



Letter from Woodstock
Rolf Diamant

Stewards of Our Heritage

THIS FOURTH LETTER FROM WOODSTOCK IS ACTUALLY BEING WRITTEN IN DENVER, COLORADO, where I am attending this year's George Wright Conference. I have been attending these gatherings for almost 20 years and have seen how the conferences grow and evolve in breadth and sophistication. The participants in this conference are younger, more diverse, and more international. There are also more professional presentations from Parks Canada, as they have sent their largest team to date to a GWS meeting. The Canadians are led by CEO Alan Latourelle and Mike Wong, who is also serving as regional vice chair of IUCN's World Commission on Parks and Protected Areas for North America. On a personal note, it was particularly satisfying to see two long-time friends and mentors—Deny Galvin and Hugh Miller—recognized with GWS awards for their remarkable National Park Service (NPS) careers and continuing good work and intellectual leadership in the stewardship of parks and protected areas.

Absent, of course, are our US government friends and colleagues. In the end, they were forced to withdraw because of the automatic, across-the-board budget cuts known as "sequestration." The dramatic gesture by the Department of Interior blocking the attendance of *all* agency participants is troubling enough, but the department's earlier decision, preceding the budget sequestration, to place an arbitrary cap on professional conference participation, is more disturbing and potentially more harmful in the long run. The effects of the cap are compounded by a cumbersome and unworkable conference approval process that makes it impossible for GWS and other conference organizers to plan national-level meetings. Together, the cap and the approval process constitute a major retreat from the Interior De-

The George Wright Forum, vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 12–13 (2013).

© 2013 The George Wright Society. All rights reserved.

(No copyright is claimed for previously published material reprinted herein.)

ISSN 0732-4715. Please direct all permissions requests to info@georgewright.org.

partment's very public commitment to "ensure and maintain the integrity of scientific and scholarly activities of its professional employees." This is really a missed opportunity for low-cost, high-value professional development for so many field-level, up-and-coming staff of the National Park Service, but ultimately it will be the American people and the nation's natural and cultural heritage that will shoulder the downstream consequences of such a retreat. Let us hope the long-standing and productive partnership between federal agencies and the George Wright Society is resilient enough to be sustained in difficult times, and that the Society's goal of advancing knowledge, encouraging communication, and promoting stewardship on behalf of people, parks and protected areas, never falters or fails.

This year's GWS conference also included a preview of the next IUCN World Parks Congress that will take place in 2014 in Sydney, Australia. I hope that the organizers devote some part of the Congress program to specifically address the growing challenge to the governance of parks and protected areas posed by an era of deepening austerity and government retrenchment. Coupled with the concurrent demographic shifts and a narrowing of traditional park constituencies, these forces have the potential to marginalize the importance of parks and protected areas and erode their perceived value and usefulness to society.

The US National Park Service as it prepares for its centennial in 2016 is faced with a similar challenge. Recently, perhaps with this in mind, the National Park Foundation, the congressionally chartered non-profit park philanthropy, retained the services of a well-known advertising agency in advance of the centennial. The intention of the foundation is to launch a national marketing campaign "to preserve and support our nation's best idea—the national parks." However, I suggest this theme might be reconsidered—broadening the emphasis beyond the parks themselves—to also highlight the many ways national parks and programs "preserve and support" the well-being and aspirations of communities and people who use them. Former NPS Director Roger Kennedy often talked about the "usefulness" of the National Park Service as exemplified by the agency's emergency conservation programs for the unemployed during the Great Depression. Perhaps now more than ever, parks and park programs can help people gain a better understanding of a constantly changing and increasingly complex world. Parks can also be the venue for hands-on projects and activities that build self-confidence and proficiency in meaningful civic engagement and sustainable practices.

A writer in my home state of Vermont, John Elder, once wrote, "We must pursue stewardship not simply as the maintenance of valuable resources, but also as a way of fostering a broader experience of democracy and community." Or as Deny Galvin put it: "We need to be recognized as the stewards of our heritage rather than managers of parks."

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Roy Damant". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned in the lower right quadrant of the page.