

# Resource Protection through Cooperative Planning

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More Americans are choosing to live on the perimeter of national parks and other protected natural areas. Shenandoah National Park and many other protected areas throughout the country have become magnets for private development. For example, the 1990 census shows that the 20 counties in the three states surrounding Yellowstone National Park would have been the fastest growing state in the Union if they were a separate state.

Unplanned and unmanaged development can do great harm to these natural areas—reducing and fragmenting wildlife habitat, introducing exotic plants and animals, polluting streams before they flow through parks, impeding or expanding recreational uses, and degrading air quality. In addition, unplanned development threatens the very quality of life that attracts investment and development for communities adjacent to parks.

Most U.S. National Park Service managers and adjacent communities have not been eager to address the conflicts that may arise when park managers perceive adjacent development as incompatible or when local officials perceive protected lands as detrimental to the fiscal or social well-being of the

community. Park managers face difficulty getting involved in extra-territorial issues and risk triggering a negative backlash from unsympathetic local officials or offended landowners.

My remarks outline an alternative to polarization and conflict between managers of national parks and other protected lands and officials of adjacent communities. My hope is to instill a little more optimism about the potential advantages of an alternative approach and a little more information about examples of mutually beneficial relationships that have been created around the country.

First, some background. The Sonoran Institute was created in October 1990 (with assistance and funding from World Wildlife Fund and the Conservation Foundation) to create innovative mechanisms for reconciling potential conflicts between national parks and other protected areas and adjacent communities.

The Institute works with World Wildlife Fund in administering a program which provides small grants for innovative local land use initiatives around the country, provides information and education to resource managers and local land-use decision-makers about tools and techniques for better managing growth, and, most importantly, helps create projects that demonstrate the benefits of partnerships to meet the needs of both protected areas and adjacent landowners and communities.

Our mission and activities are based on the conviction that a sound environment is needed to sustain a vital economy and that, likewise, economic vitality is necessary to provide the funds and the will to ensure the integrity of protected natural areas and otherwise protect natural resources and environmental quality.

In its 1985 study, *National Parks for a New Generation*, the Conservation Foundation concluded that the most promising approach to such challenges is to devise protective measures tailor-made for the unique local circumstances surrounding each park, rather than following a uniform, nationwide methodology. The report called for creating diverse cooperative mechanisms involving landowners and local governments in ways that reflect the needs and aspirations of adjacent communities. The report concluded that such mechanisms are likely to be more effective if they involve strong local constituencies that recognize the contribution that national parks make to the local quality of life.

Following publication of this report, the Conservation Foundation launched the Successful Communities program to help implement these recommendations and later helped create the Sonoran Institute to carry on these activities. One of the Sonoran Institute's first projects was to enter into an innovative partnership to create and fund the Rincon Institute, which began working on issues related to Saguaro National Monument, which protects approximately 87,000 acres adjacent to the city of Tucson, Arizona.

The Monument consists of two units, each of which were some 20 miles from the city of Tucson when they were created. Over the years, Tucson has grown to the very boundaries of the Monument, making Saguaro a suburban wilderness area. By the mid-1980s, continued piecemeal subdivision and unplanned development of land adjacent to the Monument raised concerns about its ecological and scenic integrity.

A proposed mixed-use resort-oriented community on the 6,000-acre Rocking K Ranch, which shares a five-mile boundary with the Monument, embodied the diverse land-use

challenges facing the park. The Rocking K was one in a long series of issues arising from development of adjacent private lands that collectively will determine the future ecological integrity of the Monument and the quality of the visitor's experience.

Rocking K Development Company proposed to transform the ranch into a mixed-use resort and residential community. Realizing that some form of urban growth would very likely transform the Rocking K Ranch and the surrounding Rincon Valley over the next 20 years, the USNPS concluded that planned development with significant environmental protection measures would be preferable to incremental piecemeal development, even if the planned development had higher overall residential density. The scale of the proposed Rocking K development offered the opportunity to protect integrated corridors for undisturbed wildlife movement.

Saguaro National Monument, county officials, World Wildlife Fund, and local environmentalists worked with the developers to produce a site plan that protects critical wildlife habitat and restores degraded riparian habitat throughout the ranch. The development plan sets aside over one-half of the total area as protected open space in a system of integrated wildlife corridors, which are keyed to riparian habitat. The landowner has also joined national and local environmental organizations in supporting legislation to add 1,900 acres of the most ecologically significant portion of the Rocking K Ranch and another 1,600 acres of neighboring ranch lands to the Monument.

The development plan also includes provisions for restoring critical riparian habitat along Rincon Creek, a principal drainage which issues from the Monument and has been degraded by decades of farm-

ing and cattle grazing. This restoration—which will cost \$6-8 million—is particularly important for the area's wildlife, since desert riparian environments are as much as ten times more productive wildlife habitat than desert uplands. The plan also provides new public access into the Monument and 15 miles of public hiking and equestrian trails, contributing substantially to the county's aggressive recreation and trails initiatives.

