether clear how, or even if, the humanities will play a role in the Refoundation of place-based conservation. Yet their absence would leave the field far less capable of confronting the obstacles that lie ahead.

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Roneva Keel is a historian and cultural resources professional with experience in public history, historic preservation, and public land management.

ENDNOTES

1. For more on The Secret Handshake and its installations see, Frank Langfitt, "A Propaganda War on the National Mall Pits Trump Against Satirical Statues and Posters," *NPR*, April 1, 2026, <https://www.npr.org/2026/04/01/nx-s1-5770077/president-trump-national-mall-jeffrey-epstein-stephen-miller-pam-bondi>, and "Secret Handshake," *Heni News*, March 31, 2026, <https://heni.com/news?artist=Secret%20Handshake>; Jonathan Wolfe, "Statue of Trump and Epstein Holding Hands Returns to National Mall," *The New York Times*, October 3, 2025, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1dYJRPr_r6jx8DPY5jQdMnPUUcFFKwaK40aXF_eL0BXw/edit?tab=t.0; and "Trump-Mocking Gold Toilet Sculpture Appears on National Mall," *Artforum*, March 30, 2026, <https://www.artforum.com/news/trump-mocking-toilet-sculpture-pops-up-on-national-mall-1234746549/>.
2. Co-author Eleanor Mahoney served as a Mellon Fellow focused on labor history with NPS from 2018–2021. From 2022–2026, she coordinated the first expanded cohort of 15 Fellows. For more on the program and its evolution over time, see Eleanor Mahoney and Perri Meldon, "Now and Here: Public Humanities and National Parks in Tumultuous Times—An Introduction," *Parks Stewardship Forum* 42:1 (2026): 17–23, <https://doi.org/10.5070/P5.62074>.
3. In "Moving Toward Accountability: Challenging Settler Narratives through Interpretive Shifts and Tribal Engagement at Anza National Historic Trail," Sarah Montoya summarizes her time (2023–2025) as a Mellon Fellow at the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail. The piece includes a discussion of new internal onboarding materials designed to reorient staff towards new understandings of the impact of Indigenous dispossession, settler occupation, and the legal and structural violence that shaped the United States federal government and the National Park Service. Montoya's article is published in *Parks Stewardship Forum* 42:1 (2026): 101–110, <https://doi.org/10.5070/P5.62083>.
4. Co-author Roneva Keel served as the Landscapes of Protest: Public Parkland and the First Amendment Fellow from 2021–2022. The position was part of the Leading Edge program, which placed recent PhDs with a wide range of non-profit and public-sector organizations.
5. The work of the fellowship took on even greater significance given the social and political context in which the study was conducted. The Black Lives Matter demonstrations in 2020 and the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol both heightened scrutiny of NPS's management of protest on park lands.
6. The full study, "Landscapes of Protest: A Study of First Amendment Expression in the National Park Service," can be found on the National Park Service History Electronic Library and Archive, <https://npshistory.com/publications/ncr/keel.pdf>. The archive is a private endeavor and not affiliated with NPS.
7. Since NPS first began requiring permits for First Amendment demonstrations in 1966, park administrators, politicians, and the general public wondered how (and even if) the agency could balance First Amendment rights with its mission to "preserve unimpaired" the natural and cultural resources and values of park lands for present and future generations. Through more than five decades of litigation, the courts have affirmed both the right to free speech and assembly on national park lands and the authority of NPS to regulate First Amendment activities. However, setting aside the increasingly polarized political environment, reconciling the right to use park lands as a venue for protest with legitimate concerns about security and resource protection require a

nuanced understanding of policy, how the regulations evolved over time, and the implications for the manner in which NPS regulates a First Amendment activity. In “Regulating the Landscape of Protest: The National Park Service National Capital Region as Testing Ground for First Amendment Rights,” Roneva Keel draws on her research from the Leading Edge fellowship to analyze the history of First Amendment regulations in NPS. Keel’s article is published in *Parks Stewardship Forum* 40:3 (2024): 577–586, <https://doi.org/10.5070/P5.35443>.

REFOUNDATION: DOES PLACE-BASED CONSERVATION IN AMERICA NEED TO START OVER?

REBECCA CONARD, ROLF DIAMANT, DAVID HARMON & JOHN REYNOLDS, THEME EDITORS

**Revisiting DO-100: Supporting Interdisciplinary Stewardship in Rebuilding the National Park Service**

STEPHANIE TOOTHMAN

It has been ten years since National Park Service Director's Order 100, *Resource Stewardship for the 21st Century* (DO-100), was issued, and nine years since it was rescinded. DO-100 provided a framework for National Park Service (NPS) resource stewardship in an environment of “continuous change.” It reaffirmed our responsibilities under the NPS Organic Act and identified the nature of the challenges we were experiencing and would continue to face in our second century.

Drawing on recommendations from the National Park System Advisory Board's report *Revisiting Leopold: Resource Stewardship in the National Parks* (2014), DO-100 focuses on:

- Integrating natural and cultural resource programs, functions, and funding mechanisms, where beneficial to resource stewardship;
- Emphasizing ecosystem management: resilience, connectivity at land/seascape scales, and life-cycle stewardship;
- Adopting the precautionary principle—when an action, activity, or emerging condition raises plausible or probable threats of harm to park resources and/or human health, NPS managers will take actions that err on the side of caution; and
- Promoting adaptive management—a flexible decision-making strategy that can be adjusted in the face of uncertainties (DO-100, Section 4).

It did not anticipate the unprecedented challenges currently facing NPS and other federal conservation agencies—funding and staffing cuts and restrictions on research, resource management and interpretation—that are significantly impacting the ability of NPS staff to carry out the resource stewardship required by the 1916 Organic Act, as amended.

This essay focuses on DO-100's emphasis on an interdisciplinary approach to resource management. The other areas of emphasis—adaptive management, the precautionary principle, and ecosystem management—all depend on the availability of the best data to meet the complexity of resource stewardship in an environment of continual change and competing priorities for the resources of lands of the National Park System. In addition, while this essay focuses on NPS, and a premise that it remains intact, the value of interdisciplinary resource stewardship is relevant to protected areas in general.

THE EVOLUTION OF INTERDISCIPLINARY STEWARDSHIP IN NPS

Looking to a future opportunity to rebuild the federal conservation agencies and programs that are being severely

impacted by the current administration, the policies of DO-100 should be reviewed and incorporated where appropriate into the “refounding” discussions. DO-100 incorporated lessons learned from more than 100 years of stewardship of the National Park System, as well as recent recommendations for meeting the challenges of the next century.

Science and scholarship have informed NPS management to some degree since the establishment of the earliest parks. Early explorations, mapping, collecting, and analysis preceded and informed the 1916 Organic Act. At the time of its passage, Secretary of the Interior Franklin K. Lane confirmed the value of science when used to ensure preservation of visual landscapes. The first park naturalists incorporated the findings of scientific research into interpretive programs and publications such as Yellowstone's *Nature Notes*.

At the national level, in 1930, the NPS Branch of Research and Education incorporated natural, cultural, and interpretive programs. It was expanded in 1931 with establishment of the Division of History and again in 1932 when the Wildlife Division was created, led by George Wright, to evaluate park ecosystems. The Historic Sites Act of 1935 confirmed and expanded the role of NPS in preserving and restoring park resources through research and education activities.

