Reflections on the Beginning of the George Wright Society and Why It Was Created

Vernon C. (Tom) Gilbert

[Ed. note: After retiring from a distinguished career that included positions with the US National Park Service and UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Program, Tom Gilbert served as the first president of the George Wright Society, holding that office from 1980 through 1982.]

A few months ago Dave Harmon, executive director of the George Wright Society (GWS), and I were talking about including a session on the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Program at the next George Wright Society (GWS) Conference in Denver, March 2013. This was a suggestion by Larry Hamilton, senior advisor to the World Commission of Protected Areas; by the time you read this, the conference and the session will have taken place.

During my talk with Dave, I mentioned that Donald King, the first chairman of the US MAB program, had been a keynote speaker at one of our first GWS organizational meetings and had done an excellent job promoting the Society and its mission. This led Dave to ask if I would write something about the beginning of the Society and the events of that time. I said I would, but I knew it would be difficult and probably controversial because the late 1970s to early 1980s was a period when, in my opinion, we went from great progress to dismal lows in environmental science programs in the federal government, particularly in the National Park Service (NPS). The following account of NPS science and technology during the time when the GWS was planned and chartered is based on my experience and interpretations of the events of that time. Admittedly it is biased. I am writing this because I believe there are lessons that could be useful today. As Michael Soukup suggested in his thoughtful article about integrating science and management in *The George Wright Forum* in 2007, there are good reasons for "becoming who we thought we were" (Soukup 2007).

The following account describes some of the specific vacillations and changes in government that led us to create the George Wright Society. In recalling these, I often thought about Stanley Cain's admonition during the Biosphere Conference in 1968. He was a pioneering ecologist, conservationist and friend who, while serving as assistant secretary of

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the interior for fish, wildlife and parks, played a leading role in shaping the MAB program. At the Biosphere Conference he described the need for a multidisciplinary, multiagency, public–private approach to natural resources planning and management (Cain 1970). This was my inspiration as I worked with MAB, but Cain also warned, "Although the vision may have been glimpsed, it is not a promised land somewhere awaiting human enjoyment, a Utopia or Garden of Eden that can be moved into. It must be created by human effort from the rubble and confusion and inefficiencies that have accumulated from past actions, use and abuses of the environment, uses and abuses of human power."

Background

In 1973, I was assigned to work with UNESCO in Paris to develop plans for MAB Project no. 8, "Conservation of Natural Areas and of the Genetic Materials They Contain," which later became known as the biosphere reserve project. At the 1972 Second World Congress on National Parks, Michel Batisse, director of the Natural Resources Research Division of UNESCO, had asked NPS Director George Hartzog if NPS would provide someone to assist in developing the project. I was fortunate to have been selected.

Before leaving for Paris I worked for a brief time on the US/Soviet bilateral project on environmental protection with Curtis "Buff" Bohlen, deputy assistant secretary for fish, wildlife and parks. So, in early 1974, when I learned that President Nixon was planning a summit conference with the Soviets, I suggested to Christian Herter, Jr., assistant secretary of state for environmental affairs, that this could be an opportunity for the US and USSR to pledge support for MAB and the biosphere reserve concept. I described the biosphere reserve concept by using the example of Great Smoky Mountains National Park cooperating with neighboring communities and agencies to create a coordinated regional approach to conservation. It provided the multi-agency, public–private partnership that Stan Cain had advocated. (Cain was once a plant ecologist at the University of Tennessee who had pioneered studies of the heath balds in the Great Smoky Mountains.) Secretary Herter liked the idea. To mostly everyone's surprise, he arranged to have support for MAB included in the US–USSR Summit Agreement. A joint communiqué was signed on July 3, 1974, stating that our two countries would contribute to the implementation of MAB, and would designate biosphere reserves to conduct scientific research needed for more effective actions concerned with global environmental protection (Treaty Office, US Department of State, 1974).

UNESCO Director General René Maheu commended this action and wrote to US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko that he "was sure that the endorsement by the United States and the U.S.S.R. of the project for the establishment of biosphere reserves would give a new impetus to this important Program, which with its objective of helping man to understand and live in harmony with nature and improve the quality of life, has much to offer to the cause of peace and human progress" (UNESCO news release, July 1974).