While these measures were desirable, alone they were insufficient to adequately ensure the Monument's long-term ecological integrity from regional growth pressures. The challenge was how to ensure stewardship of environmental values, not just in the short term, but through a succession of homeowners over the next several decades. Long-term guarantees were needed so that commitments made by the developer were not overlooked as development proceeded.

A new kind of institution was needed to meet the need for long-term stewardship. Therefore, the Rincon Institute, an independent, nonprofit organization, was created to provide long-term protection for park resources. The Rincon Institute provides independent professional guidance to ensure that development incorporates the highest level of environmental sensitivity.

The Institute has three principal functions: (1) managing natural open space for educational, scientific, conservation, and outdoor recreational values; (2) providing environmental education programs designed to provide for the study of natural history, and to instill a conservation ethic among contractors and construction workers, homeowners, commercial tenants, employees, and resort guests; and (3) providing professional guidance and oversight for the environmentally sensitive development and management of the Rincon Valley, includ-

ing developing principles for the ecological restoration of Rincon Creek.

The members of the board of directors include professors of renewable natural resources and landscape architecture at the University of Arizona, a land-use lawyer, a director of a local hospital, a representative of the developer, and the president of a local trails association. In addition, the director of the Pima County Parks and Recreation Department and the superintendent of Saguaro National Monument serve as board members in a non-voting, *ex officio* capacity.

The Rincon Institute and Rocking K Development Company have entered into a long-term agreement to fund the Institute's activities through start-up funding and innovative deed restrictions that bind future builders and landowners within the ranch. These deed restrictions require that various fees be paid to the Institute for habitat protection, environmental education, and conservation activities. In addition to start-up funding of \$240,000 over five years, these deed restrictions will derive funds for the Institute through nightly hotel room fees, residential and commercial occupancy fees, real estate transfer fees, and monthly homeowner fees. For example, room fees from the first proposed resort hotel could generate approximately \$50,000 per year for the Institute.

The Rincon Institute reflects the growing trend around the nation of creating effective partnerships between the managers of national parks and adjacent landowners and communities. For example, the Sonoran Institute is working with land owners, local governments, and Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area in Ventura County, California to create the Las Virgenes Institute for Natural Resource Preservation and Restoration. The Las Virgenes Institute is modeled closely after the Rincon Institute.

This arrangement—which is supported by the developer, the county, national conservation organizations, and local residents—involves the permanent protection of 10,000 acres of private land and development of a new compact, pedestrian-oriented community between Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area and the existing sprawl of Los Angeles County. In addition, the Las Virgenes Institute will undertake ecological restoration activities, provide environmental education, and manage 900 acres of open lands. Recognizing the value of proximity to protected land, the developer and the county propose expanding the National Recreation Area to include 2,600 acres adjacent to the new community.

Despite the currently elevated level of environment-bashing that accompanies a recessionary economy, economic and demographic trends lead me to think that such partnerships are more than a passing fad. I submit that partnerships will increasingly replace either ambivalence or confrontation as the principal characteristic of the relationship between protected areas and their adjacent communities.

First, the traditional formulas for creating jobs and tax revenues are not working in many rural communities. In the world's changing economy, a high-quality local environment and distinctive local character—along with quality education and other factors—are critical economic development factors. Economist David Birch concluded in a recent book entitled *Job Creation in America* that "high-innovation" businesses—such as information-oriented businesses and professional services—are creating most of the jobs in the American economy; that these businesses are increasingly "foot-loose" and locate where the owner prefers to live; and that the key to attracting these businesses is to offer an environment which

"bright, creative people find attractive."

The same principle holds true for attracting people whose retirement income or professional skills provide them a choice in where to live; and the growing number of vacationers looking for an authentic and high-quality alternative to highway clutter.

The principle has become apparent in many communities that protection and enhancement of community resources is a better, more sustainable, approach to economic development than short-term exploitation of community resources. For this reason, local interest in managing growth, attracting economic activity that builds upon local character, and conserving local resources is increasing in communities around the country.

Teton County and Jackson, Wyoming, offer an example. In Jackson—a community best known as a summer tourist destination and winter ski center—the largest payroll in the community is surprising to many people. It is a law firm with a national practice that could be situated anywhere. The firm remains in Jackson presumably because of the attraction of the community's western flavor and scenic resources.

Recognizing that extractive industries are in decline, Teton County has rejected a future overly dependent upon any single sector and is working to build a balanced economy which includes agriculture, "asset-based" tourism, retirement, "footloose" businesses and professional activity—which will not compromise the county's scenic attractiveness and unique Western character. As a result, while there is a severe statewide recession, Teton County is booming. Among many other measures, the county imposes a "bed tax" to fund promotional advertising and has recently acquired development rights to a 400-acre farm threatened by low-density resi-

dential development, in order to keep the farm on the tax rolls and in agricultural use.

