

# The George Wright Society

## The First Ten Years

DAVE HARMON

**T**he George Wright Society grew out of a need that became apparent during the first and second Conferences on Scientific Research in the National Parks (in 1976 and 1979, respectively). The need: an instrument of continuing duration, dedicated to the exchange of information within the community of researchers, managers, and other professionals, to give continuity to the broad range of topics having to do with cultural and natural park and reserve management and preservation. Such a need is from time to time underlined by vacillations and changes in government policies concerning parks, by budget restrictions, and by other vicissitudes that make for broken chains of information.

With that in mind, the George Wright Society was founded on August 18, 1980, by two former Chief Scientists of the U. S. National Park Service, Drs. Theodore W. Sudia and Robert M. Linn. By the end of 1981, there were 112 charter members.

From the beginning, the Society's emphasis has been on multidisciplinary synthesis. The aim is to get out integrated information in a form useful to the goal of better park management. This "cross-talk" is what makes the Society different from subject-oriented, professional peer organizations.

One way to think about the Society's first ten years is as the beginning of a continuing dialogue. Getting exchanges of ideas going has been the chief accomplishment of the Society so far. On the surface it might seem that the Society's task has been simple: merely to provide a "room" where people can get together to talk. These conversations have been in print (in the pages of the Forum) and in person (at the Society's Conferences on Research and Resource Management in the National Parks and Equivalent Reserves). But of

course, as anyone who's tried to organize a journal or put on a conference knows all too well, the task is far from simple.

### The Forum

The first number—little more than a newsletter at that stage—was published in the summer of 1981. Since then, the hallmark of the journal has been its holistic approach to cultural and natural resources. The Society's emblem—part of Earth as seen from somewhere above the surface of the moon—captures this notion. It symbolizes the biosphere within which our cultural, historical, and natural heritage has evolved. It was conceived of by Vernon C. (Tom) and Patsy Gilbert (Tom was the first President of the Society) and the final design was by Charlie Wise (a starving student who earned part of his keep by contributing art work to the Forum). The "typesetting" was done on an electronic typewriter from 1981 until 1984, when a computer finally came to the aid of this art, followed by a laser printer in 1985. The actual printing was done in a basement printshop with rather makeshift equipment until 1988, when it was

learned that a local printer could do the job better for not much more in cost. Counting the issue you now hold, there have been a total of twenty-five, as well as an author's index, some separately published reports, and reprints of individual articles.

Over the decade, many articles in the Forum have explored threats to the parks. In the very first issue, Roland H. Wauer contributed a useful historical perspective called "Are the National Parks in Peril?" Wauer reminded us that "internal threats" to the parks' integrity are nothing new. "While we are fighting for protection of the National Park System from its enemies, we may also have to protect it from its friends." That could have been written yesterday, but Robert Sterling Yard said it 68 years ago; as Wauer so justly remarked, "No statement was to prove more prophetic or enduring."

Also in 1981, the Forum published a major report on animal problems and related management needs in national parks. The authors were Durward Allen, Larry Erickson, E. Raymond Hall, and Walter Schirra. Wild boars, grizzlies, burros, and wolves were part of the report's focus, as were exotics in general, wildlife over-population, and the feasibility of reintroductions. The report concluded that there are three principal reasons for animal problems in the parks: (1) The parks were not set up as ecological entities; (2) Species have been lost from original communities, leaving maladjustments which must be compensated for; (3) Humans have added exotics. (Ironically, George Wright had come to virtually the same conclusions fifty years earlier; see his "Men and Mammals in Joint Occupation of

National Parks" elsewhere in this issue.)

Though the Society is named for a naturalist-scientist, cultural resource concerns have been an important part of the dialogue from the beginning. Carl Abbott's 1981 article "Historic Preservation: Facing a Crucial Choice" called for rehabilitating historic buildings, streets, and districts so that they "play a role in the normal daily lives of their communities," not stand apart as beautiful but detached monuments. F. Ross Holland, Jr., followed up with an article showing how it's being done in places like Lowell, Massachusetts.

