

Exploring Opportunities for Enhancing Relevancy and Sustainability through Cultural Landscape Conservation

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“CULTURAL LANDSCAPE” IS STILL A RELATIVELY NEW CONCEPT FOR CONSERVATION, yet it derives from a very old idea, one that has been adapted into new use in conservation. Cultural landscapes were referenced at many of the George Wright Society (GWS) conference sessions and it was noted that cultural landscape conservation, like many other areas, has continued to evolve in response to new challenges and opportunities. This panel discussion took advantage of a recent international conference as a catalyst for this dialogue to reflect on the state-of-the-art in cultural landscape conservation.

Last fall, at Rutgers University, over 330 people from 30 countries on 6 continents participated in an international conference, “[Cultural Landscapes: Preservation Challenges in the 21st Century](#),” convened by the Cultural Heritage and Preservation Studies at Rutgers University and co-sponsored by the U.S. National Park Service (USNPS) and many other organizations (see [conference sessions](#) online). A diverse collection of people participated, including indigenous community leaders, other practitioners from government agencies and nongovernment organizations, as well as academics. The conference was organized as part of the fortieth anniversary of the World Heritage Convention, one of many events around the world designed to reflect on the implementation of this international treaty. The conference also marked the twentieth anniversary of recognition of cultural landscapes as eligible for the World Heritage List. With those landmarks in mind, conference participants reflected upon recent experience with cultural landscapes that has

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prompted rethinking of conservation practice in areas such as integration of natural and cultural heritage, collaboration across large landscapes and across sectors, the role of local community leadership, enhancing relevancy, and linkages with sustainability (Figure 1).

These discussions, drawing on international experience with cultural landscape conservation, were inspiring, and convinced us that it is timely to renew our dialogue here in North America. Consequently, one of the goals of this panel discussion on cultural landscape conservation, convened at the George Wright Society conference, was to gain additional perspectives on this dynamic and growing field, and reflect on some of the new ideas and directions that are emerging, in particular, strategies to enhance the relevancy and sustainability of current conservation efforts. This paper draws both on the findings of the international conference last fall and the panel discussion at the George Wright Society conference.

Reflections on accomplishments and current practice

Over the last thirty years, there has been substantial progress and many accomplishments in cultural landscape conservation. The USNPS first officially recognized cultural landscapes when the agency founded the Park Cultural Landscapes Program, and began developing preservation standards for landscapes in the 1980s. The USNPS took a broad approach to defining cultural landscapes—from designed to vernacular and ethnographic landscapes (USNPS n.d.). In 1992, the World Heritage Committee specifically acknowledged cultural landscapes as eligible for the World Heritage List, and recognized a similarly broad range of landscapes (Rössler 2006; Mitchell, Rössler, and Trichaud 2009; UNESCO n.d.).

Examples of cultural landscape conservation across North America and around the world demonstrate how adaptable the cultural landscape concept has been. Over the last 20 years, the cultural landscape concept has proven useful in a wide variety of settings, scales, and contexts (Brown, Mitchell, and Beresford 2005; Mitchell, Rössler, and Trichaud 2009; Taylor and Lennon 2012; Barrett n.d.). This experience has developed a shared recognition for a diversity of

Figure 1. A “word cloud” illustrating some of the key words and ideas that emerged during the discussions at this international conference.



values resulting from the interaction of culture and nature that are represented through tangible and intangible heritage. The flexibility of this concept and its associated methods, and their continued evolution, have been inherent strengths, creating openness to ancient and new ideas and interpretations. Importantly, a growing voice from indigenous and other local communities gives eloquent expression to deeply held values and resilient landscape traditions, as well as insights into a variety of relationships between culture and nature. As cultural geographer Peirce Lewis has noted, “Our human landscape is our unwitting autobiography, reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspirations, and even our fears, in tangible, visible form” (Lewis 1979, 12).

