

A Personal Reflection on the 2011 George Wright Society Conference

Robert A. Winfree

THE 2011 GEORGE WRIGHT SOCIETY CONFERENCE, held March 14–18 in New Orleans, Louisiana, was a great reminder of why we do what we do as park professionals, and that doing the right thing isn't always going to be as simple as we'd wish. Held every two years, the GWS conferences are arguably the single best opportunity for park scientists, scholars, managers, cooperators, educators, and students from all disciplines and all corners of North America to meet and interact with their peers and leadership. I first discovered the GWS in 1995 when I joined the National Park Service, and I haven't missed a conference since. I've come to regard the GWS as the preeminent professional organization for people interested in park resources and science. However, for many of our colleagues, fiscal uncertainty and limited travel opportunities made their decision about whether or not participate in this conference more difficult.

The 2011 conference also turned out to be a test of commitment for leadership of the Society, and for our agency. Although the GWS weathered the recent recession in better shape than some other professional societies, the success of the biennial conference has always been key to the success of the organization. There were still many clouds in the sky during the months leading up to the March 2011 conference date. The Society's relationship with the NPS, historically one of its strongest and most steadfast supporters, had been severely questioned by government investigators. As a consequence, a long-standing cooperative agreement lapsed, cutting off support for programs that were important to the NPS, other agencies and partners, and the GWS. The Society's Board of Directors also had to be reorganized to comply with new requirements that precluded Department of the Interior employees from serving in that capacity. As the deadlines approached for GWS to commit scarce funds to conference facilities and lodging, the specters arose of tighter travel caps, a possible travel freeze, and even a federal shutdown. The Society's leadership developed contingency plans where they could, but planning for the 2011 conference continued, as it must to meet the needs and expectations of the membership.

In the end, the winds of change turned again and blew favorably for the conference. A new agreement was put in place between the NPS and GWS, with a clear commitment to

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work together to plan and implement conferences in both 2011 and 2013. The NPS also provided critical financial support for GWS programs to increase participation by diverse students, and by Native and indigenous people. The vacancies on the GWS Board of Directors were refilled quickly, as experienced and committed professionals stepped up to the plate. With renewed support from NPS leadership, the outgoing board members continued providing support throughout conference planning and implementation, and the number of registered participants continued to increase. The Society's New Orleans conference was its largest and most successful ever, with more than 200 technical sessions and over 1,100 people participating, including many first-time participants. The program included keynote talks by internationally recognized authors and experts on climate change, tribal consultation, resiliency, and a thought-provoking discussion of relevancy with top leadership of the Canadian and US national park agencies. The increased participation by park professionals from other nations and tribes was especially gratifying. Although it sometimes required hard individual choices, this region was also very well represented in all stages of conference planning, implementation, and participation.

What can we learn from all this? The challenges of being a park professional come in many forms. Some are more obvious or more difficult than others, and our parks face a lot of bigger issues than this every day. In the greater scheme of things, our individual presence at any particular meeting may not always be significant to the outcome of the meeting. However, part of what makes us park professionals is our collective belief in the mission of the National Park Service, in sharing what we've learned with others, inspiring and being inspired by our peers. It's also about our individual commitments to do the right thing, whatever we understand that to be. This successful conference is another reminder of what a number of individuals can accomplish when they share a common purpose and strive to make it happen. I look forward to seeing you again in Denver in 2013.

[Ed. note: This short essay is taken from Bob Winfree's regular "Directorate Corner" column for National Park Service Alaska Region employees, which is published on the region's intranet site. Winfree recently served on the GWS Board of Directors and as an NPS liaison to the Board, and was also a member of GWS2011 Conference Committee.]

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