

Growing the Next Generation of Protected Area Leadership: The George Wright Society Student Summits

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The George Wright Society Student Summit: Setting the Stage for the Next Century of Protected Area Management

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Student chapters addressing complex challenges

THE BEGINNING OF THE NEXT CENTURY will largely be defined by the complexity of our challenges. Issues such as climate change demonstrate the interlinkages of our ecological, social, and political systems. Additionally, both social and ecological changes are occurring at an unprecedented rate. We now require all of our intellectual traditions to respond to this complexity and truly demonstrate multidisciplinary problem framing. Fortunately, emerging students of protected area management around the world are taking up that challenge. We are now, more than ever, attuned to system approaches that are inclusive rather than reductive. We recognize the limits of science and the need for civic engagement. We recognize the political nature of the challenges we face and seek ways to better link science with policy. We need interdisciplinary collections of students, scientists, managers, and policymakers to learn from one another and enrich our thinking. Young professionals must move on to populate faculty, management, and leadership roles to ensure that the second century of protected area conservation meets the challenges left by the past.

The George Wright Society (GWS) was founded to bring professionals together to further scientific and other scholarly inquiry related to protected areas. Natural sciences were

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heavily represented in the early days, but the GWS progressed to include cultural and social sciences to the highly interdisciplinary organization. Throughout the GWS's nearly 40-year history, agency scientists, practitioners, and academics have been sharing their thoughts and findings through *The George Wright Forum* and biennial conferences. Although the GWS has a loyal following, many professionals are starting to move on to different stages of their lives, including retirement. This illustrates a clear need to engage the future generation of protected area practitioners and researchers.

The GWS has a rich history of student involvement in the publication of articles for the *Forum* and in attending the biennial conference. However, there has not been, until recently, a formal mechanism for more meaningful engagement in the GWS. Out of this void came programs such as Park Break, which gives students an opportunity to spend a week in a national park helping managers address challenges. Since 2008 this program has provided opportunities to create professional and personal relationships between students and experts in the field. Given the success of the program the GWS has continued to explore ways to engage young professionals. Thus, the GWS began pursuing the idea of developing student chapters on college campuses. By formally providing more engagement opportunities in the GWS, students will come to see and support the organization's mission and become lifelong advocates for parks and protected areas.

Although student chapters began to develop and operate at their respective universities, there was a lack of communication among them. The initial student chapters, through no prompting from the GWS, developed the concept of a Student Summit, to discuss the future of parks and protected areas exclusively from student perspectives. The idea was to have the summit take place biennially, alternating with GWS conferences. The hope was to bring student chapter members together to discuss the management and conservation of important natural, cultural, and historical resources. It would give the chapters the opportunity to meet and build networks while considering some of the larger issues in the field.

This initial summit, held in the summer of 2016 and discussed in detail below, was conceived, developed, and implemented by students at six universities and included natural and social science disciplines. The diversity of backgrounds helped students engage in meaningful dialogue on critical issues that incorporated a variety of perspectives. The relationships among students and professors at the summit has stimulated further conversation and collaboration among the universities and will likely attract additional universities in subsequent years. Through efforts like this, the GWS, parks, and protected areas will remain viable into the future through the leadership of the next generation of conservation professionals.