Over the next three decades both the natural and cultural programs continued to evolve administratively and in scope, largely independent of each other. However, the policy to base resource management on science and scholarship had been established. Ecosystem-level research and management was seen as fundamental for natural resources; thematic contexts and criteria for evaluating significance and integrity guided both internal and external preservation programs.

In the years between 1963, when the Leopold Report was published, and the 2014 *Revisiting Leopold* report, new legislation, new programs, new parks, and research trends in academia fostered interdisciplinary collaboration within NPS

as well as with associated communities. Complying with new project review and consultation requirements under the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) and the 1970 National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) resulted in new levels of engagement with communities associated with or interested in park resources. Interdisciplinary reviews involving cultural resource disciplines were required by NPS for NHPA compliance. NEPA reviews required consideration of cultural impacts. The integration of NEPA and NHPA by the Council on Environmental Quality in 2013 further encouraged interdisciplinary planning.

New NPS cultural resource programs—Cultural Anthropology (1981) and Cultural Landscapes (1991)—provided interdisciplinary frameworks for documenting, planning, and managing park resources. The provisions of the 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, for example, led to NPS using an interdisciplinary team to engage with the resident communities. Traditional subsistence practices and the peoples’ knowledge of the land and its resources were incorporated into management of the new parklands. At Cuyahoga Valley National Park, authorized in 2000, long-standing NPS practices of buying out private holdings and clearing the newly held properties of their structures, were replaced by a planning process that drew from both natural and cultural disciplines to work with the resident community to support retention of historic infrastructure and traditional practices, while addressing extreme environmental challenges. The multi-year process leading to removal of the Elwha River dams in Olympic National Park restored both native fish runs and traditional sites of importance to the Elwha Tribe. Representatives of both NPS natural and cultural resource programs, the Elwha Tribe, and multiple public and private partners were involved in the project.

Title II of 1998 National Parks Omnibus Act (P.L. 105-391) authorized an inventory and monitoring program to support NPS resource stewardship—both natural and cultural—that was science- and research-based. It provided an important legal mandate in support of NPS research and interdisciplinary

collaboration. The Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit (CESU) program was authorized to provide access to academic expertise for both natural and cultural resource projects and supported “the integration of study results into management decisions” (P.L. 105-391, Title II, sec. 206). Congress further appropriated new base funding for NPS resource stewardship. These funds were used to establish the NPS natural resources inventory and monitoring program. A similar increase to support a cultural resources inventory and monitoring program was proposed in the 2013 Cultural Resource Challenge (CRC) but was not included in the NPS Centennial budget.

Opportunities for collaboration on addressing major issues such as sustainability and climate change at a national level have often been limited by politics, leadership, and funding. The Resource Stewardship Strategy (RSS) program was impacted by the lack of cultural resources staff and funding to fully participate. Support for interdisciplinary programs varied regionally. Initiatives such as the integration of park resource data through GIS platforms, interdisciplinary planning and resource management teams, and collaboration with traditional communities have been more successful. The CESUs provide important access to academic expertise for both natural and cultural resource projects. The cultural landscape program serves as an important interdisciplinary lens for documenting the resources of park lands, from designed landscapes such as Meridian Hill Park, to the vernacular landscapes of Ebey’s Landing National Historical Reserve, to the Yosemite Valley, an ethnographic landscape reflecting thousands of years of human occupation and management.

DO-100 AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STEWARDSHIP: RECOMMENDATIONS

The experiences of NPS over recent decades have demonstrated that interdisciplinary stewardship of natural and cultural resources is a concept that should be fundamental to understanding and developing effective strategies for resource management in an increasingly complex world. We need to understand the complexity of forces—both human and environmental—that have shaped the



The experiences of NPS over recent decades have demonstrated that interdisciplinary stewardship of natural and cultural resources should be fundamental to understanding and developing effective strategies for resource management.

lands NPS manages, through science and research and consultation with the communities that have previously occupied and managed those lands. Data gathered through an interdisciplinary research program provides more comprehensive support for defensible decision-making under the precautionary principle and guidance for adaptive management. An interdisciplinary approach to resource stewardship fully aligns with the laws and policies that govern our management of the parks, including the Organic Act, as amended, the Redwoods Act, and Title II of the 1998 Omnibus Act (PL 105-391).

Section 4.2 of DO-100 provides specific direction on how a strong interdisciplinary resource stewardship approach could be implemented.

The NPS will take the following actions to integrate natural and cultural resource programs, functions, and funding mechanisms, where beneficial to resource stewardship:

- Create incentives for funding projects ... that integrate perspectives and disciplines from natural and cultural resources;
- Require existing and future Resource Stewardship Strategies to consider natural and cultural resource integration concepts;
- Co-locate natural and cultural resource operations where possible and when beneficial to resource stewardship; and
- Utilize opportunities through Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Units (CESUs), Research Learning Centers (RLCs), [and] additional NPS programs and partners to support integrated natural and cultural resource projects.

These recommendations are all valid for consideration in future “refounding” discussions as paths to “a strong interdisciplinary resource stewardship approach” and are potentially adaptable to multiple configurations of partnerships with other conservation agencies.

However, the NPS experience to date suggests that funding and leadership issues, and coordination at the planning and

operations level, need to be further addressed to achieve the level of integration that best serves our stewardship responsibilities. The imbalance in funding between the natural and cultural resources programs has limited the participation of Cultural Resources staff in joint efforts such as the RSS park plans. A posting on NPS’s Inventory and Monitoring website in 2020 stated that 12 basic natural resource inventories had been completed by 2016 for the units of the National Park System. The lack of a similar timeline of inventory and monitoring data for cultural resources has, and will continue to, limit opportunities for interdisciplinary analysis and planning to respond to a continually changing environment, and increase the potential for loss of these irreplaceable resources.

To further support interdisciplinary resource stewardship:

- The natural and cultural resource programs should be led by a deputy director who can make the case at the national level for collaboration, direct resource allocations, identify opportunities, and represent this approach and programs with other agencies. This position could be filled by the natural and cultural program managers on a rotating basis to ensure equal representation. An interdisciplinary advisory group would advise the position.
- The funding and staffing imbalances between cultural and natural resources programs must be addressed to ensure that the data available for collaborative efforts is comparable in scope and currency.
- Strategic planning to address major issues such as climate change should be interdisciplinary from inception.
- Consultation with associated communities and interested parties should be required as integral to planning and management activities by NPS policy, regardless of the future status of NHPA and NEPA.
- Opportunities for sharing research both internally and in other public and private forums should be encouraged. This is a role that the George Wright Society played for several decades in its biennial conferences and was invaluable for promoting interdisciplinary dialogue and action.
- The current attacks on science and research by the administration threaten the integrity of our research,



Data gathered through an interdisciplinary research program provides more comprehensive support for defensible decision-making under the precautionary principle and guidance for adaptive management.

management, interpretation, and education programs. If the CESU agreements are affected, restoring those agreements will need to be a priority. In addition, other pathways for access to critically needed expertise will have to be identified that are shielded from political interference, possibly through a legislatively authorized advisory group drawn from representatives appointed by relevant professional societies.