Both the Winter and Spring 1983 issues were given over to cultural resources papers presented at the 1982 conference. These included articles on agricultural ecosystems, rural cultural landscapes, historic archeology, and the Historic American Engineering Record.

As the Forum entered the middle years of the decade, its contents diversified even further. There were think pieces on the broad meaning of the parks (e.g., western parks and the American character, national parks and foreign affairs). One of the country's leading environmental philosophers, J. Ronald Engel, contributed a long essay in 1985 on promoting the development and adoption of environmental ethics. Readers learned about the USNPS Advisory Board's survey of overcrowding. There were reprints of classic articles (Grinnell and Storer's "Animal Life in the Yosemite") and comments on touchstone documents (such as the Leopold Report).

These "middle years" also saw a most innovative series of contributions from Thomas W. Lucke. Be-

tween 1982 and 1986 he published five essay-reviews of law-school journal articles concerning national parks. With a deft, clear style, Lucke—himself the holder of a law degree as well as a USNPS employee—showed Forum readers that the law journals were really not such an unlikely venue for “park talk.” In fact, Lucke showed us that quite a bit of challenging thinking on parks was appearing in their pages. His invaluable guidance to this otherwise neglected literature was cut short by his untimely death in 1987.

The last three years or so have seen a continuing stream of articles on issues of global significance: extinction, conservation biology, and global climate change among them. Major articles have included Ronald Johnson's case study of cultural resources' role in the economic revitalization of western Pennsylvania; Theodore W. Sudia's analysis of the mission, function, and structure of the National Park Service; an essay by Alston Chase on parks and education; Paul Schullery on separating media myth from reality in the story of the great Yellowstone fires of 1988; and Durward Allen's 1990 essay on environmental ethics, “Social Morality and Resource Use.”

Through the pages of the Forum, members of the Society have been put on the “cutting edge” of several topics. For example, the University of Wisconsin Arboretum's pioneering work on ecosystem restoration was profiled in a 1982 article by William Jordan III, several years in advance of the late-eighties surge in articles, newsletters, and books about the topic. And essays on topics of truly enduring interest have appeared throughout, such as “When Are You Going to QUIT?”, Rolf Peterson's

answer to skeptics of long-term research projects.

With such a wide range of interests finding a home in these pages, doubtless the Forum has appeared, at times, to be an inchoate mass of information. But recall the Society's goal: to be an instrument of continuing duration, dedicated to the exchange of information, to give continuity to the broad range of topics having to do with cultural and natural parks. In the decade to come, we want to redouble our efforts to turn the Forum dialogue toward a discussion of continuities—between cultural and natural resources; between a park's “internal” communities of plants and animals and historic landscapes and visitors, and its surrounding “external” communities; between local and regional and global issues.

## The Conferences

In 1982 the Society continued the series of conferences on Scientific Research in the National Parks which had been started in 1976. The first two conferences, in 1976 (New Orleans) and 1979 (San Francisco), were co-sponsored by the National Park Service and the American Institute of Biological Sciences. The assumption of sponsorship by the Society brought with it an important broadening of the conference agenda. Henceforth, the conferences would include research related to cultural as well as natural resources —“anthropology through zoology,” as a 1982 Forum announcement put it.

The 1982 gathering, held in the Auditorium of the Main Interior Building in Washington, D.C., was a “Strategy Conference on the Protection of Cultural and Natural Re-

sources: A Research and Education Agenda for North America." As the first conference co-sponsored by the Society (with the U.S. National Park Service), addressing both cultural and natural subjects for the first time, it was a "feeler" for the way to go in future years. Proceedings from this conference are available only on microfiche from the National Technical Information Service.

In July 1986 the Society met at Colorado State University, Fort Collins. The conference was built around the theme of "The Interrelationship of Man and the Environment." The proceedings of this conference, in eight volumes, were published by the Society starting in 1988. Each paper given at this conference was published if the author wished it to be, which resulted in a bit more than the Society probably should have committed itself to. But it did.

Tucson was the scene of the 1988 conference, whose theme was "Parks and Neighbors: Maintaining Diversity Across Political Boundaries." A wide range of neighbors—private landowners, Federal-State, Nation-Nation—were discussed as well as a host of other subjects.

