

David Harmon

## George Wright's Vision: What Does It Mean Today?

**I**n this issue of the FORUM, which closes the 20th anniversary year of the George Wright Society, we step back from current concerns to remember, in greater depth than ever before, the man for whom our organization is named. A cynic might ask: Why bother? What real relevance could there be for today in the actions of a man who died, barely into his thirties, after a public career of fewer than ten years? It's all well and good to acknowledge Wright's historic role in shaping the National Park Service, but surely our understanding of ecological and resource management principles has advanced far enough so that we can relegate him to that pantheon of conservation pioneers whose names we honor but whose works we can safely leave unread.

I suppose, on a crude level, the cynics are right. If I were a young natural resource manager just starting a park career today, doubtless I could get along well enough without having any direct contact with Wright's ideas. It would suffice to know that Wright had lived, that he made important contributions to the Park Service, and let it go at that. Yes, one could get along well enough. But truly effective park resource management calls for something much more than just getting along. It requires a mature depth of understanding that comes only through firsthand knowledge of the key thinkers who paved the way to the present—a backlighting, if you will, of our current state of knowledge. This is an insight which, if not insisted upon by some wise mentor early in one's professional life, will

only disclose itself in mid-career or later. People just starting out are, quite understandably, focused on getting up to speed with the latest thinking in the myriad disciplines that are relevant to the resources in one's particular park. It's no easy task, on top of the all the purely bureaucratic drains on one's time. Yet over the years I have observed that many of the "latest" ecological and conservation concepts were substantially anticipated in the thinking of people who, like Wright, we just assume we can ignore because they've been dead so long. If you read the bibliographies of articles in current learned journals, especially in the sciences, you could easily draw the conclusion that nothing worth quoting was written prior to 1995. A historical perspective—such as a reading of Wright provides—is an

immensely useful corrective to this kind of chronocentric hubris. It's not just a matter of acknowledging debts to the past; *knowing* the history of one's field is what elevates one's professional working knowledge above the treadmill level of just "keeping up."

The heart of Wright's thinking is in Fauna #1 and Fauna #2. He wrote or co-wrote most of the chapters and the stamp of his personality is all over both monographs. What was that personality? To get a sense of Wright the man, I urge you to take time, as you read the excellent articles that follow, to study the photos which accompany them. I had not seen most of them before starting in on editing this issue, but, upon examining them, I was struck by how Wright's extraordinary character comes shining through. Though short in stature, he had a commanding presence—like a Napoleon, one almost is tempted to say! For my part, I am convinced that, had Wright lived, his practical achievements as a conservationist would have matched those of, say, Aldo Leopold. In fact—and I go out on a limb here—I believe Wright had the introspective capacity to match, even exceed, Leopold as a philosopher of conservation. Certainly Wright was far ahead of his time in grasping the ecological basis of the great natural parks. He married that knowledge to a firm commitment to preserving natural processes in the parks. As Dick Sellars points out in his article

below, this was poles apart from the prevailing emphasis on serving up idealized nature scenes to visitors. Imagine how Wright might have developed his conservation philosophy, had he only been fated to live a full life.... There are glimmerings all through his writings of the direction he would have gone, and there is little doubt that the result would have been a landmark in American conservation history.

All this points to a simple conclusion: the work of George Wright, both his on-the-ground achievements and his thinking, is still very relevant today. Wright not only set in train the entire scientific and natural resource management program of the National Park Service, he shone a beacon in the direction park management must go if it is to be up to the task of truly preserving the parks "unimpaired" for the future.

I also feel—though I must admit my "evidence" amounts to nothing more than a hunch—that Wright would have applauded the increasing emphasis we see today on integrating natural and cultural resource management concerns, particularly in the realm of cultural landscape management. Take a look at my favorite picture of Wright: the one on page 21, where he is speaking with Maria Lebrado, reputedly the last surviving Native American to have inhabited the Yosemite Valley (this, according to *Yosemite Nature Notes*, where the photo was first published). It's July 1929; she must have been a little girl

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when her tribe was forced out of the valley. Who knows what Maria is telling George? We can only guess. But look at the rapt expression on Wright's face: he's *listening*. And, from all appearances, listening sympathetically. (In fact, a caption to the original photo noted that Wright—and his colleague, Ben Thompson—endeared themselves to Lebrado by their ability to speak to her in Spanish.) I like to think that Wright would have been quick to realize that the human presence in natural landscapes is of long standing and has its own value.

So I urge all readers of the FORUM to invest the time in reading Wright. Again, Fauna #1 and #2 are the benchmarks, and are fairly widely available in park libraries. Reading them is time well spent. Rather than excerpting those in this issue, we have instead chosen to give you a

glimpse of Wright's genesis as a naturalist by republishing a short article, "The Magic Window," that tells how his love of the natural world was awakened as a boy.

I hope it will not be thought amiss if I close this brief introduction to this issue of the FORUM by publicly thanking George Wright's daughters, Sherry Brichetto and Pam Lloyd, for their support of the Society since our founding in 1980. Sherry, along with her late husband Dick, Pam and her husband Jim, and Pam and Jim's son-in-law, Jerry Emory, have in various ways all been instrumental to the success of the George Wright Society. On behalf of the Society's Board of Directors, staff, and membership, I want to express our deepest gratitude to all of them. The vision of George Wright lives on in their efforts.

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