Today, it is widely recognized that cultural landscapes are the result of a long and complex relationship between people and nature. These landscapes are with us today because of the past and present-day stewardship of communities living in and near them (Brown, Mitchell, and Beresford 2005). They are places of ingenuity and innovation, of mystery and spiritual power, of learning and healing, of conflict and co-existence, whose complex array of cultural and natural values represented by tangible and intangible heritage are not readily understood by the outside visitor or manager. Understanding requires honoring the world-views and core values of the communities that are (or were) their stewards over different periods, listening to diverse voices and perspectives, and respecting the different knowledge systems and practices embedded in these places, which have much to teach us about resilience.

Over the last two decades, there has been substantial progress in integrating cultural landscapes into international, national, and local instruments, laws and policies and this has provided recognition of and encouragement for using the cultural landscape concept. The inclusion of cultural landscapes under the UNESCO World Heritage Convention in 1992, and the concept in other instruments, such as the European Landscape Convention in 2000, has created a set of broad policy frameworks for conservation that continues to evolve (Rössler 2006; UNESCO World Heritage Centre n.d.; Council of Europe 2000). This formal recognition has also encouraged development of scholarship, theory, and examination of practice (Kothari, Camill, and Brown 2013; Plieninger and Bieling 2012; Taylor and Lennon 2012).

Recognition of cultural landscapes has also influenced the theory and practice of historic preservation and its relationship to nature conservation. Cultural landscape conservation has shaped a concept of heritage that has become increasingly dynamic and inclusive. Importantly, conservation of many cultural landscapes is reliant on local and indigenous leadership and governance, and traditional knowledge systems and institutions, and is integrated with other policies and programs. Within the World Heritage context, for example, the cultural landscape concept has become increasingly robust, and has created opportunities for World Heritage nominations from many countries that recognize a variety of living landscapes, many with associative values. This experience has contributed feedback to improve the implementation of the World Heritage Convention, and forged connections with other conventions (e.g., Convention on Biological Diversity) and organizations (e.g., Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations).

Certainly, the interdisciplinary nature and flexibility of the concept have made it a useful framework for many situations and contexts. In particular, cultural landscapes have become an important arena for integrating perspectives and strategies for cultural and natural heritage conservation, as well as for integration of conservation and sustainable economic and community development.

At the GWS conference discussion, two panelists added their international perspectives to the dialogue on cultural landscapes. Tim Badman, of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) World Heritage Programme, discussed the IUCN's role and recent initiatives in advising the World Heritage Committee on cultural landscape nominations to the World Heritage List and their management in cooperation with International Council on Monuments

and Sites (ICOMOS; see IUCN World Heritage Programme n.d.). Terence Hay-Edie offered examples of engaging local communities in stewardship of globally significant protected areas, such as World Heritage Sites. This innovative program, Community Management of Protected Areas Conservation (COMPACT), an initiative of the U.N. Development Programme and Global Environmental Facility (GEF) Small Grants Programme and other partners, empowers communities to reconcile conservation with sustainable livelihoods, including the use of biodiversity at the local level (Brown and Hay-Edie 2013).

Looking ahead

Even with the substantial progress described by session speakers, cultural landscapes around the world face serious challenges posed by globalization, demographic shifts, and climate change. There is a sense of urgency, given these serious challenges and the vulnerability of many important cultural landscapes, and an acknowledgement that addressing these challenges will require broad commitment and action. Given the diversity of challenges, development of successful strategies can benefit from collective experience and research, sharing knowledge across communities and disciplines, and developing innovative responses.

Based on these recent discussions, several ideas for next steps were identified. In the USA, for example, the USNPS is undertaking several new initiatives leading up to the agency's centennial, and the fiftieth anniversary of the National Historic Preservation Act, in 2016. Some of the actions are underway, while others are planned for the intervening years:

- **Recognize cultural landscapes as a distinct property type within the National Register criteria.** This addresses the challenge of shoehorning these landscapes into site and district definitions. This can begin with revising the data collected on National Register forms to recognize landscape components as contributing features and updating the guidance for documenting and preserving cultural landscapes.
- **Commit to updating the guidance for identifying and managing cultural landscapes.** The USNPS has committed to updating the secretary of the interior's Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes, to address the concepts of adaptation for greater sustainability and resilience to climate change. In addition, the National Register staff are carrying out a multi-year consultation on how traditional cultural properties are being identified as eligible for the National Register, with the intention of updating Bulletin 38. The panel discussed another related effort on indigenous cultural landscapes as a subset of ethnographic landscapes and the importance of understanding how indigenous people perceived and used their environment, and how this legacy continues today.
- **Through legislation, recognize National Heritage Areas as a system of cultural landscapes encompassing communities and their resources, connected by theme and geography, and supported as part of the strategic mission of the USNPS.** National Heritage Areas are an example of large-scale landscapes that are treasured and valued by many people both within the region and beyond. Through a variety of partnerships, and by learning more about successful strategies for governance, the effectiveness of on-the-ground conservation for cultural and natural values can be strengthened. There is much to be learned from experience with this model of community-led preservation of nationally significant stories.

Following the discussions at the international conference, several other suggestions for ways to move forward were offered:

- **Support indigenous and local communities in stewardship of these landscapes** into the twenty-first century through new partnerships that take into account the need to sustain the

core values underlying stewardship—such as tradition, language, respect and love—ensuring that these are reflected in education of the next generation and translated into the policies affecting communities. Such an approach would (1) reinforce the central role of communities not only in management but also in *governance* (by communities or in collaborative relationships), and manage adaptively; (2) honor the importance of distinctive spiritual relationships to the land (enshrined as a human right by the United Nations (UN 2007)); (3) recognize traditional knowledge systems alongside western systems of science, ensuring that these knowledge systems inform management policies, and support communities in transmitting this knowledge and associated practices; and (4) support and develop livelihood opportunities, so that young people have the option of living in their home communities.

- **Further develop the concept and language for “a cultural landscape framework” to more clearly articulate a shared terminology.** While the widespread use of the concept and terms associated with cultural landscapes has contributed to conservation in many countries, there is an increasing concern with the lack of clarity in the terminology. Questions are now being posed, for example, whether the term “cultural landscape” refers to a place, a typology, an approach, or a framework, or all of these ideas, depending on the circumstances. Further clarifying the terminology for this rapidly developing field will encourage better communication and knowledge exchange among a diverse set of practitioners as well as with the public.
- **Develop additional guidance on good practice to improve integration of nature and culture, to sustain traditional processes on living landscapes, to strengthen governance approaches, and to demonstrate forms of sustainable development.** Guidance is also needed on more effective vertical integration from local communities to the World Heritage Convention and with the systems and programs at the national level and on improved crosscutting connections across conventions. To develop and share this guidance, explore the use of communities of practice for peer-to-peer exchange through various social media.
- **Increase capacity building and support research while engaging the next generation by strengthening a network of universities and other organizations including ICOMOS and IUCN.** Develop a research agenda and case studies of good practice focusing on topics such as role of cultural landscapes in sustainable development, legal frameworks, economic impact of heritage conservation, landscape-scale conservation, ecosystem and cultural services, and resilience to disasters and climate change. Disseminate research findings and technical advice using innovative technology.
- **Strengthen education and public awareness** to enhance understanding and safeguarding of cultural landscapes at local, national, and international levels and support initiatives at all levels.

Concluding remarks

The panel at the GWS conference provided an opportunity to share various perspectives and trends in cultural landscape practice and demonstrated the growing interest in the field in both the cultural and natural resource management fields and by indigenous communities. In the discussion, the participants welcomed the renewed interest of the USNPS in further defining cultural landscapes within the existing framework and in learning and sharing best management practices. Many shared their personal experience of connections to cultural landscapes with deep meaning for them and their communities. Discussion emphasized the challenges in conserving what is designated as a cultural landscape and the critical importance of engaging indigenous and local communities, residents and interest groups within the region. The discussion reinforced the findings of the international conference last fall at Rutgers University that landscapes are shaped and sustained by the stewardship of associated local and indigenous communities and that those

knowledge systems, institutions, and perspectives inform future adaptation, sustainability, and resilience. This understanding of landscapes can serve as a guide for successful cultural landscape conservation.

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