

# The Sense of the Conference

**Y**es, it was a different atmosphere at the 1995 George Wright Society Conference in Portland. Different from the one two-and-a-half years before in Jacksonville. Back then, the election had just ended a 12-year reign of assault upon the principles and laws undergirding protected lands in the United States. The notion in late 1992 that conservationists and preservationists could regroup and march forward again—rather than be bled white by constant rear-guard actions—made that sunny Florida conference a celebration.

But in our relief our hopes soared too high. The political context—degraded by scary social, economic, and environmental events, and simplistic responses to them—had been insufficiently changed by the close election. The anti-public lands movement hog-tied the new Administration and blunted its efforts at reform, then resumed the offensive. Bill Clinton's Administration—styried by battles over appointments and side issues, wracked by internal disarray—never got up to speed on public lands and other environmental issues.

Then came the 1994 mid-term election, which shifted the power base to Congress. Today the Congress' ideologically motivated majority rushes to dismantle United States public-lands and environmental policy. This policy, a century old now, is defined by laws designed to pass on to future generations the productivity, aesthetics, and environmental health of the nation's patrimony. This social contract with our descendants is now being shredded in favor of another contract that discounts the future in favor of an unregulated exploitative present. Despite the glaring examples of our own 19th-century Robber Baron history, the proponents of regressive pillage take aim at the national

commons. Like alchemists, they rationalize this reckless course with the discredited assumption that the unrestrained greed of predatory interests will somehow transmute to an enlightened national interest.

So there was reason for a different tone and tenor at Portland. What happened was, we gazed into the abyss. We saw the painfully built edifice of protected lands and enlightened environmental policy—already staggered by the Watt/Hodel era—now openly and enthusiastically threatened by zealots revving up the machinery of the wrecking ball. No more Mr. Nice Guy.

Yet, there at Portland and back at our home bases, we continue to cultivate our fields—rather like the peasants of Eastern Europe who could sense the pounding hooves of approaching Mongol hordes. Like them, it's what we know how to do.

From conversations with many good people, I came away with a feeling that I can describe only as bleak ambivalence: facing the spectre, then denying it, and getting on with the work at hand. Again, because it's what we know how to do and can do.

Yes, we work on. That is the message of the 1995 George Wright Society Conference. This is our hope. The need for our kind of work—and

that need is worldwide—is evermore urgent. The combination of a spiritual view of our life system, this small planet, and scientific understanding of its workings, right down to the specific reserves and study plots where most of us work, transcends the current political and tribal regressions both in the United States and abroad.

We and our kind, wherever they are, remain the guardians of these tracts of the life system. These tracts and our knowledge of them are the archives that will become overtly and publically valuable again when the current pride in ignorance goes out of style, as it will.

We in the United States can learn from the Old World, from countries repeatedly devastated by wars and calamities beyond our ken. As for example, during World War II, when the guardians of Estonia's National Botanical Gardens hid away seeds of their native plants to replenish their ravaged homeland after the war was over. Our work, and the places we maintain and guard as best we can in dark times, are of this order. And we must have courage, and patience, and the seasoned optimism of the long view.

Thus, that bleak ambivalence in Portland was our initiation rite for the long haul. With reinforcement from our brothers and sisters of the order we faced today's reality. So we could gird and go on.

And despite today's unpleasant externalities, good work is going on. And it is the right work for these times and these ranks. Most of us in the George Wright Society are not leaders. We are scientists, scholars, resource management specialists. We add to the fund of knowledge and, when inspired, to the fount of wisdom that an enlightened public—galvanized by enlightened leadership, when it comes—can use to make us right with the world.

Despite setbacks we—in our various nations, agencies, and associa-

tions—continue to be the trustees and friends of immense landscapes and thousands of smaller protected areas. These places are society's reality check. As such, they are, individually and in aggregate, generic in import. They are all parts of a larger system for recovery in the next progressive era. With this land base we are more fortunate than most people in this age of shifting, degrading values. For we have daily contact with the enduring cultural, biological, and physical world as it has evolved and continues to evolve—a real world indifferent to current political and ideological myths, which for this passing moment hold center stage. Our minds clear of such distractions, we can continue to convey that reality to our fellows, growing numbers of them as sick as we are of the prevalent demagoguery of ecological destruction.

In this protected land base resides the larger truth that will become the moving, encompassing idea of that next progressive era. This idea can be simply stated: *Homo sapiens* can get right with the world only by considering all of the world's lands and seas and airsheds as valued and protected elements of the biosphere. And the profound corollary: Given the load of humanity that it bears, the world must be given a break by all-deliberate-haste reduction of our numbers and moderation of our demands. Finally, these principles of reconciliation must apply across the board in integrated fashion—to the full span of property arrangements, public and private; to the full span of utilization of biospheric elements—intensive, moderate, and preserved. Moreover, any hope of reconciliation of this species with the rest of the world must rest on social equity and liberation from tribalistic/nationalistic instincts.

No one said it would be easy. But is there any alternative to the rigors of reconciliation, except surrender to accelerated destruction? Nor can

we transcend the desperate fears and anti-social behaviors of the spreading culture of poverty, which undermines the stability of even the richest countries now, unless we have a transcending ideal of what the world should be. How about livable and fair—for us and our supporting cast—within a system of ecological balance, i.e., sustainability?

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The formal work of the conference can be sampled in the volume of 41 contributed papers edited by Robert M. Linn, published by and available from the George Wright Society, entitled *Sustainable Society and Protected Areas*. With few exceptions, these papers translate scientific research into management applications within protected areas. So this book is not a journey into undigested esoterica; it is a working set of analogues for people facing problems in protected areas. An excellent poster session illuminated scores of specific research projects and accomplishments for the over 400 people in attendance.