## The Future

To take us to the new century, a ten-year platform is being decided by our membership at the El Paso conference, November 12-17, this year. No doubt it will contain many ideas for specific things the Society can do to carry out our mission of promoting research and education.

But beyond this, there are some general goals the Society would like to meet in the coming years. One is to truly "internationalize" the dialogue in the Forum. It need hardly be said that challenges to parks and equivalent reserves are increasingly

becoming global in nature, if for no other reason than the prospect of worldwide, wrenching climate change. We are going to be actively soliciting submissions on international topics and are strongly encouraging authors to "deparochialize" their manuscripts. (Hence our fledgling attempts to make reference to the "USNPS" rather than "NPS" or "the Service.") In a similar vein, we are hoping to achieve more overseas distribution of the Forum, conference proceedings, and other Society occasional publications; currently, the Forum is sent gratis to all Canadian national parks and to a few individual overseas subscribers. And, of course, we want to get more members from other countries. Our next conference happens to fall in 1992—the year of the Columbus Quincentenary, the U.N.'s international development conference, and the fourth decennial World Conference on National Parks. These events serve to reinforce the increasingly multinational character of conservation efforts.

As Jean Matthews put it in a 1981 Forum editorial, there is a pervasive, though usually unstated, moral imperative running through our dialogue of the past ten years. The imperative is that there is a profound, solemn, and sometimes dire responsibility that comes with the evolutionary accident of human dominance over this planet. According to Matthews, one could couch this responsibility in terms of "caring," which makes it an invitation to action, or in terms of "consequences," which makes it a threat. The latter (a negative) begs resistance to the problem by nay-sayers; the invitation to action is the only way to which humankind has ever been known to react favorably. This is our hope. And this is our future.

# A LISTING OF OFFICERS AND DIRECTORS OF THE GEORGE WRIGHT SOCIETY, 1980-1990

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### **INCORPORATOR**

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### **INCORPORATING DIRECTORS**

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Albert G. Greene, Jr.

Robert M. Linn

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### **May 1990-**

### **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

Robert M. Linn

### **October 1990-**

### **DEPUTY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

David M. Harmon



# THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM ♦ THE FIRST TEN YEARS

## VOLUME 1 • NUMBER 1

Editorial	i
George M. Wright 1904–1936	1
<i>Ben H. Thompson</i>	
Are the National Parks in Peril?	4
<i>Roland H. Wauer</i>	
Notes on Two Important Conferences	7
<i>Vernon C. Gilbert</i>	
Notes:	8
DC Chapter Meets	
Triennial Conference-1982	
The IRS and Us	
The GWS Logo	
Walter B. McDougall, 1883-1980	
James E. Cole, 1903-1981	
Charter Members	10
The Membership-A Status Report	11

## VOLUME 1 • NUMBER 2

Editorial	1
Historic Preservation-Facing a Crucial Choice. <i>Carl Abbott</i>	3
Comments on Carl Abbot's Article	4
<i>F. Ross Holland, Jr.</i>	
Ecosystem Responses to Acid Precipitation: Isle Royale National Park	6
<i>J. Robert Stottlemeyer</i>	
Report to Secretary of the Interior James G. Watt: A Review and Recommendations on Animal Problems and Related Management Needs in Units of the National Park System	9
<i>Durward L. Allen, Larry Erickson, E. Raymond Hall, and Walter M. Schirra</i>	
Chronology of Landmark Documents: Concerning Wildlife Resources of US National Parks	33
Long-Term Research: An Answer to When Are You Going to Quit?	35
<i>Rolf O. Peterson</i>	
Charter Members of The George Wright Society	39
Notes	40
Authors, References, Illustrations	41