Pittman Center, Tennessee—a community adjacent both to Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the Gatlinburg-Pigeon Forge tourism complex—offers another example. Citizens in Pittman Center, with the assistance of the Southern Appalachian Man and the Biosphere Program, have recently undertaken a comprehensive planning effort that led them to realize that residents prefer an emphasis on attracting high quality development while protecting the community's bucolic character. This provides an alternative both to the amusement park atmosphere of Gatlinburg, which has produced a seasonal, minimum-wage economy.

Also consider Cape Cod, Massachusetts. In the 1960s and 1970s, the federal Government acquired approximately 5,700 acres of upland to create the Cape Cod National Seashore. Federal acquisition slowed down dramatically in the 1980s, while at the same time local land acquisition took off. Five of the six communities within the National Seashore have approved local bond referendums to acquire and protect open space. Since the mid-1980s, fifteen of the sixteen communities throughout the Cape have approved approximately \$117 million dollars in local funds to acquire over 5,000 acres of open space.

To be sure, the National Seashore and adjacent towns have plenty to fight about, but fundamentally both the towns and the National Seashore are working together toward conservation of environmentally sensitive lands and sustainable development that protects the Cape's distinctive regional character. Voters on the Cape have also approved creating a regional land use authority called the Cape Cod Commission which reviews developments of regional impact.

Finally, in the mid-West, a precedent-setting linear park running from Chicago down the Illinois and Michigan Canal to the Mississippi River serves as a model for numerous new partnerships between local communities, states, and federal agencies designed to protect a region's heritage and spur economic vitality based upon regional assets. The Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor runs 120 miles and protects historical resources of 41 canal towns while providing recreational assets and a boost to economically depressed communities. It links 39 natural areas and 200 historic sites. Old steel mills along the canal are being converted to an office complex that is being marketed by emphasizing the attractiveness of access to the historic locks and canals.

In sum, there is an increasing number of cooperative mechanisms tailor-made for unique local circumstances involving landowners, managers of national parks and other protected areas, and local governments in ways that reflect the needs of protected areas and the aspirations of adjacent communities.

The integrity of Shenandoah and many other national parks increasingly depends upon decisions made by local officials and land owners. At the same time, the economic vitality of many communities depends upon maintaining an attractive natural and built environment and capitalizing upon the tremendous economic impact of nearby national parks. The challenge facing both the USNPS and residents of nearby communities is to mobilize cooperative action that protects park values and capitalizes upon natural values to meet community objectives.

Certainly developing a dialogue between diverse interests on what kind of future the residents desire for a region is beneficial. A shared vision is the basis for many successful and far-reaching local initiatives.

Boulder, Colorado, has for the past 20 years pursued its vision of an economically vital town surrounded by open lands. This vision has led to an attractive community, the protection of approximately 17,000 acres of land in a greenbelt around the city, and to economic success. For example, when U.S. West (the western "Baby Bell" telephone company) cut the ribbon on one of the premier new research and development facilities in the West, they said it was the natural amenities that Boulder offered that attracted them.

Lack of a clear vision based upon shared values creates a climate in which incremental degradation of natural and community values thrives. Many communities have successfully dealt with these problems by developing broad-based "quality of life" advocacy organizations created to provide dialogue between disparate elements of a community about land use and development issues. Sincere and informed communication—outside of heated public meetings—can lead to non-conventional coalitions that promote both conservation and economic initiatives. For example, in Fort Mill, South Carolina, conservation interests and the downtown merchants association worked together with major land owners to develop a plan supported by virtually the entire town. The plan identified ways to revitalize the downtown, to funnel new growth into areas that can sustain increased traffic, and to protect a greenbelt around Fort Mill protecting the town from sprawl encroaching from nearby Charlotte, North Carolina.

Local decisions also need to incorporate sound information about not only the ecological impact of development but also the economic impact of various types of development and conservation. In Alabama, the Huntsville Land Trust compared the public cost of development with that of open space ac-

quisition in its effort to preserve Monte Sano, the city's scenic mountainous backdrop. An independent study commissioned by the land trust concluded that public infrastructure costs of proposed development would be close to \$5 million and that the net annual cost to provide city services to the new development would be \$2,500 to \$3,000 per acre. In comparison, the city's acquisition costs would be \$3.3 million and annual maintenance costs for open space would be only \$75 per acre. Voters have since approved a bond referendum to acquire and protect part of the mountain.

All over the country, people who care for parks and other protected areas are coming to realize that they cannot rely upon isolation and federal spending to protect the integrity of these areas. At the same time, many local leaders realize that the old formulas for economic devel-

opment no longer work. In these places, residents are developing community development strategies that build upon and enhance the local and regional natural and cultural assets.

Disregard by local leaders for the legitimate needs for protecting the ecological integrity of national parks and other protected areas does not long benefit local aspirations. Disregard by park advocates for the legitimate economic aspirations of adjacent communities and landowners likewise fails to protect park values.

Creating diverse cooperative mechanisms to protect park values and realize local and landowner objectives is a promising approach for protecting the ecological and scenic integrity of national parks and other protected areas. Conserving our natural and cultural heritage requires that greater attention be paid to these cooperative approaches.