As in all conferences the formal work, and current events, became the grist for informal discourse, both within the programmed sessions and after them. Beyond the specific responses to papers and panels, a few master themes coalesced the urgent concerns of most conference attendees: the fate of U.S. public-lands science and resource management under the new congressional regime, including the future of the National Biological Service (NBS); the effects of U.S. conservation agencies' restructuring under the rubric of reinventing government; and the keynote theme of the social foundations for sustainability.

In summary, these concerns turned out to be inextricably related. The current congressional hostility toward all things public and ecological translates to disdain for scientific research in protected public lands.

This attitude, paired with frenzied budget cutting, places long-term natural resources science in the category of a luxury no longer to be afforded. But this malevolent ignorance has calculated import: Science reinforces the legal system of environmental protection—from clean air and water to wetlands and endangered species. Not to mention regional ecosystems and broader concepts of habitat protection and biodiversity. So, say the rash dominants in Congress, let's neuter NBS. This negative combination—affecting both public and private lands—fuels a significant attack on the livability of the country we once called "America the Beautiful."

Certainly we can look for severe cuts and restructuring of the natural resources science base. This will throw the protection of public lands to the resource management specialists and line managers, who will be progressively starved for lack of scientific data to construct valid, long-term solutions to resource-management problems. From the point of view of the anti-public lands ideologues, this is a happy conclusion.

Add to the above the impact of government-wide restructuring and downsizing of Federal agencies. For conservation agencies the sure result on the land base will be a sharp turn toward basic, immediate operations to the near or total exclusion of long-term studies, plans, and implementations. This would produce, over the course of years, a mere custodial regime replacing positive management and protection. There is a lot of metaphysical baloney circulating at higher levels in the agencies about leaner and meaner, more efficient, it's all for the best, etc. But the real upshot will be the crippling of the agencies' ability to fulfill their legal responsibilities as trustees of the nation's patrimony. For too many years these responsibilities have increased as relative funding and personnel have decreased. No ideological or managerial wizardry can over-

plume this long-term anemia and plummeting disparity. Especially is this so when the very value system that justifies protected lands is under vicious attack by politicians and propagandists, whose excesses fuel armed insurrection in the hinterlands.

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How has it come to this in the United States of America? Well, there is a vast amount of historical baggage and many universes of discourse all colliding at this critical time. Emerging from these collisions is the shocking realization that this recently richest of all countries has used up its surpluses, both social and natural. And the battle is on for the control of the remainder.

We are finally facing the kinds of limits that other countries have long known, some from ancient times. And we are not handling it very well. It is true that great mistakes have been made, that we have been egregiously prodigal, that national politics and priorities have become a juggling act, confounded by smoke and mirrors to obscure the fact that we can't live this way anymore, can't cover all the bases we used to cover. We just can't quite face it yet.

The concept of a sustainable society requires us to face these new realities. Professor George Stankey launched this conference with his talk called the "Social Foundations of Sustainability." In doing so he provided an intellectual frame that gave coherence to the conference and to all that has been written here. It was a prodigious performance, and certainly the central highlight of the conference. For all else spoken, shown, and discussed to the wee hours connected within his frame.

There were many other highlights and moments to remember: the well-deserved awards, National Park Service Director Kennedy's inspiring speech, National Biological Service

Director Pulliam's honesty—and hopes—on the fate of his agency, NPS Deputy Director Reynolds' call for exemplary National Park Service practices and operations, and innumerable cogent presentations and exchanges during the sessions.

But Professor Stankey's talk stands forth as the critical assessment of where we are and what we and our kind must do to get through this dark time and get on to a better one—as pathfinders for troubled societies. So I conclude this rapporteurial tour with a few samples of his thinking as I heard and interpreted them.

He began with sustainability as an organizing myth, a philosophical construct, a guiding fiction to help society set values to live by. But our preachments are too restricted; they echo only in the choir loft. A fatal flaw. These must be public pronouncements, and they must address the political roots of public action. Only thus can an informed public overcome ideological ignorance. Somehow we must encourage—even in this cynical time—a public discourse that moves the body politic to scrutinize political processes and decisions, and take control of them.

For the public to be effective it must exercise social choice. But what do we want, what is the range of choices? How do we move from opinion to knowledgeable resolution of problems?

As academics, as public agency scientists and interpreters, we must encourage public forums for working through complex issues. We must overcome, amongst ourselves, the problem of disagreeing experts who cannot rise above detail and ego. To be useful, we must overcome our antipathies to engagement, our reluctance to involve laypersons in such complex matters. The forums should be places where laypersons have time and encouragement to think things out themselves, with our role as helpmates, not preemp-

tors of their thought processes. Only thus can scientists/experts and the public break through the barriers to communication.

He spoke of crossing the next meridian, leaving behind the lords of yesterday. Fundamental reform requires that anachronistic ideas and institutions must be shaken up. Nothing less will get us from the destructive *now* to the sustainable *future*. These older, centralized establishments are too inflexible, too compartmentalized. In their place must be devolutions of power for

quick local action, liberation from centralized technocratic fixes that merely postpone/compound our problems. At human scale, in human terms, communities must exercise critical judgments to control their fates.

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That is quite a charge. One we have been experimenting with. But now we must embrace it. Clear thought and places to exercise it just might work. So let's give it a shot.

*Gustavus, Alaska  
May 31, 1995*