The network of biosphere reserves took a major step closer to reality in September 1974 when 38 countries endorsed the idea at the International Coordinating Council of MAB held in Washington, D.C. The United States was the first to announce that 20 areas (including 10 national parks) would be designated as biosphere reserves. The USSR delegate, Professor

Vladimir Sokolov, followed by giving examples of areas they would designate, including forest–steppe areas in Ukraine, desert areas in Turkmenia, and mountain areas in the Caucasus. I said that biosphere reserves would add a new dimension to conservation and mentioned that UNESCO had worked with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) to define priorities for conservation of natural areas. In *Biotic Provinces of the World* (published in 1974 as IUCN Occasional Paper no. 9), 198 provinces were identified, 53 of which had no national parks or equivalent reserves; 29 had only one. This showed the need to focus international conservation efforts on regions where little had been done.

Upon returning to the US in 1975, I was pleased to be assigned to the new position of associate director for natural area preservation to work with NPS Chief Scientist Theodore "Ted" Sudia on formulating policies and developing programs in natural areas preservation, and coordinating US MAB activities with Donald King, chief of the division of environment and health in the US Department of State. The assignment had the approval and support of NPS Director Gary Everhardt.

Working with Ted and his colleagues, Robert "Bob" Linn and Albert "Al" Greene, was a pleasure. Ted was a visionary who believed that the development of national parks and ecological knowledge could do much to promote domestic tranquility in the world. He had participated on the Expert Panel on MAB Project no. 8, and the US Interagency Committee that selected the first US areas to be nominated as biosphere reserves. Bob, a close friend, was an experienced naturalist and ecologist and had the personality and persistence to make these programs work. Al excelled in science administration and organization. These three were the principal architects of the new NPS science and technology mission.

Working with Don King in the State Department was also an exceptional experience. Don was an outstanding science bureaucrat who had persuaded many distinguished individuals from government agencies, universities, and private institutions to become involved in MAB. He sought extraordinary ways to "put MAB on the map," as he liked to say. For example, early in April 1977 he asked me what I thought about trying to get President Carter to request a study of environmental trends to the year 2000. I thought it was a great idea. We called upon Lee Talbot, senior scientist of the president's Council for Environmental Quality, who had previously served on the biosphere reserve directorate, to ask if he would include such a request in President Carter's environmental message to Congress. Lee did. On May 23, 1977, in his environmental message to Congress, President Carter directed the Council on Environmental Quality and the Department of State to "work with other federal agencies to study the probable changes in the world's population, natural resources, and environment through the end of the century" (Carter 1977). The *Global 2000 Report*, which was released in 1980, was the first of its kind. Translated into eight languages, it influenced other countries to take more comprehensive, longer-range looks at their environmental problems and the interrelated global challenges of natural resources, environment, and human population (Barney 1993).

President Carter's strong interest in science and technology and building international cooperation helped us in many ways. His offices of Science and Technology (OSTP) and Management and Budget (OMB) issued a joint memorandum on March 9, 1979, requesting

federal agencies to participate in MAB. Signed by OSTP Director Frank Press and OMB Director J.T. McIntyre, Jr., the memorandum stated that the MAB program provided an excellent opportunity for international cooperation and a focus for the coordination of related domestic programs aimed at improving the management of natural resources and the environment. The Department of State was given responsibility for developing US international activities under MAB, and the Departments of Interior and Agriculture were assigned joint responsibility for developing and coordinating the domestic MAB program. All major natural resource and environmental management agencies were directed to work with the Departments of State, Interior, and Agriculture and the MAB National Committee to develop a national plan for participating in US MAB.

Congress also amended the Foreign Assistance Act in 1979 to authorize the president to furnish assistance to less-developed countries (LDCs) to protect and manage their natural resources and environment. This was a new direction for the US Agency for International Development (AID), which had lacked skilled personnel and technical resources to carry out these directives. Therefore, arrangements were made for US MAB to provide, through its member agencies, expertise to assist AID in carrying out its mandate. I led the negotiations to achieve the following initiatives:

- An AID/NPS Environment and Natural Resources Expanded Information Base to produce review papers, case studies, and design aids, thus enabling AID missions and host country personnel to integrate natural resources concerns with social, economic, and institutional factors in relation to development strategies and project planning, design, and assessment.
- Development of AID host country profiles to assess national environmental issues and institutional capabilities, which provided good starting points for more detailed assessments and dialogues about ways for other nations to deal with their environmental problems.

