

The "Status of Protected Areas in North America" Project: An Introductory Note

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WE MUST THINK, PLAN, AND ACT IN TERMS OF ECOSYSTEMS. This is a principle that has found wide currency in global initiatives like the World Conservation Strategy, Caring for the Earth, and Our Common Future. These initiatives represent attempts to set a broader and more unified focus. This is in contrast to the traditional orientation of viewing the world on the basis of separate countries or by the narrow mandates of line agencies or departments. A focus on ecosystems may sound rather simplistic, but ecological sustainability is a complex and paradoxically powerful tool. The U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity has further highlighted the importance of designating protected areas throughout the globe or ecosphere.

In North America, our efforts to date have largely been built around a far less robust vision. Much of the thinking has instead been restricted to the immediate objectives of particular organizations. It has resulted in systems plans for "parks," for "wildlife sanctuaries," for "forest reserves," and so on. But how should we act with a much larger, unified picture in mind? Some discussion has occurred between different governments and other organizations to meld complementary state, provincial and federal activities. However, these discussions have proved most fruitful when fairly narrow themes are addressed. Sessions on themes like national and state parks, international biosphere reserves, North American wetlands, and Canadian forest reserves are examples. These efforts are very constructive in building an improved understanding of the broader setting of complementary initiatives, but are restrictive in themselves.

A weak knowledge base concerning current protected area holdings, a poor understanding of ecosystems, and a lack of readily understood

measures present widespread barriers to progress. What is lacking in bringing forward a more comprehensive picture is the absence of a simple frame of reference. Seldom do individual states or provinces, let alone nations, have an adequate foundation of knowledge from which to work. Information covering the breadth of protected areas that are held and managed by various jurisdictions is typically not known nor found in a single source. Equally, the distribution and characterization of ecosystems which many protected areas are trying to represent are not well documented nor understood. Difficulties also occur regarding how to measure ecosystem integrity and representation.

At a recent North American Workshop on Environmental Information, concerns of this nature were tabled. With state of the environment reporting interests growing at the continental level, how capable are we going to be in sharing information that we have on topics like protected areas?

How many protected natural areas are there in North America? It

is estimated that governments hold over 7,000 areas, more than 95% of them in Canada and the USA. What of protected areas held by non-governmental groups? In Canada alone, private groups hold approximately three times the number of properties as do governments.

What is the distribution of protected areas? Figure 1, based on data from the World Conservation Monitoring Centre and the Canadian Conservation Area Data Base, shows the rough distribution and broad trends according to administrative boundaries. But how well do these holdings represent different ecosystems? While the numbers of sites are numerically large along the 49th parallel and in the western half of the continental USA, how does this translate into area protected? It is widely believed that the largest proportion of land held in protective status in either country lies north of the 60th parallel. What implications will size have on questions related to representation and long-term integrity? What types of protected areas are there? How accurate are the current data bases? How well are wetland ecosystems represented? What

of forest ecosystem types? Alpine ecosystems? Marine ecosystems?

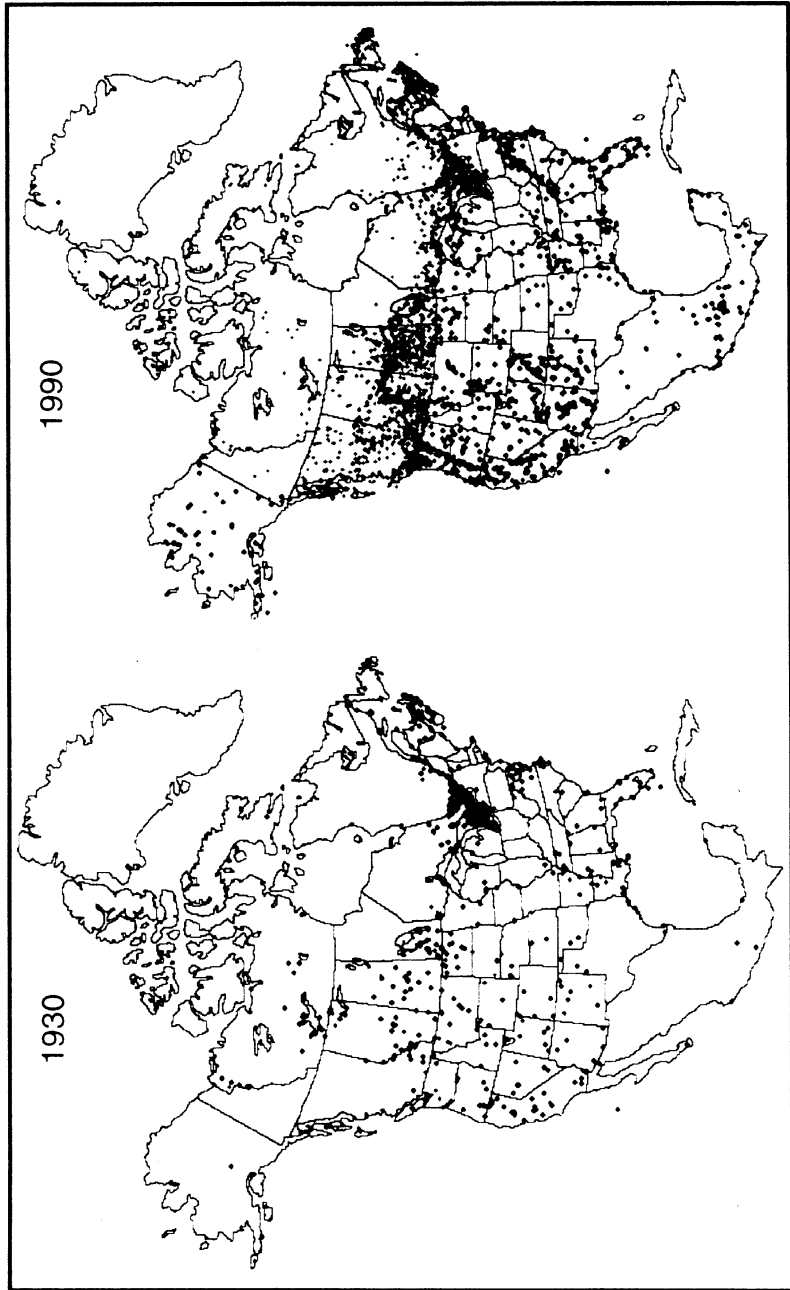
Based on recommendations from the North American Workshop, a Working Group composed of members from Mexico, USA, and Canada was formed to: (1) develop a common ecosystem framework for North America, (2) document appropriate ecosystem approaches, and (3) provide a profile of the status and trends concerning protected areas and ecosystem biodiversity. Much of the work will rely on synthesizing material from ongoing and past studies. The protected area information is to be portrayed primarily against a common ecosystem framework and summarized as a state of the environment report for North America. Undoubtedly, it will be used to examine larger questions about topics such as:

- What should be used to develop protected area indicators?
- What types of conservation strategies are best suited for rural and near-urban landscapes?
- Where should we encourage the expansion of government/non-government partnerships?

Editor's note: The next issue of the FORUM will have an expanded discussion of this project and of the potential for a parallel inventory of protected cultural areas and sites.



Protected Areas Progress



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Figure 1. Growth in number of North American protected natural areas, 1930-1990.