

## U.S. MAB Updates: Discussion Notes from the 2015 GWS Conference

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### Status of U.S. MAB Program and Revival

THE U.S. MAN AND THE BIOSPHERE (MAB) PROGRAM HAS BEEN INACTIVE FOR PAST 15 YEARS. Over the past year, 35 out of 47 biosphere reserves (BRs) completed UNESCO's periodic review. The responses reflected existing interest of many to maintain their BR designation. However, UNESCO has not approved these units because of lack of buffer and transition zones. There appears to be a lot of interest to reengage with the international network which is very promising!

There have been recent efforts to revive the U.S. MAB program including the reestablishment of U.S. MAB Committee and creation of the Biosphere Reserve Associates, an organization established to support the revival efforts of the U.S. MAB. We are currently in the process of drafting a letter to UNESCO from U.S. Secretary of State with U.S. MAB plan and developing guidelines to improve compliance with the periodic review reports. We also hope to work with the 35 BR sites that submitted periodic review and engage with the 12 BR sites that still didn't submit their periodic review. There is a long road ahead, but the first step is to identify the current challenges and identify potential solutions.

### Challenges and Potential Solutions

#### *Zoning system*

- Consider other "titles" than buffer and transition, that would serve the same purpose
- Use case studies to demonstrate that the U.S. is applying the concepts of buffer and transition zones though not using those exact titles
- Coordinate with other countries and groups to gain more support for zoning issue with UNESCO

#### *Lack of relevance of BRs to society and communities*

- Demonstrate economic incentives for locals linked to tourism; create ownership of the BR designation
- Learn from World Heritage Sites

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*Low level of visibility of UNESCO programs in the US*

- Increase promotion through information sharing platforms

*Title/name of program associated with negative image*

- Raising awareness about meaning of BR concept, changing misconceptions about land ownership
- Swedish BRs call themselves Biosphere regions
- Reimagining and marketing BRs in U.S. for their unique niche

*Lack of relevancy and clear benefits*

- Engaging youth and young professionals
- Connecting with local communities/gaining support
- Need clear way to demonstrate impacts/results including intangibles
- Focus on a few BRs who are enthusiastic about reviving status

*Loss of institutional memory and partnerships over time*

- Existing platforms that can help BRs share historical documents and communicate: the OPN ([openparksnetwork.org](http://openparksnetwork.org), version 3.0 to be launched next summer); and the GWS BR sharing platform
- Connecting these platforms with existing international MAB platforms online
- May be a MAB online platform already created by German University of Greifswald
- Online sharing of information needs to be complemented by face-to face capacity building

*Lack of resources*

- Need resources to support and institutionalize the U.S. MAB program
- Partnering with universities
- Engagement with LCCs (landscape conservation cooperatives) and NGOs (nongovernmental organizations)
- Sister biosphere reserves in the international network or within the U.S.
- Engagement with Canada and Mexico—currently a proposal for research on capacity building and governance of BRs in North America

**Next Steps and How to Stay Involved**

The U.S. MAB program is at a critical turning point for reengaging itself in UNESCO's international network after over a decade of inactivity. Some next steps and questions:

*Department of State is drafting a letter to UNESCO with U.S. strategy for BR renewal*

- What should be included in the letter to address the current challenges and how do we narrow down the strategies for the U.S. renewal?

*Reestablishment of U.S. National MAB Committee*

- Who should serve on this committee and what should be the committee's main role in the revival effort?

*Engage sites who did/did not review*

- How can we support sites who did and did not participate in the recent review and emphasize the unique benefits of staying involved in the program?

*Biosphere Reserve Associates acting as support organization*

- How do we recruit people who want to stay engaged in the U.S. BR program and where

should the organization focus their efforts to meet the needs of the individual units and also support the National MAB committee?

We need your help to answer these questions and are seeking individuals who want to stay involved in the effort and discussions!