## VOLUME 2 • NUMBER 1

Conference Announcement	ii
Society Election of Officers and Board Members	iii
Editorial: The Long Haul	1
A Voice from the Wilderness: about the Guest Editorial. <i>Jean Matthews</i>	2
Glacier National Park: An Island in a Sea of Development-A Guest Editorial. <i>Jack A. Stanford</i>	2
The Park Library: Rare Materials and Easy Marks. <i>Thomas W. Lucke</i>	6
The Conservation of Agricultural Land Resources: The Role of the American Farmland Trust. <i>Douglas P. Wheeler and Stephen F. Harper</i>	9
The Relevance of Carrying Capacity: To National Parks and the World	16
<i>Clay E. Peters</i>	
Domestic Tranquility and the National Park System: A Context for Human Ecology. <i>Theodore W. Sudia</i>	22
Evaluation of New Areas for the National Park System: The Great Basin Study	25
<i>Ronald W. Johnson</i>	
Conferences: Science is Stirring!	28
<i>Jean Matthews</i>	
Pseudoergocytes	29
<i>Neil J. Reid</i>	
Notes	30
Sigurd F. Olson, 1899–1982	33
New Members	34
Authors, Illustrations	34

## VOLUME 2 • NUMBER 2

Editorial	1
Letters and Commentary	4
Computers and the Field Research Station. <i>J. Robert Stottlemeyer</i>	9
A Computerized Flora of the National Parks. <i>James P. Bennett</i>	14
Computers and Land Conservation	17
<i>Larry E. Stein</i>	
Resource Information Tracking System (RITS). <i>Roland H. Wauer</i>	22

Recreation Opportunity Spectrum	25	Making Nature Whole: Fifty Years of	35
Planning: An Arid Land Case		Ecosystem Restoration at the	
<i>Perry J. Brown &amp; Michael J.</i>		University of Wisconsin Arboretum	
<i>Manfredo</i>		<i>William Jordan, III</i>	
Computer Notes	34	Historic Maritime Resources	43
New Members	41	<i>J. Revell Carr</i>	
Program for the Triennial Conference	13	Isle Royale's Submerged Resource	52
Triennial Election of Officers and	16	<i>Bruce E. Weber</i>	
Board Members		Announcements	55
		The 19 October 1982 George	
		Wright Society Election Results	
		Olympic Wild Fish Conference,	
		March 24–26, 1983	
		Nicholas Louis Scrattish, 1942–1982	56
<b>VOLUME 2 • NUMBER 3</b>		<b>VOLUME 3 • NUMBER 1</b>	
Editorial	1	Editor's Note	1
Letters and Commentary	3	Agricultural Ecosystems	2
Regional History and the National	4	<i>Douglas P. Wheeler</i>	
Parks: In The Great Lakes Area		Protecting Rural Cultural Landscapes:	15
<i>Arthur F. McEvoy</i>		Finding Value in the Countryside	
Indians and the National Parks: Of The	9	<i>Robert Z. Melnick</i>	
Great Lakes <i>H. Paul Friesema with</i>		Rehabilitated Historical Properties	31
<i>Sarah J. Friesema</i>		<i>H. Ward Jandl</i>	
Carrying Capacity: In Great Lakes	15	Upper Delaware National Scenic and	42
National Parks. <i>Thomas A. Heberlein</i>		Recreational River: A Process to	
The Role of Science In The Great Lakes	18	Protect a Rural Landscape	
National Parks. <i>Mark Reshkin</i>		<i>Richard V. Giamberdine,</i>	
Air Pollution Threats to National Parks:	23	<i>Lawrence E. Beal, Keith B.</i>	
In The Great Lakes Region		<i>Dunbar &amp; Ronald W. Johnson</i>	
<i>T.V. Armentano &amp; O. L. Loucks</i>		Creole Defined in an Ethnohistorical	50
The National Park Service: In Law	36	Context: Jean Lafitte National Hist-	
Reviews and Law Journals		orical Park. <i>Larry Van Horn</i>	
<i>Thomas W. Lucke</i>		Natt Noyes Dodge: 1900–1982	52
Cultural Resource Management's Role:	40		
In The New Areas Study Process		<b>VOLUME 3 • NUMBER 2</b>	
<i>Ronald W. Johnson</i>		Historic Archaeology: And Reshaping	1
New Members	44	the Myths of American Origins	
Reviews	45	<i>Mark P. Leone</i>	
<b>VOLUME 2 • NUMBER 4</b>		M A B and Its Biosphere Reserves	17
Editorial	1	Project: A New Dimension in	
Recommendations from the Conference	2	Global Conservation. <i>William P.</i>	
Workshops:		<i>Gregg, Jr.</i>	
Cultural Resources	2	Technology, Environment, and the	32
Natural Resources	4	Historic American Engineering	
The US National Park System's Cultural	8	Record. <i>Donald C. Jackson</i>	
Resources		A Curious Finding: From National Park	37
<i>F. Ross Holland, Jr.</i>		Service Anthropology	
Barrier Beaches: Special Management	12	<i>Lawrence F. Van Horn</i>	
Problems. <i>Paul J. Godfrey</i>		Review: Extinction	38
Will the Real Archeology Please Stand	17		
UP? Comments on the Status of			
American Archeology, ca AD 1982			
<i>W. James Judge</i>			