Interdisciplinary resource stewardship will be increasingly important to support responding to “continuous change,”

engaging with partners beyond our boundaries, promoting adaptive management, and applying the precautionary principle. A commitment to science and scholarship, drawing from both the most current scholarship and the knowledge of associated communities, is already present in the NPS corps of resource managers, interpreters, and educators. We must also continue to work together to steward not only the resources we manage but also to collaborate with public and private partners and with associated communities in sustaining their cultures and telling their stories.

Stephanie Toothman concluded her career with the National Park Service as the associate director for Cultural Resources, Partnerships, and Science.

REFOUNDATION: DOES PLACE-BASED CONSERVATION IN AMERICA NEED TO START OVER?
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Renewing the US National Park Service's International Mission

JONATHAN PUTNAM

The 250th birthday of the United States has stimulated a great amount of discussion and debate regarding the founding ideals of our nation and the extent to which it has (and often has not) lived up to those ideals over its

history. Despite acknowledging our nation's shortcomings, there has been broad (if not quite so universal anymore) agreement that it is those ideals which define us and continue to serve as a guiding star and a measuring stick for progress toward a more perfect union.

I see the US National Park Service (NPS) in a similar light—the agency's organic act, subsequent legislation, management policies, and official mission statement and values have together formed an organization with one of the most noble missions (or set of ideals) of any in the world, including a specific call to work internationally. Over more than a century, NPS's record of living up to its mission is mixed, but having that North Star nonetheless has proven essential in guiding the agency, its leadership, and employees, making it the pride of the US and envy of the world. Much like the US as a whole, the NPS mission and ideals are now challenged by an administration that has frequently shown itself to be at best lukewarm in supporting fundamental American and NPS values. More than most government agencies, NPS and the United States are inextricably linked in the world's eyes: much as NPS has served to enhance the American brand, the perception of the United States internationally impacts the extent to which NPS can be viewed as a global leader. As bad as so much is now, I have to believe at some point there will be an opportunity to rebuild; doing so will require a concerted effort to reset NPS. In my most optimistic moments, I believe that the current crisis, which has led to numerous initiatives to reimagine the future of conservation at home and abroad, could ultimately bring NPS closer to its highest ideals than ever before.

For my entire career, I have worked to promote both US and NPS ideals at home and abroad—as a park ranger, Peace Corps volunteer, US Army soldier, environmental specialist with the US Agency for International Development, and, for nearly 25 years, in a variety of positions, including acting chief, with the NPS Office of International Affairs (OIA). Though little known (even inside NPS), OIA was established in 1962 by Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall at the First World Parks Congress (also initiated by NPS) to advance international cooperation between NPS and park agencies across the world. It was the first official program focused on international conservation created by the United States

government. Over its first three decades, OIA facilitated NPS's leadership in the global parks community: among much else, the NPS International Seminar trained over 1,200 park managers (and many thousands of international volunteers) from across the globe, an NPS partnership with Peace Corps provided critical technical assistance to scores of protected areas, and NPS played key roles in the development of the World Heritage Convention and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Man and the Biosphere program.

By the time I joined OIA in 2001, its staff and budget were shadows of what they were at its height in the 1960s–1990s, but nonetheless I and my OIA colleagues all believed we had some of the very best jobs in NPS and indeed in the entire US government. Through OIA, NPS continued to advance the causes of nature conservation, historic preservation, and outdoor recreation around the world, while simultaneously promoting many other US interests and American values with international partners—a textbook example of American “soft power.” Representing what some describe as “America's best idea,” (and without a doubt representing many of America's most important places, stories, and values), NPS was much sought after by US Ambassadors, other Embassy and State Department staff (and many other US government partners), other nations' park agencies and embassies, and by international organizations such as the World Bank and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for support and assistance.

We in OIA stressed, though, that international cooperation has always been a two-way street: NPS and the United States have gained as much as we have shared with other countries. NPS has learned from and adopted practices of many other park agencies across the globe over the last century—ranging from the very concept of the ranger naturalist/interpreter (learned from Switzerland) to the All-Taxa Biodiversity Inventory (Costa Rica) to the Healthy Parks, Healthy People initiative (Australia).

OVERLEAF The USNPS Office of International Affairs oversaw the US's involvement in the World Heritage program, including the nomination of Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, which was accepted in July 2026, becoming the nation's 27th World Heritage Site. It is unclear how the US will handle its legal obligations under the World Heritage Convention in the future. GEORGE GENTRY/US FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE

Even before the second Trump administration, though, NPS's international leadership had been on the decline for at least 25 years. OIA's budget continued to shrink relative to the overall NPS budget (and became far smaller than similar programs in the US Forest Service and US Fish and Wildlife Service), staffing was cut from over 20 to only 6 permanent employees, the International Seminar and Peace Corps partnerships were discontinued, and OIA's support from the top leadership of the Department of the Interior (DOI) and NPS ranged from moral—if not financial or legislative—support to outright skepticism, occasionally bordering on hostility. As DOI's international programs grew, it was frequently at the expense of NPS's ability to lead globally. NPS's engagement with the World Heritage Convention and (to a lesser extent) the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Program (in which the NPS Natural Resources Stewardship and Science program had the lead) continued, but with less support than in earlier eras. Proposals prepared by OIA for congressional legislation authorizing and encouraging NPS to work internationally (an authority long held by the US Forest Service and US Fish and Wildlife Service) never made it very far with NPS leadership—they were always among the first legislative proposals cut from NPS's congressional packages.

In spite of these challenges, OIA and its partners in NPS and elsewhere continued to provide a high level of service to both domestic and global conservation—numerous sites were successfully nominated and inscribed on the World Heritage List, NPS staff provided immensely important technical assistance to international colleagues around the globe, and NPS continued to learn from the global parks community.

And then of course came the second Trump administration and DOGE, the self-styled Department of Government Efficiency. After over 60 years (approximately the same age as USAID, also sent to the wood chipper), OIA was abolished, with what remained of its functions consolidated into DOI. All but one of OIA's staff “voluntarily” retired

(with a metaphorical gun of likely layoffs understood as the other option). Any chance of transitioning to new staff was also eliminated. As of today, there is nobody left in the US government with any experience in World Heritage, a US treaty obligation, with decades of institutional memory of NPS's international activities having been wiped out in a few days.

SO WHAT NOW?

To state the obvious, nearly all of what follows assumes a supportive administration, from the White House to the Department of the Interior to the National Park Service. While DOI maintains some of its international role, including a staff member who serves as a “liaison” for NPS international activities, NPS no longer has a dedicated international office responsible for advancing a key component of the decades-old NPS mission highlighting its global reach: “The National Park Service cooperates with partners to extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout this country and *around the world*.”

The key steps to renew NPS's international role include the following:

1) Re-Establish the NPS Office of International Affairs

A rededication to that global mission will require a lot of work, starting with the re-establishment of the Office of International Affairs within NPS.