In support of these efforts, the MAB biosphere reserve directorate prepared a report on international activities of federal agencies, especially in relation to conservation of natural areas and scientific research that directly contributed to the goal. The intent was to provide a better basis for planning US assistance in accord with assessments of the status of conservation of natural areas worldwide. Robert Milne, chief of NPS international park affairs, said this request prompted his division to start a new system for recording and describing NPS international activities, their costs, and status.

Under Ted Sudia's leadership, a project was initiated with The Nature Conservancy to prepare reports describing the myriad ways in which the United States manages and protects areas of ecological value. The following reports were done to enhance international exchange: *Preserving Our Natural Heritage: Volume 1—Federal Activities*, 1976; *Volume 2, State Activities*, 1977; *Volume 3—Private, Academic and Local Government Activities*, 1982. Our intent was to continually update these reports as working documents.

All seemed to be going well. Assistant Secretary Robert Herbst pushed for an expanded science and technology program and for NPS to lead the nation in developing MAB. During

an NPS reorganization meeting on August 21, 1978, NPS Director William Whalen said that he and Secretary of Interior Cecil Andrus, felt the need to change the Washington office's organization and to approve a new science and technology mission. The reorganization left several key positions vacant. I was made chief of the natural history division, responsible for policy, standards, and procedures for natural history and natural area programs, including scientific collections, ecological baseline research, and ecosystem monitoring. I was also in charge of developing and implementing cooperative international programs related to park science and technology, particularly the MAB program.

In accord with these responsibilities, at the request of Phillip A. Smith, associate director of OSTP, I arranged a meeting with Assistant Secretary of the Interior Herbst. Smith felt there was enormous potential for expanding research in the national parks; and both he and Secretary Herbst supported MAB because of its success in bringing federal agencies and private institutions together to help solve environmental problems that transcend sectoral boundaries and jurisdictions.

The prospects for NPS science and technology seemed very good. However, Director Whalen prevented us from filling most of the vacant positions. On April 19, 1979, I told him I could not carry out my division's responsibilities under these circumstances. He said that he was not satisfied with our performance, and he asked me to explain what we were doing, "from A to Z." Ever since being appointed associate director for natural area preservation I had submitted regular reports and memoranda on subjects of concern to NPS. One was about the need for NPS to join other agencies in a national program to monitor air pollution and climate change. Another was focused on a decision by the Peace Corps (PC) and the director of the Action Program to reduce PC activities in conservation and phase out PC work related to national parks and reserves. They had decided that such activities did not contribute to President Carter's policy of providing aid to meet "basic human needs." I emphasized that their decision could destroy the best program that the US had to assist developing countries in conserving their natural areas and the plant and animal resources these areas contained. Hundreds of PC volunteers were doing outstanding work in this field, aided in part by assistance from NPS. When George Hartzog was NPS director, I had negotiated a cooperative agreement with PC, so I suggested to Director Whalen that he should inform the PC director that NPS would cooperate in training and assisting PC volunteers in the area of natural area planning, management, and protection. I asked him to encourage the PC director to expand their activities in this field. Director Whalen never responded to my memo, but, ironically, the PC director did. A copy of the memo had been shared with the US Forest Service (USFS) representative in the PC office. After the PC director contacted Whalen, several meetings were held, and NPS Deputy Director Ira Hutchinson agreed to my proposal to assign someone to work with the Peace Corps. George Mahaffey, from the NPS Resource Management Division, was selected. For more than a decade he provided outstanding assistance to PC in expanding its conservation programs. This resulted in a multiplier effect for conservation of natural areas that we could never have achieved through the smaller NPS international programs.

