

# TOWARD AN INVENTORY OF NORTH AMERICAN PROTECTED AREAS

## Introduction and Comment

In this issue of THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM we explore the steps that already have been taken, and remain to be taken, to produce a comprehensive inventory of protected areas in North America. Canada, Mexico, and the USA have joined together on what might be called a "voyage of self-discovery." In 1993, the three countries convened a North American Workshop on Environmental Information. The result of the workshop was, in essence, a long-term commitment to gathering the information needed to identify and understand the ecosystems of the entire continent. A number of working groups have been created to tackle aspects of the project. The one which concerns those of us in the GWS is the Working Group on Ecosystem Frameworks and Analysis, which has as one of its goals the creation of a North American Protected Areas Database. Ed B. Wiken and Kenneth Lawton describe the genesis of the project in the following article. Then James M. Omernik reviews the conceptual background of categorizing the continent into ecoregions.

Needless to say, the task is monumental. Canada's National Conservation Area Data Base has more than 14,000 entries and is by no means complete. A similar inventory of U.S. protected areas would undoubtedly produce even higher numbers, and work on quantifying Mexico's protected areas has only just begun. The figures could become staggering, depending on how small one wants to go in terms of size and how broad one wants to get in terms of defining "protected area." As GWS member Craig L. Shafer recently pointed out in a fascinating article called "Values and Shortcomings of Small Reserves" (published in the February 1995 issue of *BioScience*, Vol. 45, No. 2, pp. 80-88), in this era of rampant habitat fragmentation we can ill afford to offhandedly dismiss the conservation value of small reserves, even ones as small as, say, 0.01 hectares. Consider a recent inventory in Illinois which looked at almost 4,000 cemeteries and all 11,000 miles of railroad rights-of-way in the state—and found 910 locations with rare species. No one is claiming that the local graveyard equates with Yellowstone, but Shafer argues persuasively that vest-pocket reserves are not without value. Throw them into the continental inventory mix and pretty soon you're looking at very big numbers.

And all these considerations refer to protected *natural* areas alone. Counting and categorizing protected cultural areas and sites is currently outside the purview of the trilateral Working Group. This is, no doubt, partly a matter of feasibility and partly a reflection of the tendency to view protected cultural areas as being somehow genetically different from protected natural areas. Now, no one can deny that there are vital differences. For example, organizing a continental inventory by ecoregions makes good sense for large natural areas, but doesn't necessarily work for cultural areas. And there are special problems associated with inventorying cultural resources, such as the need to conceal (or at least avoid publicizing) the exact location of certain sensitive archeological sites, and similar considerations that attach to native religious and spiritual sites. Nonetheless, as we have stressed many times in GWS publications, there are real benefits to integrated management of natural and cultural resources, and these benefits extend to inventorying *all* protected areas, natural and cultural—at least in tandem if not within a single monolithic database. In the third and final article under this theme, Thomas

J. Green and W. Frederick Limp give us an idea of how complicated a task it is to inventory archeological sites within a region, let alone a whole continent.

As Wiken and Lawton ask, if we are to know the ecosystems of North America, we must ask ourselves "What is happening to them? Why is it happening? Why is it significant? What is being done about it?" The same things need to be asked about our cultural sites. These are vital questions of self-discovery, and it is both right to ask them and right to seek the answers in the parks and protected areas of our continent. This is, unfortunately, no longer a self-evident proposition. Here in the USA, we face a politicized backlash against the very idea that publicly funded research and resource management in protected areas are valid and valuable endeavors. (The tortuous birth of the much-maligned National Biological Service—its mission twisted and distorted by various politicians and interest groups—amply testifies to this.) In the face of the backlash, all of us in the GWS need to renew our commitment to the spirit of "knowing thyself" that lies at the heart of park management and research, and defend this value against its detractors. One way is by contributing your knowledge to this trilateral inventory effort. Let us hear from you!

— David Harmon

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