

# Sister Parks as a Tool to Protect Shared Resources: An Example from St. Croix National Scenic Riverway

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THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE (NPS) CORE VALUE OF “SHARED STEWARDSHIP” applies to our international affairs as well as our domestic ones. For example, take the plight of neotropical migrants, a long-recognized international environmental issue.

At St. Croix National Scenic Riverway (located in Minnesota and Wisconsin), these winged neotropical jewels only spend about 25% of their lives in the Upper Midwest—to carry out the all-important reproduction function. The other 75% of these birds’ lives are spent elsewhere—either in Central or South America, or migrating back and forth between there and here. Given these percentages, the critical importance of “shared stewardship” is evident.

We must work with our Central and South American partners to protect habitat in their countries as well, so that neotropical migrants always come back north each spring. While international efforts like Partners in Flight and Southern Wings have been working on this dilemma for many years, St. Croix National Scenic Riverway and several other national park units in the Upper Midwest (Voyageurs National Park, Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, and Mississippi National River), as well as the Great Lakes Inventory and Monitoring Network, are now working on partnering with Corcovado National Park (located on the Osa Peninsula of Costa Rica), and perhaps others, to form a sister park arrangement to benefit these international birds.

While it is certainly true that park resource managers do not need to have a “sister in the south” to restore neotropical migrant habitat along the St. Croix (e.g., the park’s 65 pine plantations that lack diversity), the sister park aspect of this shared stewardship relationship is a public relations “win.” This cross-border relationship on behalf of neotropicals shines an educational spotlight on the birds’ very existence and this international problem. When the time is ripe for the media, it is anticipated that this issue will garner all the attention it rightfully deserves. By making it a “park-to-park” effort, we hope to raise public awareness about this pressing international environmental issue.

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**Figure 1.** The concerned citizen stewards of the St. Croix Valley on the bluffs at the confluence of the Mississippi and St. Croix Rivers.

Under the guidance of NPS’s Office of International Affairs, we are establishing a formal international partnership that aims to further protect habitat for neotropical migrants in parks located thousands of miles away from each other—all in the name of the NPS core value of shared stewardship. We now patiently wait (as is required in many of these international partnership efforts) for a formal agreement to be signed between the US and Costa Rican governments. However, people of the St. Croix Valley are not waiting for these governments to act.

While we wait for a formal agreement, the idea of working across borders to protect the birds and their habitats (through “the people’s” national parks) has captured the imagination of a group of concerned and interested citizen stewards who live in the St. Croix Valley (Figure 1). Independent of government schedules, this new group is meeting regularly to develop ideas that can be implemented now on behalf of protecting the birds and their habitats. Recently, the international group Friends of the Osa (concerned about habitat protection in Costa Rica) told the new St. Croix Valley group that they should move “full steam ahead” with the idea of partnering with the Friends. This great news is a welcome byproduct of the budding sister park arrangement between St. Croix National Scenic Riverway (plus the other Midwest parks) and Corcovado National Park. Whether or not the day ever comes for a formal agreement, these dynamic citizen stewards will figure out how to help the neotropicals. At St. Croix National Scenic Riverway, we’ll work side by side with this group to help us all succeed even more than any one of us could do by ourselves.

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