Society Notes	40	Urban Soils of Washington, DC	15
<b>VOLUME 3 • NUMBER 3</b>		<i>John R. Short &amp; James C. Patterson</i>	
Editorial	1	Natural Resources Management: Trend	24
A Data Base Management System: for	2	or Fad? <i>Roland H. Wauer</i>	
Cultural Resource Managers		Extinct Carnivores Entombed in 20	29
<i>Frances Joan Mathien &amp; W.</i>		Million Year Old Dens & Agate	
<i>James Judge</i>		Fossil Beds National Monument,	
Report on the International Working	16	Nebraska. <i>Robert Hunt</i>	
Conference: New Directions for		Review: <i>Ecological Conditions in Na-</i>	40
Conservation of Parks		<i>tional Forests and in National</i>	
<i>Roland H. Wauer</i>		<i>Parks</i> , by C.C. Adams, 1925.	
Cooperative Regional Demonstration	32	<i>J. Robert Stottlemeyer</i>	
Projects: Environmental Education		Society Notes	43
in Practice. <i>Vernon C. Gilbert</i>		<b>VOLUME 4 • NUMBER 2</b>	
The National Park Service in Law	40	National Parks and Foreign Affairs	1
Reviews and Law Journals: an		<i>Theodore W. Sudia</i>	
Update. <i>Thomas W. Lucke</i>		The National Park Service in Law	6
An Outdoor Laboratory: The Indiana	42	Reviews and Law Journals: A	
Dunes. <i>Florence Broady</i>		Second Update. <i>Thomas W. Lucke</i>	
Park Superintendent Responds: to	46	Promoting the Development and Adop-	13
"Acid Rain" Article. <i>Doyle Kline</i>		tion of Environmental Ethics	
Reviews	49	<i>J. Ronald Engel</i> , with an introduc-	
Aldo Starker Leopold: 1913-1983	53	tion by <i>William E. Brown</i>	
<i>Bruce M. Kilgore</i>		Reviews:	35
<b>VOLUME 3 • NUMBER 4</b>		America s National Parks and Their	
Editorial	1	Keepers, by R.A. Foresta. 1984.	
Biological Research and Management	3	Reviewed by <i>Robert Stottlemeyer</i>	
in the National Park Service: A History		Analyzing Activity Areas: An Ethno-	
<i>Lowell Sumner</i>		archaeological Study of the Use of	
Get the Facts, and Put Them to Work:	28	Space, by Susan Kent. 1984.	
Comprehensive Natural History		Reviewed by <i>Larry Van Horn</i>	
Research Program for the National		Society Notes	41
Parks. <i>Howard R. Stagner</i>		<b>VOLUME 4 • NUMBER 3</b>	
Research in the National Parks	39	The Paradox of Repeating Error:	1
<i>Horace M. Albright</i>		Yellowstone National Park from 1872	
Rationalizing Management of Natural	48	to Biosphere Reserve and Beyond	
Areas in National Parks		<i>Robert D. Barbee &amp; John D. Varley</i>	
<i>David M. Graber</i>		Managing for Uncertainty: National	4
Non-Ecological Principles for Park	57	Parks as Ecological Reserves	
Management. <i>Rick Smith</i>		<i>David M. Graber</i>	
A Few Convictions. <i>T. Destry Jarvis</i>	58	From Grizzlies to Geysers: Science	7
<b>VOLUME 4 • NUMBER 1</b>		Challenges Tradition in Yellowstone	
Vestal Fires and Virgin Lands: A	1	National Park. <i>Robert D. Barbee &amp;</i>	
Historical Perspective on Fire and		<i>John D. Varley</i>	
Wilderness. <i>Stephen J. Pyne</i>		Building a Science Program for the	12
Western Parks and the American	13	National Park System	
Character. <i>William E. Brown</i>		<i>John G. Dennis</i>	