On April 20, 1979, I gave Director Whalen a Memorandum describing our activities from "A to Z." Highlights included:

- Arranging for NPS and USFS to cooperatively lead the biosphere reserve directorate and program. I asked Deputy Director Bill Briggle to represent the NPS side. He agreed and helped initiate a series of regional workshops that resulted in pilot inventory, research, and monitoring projects within several national parks. (Ted Sudia described this as the best working interagency relationship that NPS and USFS ever had!)
- Developing a system to assess the status of flora and fauna studies, inventories, and collections in the national parks.
- Administering the "Flora National Parks" report, part of the Flora North America Project, and giving information to NPS regions on distribution of plants, including rare and endangered species.
- Arranging for the US Geological Survey to compile a portfolio of its LANDSAT satellite imagery and high-altitude aerial photographs of the 12 national parks that had been designated biosphere reserves to form a basis for comparisons over time.
- Arranging an international workshop with UNESCO, the UN Environment Program (UNEP), and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and its Las Vegas laboratory on "Long-term Ecological Monitoring in Biosphere Reserves." With EPA's assistance, this led to monitoring activities on air pollution and climate change in several national park areas. UNEP also agreed to fund pilot projects in several less-developed countries as part of the Global Environmental Monitoring System (GEMS).
- Assisting USFS in preparing a book titled *U.S. Policy, Strategy and Programs on Tropical Forest Management*. (The problem of deforestation in the tropics impacted the entire world from an economic and natural resource standpoint, making effective strategies for conservation of natural areas an imperative.)
- Leading (with support by the Organization of American States) a PC and Honduran team to plan a biosphere reserve in the Río Plátano region of Honduras, which was one of the best examples of tropical forest remaining in Central America.
- Arranging for a study and report on the economic values of *in situ* plant and animal genetic resource conservation. This study, which was conducted by Margery Oldfield and based on her master's thesis, was produced by the Texas System of Natural Laboratories. She described the value of conserving genetic resources from the standpoint of their importance for food production, medicine, and pharmaceuticals, and for providing raw materials for industry. Many of these important species or their close relatives are located in national parks and natural areas around the world. The role of protected areas in conserving these genetic resources was described.
- With the NPS Division of Museum Services, organizing a workshop of experts to improve the curation of park natural history collections, and with the Smithsonian Institution, a short course in curating natural history specimens was conducted for NPS personnel.
- Cooperating with the NPS Division of Museum Services to provide assistance to parks concerning problems of curating natural history specimens. Christine M. Schonewald-Cox was outstanding in working with Art Allen in Museum Services. Later she edited the book *Genetics and Conservation: A Reference to Managing Wild Animal Populations* (Benjamin Cummings Publishing, 1983).

- Providing a directory of outside experts willing to volunteer their time and facilities to aid in analyzing, curating, and restoring natural history specimens. One expert trained museum services technicians in his field of expertise.

I urged Director Whalen to approve the filling of key positions. He did not reply, but my memo was returned to me marked "Thanks" by Deputy Director Ira Hutchinson.

Things improved for a while, but then there were delays and moves made to dismantle the science organization. These moves accelerated with the appointment of Richard Briceland as associate director for science and technology and the removal of Ted Sudia from his acting position as associate director. Still, a rosy scenario was presented by Director Whalen at the Second Scientific Conference on Scientific Research in the National Parks in San Francisco (1979), when he declared in his keynote speech to 750 participants that he was working to expand the budget of the NPS science and technology program and was determined that the NPS "Man and the Biosphere" program would be unequalled by any other resource management agency" (NPS *Courier,* 1980).

The reality was that Dick Briceland had already informed me that the MAB and AID activities would not be a priority under his administration. Director Whalen also appointed George Gardner to the MAB coordinator position for which William "Bill" Gregg had been selected and notified of his selection. Previously, George told me that he had no interest in MAB because he did not see it as a step toward his becoming director of the NPS. I wanted Gardner removed from the MAB position, but the NPS chief of personnel told me that he "would not touch it with a ten-foot pole." I then asked Secretary Herbst to intervene. He said he would have Gardner transferred to another position after three months. Bill Gregg received a letter of non-acceptance and was told that he would have to reapply if the position became vacant.