Symbolic venue

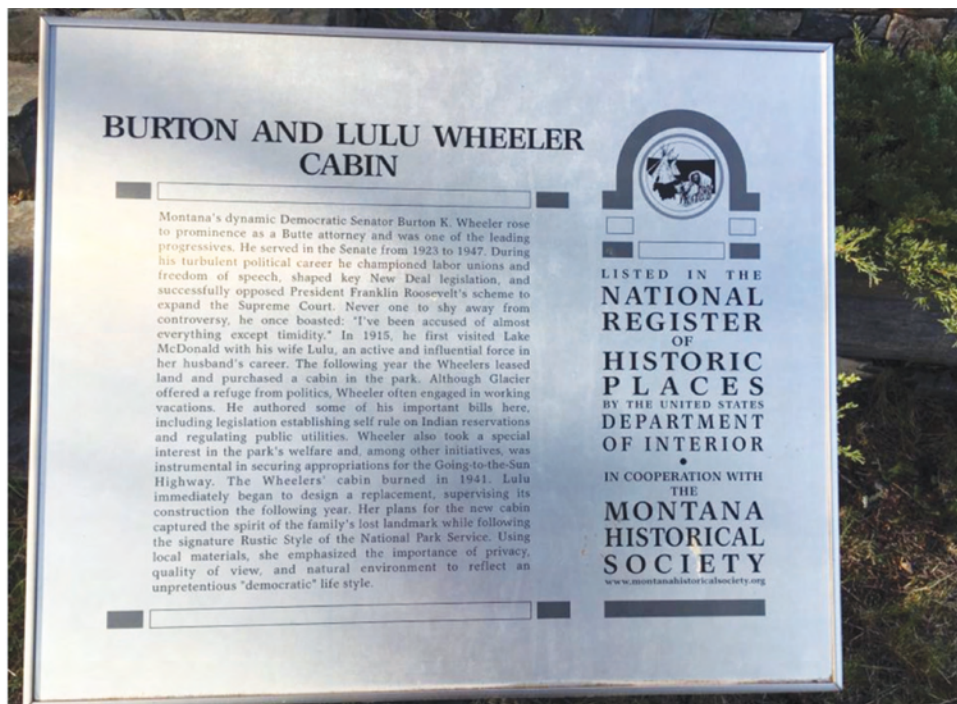
The first summit was held at the historic Wheeler property along the shores of Lake McDonald in Glacier National Park, USA (Figure 1). This property was the family home of former Montana Senator Burton Wheeler for much of the past century. When its lease concluded in 2013, it reverted back to the park. The property serves as a metaphor for the current state of protected area management in several ways. First, it is on the National Register of Historic Places and tells a profoundly important story about our past. It is also located in an inspi-

rational setting that allows the power of Glacier National Park to draw participants into the rhythms of nature. Finally, its next chapter is being developed through a partnership between Glacier National Park, the University of Montana, the Glacier Institute, the Glacier National Park Conservancy, and the Montana Preservation Alliance. The synergy of these institutions creates more strength than any one could achieve on its own. They are working to develop a vision that will feature transboundary management, peace, education, and demonstrations of the successes and failures in our science and management. The summit was the first formal meeting to be held through this new partnership. The legacy established by this group of emerging leaders will set the activity inspired by the Wheelers on a trajectory every bit as exciting as the careers of these vital professionals.

Emerging themes and structure for the summit

Conversations about the Student Summit started during the GWS conference in 2015. As the idea became a reality, student chapters organized and met separately to develop themes. These themes were developed to address deep, underlying challenges instead of specific topics (e.g., carrying capacity, invasive species, transboundary wildlife issues, etc.). The themes from the different chapters were pooled and voted on by members. The following five themes were the focus of the summit.

Figure 1. Montana Historical Society plaque describing the historic Wheeler Cabin in Glacier National Park, site of the GWS Student Summit. Photo courtesy of the participants.



Unbounding parks. Protected area management largely recognizes that parks affect and are affected by things outside of their boundaries. This theme is centered on what it means to work beyond the borders of parks. These boundaries are both real and imagined, and include topics such as private/public partnerships, gateway communities, migratory corridors, shifting species ranges, invasive species, and other transboundary resource issues. How can we protect and manage beyond boundaries? What are the best practices being implemented?

Who are we? Core park values and identities. National parks and the National Park Service (NPS) have always told a story that was centered on core park values and the identity of NPS. As we are seeing changing park visitors and a struggle with the idea of relevancy to groups who do not visit national parks, what is the story that NPS is telling people today? How does the NPS's identity and core park values relate to changing visitor demographics and the idea of relevancy?

Find another park: Visitor use management in our most visited national parks. Dealing with visitor use in national parks has been a salient issue for decades. Some national parks in the US are now seeing record-breaking levels of visitation. At the same time, these parks feel strapped in their ability to deal with so many visitors and their impacts. How do we assess, plan for, manage, and research visitor use in national parks?

Nature gone wild: The struggle to keep national parks as they were. It's an age-old complaint: change. Despite our best efforts to keep the national parks as they were, climate change, invasive species, declining species, and thriving species continue to alter landscapes. How should the National Park Service prepare for these changes and what should future strategies for managing resources be?