The Philosophical Basis for National Park Management <i>Brian C. Kenner</i>	22
Society Notes	38

#### **VOLUME 4 • NUMBER 4**

George M. Wright: 1904-1936 <i>Ben H. Thompson</i>	1
The Changing Role of Protected Areas in Planning and Development <i>Joanne Michalovic</i>	5
The National Park Service in Law Reviews and Law Journals: A Third Update. <i>Thomas W. Lucke</i>	15
National Parks and Domestic Affairs <i>Theodore W. Sudia</i>	19
1986 Conference on Science in the National Parks, July 13-18, Fort Collins, Colorado	27
The George Wright Society Triennial Election Results	30

#### **VOLUME 5 • NUMBER 1**

Digressions	1
Animal Life in the Yosemite <i>Joseph Grinnell &amp; Tracy Irwin Storer</i>	2
Grizzly Country <i>Theodore W. Sudia</i>	10
The National Park Service in Law Reviews and Law Journals: A Fourth Update. <i>Thomas W. Lucke</i>	14
700-Year-Old Ceramic Pot Discovered at Isle Royale National Park <i>Bruce Weber</i>	18
A Needs Assessment-Based Review of the National Park Service Science Program in the Rocky Mountain Region. <i>Katherine P. Kitchell</i> With Reviews by: <i>William E. Brown &amp; J. Robert Stottlemeyer</i>	21
Brief Note on Mrs. J. Robert Shuman <i>Ben H. Thompson</i>	27
Society Notes	28

#### **VOLUME 5 • NUMBER 2**

The Bicentennial of the Constitution and the Alaska Lands Settlement <i>William E. Brown</i>	1
The "Leopold Report" Revisited: "A Sense of the Meeting." <i>David</i>	4

<i>M. Graber</i> ; Preamble Grist <i>William E. Brown</i>	
National Park System Advisory Board Report: "Overcrowding in the National Parks." <i>George Barley &amp; S. J. DiMeglio</i> , with <i>Priscilla R. Baker</i>	23
National Park System Advisory Board Questionnaire on Overcrowding in the Parks	26
New Options for Park Protection <i>Robert H. Gartner &amp; Theodore W. Sudia</i>	31
Notices	38
Thomas William Lucke, 1940-1987	38

#### **VOLUME 5 • NUMBER 3**

Announcing: Proceeding from the 1986 Conference	i
Announcing: Plans for the November 1988 Conference on Research in the National Parks and Equivalent Reserves. <i>R. Roy Johnson</i>	ii
The Future of Science in the National Parks: Positive Directions, New Opportunities. <i>Raymond Herrmann</i>	1
Development of Significant Cultural Resources to Promote Economic Revitalization: A Case Study in Western Pennsylvania <i>Ronald W. Johnson</i>	13
Economic Values of Wildlife and Fisheries: What Importance are Those Values in Decision-Making? <i>Al Lovaas</i>	29
Review: "El Niño in the Galapagos Islands: The 1982-1983 Event" by <i>Gary Robinson &amp; Eugenia M. del Pino</i> . Reviewed by <i>Lloyd L. Loope</i>	33
Letters and Notes <i>Javier G. Perez Calvo</i>	37

#### **VOLUME 5 • NUMBER 4**

Society Notes	iii
Remarks by <i>William Penn Mott, Jr.</i> at the Fourteenth Annual Natural Areas Conference	1

The National Park Service in the Temporary Society: Creating a Learning Agency. <i>Richard Greenough &amp; J. Douglas Wellman</i>	7
The Mission and The Function and Structure of the U.S. National Park Service. <i>Theodore W. Sudia</i>	19
The Politics of Community Resource Management. <i>Robert L. Arnberger</i>	35
Northern and Remote Parks: Development, Management and Impacts. <i>Chip Dennerlein</i>	45
The Role of Research in Wilderness. <i>David M. Graber</i>	55
Preliminary Schedule of Activities: Third Triennial Membership Meeting and Fifth Triennial Conference	60