Briceland also refused to have Margery Oldfield's completed book published, so I had to get outside experts to attest to the value of her work. Afterwards, and with help from Secretary Herbst, I got permission to go ahead with the publication. Her book, *The Value of Conserving Genetic Resources*, was finally published by NPS in 1984. It is now considered a classic in the field of conservation biology.

During these battles, I succeeded in getting reassigned to work exclusively on the $2.2 million NPS/AID Expanded Information Base Project, in which NPS was responsible for preparing case studies, design aids, and publications to help enable AID's mission and to assist host-country officials to integrate natural resource and social and economic issues in development. Briceland and Associate Director for Administration Nancy Garrett delayed the project at every turn. They argued that that the work was not the responsibility of NPS. I reminded them that a participating agency service agreement between NPS and AID had been signed in July 1979 with the approval and support of Assistant Secretary Herbst. They ignored this, and the delays damaged the NPS relationship with AID to the point that AID threatened to withdraw the funding. Under these circumstances I chose to retire from NPS in March 1980 to work with the International Science and Technology Institute (ISTI) to complete the national plan for MAB. Fortunately, before I retired Assistant Secretary Herbst

helped us get the project transferred to International Park Affairs. Over the next few years it succeeded in producing useful information for AID missions (NPS/AID Expanded Information Project, 1981–1987).

By November 1980, the plan for the United States participation in the MAB program was completed and we transmitted it to the directors of OMB and OSTP. The transmittal memorandum, which was signed by the assistant secretaries of state, interior, and agriculture and the chairman of the US MAB National Committee, stated that MAB had developed a range of science programs and with an expenditure of approximately $1.3 million in fiscal year 1980, had generated cooperative programs involving more than $10 million.

Unfortunately, this did not fit the priorities of the new Reagan Administration. Both the MAB national plan and the *Global 2000 Report* were rejected. A nearly finished booklet, "An Earth in Need: The U.S. Man and the Biosphere Program" was not published. Gregory Newell was appointed assistant secretary of state; subsequently he led a movement to get the United States out of UNESCO in spite of recommendations by the US National Commission for UNESCO and most of our embassies that we should remain. This was the forerunner of a well-organized, sensationalized campaign to reduce our participation in the United Nations. Newell also tried to fire Don King, but fortunately, Don succeeded in getting assigned to a position in the Environment Department of the World Bank.

President Reagan also appointed James Watt as secretary of the interior, which even prominent Republicans Russell Train and Nathaniel Reed thought was a disaster. Reed said he thought Watt was attempting to turn the clock back to the pre-(Teddy) Roosevelt era, when everyone supposed natural resources were inexhaustible. He said he could not "sit idly by and watch this lame-brained, outmoded philosophy take hold and stain his party's reputation" (Cope 1981).

Such were the vicissitudes of federal government politics at the time the idea for the George Wright Society was born.

Creating a nongovernmental organization to respond to perceived needs

The GWS was incorporated in August 1980 by Bob Linn, the former NPS chief scientist. Bob and Ted Sudia, the NPS chief scientist at that time, were the chief architects of the Society. Bob had retired earlier in 1980, and would devote most of the rest of his life to making the GWS a success. Ted was an ecological science visionary who was good at creating new organizations. Al Greene, who excelled in science administration, worked closely with Ted and Bob. They were a good team and others, such as the following persons, willingly joined to get the GWS established:

- Pamela Wright Lloyd, George Melendez Wright's daughter, a distinguished conservationist in her own right, fully endorsed the Society, and participated in its organization.
- Harry Pfanz, a distinguished NPS historian, helped shape the cultural resource stewardship mission.
- Jean Matthews, an outstanding NPS writer, became the first editor of *The George Wright Forum*. She wrote fine editorials about the GWS mission and later organized and edited an excellent journal, *Park Science*.

- Daniel B. Beard was a pioneer advocate of multi-disciplinary research in the national parks. He and Gordon Fredine, former chief of international park affairs at NPS, arranged for the Renewable Natural Resources Foundation in Maryland to host an organizational meeting of the GWS.
- Durward L. Allen, distinguished professor of wildlife ecology, helped plan the GWS and served actively on the original GWS Board.