Reimagining the National Park Service to be a resilient agency. We live in a time of rapid change. This theme focuses on building organizational capacity in NPS to be an agile and adaptive agency. How can NPS better integrate science into decisionmaking processes? How can NPS build relationships with universities to bring the best knowledge to bear on protected area management? Additionally, we have educational institutions that are preparing future park management and leaders. How do we better integrate these students into NPS? How can our educational institutions better prepare students to take on the challenges of protected area management?

These five themes served as the foundation for all discussions throughout the summit. It was structured into four main workshop sessions that built on each other, moving from the past, through the present, and to the future. The first session focused on where we have been in protected area management, with each group structuring their discussion around their respective theme. Once each group had time to develop main points, we employed a gallery walk that allowed each group to rotate to the other groups' themes and review the points that were written and add additional thoughts. The second session focused on where we are going in protected area management. Each group further expanded its discussion from the previous session to explore the present and future challenges and opportunities within each theme. Instead of a gallery walk, this session culminated in a group discussion, with each small group presenting to the broader group.

The third day of the summit was dedicated to immersion in the park to promote further reflection on the issues discussed while experiencing the park firsthand. After returning, each themed group met for the third session, which focused on bridging the past and present with the future of parks and protected areas. At this point, groups were able to dig deeper into their respective themes and prioritize areas to focus their discussions. The final session concentrated on outlining roles for the papers and discussing next steps within the small groups. We then concluded with a final wrap-up and reflection of where the GWS chapters want to go in the future, including exploring ideas for future summits.

Next generation for the George Wright Society

There were several goals for the first summit, including: (1) *Establishing a George Wright Society student chapter organizational system*, (2) *Understanding different perspectives*, (3) *Developing ways to address challenges*, and (4) *Disseminating summit findings*. The summit met these goals and achieved additional, unexpected, positive outcomes.

The summit provided a great way for students to share different perspectives and engage in meaningful discussion on complex topics. Students' diverse backgrounds, disciplines, and personal and professional experience brought unique insights into the pertinent issues from regions around the country. Small-group, large-group, and informal conversations gave opportunities for different perspectives to be shared and challenged. The summit also provided a forum for different ways of addressing challenges in the next 100 years of the National Park Service and protected area management. The dissemination of findings from the summit is materializing in this issue of the *Forum*. The findings were also shared in a session at the latest GWS conference in April 2017.

The unexpected outcomes of the summit included a connection with Parks Canada. In leading up to the summit, a student reached out to Parks Canada to get more information about its campus clubs. The relationship that developed led to a letter from Parks Canada youth engagement representatives being read to attendees of the summit. Video footage was taken at the summit for a Parks Canada "nature playbook" which was showcased at the 2016 World Conservation Congress. Some of the photos of the summit were also sent via Instagram to the Parks Canada campus clubs. In addition, the GWS student chapters Facebook group was embraced as a platform for communication among chapter members.

Maintaining momentum

The success of future student summits depends on continued enthusiasm, and a focus should be placed on providing organizational capacity and promotion of student chapters. Although originally intended to be held on the off years of the national GWS conference, the success of the inaugural summit, robust student enthusiasm, and support from the GWS may enable the summit to occur every year.

There are several key actions that can ensure the success of the student chapters. The first would be to grow the chapters more widely. One example of this is giving students an opportunity to disseminate their findings in places like the *Forum* and the national GWS conference. This could include a formal session, as well as an informal meeting/social of stu-



Figure 2. Students from across the USA gathered for several days of discussion and critical thinking. Photo courtesy of the summit participants.

dent chapters and other interested individuals, at GWS conferences. For members of student chapters, they can utilize tools such as the GWS student chapters' Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/GWSstudentchapters/>) and other forms of communication to stay connected with and inspired by each other. On a more local level, it is encouraged that student chapters of the GWS reach out to include members who represent the diversity of individuals who are interested in protected area management to help further grow the chapters. Lastly, individuals who want to participate but do not have a student chapter at their university should be provided opportunities to do so.