While I would not expect (though would welcome!) NPS to bring back an OIA of over 20 people (as it once had), to truly be effective in carrying out NPS's international mission will require an office of at least 10 professionals, with expertise in protected area management, historic preservation, foreign languages, and regional knowledge as well as the World Heritage Convention—a very specialized program which requires specific expertise. These positions will be highly attractive opportunities and should receive significant interest from potential applicants in and outside NPS.



As of today, there is nobody left in the US government with any experience in World Heritage, a US treaty obligation, with decades of institutional memory of NPS's international activities having been wiped out in a few days.

After decades of decline—even before DOGE—OIA’s budget will also need to be increased to be able to more fully accomplish the international mission. For the last 20 years, OIA’s budget was barely sufficient to cover the staff’s salary and benefits, with essentially nothing left to actually carry out technical assistance or other international projects. Below I will delve into some of the areas where a more robust NPS international program could focus.

2) Congressional Authority for NPS’s International Mission

While NPS has always been able to point to a variety of existing legislation to authorize its international work—particularly regarding World Heritage—and the reference to that work in its mission statement, it lacks the explicit congressional authority (and encouragement) held by similar programs in the US Fish and Wildlife Service and US Forest Service. Proposed legislation has been drafted previously and could easily be updated as appropriate and re-submitted for consideration by Congress, but seeing it through will need a more serious commitment by NPS and DOI leadership. Supporting the international promotion of “America’s best idea” should not be controversial nor partisan!

3) Develop and fund NPS-Managed International Technical Assistance and Exchange Programs

With a more robust international budget (even if still only a fraction of what other US government agencies have had for international work), a new NPS OIA could be strategic and proactive in how it works internationally, as opposed to the more reactive paradigm under which I worked for most of my time with the office—with limited exceptions, we could only respond to what other entities were proposing, rather than developing activities of most interest to NPS and its mission. While NPS should always welcome opportunities to support international activities proposed by other US government partners, other countries, international organizations, NGOs, and individuals (including retired NPS staff with international interests), it is vital that NPS be able to prioritize projects of direct benefit to itself.

Shared migratory wildlife species populations, climate change, transboundary pollution, wildlife disease, and invasive species are just a few examples of the many issues that cross international borders and have a major impact on the health of the US National Park System. Establishing a dedicated funding source for international technical assistance would allow NPS to proactively address the most significant international threats to the health of the US park system. This funding would enable NPS to focus its international technical assistance on priority geographic and thematic areas, responding to issues of mutual concern. Working with other parts of NPS, OIA would develop strategic priorities for international assistance.

As noted in the National Park Conservation Association’s Second Century Commission report, “The future of many park resources depends more on what happens outside of the United States than on park management within the national park system itself.” Providing targeted technical assistance to non-US parks on issues of shared interest is therefore a critical step in enabling NPS to fulfill its mission of preserving the National Park System and its resources unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.

4) Resume the NPS–Peace Corps Partnership

For over 30 years, NPS and the Peace Corps collaborated closely on protected area and related projects in dozens of countries. It has been described as among the most effective things the US government has done in international conservation, but was ended during a period of fiscal austerity in the early 2000s.

Somewhat miraculously, the Peace Corps has survived (so far) the cuts to foreign aid by the current administration. Even so, its applicants and activities have dropped significantly. NPS and the Peace Corps can both separately and together provide amazing service opportunities to a generation that frequently seems lost. A new emphasis on global conservation projects could help attract many young (and not so young) Americans who are looking for a way to con-



While NPS should always welcome opportunities to support international activities proposed by partners, it is vital that NPS be able to prioritize projects of direct benefit to itself.

tribute to our global biodiversity and climate change crises. It can also provide a pipeline of future employees for NPS and other federal conservation agencies.

5) NPS International Seminars and Capacity Building

The former NPS International Seminar (mentioned above) was among the flagship programs of OIA from the 1960s–1990s. OIA and partners began the development of a new international capacity building initiative in 2024 that would have focused on activities to support both NPS and international colleagues—recalling that NPS has as much to learn from the experience in other countries as we have to share with them. With the significant cuts to NPS over the last year, this approach will be only more important in the future as NPS staff will likely benefit even more from guidance from experienced park managers internationally.

6) Re-connect with the global conservation and heritage preservation communities

NPS has a long history of leadership in the global conservation and preservation communities, and while this was diminished even before DOGE, it is now essentially gone. Any attempt to revive NPS's international role must include active involvement with these organizations and initiatives, including in particular the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which the Trump administration specifically targeted by having the US government give up its long-standing membership. IUCN's many protected area initiatives long supported (until now) by NPS include the World Commission on Protected Areas, the World Protected Area Leaders Forum (started by NPS in 2000), the World Parks Congress, advice on World Heritage, and much more.

There are dozens of other global conservation and preservation initiatives relevant to NPS, including, for example, ICOMOS, the International Council on Monuments and Sites, and ICCROM, the International Council for the Protection and Restoration of Cultural Property, both important leaders in cultural heritage management. A new OIA should conduct its own review to advise NPS leadership on priority (re-) engagement opportunities.

Jonathan Putnam retired from NPS in 2025; he is currently involved with the World Commission on Protected Areas, US Biosphere Network, and Conservation Volunteers International Program.

7) Develop staff with World Heritage expertise

With the abolishment of OIA in 2025, the US government lost all of its institutional memory regarding the implementation of the World Heritage Convention within the United States—there is nobody left in the US government with any experience in preparing World Heritage nominations, moving such nominations through the bureaucracy, responding to World Heritage Committee concerns about existing US World Heritage Sites, etc. If the US is going to have any role with the World Heritage Convention in the future, there will need to be some development a new World Heritage team —preferably while some of the former OIA staff are still available to provide advice on the convention and its processes.

8) Biosphere Regions

The US Biosphere Network (USBN) is a group of 28 UNESCO Biosphere Regions (part of a global network of over 700 such areas) that work at land- and seascape levels to promote sustainable development compatible with nature conservation—where both humans and nature can thrive. While the current (and correct) approach of USBN is to move away from a US government-led network and focus more on NGOs, NPS and other federal agencies involved would benefit from providing more support to USBN both at home and abroad.

NPS, the US government, and the United States itself have all suffered significant damage in the last 18 months—with perhaps more to follow. But we need to be thinking now about how to rebuild, because that opportunity will come and it is essential to have ideas ready to go when it does.

At its most basic, NPS's mission is focused on (a) connecting Americans (and others) to the natural world, and (b) connecting them to their fellow Americans through a shared history. The international mission adds another key role: connecting Americans with the rest of the globe. This role, both through parks welcoming international visitors and through a new and improved OIA, will no doubt prove critical in helping to restore both NPS and our nation itself.

REFOUNDATION: DOES PLACE-BASED CONSERVATION IN AMERICA NEED TO START OVER?
REBECCA CONARD, ROLF DIAMANT, DAVID HARMON & JOHN REYNOLDS, THEME EDITORS



Reclaiming the National Park Service Mission

FRED HERLING

Since January 20, 2025, federal parks, historic sites, and other conservation areas have been severely harmed by the direct actions of the current administration. In countless ways, seeds for this destruction began many years ago, and were ultimately made crystal clear in *Project 2025* (this administration’s 2024 campaign blueprint for unraveling the federal government that has played out over the past nearly two years).

