

Paul M. Bray

# Taking Stock

**R**ecent decades have been a challenging, dynamic, and interesting time for the social invention of parks and protected areas. How we think about them has been shifting and evolving to a drum beat of growing societal challenges and expectations.

I have found, for example, what I believe to be the core notion of parks, creating the right fit between preservation for future generations and beneficial public enjoyment. The history of parks in the 19th and 20th centuries has been a large and useful reservoir to guide me in my own work of over a quarter-century of park advocacy and park-making.

I learned from and was inspired by the history of urban parks, from Olmsted's greenswards to the era of playgrounds and facility parks; of the national parks, from Yellowstone to today's historical parks, such as Lowell National Historical Park, where it is said that there is not a park in the city of Lowell—the city *is* the park; and of the vast, six-million-acre Adirondack Park with its 130,000 permanent inhabitants, which has been called “a park in the painful process of becoming a park” for more than a century.

I saw parks in the vanguard of urban planning, preserving the public ability to enjoy scenic beauty when it might have been monopolized by the

few, as well as developing the interpretive approach to education. Here was a social invention, diverse in its many forms and changing over time, that had a unique ability to respond in a timely way to society's needs.

This led me to the notion of the city and region as a park. Parks could be a contemporary vehicle for integrating conservation, recreation, and education in urban and regional settings that have a coherence based on both cultural and natural heritage. It was applied in creating the Hudson Mohawk Urban Cultural Park in 1977 (a.k.a. Riverspark), which encompasses most of seven neighboring cities, towns, and villages at the confluence of the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers. Riverspark as an inhabited park is a living organism continuously striving to achieve its preservation and public enjoyment goals.

While some of us were working with cities or regions as park or heritage area and carrying on the tradition of parks as agents of environmental reform, many other park-re-

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lated initiatives were advancing, such as greenways, countryside stewardship, and planning for cultural landscapes and bioregions. On the one hand, it is very good that we are moving so fast on so many fronts because the threats to natural and cultural values from the global economy and population growth are unremitting. The opportunities for human and community enrichment from stewardship are also expanding. But it leaves us little time to step back and take stock of where we are, how we got here, and what the best course is for the future when it comes to parks and protected areas.

This special section of THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM is designed to tap the wisdom and ideas of a group of outstanding and diverse international scholars and practitioners (and, in some cases, scholar-practitioners) who are thoughtfully working on the front lines when it comes to parks and protected areas.

Ethan Carr, author of *Wilderness by Design*, a study of the partnership between landscape architecture and the National Park Service, offers a historical framework to clarify how we have gotten to where we are. He points to three ideal American landscapes: the civic, utilitarian conservation, and wilderness models, each with conflicting goals. Carr's analysis may help remove the blinders that have kept fierce advocates of these models from finding common ground.

Rolf Diamant also uses history to

show that the National Park Service has been more adaptable to change than some park professionals acknowledge. He shows us that NPS has been "operating along a continuous evolution and diversification," giving us more reason to believe that ultimately the agency will meet the challenge to take the National Park System in new directions.

New directions are where Judy LaBelle and Roberto Gambino, authors from opposite sides of the Atlantic, see us going. They address the expansion of park and protected area approaches to encompass "humanized territories and cultural landscapes." Gambino points out that in Italy parks are increasingly being used as "essential tools for enhancing and improving local values, specificities, and cultures," while LaBelle points to an increasing American constituency for "protecting the distinctive and desirable elements of our communities" by adapting notions of the European countryside parks. Gambino and LaBelle have been working together on the twinning of Italian and American parks and protected areas and sharing conservation lessons therefrom.

Canadians J. Gordon Nelson and Lucy M. Sportza draw from extensive research in Canada and the rest of the world to outline nine elements of thought and practice concerning parks and protected areas that have changed during the last two decades. Whether the elements relate to

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planning, funding, or management “a more interactive and adaptive approach is being taken to parks and protected areas.”

No better example of new approaches can be found than the increasingly important role protected areas are playing in addressing the challenges of biodiversity conservation and sustainable development in transboundary areas. This is detailed in the concluding article by David Sheppard, who has the advantage of a global perspective from his position as head of the IUCN Programme on

Protected Areas.

New directions, connectivity, and pluralism are the recurring themes. They apply whether the vantage point is local, as it is for LaBelle in “Postcards from Home,” or global, as it is with such issues as biodiversity conservation. If we can take some moments from our particular tasks, passions, and challenges to read and ponder these articles, I suggest that we may be better able to chart and navigate the societal currents affecting our era of park and protected area activity.

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