Keys to a successful summit

Partnerships. The summit was truly a team effort and to ensure sustainability will need to continue to be so. A partnership between GWS and the hosting university is integral to a successful planning process. Collaboration between the hosting university and neighboring protected areas makes it possible to have a summit in a place that enmeshes attendees in the topics being discussed and allows an opportunity for professionals in the field to attend the event. Moreover, it develops relationships between the university and protected areas for future joint efforts. Additional partnerships, such as the one with Parks Canada, are also encouraged. Partnerships with donors can also be explored to ensure the future of the summits.



Figure 3. GWS Vice President Jerry Mitchell in conversation with the students. Photo courtesy of the participants.

Diverse funding. Funding is always a challenge. The GWS provided funding to help cover some of the costs of non-local students traveling to the area. We encourage that any future GWS-provided funds to be used for the same purpose. The sponsoring university provided matching funds to provide cost-free local transportation, food, bedding (sleeping bags/pads), and other necessities. The sponsoring university was also responsible for the logistical planning of the event, as well as coordination with the host of the event. In total, running a summit will likely cost between \$5,000 and \$8,000 for about 25 participants. Scholarships are necessary in order for students to be able to attend the summits. Creating a system for scholarships will allow diverse representation and enthusiastic attendees. Requiring students interested in attending and receiving funding to submit an information sheet about themselves can streamline the process of choosing participants and distributing funds.

Faculty guidance. Faculty guidance and support is necessary to help students organize and find funding. However, the spirit of the summit is for it to be a truly student-driven, student-led event. This approach was integrated into the fabric of the inaugural summit. Nowhere was this more important than in forming themes and leading discussions. This event gives a voice to the future leaders of protected area management to share their own visions, challenges, and worlds. Importantly, this unconstrained expression may help more integrated professionals challenge their own perspectives and the status quo.



Figure 4. The rugged natural setting of Glacier National Park helped inspire creative thinking. Photo courtesy of the participants.

Layered leadership. The formation of a leadership team is integral to the planning and implementation of the summit as well as the transition to a new leadership team for the next one. Leadership involves the GWS graduation student liaison to the Board of Directors, the previous summit organizer, two student representatives from the university planning the summit, and a representative from each university with a GWS student chapter. The leadership team participated in frequent calls leading up to the summit and facilitated dialogue afterward to ensure the outputs were generated and the momentum continued. During the summit, there were additional opportunities for leadership through the individual leaders of each themed sub-group. These leaders helped keep each group on task and coordinated with the other groups. The various layers of leadership supported the seamlessness of the summit and did not put the burden on a single individual or institution.

Clear goals and targeted outcomes. Clearly defined goals and targeted outcomes are important when bringing together groups from around the country that have not previously engaged with each other and are expected to have productive, thought-provoking discussions. The interconnected structure of the summit was critical to linking the goals to the targeted outcomes. Additionally, the communication before and after the summit contributed to the buy-in and accountability of participants to meet the goals and outcomes.

Balance of work and play. When hosting a summit, it is critical to make sure that partic-

ipants have ample opportunities to experience and enjoy the environment. Most participants had never visited Glacier National Park and immersion in the setting contributed to the discussions and personal bonds among participants. Additionally, the bulk of the sessions took place outside to further connect the themes to protected areas. Lastly, shared meals and informal gathering creates an opportunity to invite local protected area professionals to engage with the participants, which can support long-term professional relationships.

Positive attitude, flexibility, and open-mindedness. Arguably the most important factor in a successful summit is the participants' involvement. Despite the thorough planning of the summit, there are always factors out of one's control. A positive and flexible attitude ensures that the group does not let unexpected changes or obstacles stand in the way of a great summit experience. Open-mindedness is also integral to having meaningful and productive discussions with diverse perspectives despite differing lenses on a complex issue.

Implications for the GWS

The GWS will benefit from the exceptional work of the inaugural Student Summit. The event offered an unparalleled opportunity for young professionals to discuss the field in a working protected area setting. The energy and enthusiasm already generated will sustain the GWS for years to come. Even more important is the impact the student chapters and the related summits will have on park and protected areas. Perhaps in 50 years we will look back on this moment and realize the importance that bringing young, intelligent minds together had on the GWS and protected area management.

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