

Biosphere Reserves: A New Look at Relevance to Meet Today's Challenges

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Abstract

The International Biosphere Trust, which was chartered in 2011 to support information sharing and collaboration among biosphere reserves, will collaborate with the George Wright Society and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to initiate a U.S.-based information sharing project focusing on the World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBRs) and World Heritage sites. The WNBR now includes 610 reserves in 117 countries, with some 85 of the reserves also designated World Heritage sites. These two programs provide a wide array of ecosystem types, and social and cultural settings where people are working to solve interrelated problems such as biodiversity loss, climate change, and food and water supply. Sharing information and collaborating with people in these areas through this project will enable interested individuals and groups to contribute to and benefit from the synergy and experience of others in solving these global challenges.

Introduction

THE U.S. NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL (NRC) REPORT, *Our Common Journey: A Transition Toward Sustainability*, concluded that a central challenge for promoting a transition toward sustainability would be to develop an integrated and place-based understanding of the threats to sustainability, and the options for dealing with them.¹ The NRC report reflected the view that any successful quest for sustainability would be “a collective, uncertain and adaptive endeavor in which discovering where it wants to go is intertwined with how it wants to get there.”² The World Network of Biosphere Reserves, containing 610 sites in 117 countries, including more than 85 world heritage sites, provides a wide array of places, ecosystem types, and social and cultural settings that can contribute to making this transition toward sustainability more effective and less uncertain. An information-sharing project focusing on activities in some of these areas will be initiated by the George Wright Society (GWS), in collaboration with the International Biosphere Trust (IBT). The project will contribute the GWS goal to connect people, places, knowledge and

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ideas to foster excellence in natural and cultural resources management, research, protection, and interpretation in protected natural and cultural areas.

Background

The experts who designed the biosphere reserve criteria and guidelines in 1974 emphasized that biosphere reserve establishment in different biotic regions of the world would be a way to keep options open and prevent, to the best of our ability, the depletion or destruction of the genetic diversity of life. The USA and the Soviet Union recognized the need for this project and agreed at their Summit Conference in Moscow, July 1974, to support the Man and the Biosphere Program (MAB) and to “designate certain natural areas as Biosphere Reserves for protecting valuable plant and animal genetic strains, and ecosystems, and for conducting scientific research needed for more effective actions concerned with global protection.”³

In carrying out this important mandate the U.S. MAB Program developed effective domestic and international cooperative activities over the next five years, and this progress was recognized in 1979 by the Executive Office of the President, Offices of Science and Technology (OSTP) and Management and Budget (OMB), which issued a memorandum for heads of certain departments and agencies. It stated that MAB was “an excellent opportunity for international cooperation and provided a focus for the coordination of domestic programs aimed at improving the management of natural resources and the environment.”⁴ The interior and agriculture departments were directed to lead development of the domestic program, and the Department of State was directed to lead development of the international program.

With this mandate, and the clarification of agency responsibilities, progress was made in developing effective international and domestic programs over the next fifteen years, but in the mid-1990s opponents of the United Nations (UN) and some members of the U.S. Congress, alleged that biosphere reserves were part of a conspiracy by the UN and the White House to take control of lands in the U.S. This sensationalized campaign gained support in Congress even though the Congressional Research Service reported that biosphere reserves promoted communication and cooperation among a world network of areas, and that the U.S. retained full sovereignty and control over its designated areas.⁵ The Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Oceans and International Scientific Affairs testified before Congress in 1997 that the MAB Program was a component of the Administration’s strategy in international diplomacy and that biosphere reserves facilitated scientific and technical exchanges that benefited both U.S. and foreign scientists and managers. He said, “Continued collaborations under MAB are of importance to the Department of State because they further the Administration’s goal of fostering wise environmental stewardship around the world while at the same time strengthening relations between the U.S. and key counterpart nations.”⁶ In spite of this, the U.S. Congress attached amendments to appropriation bills that prohibited agencies from funding the MAB program, and it was essentially abandoned.

Hope for renewing the program came in 2003, when First Lady Laura Bush announced at the UNESCO General Conference in Paris, “The United States will once again be a full, active, and enthusiastic participant in UNESCO’s important mission to promote peace and freedom, and the people of my country will work with our colleagues throughout the world to advance education, science, culture and understanding.”⁷ Encouraged by this pledge, I met with Mark Rey, Under Secretary of Agriculture, and asked him to allow the U.S. Forest Service, MAB co-lead agency with the National Park Service (NPS), to plan the renewal of USMAB. I agreed to organize the U.S. Biospheres Association to assist. Undersecretary Rey approved the approach, and planning began in 2004, with a meeting hosted by the Missouri Botanical Garden.