This essay identifies some of the clear harms to the National Park Service (NPS) and identifies several strategies that can be explored to rebuild, strengthen, and provide greater organizational resiliency, so that any future similar assault on NPS can be prevented. These strategies and other ideas, such as those identified in this edition of *Parks Stewardship Forum*, need to be analyzed and a smart, integrated approach needs to be pursued aggressively because the threats are not going away anytime soon.

A PLANNER’S PERSPECTIVE

This piece is written largely from my background as an NPS planner for 35 years before retiring in 2019. Given my greater familiarity with NPS, that’s the focus of this essay, though it seems reasonable that there might be relevance and value to other agencies and institutions.

In the NPS planning world, the guiding principles were there for all to see and served as the beacon for the work—follow the laws, regulations, and policies, whether broadly at the federal government level, specific to NPS or an individual park unit, and/or related to a particular issue (e.g., endangered species, historic preservation, recreational opportunities).

Sometimes there were gray areas where there might be an incomplete understanding of what a law intended. The answer was not automatically left to the interpretation of any one person or to a preconceived ideology (the default approach for this administration). Legislative history and congressional intent were studied, or research on past decisions and policies was used to provide the needed context. Often, this due diligence provided the important details behind a law, how an issue was thought about over time, or what relevant information was needed to reach informed decisions.

This framework, as described in the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and further detailed in *NPS Management Policies*, provided the opportunity to have

a substantive public dialogue that was the heart of the project management model. The goals were to increase understanding and knowledge in order to make informed, legally defensible decisions to advance the NPS mission.

And while far from perfect, this approach worked well over time, serving as the contract between the federal government and the public to manage national parks “*unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations*” (from NPS Organic Act of 1916).

Besides this administration’s catastrophic budget and staffing cuts, and elimination or reversal of many core NPS and conservation principles, equally disturbing are that the actions often appear to be made based on ideological views or where financial gains can be had, and have little to do with science, history, providing outstanding educational and recreational opportunities, or other objective considerations to fulfill the NPS mission. This approach is completely counter to the way so many of us were educated and trained, and how we conducted the work with and for the American people.

The bottom line is this: evidence shows that this administration’s actions, which in many cases courts have said violate the law, have caused direct harm to NPS lands, waters, its outstanding professional and volunteer workforce, and the telling of the American story—and that is an unacceptable, unsustainable way to manage the National Park Service.

THE VALUE OF SIMPLICITY

Working on this essay one day, I noted that it was “National Simplicity Day” (July 12), the day that honors Henry David Thoreau’s birthday. Born in 1817, among the many values Thoreau inspired were to simplify life, return to basics, focus on the important, connect with nature.

These ideas resonated in the 19th century, and there is a strong argument that today these principles are even

more important as we navigate in far more complex times—events, transportation options, technology can keep us on a 24/7/365 cycle if we so choose. The US population is 20 times larger than it was in Thoreau's time, and today society functions in ways that would certainly be unrecognizable to the people living in Thoreau's day.

Yet here we are in 2026, still capable of keeping it simple, honing in on what's important and able to connect with nature in so many remarkable ways. Though not always easy, it seems valuable, maybe even essential, to stay connected to these ideas as we explore the difficult *Refoundation* challenges and solutions.

THE THREAT IS NOT GOING AWAY

Having just marked the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, I think most citizens wonder not what the next 250 years will bring, but what's in store for tomorrow, next week, next year ... as we grapple with an endless string of controversies and problems playing out nationally and internationally that would have seemed farfetched just a few years ago.

NPS still has in its portfolio 433 units of the National Park System; more than 3,000 exceptional places preserved as national historic and national natural landmarks; many programs that connect to local and state park systems, and to regional natural, recreational and historical sites; and connections to thousands of US communities and their economies (and until 2025, a strong international parks community presence). It has a powerful mission and a set of laws and principles that speak as much to our nation's future as to our past and present.

It is clear that the unprecedented, destructive actions that have occurred to and within NPS recently cannot be met with a business-as-usual approach. In addition, the ongoing threats cannot be explained as just another partisan or political matter, even though differences of NPS vision, priorities, funding, etc. have been debated throughout the agency's 110-year history. Those ideas

fall apart given the long track record of documented bipartisan agency and broad public support.

Even if upcoming federal elections in the next few years lead to new checks and balances or changes in priorities that support the longstanding NPS mission and its governing laws and policies, the architects of *Project 2025* are not going away quietly. Most critically, they will continue to use all levers of power at their disposal to further harm NPS. There is a clear through-line from the *Project 2025* playbook to the illegally operated "DOGE" (Department of Government Efficiency) and the warped focus by the Department of the Interior, imposed upon NPS, on projects and activities this administration deems most important. They have provided us with a clear vision of their intent in spite of the overwhelming public opposition to their actions.

The *Refoundation* counter must be a smart, feasible, well-coordinated approach to reclaim NPS. Through hard work and systematic thinking the end result must be a rebuilt, more resilient NPS that is stronger than ever. And for many reasons "stronger" cannot mean reconstituting the agency as it existed in prior administrations. Simply relying on a return to past agency, congressional and legal systems to function as they once did is naive and inadequate. We'd be shortsighted to think the current assault on NPS could not happen again, because it could, unless strong safeguards are established.

THE FAILURE OF CHECKS AND BALANCES

The immense challenges facing parks and conservation are emblematic of the destructive efforts throughout the federal government by this administration. We recognize that many of the key guardrails in place and generally followed for most of the nation's history are now either gone, ignored, or willfully violated.

Since January 20, 2025, NPS has been decimated in many ways: from destruction of our wild and natural places, to the whitewashing and rewriting of history,



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to ignoring the climate crisis, to the loss of significant cultural resources, this administration has turned NPS upside down.

Most of the harm has occurred through direct actions of the executive branch without any analysis or basis in fact. They include natural and cultural resources damaged or lost, air and water quality degraded, climate science eliminated, history falsely rewritten, staff levels shattered and morale devastated, funds diverted for pet administration projects ... the list goes on and on.

But the two other federal branches have also contributed. Clearly, the legislative branch has failed to meet the moment in terms of its constitutional oversight responsibilities. The disregard by the administration of congressionally approved budgets and programs without congressional pushback shows Congress is missing in action.

The judicial branch has been the most normally functioning one, but there have been damaging results there, as well. While legal challenges to administration actions by park advocacy organizations, unions, and others have resulted in numerous “wins” in court, the legal system has shown its weaknesses: slow responses to time-sensitive projects that destroy protected (and in many cases, unique) resources; inconsistent interpretation of clearly written law by different courts; the pattern of the Supreme Court shifting matters of science and other expertise from agencies to the courts, and the inevitable march of so many cases to a highly partisan Supreme Court that often specializes in “selective originalism” (of the Constitution or legal precedent) to suit the majority’s political ideology rather than the solid underpinnings of law and precedence.

