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The World Commission on Protected Areas: A Network of Professional Expertise

What is WCPA?

The World Commission on Protected Areas is the world's largest voluntary network of protected area managers and specialists. It is one of six commissions of IUCN-The World Conservation Union. These commissions comprise experts in different areas, including species conservation, environmental law, and environmental education, amongst others, as well as protected areas.

WCPA was first established at the IUCN General Assembly in Greece, in 1958. The IUCN *Bulletin* at the time reported on this event in the following lyrical terms: "The meeting was inaugurated just as night was falling. When the rising moon was beginning to throw light and shade among the hills where once echoed the oracular voice of the pythian priestess of Apollo, Hal Coolidge and ten others established the Provisional Commission on National Parks." With a beginning like this, how could any organisation fail?

Since that time, this commission has gone through several changes of name and focus, reflecting changing realities and perceptions regarding the role of national parks and protected areas in society.

How Do We Work?

The members of WCPA serve in a voluntary capacity. Membership is by invitation and is based on two broad

criteria: first, competence in relation to the area of protected areas; and second, willingness to contribute in a voluntary capacity to the activities of WCPA. Membership has grown rapidly in recent years, from 400 in 1993 to the current membership of over 1,400 members in 160 countries.

WCPA is structured by geographical region and by theme. There are 16 geographic regions (including Brazil and Antarctica as separate regions), each under the direction of a regional vice chair. The regional vice chair for North America is Bruce Amos, the director general of Parks Canada, who will be familiar to many readers of THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM. To address "cutting edge" protected area issues, WCPA has established theme programmes and task forces, with the latter generally set up to achieve specific outcomes and then disbanding after these outcomes are achieved. Theme programmes,

which exist over a longer time period than task forces, have been established to cover marine protected areas, mountain protected areas, World Heritage sites, and biosphere reserves. Task forces have been established to cover the following areas as they relate to protected areas: tourism, information management, training, national systems planning, economic benefits, and funding. In addition to the task forces and official theme programmes, WCPA also has informal thematic programmes on various issues, including cave and karst management, grasslands, and the spiritual values of protected areas.

What Do We Do?

The fundamental role of WCPA is to encourage the establishment and management of a worldwide, representative network of terrestrial and marine protected areas. In carrying out this task it recognises the vital importance of protected areas to biodiversity conservation, but also acknowledges that the value of protected areas to human development is not always understood or appreciated. The many benefits from protected areas can only be achieved if they are carefully planned and effectively managed. There is thus a need at the international level to ensure that key habitats are protected, new cooperative approaches to management are developed, and the duplication of efforts is minimised. WCPA has been

leading attempts to carry out this mission since its inception.

One of the main functions of WCPA is to provide focused and relevant forums in which protected area professionals can meet and discuss key issues. It has convened four World Parks Congresses, held every 10 years, with the last being in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1992. WCPA was delighted to work closely with the George Wright Society at this congress, and this cooperation resulted in the publication of the useful document *Coordinating Research and Management to Enhance Protected Areas*. The commission looks forward to future cooperation with the GWS in the implementation of the Vth World Parks Congress, which will be held in Africa in 2002. WCPA has also organised more than 50 regional working sessions in all regions of the world, with the last North American working session having been held in Montreal in October 1996, in association with the IUCN World Conservation Congress.

WCPA has ongoing activities in most of its regional and thematic programmes and task forces. Key outcomes have included the development of the category system for protected areas (as outlined in the document *Guidelines for Protected Area Management Categories*). This system is providing a framework for approaching the classification and establishment of systems of protected areas and, in a number of cases, is

providing the basis for relevant national legislation. WCPA has an active publication programme which includes the distribution of the magazine *PARKS* and the *WCPA Newsletter* to all members, three times a year, and the preparation of publications on a range of issues.