The needs for the Society had been determined in several conferences, especially in the two meetings on Scientific Research in the National Parks (1976 in New Orleans and 1979 in San Francisco). In addition, the Second World Conference on National Parks in Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks (1972), called for expanding research on the manifest contributions of national parks to the well-being of the community, and for an exchange of information among nations on all matters affecting the planning and management of national parks.

The needs for the GWS were described in the first issue of *The George Wright Forum* (Summer 1981). Jean Matthews wrote, "Today the threats to protected areas and their values are mounted on too swift a juggernaut for hit-or-miss countermeasures.... We need to know when we act in managing these resources that what we do is right and sufficient. This requires basic, organized, retrievable information, available in a timely manner to those who must make policy and manage natural and cultural areas and reserves" (Matthews 1981).

Roland "Ro" Wauer, chief of the NPS Division of Resource Management, wrote that very few parks had sufficient natural and cultural resource information to permit identification of incremental changes that may cause threats. He also noted that priorities for resource management baselines had been very low compared with those for construction and maintenance. Ro added, "Very simply stated, preservation of the resource has been unsuccessful in competing for the appropriation dollar" (Wauer 1981).

I wrote that the genetic resources of plants and animals on which humans depend were dwindling rapidly with the destruction of natural areas throughout the world, that an important means of correcting this situation would be to increase the numbers of national parks, reserves, and protected areas and to improve the management of biological resources in these areas. I called attention to two forthcoming conferences on developing US strategies for conserving biodiversity, which my former Division of Natural History had helped to plan (Gilbert 1981).

Bob Linn was more specific about the need for the GWS. He wrote that there was a need for "an instrument of continuing duration, dedicated to the exchange of information within the community of researchers, managers and other professionals, to give continuity to the broad range of topics having to do with cultural and natural park and reserve management. Such a need is from time to time underlined by vacillations and changes in government policies concerning parks and reserves, by budget restrictions and by other vicissitudes that make for broken chains of information" (Linn 1981).[1]

After I retired from NPS in 1980, I was able to go on to manage many other programs, including an environmental training and management project in Africa and a project on "Institutional Strengthening for Biodiversity Conservation" in Indonesia. However, I wish

that the NPS science and technology program could have continued as we had planned. Some important programs were continued. As an example, Bill Gregg was finally appointed as coordinator of the MAB program with the Department of the Interior. He did a fine job developing the program.

As Stanley Cain had predicted, the mission hasn't been utopic. Today the prospects for environmental sustainability are discouraging, but I like to recall what ecologist Raymond Dasmann wrote just as the MAB program was beginning: "In 1971, it is difficult to be hopeful about the prospects for man and the biosphere he now controls. There is always danger that the nations of the world, like the infamous Kilkenny cats of Ireland, will keep clawing, scratching and biting each other until there is nothing left of them but their tails."[2] Then Ray added that ecologist Sir Frank Fraser Darling had summed up the situation as well as anyone could when he addressed the Biosphere Conference: "Ecologists can scarcely afford to be optimists. But an absolute pessimist is a defeatist and that is no good either. We see there need not be complete disaster and if our eyes were open wide enough, world wide, we could do much toward rehabilitation" (Dasmann 1972). However, he added that time was not on our side, and that was forty-five years ago!

I am not as optimistic now, but I think that much toward rehabilitation can be accomplished by helping the GWS achieve its goals of connecting people, places, knowledge, and ideas, and to foster excellence in natural and cultural resource management, research, protection, and interpretation in parks and equivalent reserves. As Ted Sudia believed and advocated, this would help promote domestic tranquility throughout the world.

Endnotes

1. In a fitting tribute to Bob after his death in October 2004, Dave Harmon wrote that Bob had sustained the fledgling GWS in its early years and continued to work daily for it until August 2004, dedicating 24 years of full-time labor to the Society entirely on a volunteer basis.
2. Ray was referring to this limerick:

> There once were two cats of Kilkenny
> Each thought there was one cat too many
> So they fought and they fit
> And they scratched and they bit
> 'Til (excepting their nails and the tips of their tails)
> Instead of two cats there weren't any!

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Vernon C. "Tom" Gilbert, 2228 Island Home Boulevard, Knoxville, TN 37920-2745; vernongilbert@comcast.net