Here are three data points (among many that could be cited) that illustrate the administration’s (lack of) values, and consequent lack of commitment to: conserve the iconic places under NPS stewardship, provide high-quality authentic experiences, and offer learning opportunities for the public to explore the full, complex

and ever-evolving history of America:

- In *Project 2025*, the administration’s 2024 campaign blueprint and (despite its denials) subsequent operating manual, *not a single priority focused on benefits to or for parks, conservation, or resource protection activities; NPS was not mentioned at all.*
- The administration’s budget requests have called for a billion-dollar cut, or 30% of the annual NPS budget; *actual staffing levels plunged 20% in FY2026, with calls for another 20% reduction in FY2027.*
- Starting on Day One, “DOGE” was put in motion as the implementing arm of *Project 2025*, *aggressively working to remove thousands of employees and eliminate numerous NPS programs and offices that provided critical services; indiscriminately terminating NPS property leases without analysis; carrying out substantial cuts that impacted the quality of park visitor services and facilities; and terminating grants and cooperative agreements that supported the NPS mission in science, natural and cultural resources, and history and education programs.*

THE REFOUNDATION OPPORTUNITY

Where does all of this leave us in considering *Refoundation*, knowing the severe damage to NPS to date, with more to come?

Some of the ideas below highlight information on different scales of complexity and feasibility. Viewed together, I see them as components of a lasting solution. Additional *Refoundation* conversations will be needed to more fully develop an integrated strategy to reclaim NPS. Some would be part of much larger efforts by others (e.g., Congress), while others could be streamlined to NPS- or conservation-specific efforts. It might be possible to initiate some actions in the next year or so, while others would not be possible until 2029 and beyond.

Big Picture

- Supreme Court reform. While there are many ideas that have been discussed on this topic (e.g., expand number of judges, term limits), the result should



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be an institution that analyzes and decides cases based on democratic principles and in a manner consistent with the Constitution (e.g., three equal branches of government) and existing law, and accounting for the good of the American people as a whole. The court should not function as an arm of any political party. NPS and the American people lose when this court decides cases on factors other than the law and relevant circumstances.

- Reconsideration of the 2024 presidential absolute immunity decision. If and when a reformed Supreme Court is in place, this decision should be reconsidered to bring a return to the notion that no one, including the president, is above the law. This is essential to support well-managed agencies such as NPS, and a fully functioning democracy.
- Legislation to outlaw a future "DOGE" or its equivalent. Whether established by executive order or other means (e.g., by renaming the US Digital Service to "DOGE") this type of powerful, unaccountable, illegal entity should never be a part of the federal government. Without analysis or consideration of intended or unintended consequences, "DOGE" carried out the indiscriminate gutting of federal departments, agencies and programs (including NPS), domestically and internationally, with devastating results. This type of government program hijacking must never happen again.
- Assess the shortfalls in civil service legislation. New law(s) or the closing of loopholes are needed to prevent wholesale firings and elimination of federal jobs without analyses of mission-critical work, budgets, and due process.

More Focused

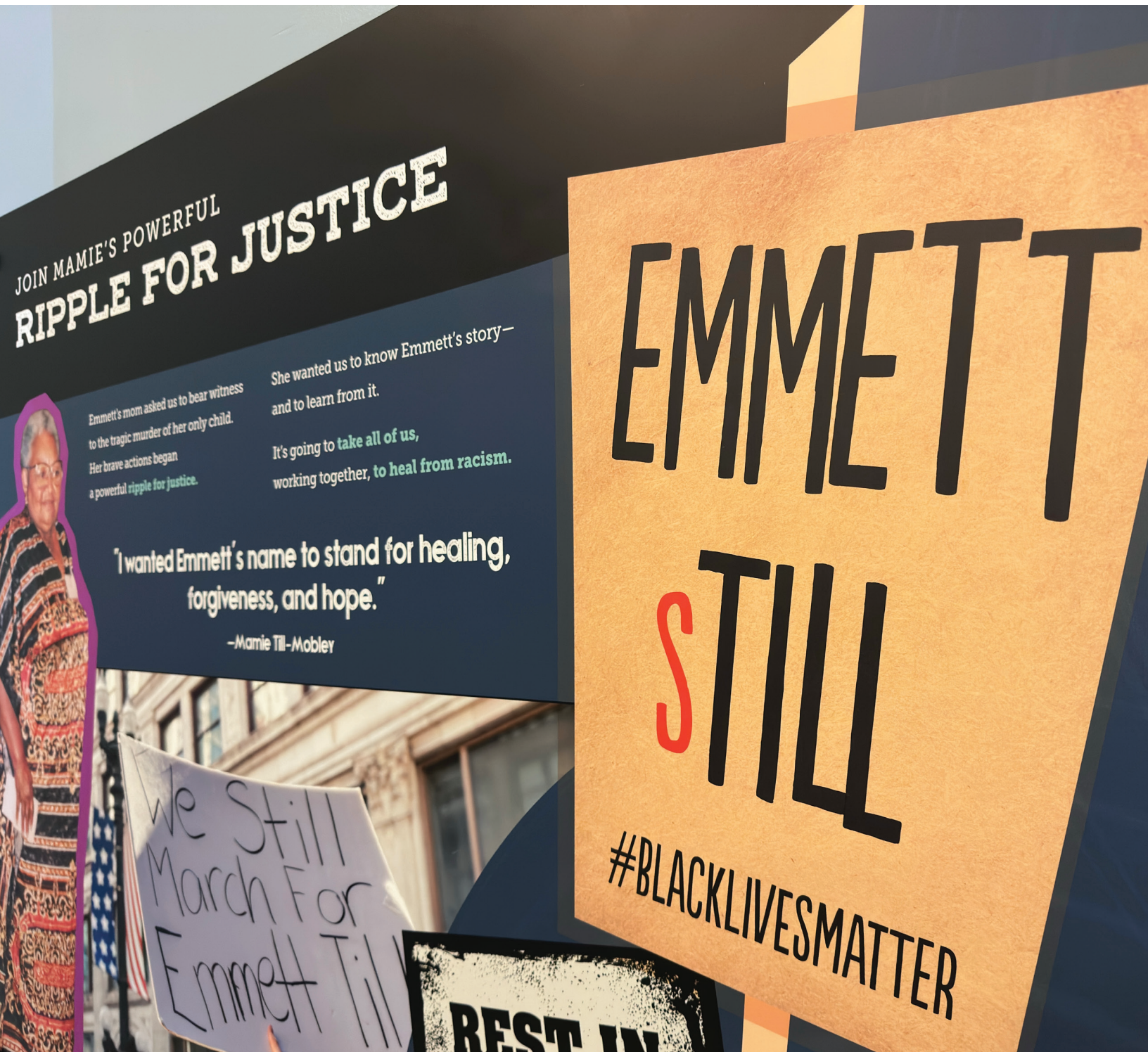
- Congressional request (when there is a change in the majority) to work with DOI/NPS for legal analysis of existing laws and, if needed, drafting services for new or amended legislation. The intent is to ensure that the laws (and associated regulations) that apply are written as clearly as possible. This could apply to agency-wide and/or park-specific laws. Wherever the intent is found to be vague or confusing, or worded as optional ("may") rather than required ("shall") in ways that could leave them open to misinterpretation or misuse, pursue actions to fix.
- Future Congresses and administrations should work cooperatively to clarify and prescribe more precise intent and expectations regarding the management, protection, and improvements needed for NPS in

all its facets. This includes opportunities to: (1) give honor to the science- and resource-based approach first brought to NPS and the conservation world by George Meléndez Wright more than a century ago, (2) grow and strengthen the expanse of NPS units to tell the ever-expanding set of stories, and (3) increase support for collaborative conservation with Native American Tribes and other under-represented groups.