WCPA also has provided a range of policy advice to decision-makers and donors, such as, for example, through the preparation of the landmark four-volume publication *A Global Representative System of Marine Protected Areas*, which identifies priorities for the establishment and more effective management of marine protected areas around the world. Policy advice has also been provided by WCPA to the Convention on Biological Diversity, particularly as it relates to Articles 8(a) and 8(b) concerning *in situ* conservation. [Ed. note: See WCPA News, this issue.]

Recent WCPA activities have included the implementation of two major international symposiums: The "Parks for Peace Conference" explored the role of transboundary protected areas in contributing to biodiversity conservation and also in encouraging cooperation and better relationships between countries.

The "Albany Symposium" brought together 80 world leaders in protected area issues in Albany, Western Australia. This meeting reviewed the Caracas Action Plan (which was adopted at the IVth World Parks Congress) and exam-

ined the key issues facing protected areas as we move into the next century. While noting the considerable progress in the establishment of protected areas—the current global system comprises some 30,000 sites, covering about 13.2 million sq km or 9% of the Earth's surface—the symposium noted that many challenges still face such areas. It concluded that protected areas need to incorporate a more outward focus and approach if they are to have a viable future into the next century. The elements of this approach include the need to more clearly demonstrate how protected areas contribute to local economies and human welfare, plus the need for complementary management. Protected area management must be linked with the management of surrounding areas, particularly through the encouragement of compatible land use and "biological corridors," such as the Yellowstone-to-Yukon Corridor in North America. It is interesting to note that this parallels the viewpoint of George Wright, who, as has been noted in THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM, "realised that protected areas cannot be managed as if they are untouched by events outside their boundaries." Clearly he was a visionary ahead of his time.

What are Some of the Lessons from WCPA?

There are a number of lessons from the experience of WCPA that are relevant for other protected area

networks—the focus of this issue.

First, networks of volunteers, when mobilised and motivated towards clear objectives, can make an enormous contribution for conservation. The nature and extent of this contribution is rarely quantified; when it has been it provides interesting results. For example, an investment of US\$100,000 by the World Bank in the marine network of WCPA resulted in products conservatively estimated at US\$1.5 million (the four-volume publication *A Global Representative System of Marine Protected Areas*). Thus a multiplier effect of 15. The non-monetary benefits, while harder to quantify, are also significant. These include the informal training and capacity-building associated with networking and exchange of experience, as well as the ability to distil lessons learnt from case studies around the world.

Second, networks work best when they have a clear focus, have effective leadership and where some basic resources to “grease the wheels” already exist to help achieve results. Networks function most effectively when they are linked to the interests and aspirations of the members—the practical manifestation of this in WCPA can be seen through the work of the WCPA theme programmes and task forces which bring together highly motivated individuals working together in specific areas relevant to conservation. WCPA also seeks to apply the “give-get test.” That is, the member-

ship of WCPA receive considerable services, including free issues of *PARKS* and the *WCPA Newsletter*. For this we are increasingly seeking something from the membership in return, whether it is through contributing some of their time to a task force or through contributing an article to the WCPA newsletter.

Third, it is important that realistic expectations are established in relation to what can and cannot be achieved by volunteer networks. Network members cannot be treated as paid staff of a protected area agency, for example. Management of networks requires special skills, and this needs to be recognised in the recruitment of staff who are working to support the operation of volunteer members.

Fourth, partnerships with like-minded institutions are essential. It has been estimated by WCPA that there are more than 150,000 persons working in the field of protected areas around the world. WCPA, with its membership of 1,400, will never be able to adequately cover and represent all these people. Partnerships with institutions with similar objectives, such as the George Wright Society and the International Ranger Federation, need to be forged to the mutual benefit of all parties.

In Conclusion

WCPA plays a major role at the international level in contributing to the more effective establishment and

management of protected areas. membership as well as working with
However, its potential has still to be partners, such as the George Wright
fully realised. It is only through more Society, that this potential will be fully
effectively mobilising its voluntary realised.

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