However, Henry Lamb, Chairman and founder of Sovereignty International, Inc., became aware of the plans and complained to U.S. Representative Richard Pombo, Chair of the House

Resources Committee, that the U.N. was planning to “renew its global land grab.” This led Pombo to initiate an investigation of MAB, and he ordered the U.S. Forest Service to turn over all MAB records to the House Investigation Committee. I appealed to Representatives Pombo (CA) and John Duncan (TN) to conduct a fair investigation, and after several such requests they suggested that I meet with Henry Lamb to possibly resolve some of the controversy. I agreed, and from November 2005 until 2010 we met several times. To the surprise of most everyone, including members of Congress, Henry and I agreed that biosphere reserves could make significant contributions to conservation of landscapes, species, and genetic diversity in the United States, and that participation in the World Network of Biosphere Reserves would enable the U.S. to benefit from exchange with others, and improve international relations if the program had appropriate oversight by the U.S. Congress.⁸ We signed an agreement to this effect, but it was not enough to convince some members of Congress. However, one positive effect was that the House Resources Committee ceased its investigation.

The situation today

Most of the 47 U.S. Biosphere Reserves have been inactive for a decade or more, and the periodic review required by UNESCO has not been done since 1995. UNESCO reminded the Office of UNESCO Affairs, U.S. Department of State, of this requirement in 2010 and again recently. The request is now being considered by the Department of State. If a decision is made that the review will not be conducted, the MAB International Coordinating Council (ICC) will be obligated to take steps to delist the U.S. Biosphere Reserves, and they will no longer be referred to as biosphere reserves. It may be possible to convince agency leaders that the review should be done, and that some of the U.S. biosphere reserves should continue to be part of the World Network. However, we should look beyond the political short sightedness that has kept the U.S. from participating in MAB in recent years, and get back to reason-based diplomacy. A start toward this goal will be to initiate an information system where interested individuals and groups in the U.S. can collaborate with other biosphere reserves, especially our neighbors, Mexico and Canada.

An opportunity

The GWS has agreed to allow the use of its website to begin an interactive information sharing project focusing on biosphere reserves. This will provide a way to keep interested individuals and groups in the U.S. involved with the growing network of biosphere reserves. A very compelling reason for doing this is that Canada and Mexico have active biosphere reserve programs, and they desire to cooperate with the U.S. to address shared transnational and trans-boundary issues, such as migratory and invasive species.

Initiating information sharing among biosphere reserves can also contribute to the growing movement to foster social financial investment in the conservation and sustainability of significant areas, such as biosphere reserves and world heritage sites. Shaun Paul, a leader in this movement, described an initiative of social capital (SOCAP) markets and the Packard Foundation to draw investor attention and interest to coastal and marine areas. There are about 150 coastal, island and marine biosphere reserves, which may have opportunities for social investment. The GWS information-sharing project should become a broker and facilitator for initiating social investments in appropriate places. This will link with the Biosphere Innovation System (BIS) started in Sweden’s Biosphere Reserves and expanded to Biosphere Reserves in a several other countries. This program has inspired local business leaders to participate in achieving biosphere reserve goals.

Endnotes

1. U.S. National Research Council, *Our Common Journey: A Transition Toward Sustainability*

- (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1999).
2. *Ibid.*, 3.
 3. UNESCO, MAB Report 22, *Criteria and Guidelines for the Choice and Establishment of Biosphere Reserves* (Paris, France: UNESCO, 1974), 41, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0000/000098/009834eb.pdf>.
 4. Executive Office of the President, "Memorandum For Heads of Certain Departments and Agencies," Subject: U.S. Participation in UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Program (Washington, DC, 1979).
 5. Susan R. Fletcher, Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, *Biosphere Reserves: Fact Sheet, Major Studies and Issue Briefs of the Congressional Research Service*, 96-517 ENR (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 1997).
 6. Rafe Pomerance, Testimony of Deputy Assistant Secretary, Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, Department of State, before the U.S. Congress Committee on Resources during a hearing on H.R. 901, American Land Sovereignty Protection Act, 10 June 1997 (Washington, DC: US Congress, 1997), 3.
 7. Laura Bush, UNESCO General Conference, Paris, France (2003), http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=15739&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.
 8. V. Gilbert and H. Lamb, Signed Agreement Regarding Biosphere Reserves (Knoxville and Hollow Rock, Tenn., 2007). On file at U.S. Biosphere Reserves Association, 314 Conference Center Building, Knoxville, TN, 37996-4138.