- Revise NPS policies and its guiding management framework to better protect the places under its care and the people that represent the agency, and better insulate the parks from political and legal attempts to undermine the NPS mission and associated responsibilities.
- Identify strategies to (1) restore budgets and staffing levels to pre-2025 levels over a three-year period, and (2) build and retain a strong, committed work force for the long-term, with an emphasis on supporting the next generations of parks and conservation leaders.
- Encourage park-related non-profit organizations to explore new, more strategic ways (building on their great successes to date) to respond with maximum speed to any future legal, policy, or management action determined to be contrary to federal laws, regulations, or policies governing NPS. Consider strategies to become more agile and responsive to immediate threats from unlawful actions taken or being considered.
- Establish a task force of resource, science, historical, economic, educational, planning, and legal experts to create the next iteration of the NPS planning portfolio: a blueprint for a set of documents containing the essential information to manage, seek funding, identify partner opportunities, etc. for implementing priority projects and programs. The documents envisioned would be grounded in law and previous management decisions and could be used by an individual park or groups of parks connected by geography or a common theme. This task force would be charged with defining the scope, approach, parameters, and other ways to create concise, easy-to-understand, legally defensible, results-oriented products. The resulting documents would build on previous iterations of the NPS planning portfolio: general management plans, resource and implementation plans, and NPS's last big agency-wide initiative for all parks to develop—the foundation document program that began about 15 years ago.

Fred Herling is the president of the George Wright Society. He writes here in his personal capacity.

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Tilting at the “Best Idea” Windmill

ALAN SPEARS

In 1983, when Wallace Stegner proclaimed that national parks were America's best idea, he was responding to two basic themes then running through American culture and politics. First, he wanted to capture in one phrase his immense pride in and gratitude for a nation that had made and sustained its commitment to protecting public lands in perpetuity for the benefit, enjoyment, and inspiration of the public. Second, it was Stegner as environmental advocate who wanted to put the legislative and the executive branches of government on notice about the bad budgets and policies emanating from both that threatened to undermine the well-being of these uniquely American places.

For giving us that phrase, that energy at that time, we owe Wallace Stegner a tremendous debt of thanks. And it is with respect for the author's words and his defense of national parks that I suggest it's now high time to retire the "best idea" concept from the public lands lexicon. For good.

Oratory can inspire and unite. Think Tom Paine's "These are the times that try men's souls." Or Michelle Obama's "When they go low, we go high!"

Problematic rhetoric can divide. How the Dallas Cowboys became "America's team" remains a presumptive slight that discomfits me to this day.

The challenge with the "best idea" concept, the spine of the sentiment behind those words, is that it is inherently cliquish and divisive. It's a small, even elegant phrase that carries with it an Amtrak baggage carload of assumptions about what national parks should mean for all of us, when our history demonstrates clearly that not all Americans approach their relationship to national parks and public lands from the same starting point.

National parks are not America's best idea if a National Park Service (NPS) visitor center has been planted squarely in the middle of your ancestral homeland. National parks are not America's best idea if you've dedicated your life to the preservation of the African American experience only to watch that history be disappeared from NPS sites across the nation seemingly without care or consequence.

Concerns about equality and human rights are not being assuaged by a National Park System strongarmed into scrubbing references to Transgender people from websites and taking the Pride flag down from its post at the Stonewall Inn in Manhattan. And if you follow the aphorism "Show me your budget and I'll show you your

priorities," then clearly national parks are not regarded by Congress or administrations past and current as America's best idea.

We're experiencing an unprecedented assault on our national parks that's inflicted generational harm. In 2025, terminations and fork-in-the-road buyouts reduced NPS staffing levels by 25%. Draconian budget cuts and the freezing of congressionally authorized funding by the Trump administration jeopardized the operations of national park sites and agency partners. Staff morale is at an all-time low.

And erasure and censorship efforts in the name of restoring "truth and sanity" have been crippling. They are leading not just to the removal of interpretive materials about race, slavery, gender identity, Indigenous culture, and climate science at scores of national parks, but to a chilling of research and accurate, just, and inclusive interpretation at all NPS sites. Our national parks are in trouble, and they need all the advocates and stewards they can get.

But our expectations for support must consider the experiences of the audience we're seeking to engage. They cannot be couched in rhetoric that exclusively appeals to and comforts the initiated because (generally speaking) the relationship of people from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds with national parks has been different from the jump. Here's a little history for you.

Ten years after Yellowstone was established as America's first national park the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) became the first law to prohibit immigration based on a specific nationality. In 1916, the year the National Park Service was established, at least 50 African Americans were lynched in this country. And two months after the National Parks Association (now known as my beloved National Parks Conservation Association) was founded in

Washington, DC, in May of 1919, the nation's capital was convulsed in a four-day race riot.

The founding era of our national parks is certainly replete with more positive history connected with people from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. In 1927, George Meléndez Wright started his career with the National Park Service. In 1934, the Indian Reorganization Act began a reversal of decades of discriminatory federal policy by restoring Tribal self-government. This is our history bending back and forth along that long arc of moral justice. Still, it must be remembered that as many in this country were learning to love national parks, others of us were occupied literally with the pursuits of life, liberty, and equal protection under the law.

Beyond the policies, however, are the lived experiences of this wonderfully diverse population who make up what Frederick Douglass called our “composite nation.” My parents Emily and Wallace weren’t “park people.” They were, in the 1970s, looking for inexpensive and educational things to do for their only child. The twice-annual visits to Antietam, Gettysburg, and Harpers Ferry that they organized for my benefit changed my life for the better.

But it must also be noted that my dad, a scoutmaster for troop 580 from the Episcopal Church of Atonement in northeast Washington, DC, for more than two decades, never took his scouts to Shenandoah or the Smokies. Born in 1919 in rural West Virginia, my father experienced racial segregation in its most virulent forms. Responsible for the safety of his scouts and determined to build the confidence of those young Black men, it never occurred to my father in the 1950s and ’60s to take them to a place where their race might make them unwelcome due to someone else’s dumb prejudice.

I suppose he didn’t think that national parks were America’s best idea either.

This, I think, explains why many people of color view our national parks differently. Given our history it should be perfectly understandable why some of us, if asked to

submit a list of America’s best ideas, would lead with the Emancipation Proclamation; the 1st, 4th, 13th, 14th, 15th, and 19th amendments to the Constitution; the G.I. Bill; the Civil Rights Act of 1964; the Voting Rights Act of 1965; Head Start; and marriage equality. Note to readers: your lists may vary.

And it may also shed light on the curious way some grassroots organizations run by people of color have responded to the current emergency facing our national parks, including the history erasure crisis.

In January 2026, employees of the National Park Service, acting on the order of the president of the United States, removed interpretive panels about slavery from the President’s House at Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia. A lawsuit was immediately raised by the city of Philadelphia in collaboration with the Avenging the Ancestors Coalition (ATAC).