### VOLUME 6 • NUMBER 1

Preface	1
Values and Purposes of The National Park System. <i>William E. Brown</i>	2
Wolves Approach Extinction on Isle Royale: A Biological and Policy Conundrum. <i>Rolf O. Peterson &amp; Robert J. Krumenaker</i>	10
Remarks of <i>George B. Hartzog, Jr.</i> at the Fifth Triennial Conference of The George Wright Society	16
The Role of the National Park Service in American Education. <i>Alston Chase</i>	24
Some Comments on Natural Resources Management. <i>Al Lovaas</i>	31
Global Ethic: Fostering Parks in America. <i>J. Hauptmann, James Donoghue &amp; Theodore W. Sudia</i>	35
National Parks in the 21st Century. <i>Theodore W. Sudia</i>	38
Feral Fish and Kayak Tracks: Thoughts on the Writing of a New Leopold Report. <i>Paul Schullery</i>	41
Society Notes	47

### VOLUME 6 • NUMBER 2

Culture, Science, Nature...and the Beringian Connection. <i>William E. Brown</i>	1
First Asian School on Conservation Biology: A Trip Report	7

<i>Cat Hawkins</i>	
The Appalachian National Scenic Trail: A Neverending Story. <i>Pamela Underhill</i>	13
Tandem Tracking for Research and Resource Management. <i>Charles L. Douglas</i>	21
Functions of Natural Science Research in National Parks. <i>Gary E. Davis</i>	26
Let's Bet the Ranch and Learn the Game. <i>David A. Mihalic</i>	32
Evaluating Science in the National Park Service. <i>Theodore W. Sudia &amp; Nicholas J. Chura</i>	37
Society News	50
Triennial Election Results	
1990: 6th Conference on Research in the National Parks and Equivalent Reserves	

### VOLUME 6 • NUMBER 3

The 1990 Conference El Paso Where, When and What—and a First Call for Papers	1
The Longing of the Lodgepole Pine. <i>Daniel Grego</i>	3
Prescribed Burning Opportunities in National Parks of the Northeastern United States. <i>William A. Patterson &amp; Mary K. Foley</i>	4
Introduction to the Role and Effect of Fire in Greater Yellowstone. <i>Dan E. Huff</i>	12
The Story Itself: Lessons and Hopes from the Yellowstone Fire Media Event. <i>Paul Schullery</i>	17
The National Parks: Political Versus Professional Determinants of Policy. <i>John Freemuth</i>	26
Potpouri	11 and 38
Society Notes and Notices	39

### VOLUME 6 • NUMBER 4

Planning for Global Climate Change Research: An Example from Sequoia-Kings Canyon. <i>David J. Parsons, David M. Graber &amp; Nathan L. Stephenson</i>	1
--	---

Regional Conservation Management Relative to NPS Policy and the Conservation Ethic <i>Stephen C. Nodvin</i>	10
Social Morality and Resource Use <i>Durward L. Allen</i>	16
Remembering Lowell Sumner <i>M. Sumner, G. Collins, G. Sprugel, O. L. Wallis, R. Linn</i>	36
Arctic Grizzly...A Time in the 1950s <i>Lowell Sumner</i>	39
Society News, Notes & Mail	43
<b>VOLUME 7 • NUMBER 1</b>	
Translating Scientific Information into Park Management at the Operational Level. <i>Susan L. Consolo</i>	2

A Future for the Everglades <i>Robert L. Arnberger</i>	8
Citizen Mobilization in the Fight to Save the Golden Gate Eucalyptus <i>Judd A. Howell</i>	18
Hunting in the National Park System <i>Al Lovaas</i>	28
The Stanley A. Cain Papers: -Of Museums, Parks, and the Many Interests of the Public -Some Research Needs of the National Park Service	32
Agenda for the El Paso Conference	39
Society News, Notes & Mail	53