In the 1990s, ATAC had led the fight to have the interpretive panels about the enslaved Africans that George Washington had brought with him to Philadelphia from Mount Vernon installed. They regarded the removal of the displays as a racist betrayal of African Americans. And they largely laid the blame on the National Park Service.

As the fight to restore the panels raged in the courts, it was clear that ATAC was advocating for the preservation of a specific chapter in the history of slavery in America, *not* for the survival or well-being of a national park. The President’s House might as well have been managed by Home Depot. Preserving the history of Austin, Christopher Sheels, Giles, Hercules, Joe, Moll, Ona Judge, Paris, and Richmond was their objective. Defending the Park Service from the horrible policies that led to the removal of those panels was at best a tertiary concern.

Turning ATAC into a park advocacy organization should not be anyone’s goal. Rather, we who live and breathe park advocacy should be highly motivated to work collaboratively with any group so dedicated to the preservation of American history and with such a close connection to a national park. The question we must



My dad, a scoutmaster for troop 580 from the Episcopal Church of Atonement in northeast Washington, DC, for more than two decades, never took his scouts to Shenandoah or the Smokies.

ask ourselves is not why ATAC isn't fully with us in this moment of crisis, but rather, How have we failed utterly to appreciate, court, and empower their leadership?

Such missed opportunities abound.

Examine the priorities of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the League of United Latin American Citizens, the Urban League, the National Congress of American Indians, and the National Center for LGBTQ Rights. All lead the fight for racial justice, human rights, economic parity, and political enfranchisement. They represent people and cultures whose stories are captured honorably in our National Park System. None have an overt policy plank regarding national parks and public lands.

The composition of most major conservation and preservation organizations remains largely White. The same may be said of National Park Service staffing. And although the numbers of people from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds who visit our national parks appears to have increased over the last decade, the presence of people of color remains far below representative numbers.

All these absences point to the gap that still exists between people of color and their public lands. Simply telling us that national parks are America's best idea repeatedly while hoping we don't notice the self-evident truth of this exclusion is, frankly, an insult.

We need new blood, new allies, and the strength of this nation's diversity to save our parks and public lands. We can get that by working in a genuinely collaborative fashion and by understanding that while national parks can bring us together, we should never ask anyone to forget their origin stories as the price for admission into the Club.

To state that there are reasons why Black, Brown, Tribal, and LGBTQ people approach their public lands differently

is not to suggest that they don't or shouldn't care about them. It is to confirm that a gap exists and that those of us who regard ourselves as advocates for national parks should move heaven and earth to close the distance between "us" and "them."

This is how we win more often. On park funding and NPS staffing levels. And on the preservation of our shared national narrative unimpaired for future generations. This is, in fact, how we strike a blow for democracy. How we heal and come together.

Wallace Stegner had a fundamental belief in the power of national parks to be transformative. He wasn't wrong about that.

But his best idea concept, like the pair of striped bell bottom jeans I wore as a ten-year-old boy on my first trip to Gettysburg National Military Park in 1974, has long ago seen its best days. We should let it go and not succumb to the temptation in challenging times to re-embrace it as though it were a chicken soup aphorism for the troubled souls of conservationists.

A less well-known quote from Stegner is this: "Wisdom is knowing what you have to accept." Now those are words to live and to organize by.

My deep love for American history was born in the 1970s during those visits to the hallowed grounds at Antietam and Gettysburg. I became a historian because of the National Park Service.

National parks are not our best idea, but they are certainly worth fighting for. And as we approach the reconstruction or refoundation of the agency, how well and broadly we organize will determine our success by ensuring not just that the second century of national parks will be more glorious than the first, but that these unique places will have any future at all.

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Refoundation: Opportunity Out of Chaos

JOHN REYNOLDS

Recent actions by the current administration have proven that the current structure supporting the systems of federal public lands and waters is far more easily bypassed and undermined than ever before imagined. The effects on the management of the agencies involved—their highly committed workforce decimated and despondent—and on the lands, waters, and air themselves, which seemingly had been well protected, are vivid and shockingly apparent.

The foundation is now crumbling and becoming largely ineffective, the result of a Unitary Executive and a politically complicit Congress that care mostly about power, money, and personal aggrandizement. In the process, they are upending concern for the environment and damaging the breadth and depth of our national experiment in democracy. Most recently, the Supreme Court has added the insult of making it almost impossible for citizens or advocacy organizations to have standing to bring suit.

“We the People” have been and are continuing to be blindsided.

A Refoundation of our national aspirations regarding our environment, coupled with a return to a full, honest reckoning with our richly varied history, is critically needed. They require a recommitment of the people of the nation.

What is refoundation?

Refoundation is an opportunity. An opportunity to reflect seriously on what we value most, what experience has taught us, what today’s political and judicial chaos means, what future climate and environmental disruption means. And then, in turn, what foundations of environmental protection and historic preservation are needed for the future.

Part of such reflection includes actively valuing the successes that gave us the foundations we have inherited from our predecessors’ commitments and actions. We owe past leaders of conservation and preservation activism our lasting thanks.

Refoundation is an opportunity to rethink, rebuild, and in many cases, reimagine a future framework for conservation and preservation.

The work will be hard, and perhaps often frustrating. We will have to realize and grapple with the seriousness of immensely complex problems, such as climate change and our highly partisan political and judicial environment,

to name but two. But the opportunity is there to take, and the shape of the future is deeply dependent on taking it.

Refoundation is, then:

- A critical look at the foundational laws and principles of the past, deciding what to keep, what to enhance, and what new ones to build.
- A new, solid, legal basis for conservation and preservation in the United States for federal lands and waters and as a basis for assistance to others (e.g., other nations, states, local jurisdictions, and privately protected areas such as those run by land trusts).
- A forward-looking concept and set of actions that prepare the ground for additional places and practices to reflect the country’s evolving aspirations.
- A process built on facts, tenets, and principles that anticipates the assaults on our environment as they are factually projected to be, not what we have believed them to be in the past.
- A relearning of and recommitment to civics literacy, critical thinking, and civic engagement. These are the cornerstones of our success as a nation in the past, and the key to greater successes in the future.
- A moral and ethical commitment to the future of conservation and preservation and to the benefit of future generations, at home and abroad.

Of utmost importance, it is discerning the benefits of land management for conservation and historic preservation, and building a new societal vision for retaining and strengthening them.

It is building a broadened and more fully representative commitment of all of our people.

It is creating an “ecosystem of diversity” in ways that allows everyone to feel welcome to organize and act.

It is respecting and including all who care, including Tribal Nations, all levels of our government,

international organizations, academia, and for-profit and non-profit organizations of many kinds.

It is learning about successful conservation and preservation models and structures in use today in a myriad of places, both here in the United States and elsewhere.

It is creating new legal and operating structures far less vulnerable to single-source power.

The opportunity to refound and move forward awaits. It is in the hands of “We the People” to take.

Yes, it is a big job, a hard job, and in the end a job based on a moral and ethical caring for generations yet unborn, caring for all life, and caring for the culture of the future.

It is all worth doing.

John Reynolds was born to a Yellowstone ranger and his wife, and had a 39-year National Park Service career.