
*Letter from Woodstock*

**Rolf Diamant**

# Point Reyes: A Landscape Indivisible?

I have often thought about writing something on Point Reyes National Seashore but held back. A principal reason was that there never seemed to be a break in a successive chain of legal storms that rolled in over this lovely, beleaguered seashore that might afford an opportunity to step back and do one's sums—assessing what has been gained and lost over decades of conflict and what the future may hold.

Changing circumstances, however, have overcome my reticence. Several years have passed since the National Park Service (NPS) decision not to extend the Drakes Bay Oyster Farm lease was upheld in federal courts, and a settlement was recently announced ending a separate lawsuit that threatened the continuation of more than a century and a half of agriculture at Point Reyes. This settlement has at least temporarily lifted the cloud of litigation that has hung over the 71,000-acre seashore for the past decade or more. These developments coincide with the publication of Laura Watt's comprehensive new book *The Paradox of Preservation: Wilderness and Working Landscapes at Point Reyes National Seashore* (which I shall review in a future *George Wright Forum*) that hopefully will inspire thoughtful dialogue on the seashore's past and future. And lastly, given the theme of this issue of *The George Wright Forum,* it seemed an auspicious time to make a few observations on the indivisible values of Point Reyes National Seashore, and by extension, the larger meaning of national parks today.

Almost 40 years ago I worked on a general management plan for the seashore as a young landscape architect. This was almost a decade before some in NPS began seriously thinking about rural historic districts and cultural landscapes. The plan, however, did sparingly acknowledge Point Reyes' 100-year-old dairy farms and suggested, given public support, that "this use will continue indefinitely."[1] Over time, cultural landscapes began being recognized by NPS as bona fide cultural resources and certainly my own views on their value evolved

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**Figure 1.** Shoreline at Point Reyes National Seashore. (Rolf Diamant)

during my tenure as superintendent of Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site and Marsh–Billings–Rockefeller National Historical Park. At Marsh–Billings–Rockefeller we adopted third-party certification systems for the park's historic managed woodland that promoted and interpreted responsible environmental and social practices on this forested cultural landscape. In 2006, I was asked to help prepare an NPS publication looking at ways small family farms and producers of traditional hand-made crafts can be good stewards of the land, maintaining the character and integrity of national park cultural landscapes.[2] In a chapter about Point Reyes I mentioned several ranchers currently raising grass-fed beef, among them Kevin Lunny, who was also in the process of acquiring and upgrading the Johnson oyster farm in Drakes Estero. Renamed Drakes Bay Oyster Farm, the property would soon become the focus of an escalating controversy that reached all the way back to Washington when NPS decided not to extend the 40-year lease on the property, set to expire in 2012. Instead, NPS moved to fold the 2,500-acre estero (identified as "potential wilderness" by Congress in 1976) into the 30,000-acre Phillip Burton Wilderness Area.

The NPS action triggered a firestorm that was amplified in the media, particularly social media, bitterly dividing the environmental community as wilderness advocates squared off against supporters of sustainable agriculture. The conflict created much heartache for many people who sympathized with both objectives and sought to avoid a "take no prisoners" approach, hoping in vain for compromise. In adjacent rural communities emotions ran high, often estranging neighbors with opposing views from one another.

As the struggle over the lease renewal became increasingly bitter and personal on both sides, several NPS colleagues complained to me that our publication had included a photo of Lunny alongside rancher Dave Evans. I believed then as I believe today that demonizing people on an opposing side of a high-profile debate carries long-term costs, inevitably generating

the kind of intense polarization and animosity that we see far too much of in this country today. The credibility of the National Park Service is only strengthened when national parks appear unbiased, do not defensively recoil from complexity and ambiguity, and always treat everyone, even people who challenge NPS decisions, with respect.

When Secretary of Interior Ken Salazar denied the lease renewal for the oyster farm in 2012, he extended an olive branch to the park's long-established ranching community, which was increasingly worried about its future. Salazar recognized the deep historical roots of the dairy and cattle ranches at Point Reyes and sought to re-assure this community that NPS would work with them. In particular, the secretary pledged a new NPS ranch management plan aimed at extending the term of farm leases for up to 20 years (some ranches had been operating on year-to-year permit extensions). Such a step would greatly enhance economic security and viability for the 24 ranching families remaining in the park's pastoral zone. This 18,000-acre pastoral zone (20% of the seashore)—the heart of a dairy farming landscape at Point Reyes dating back to the 1860s—was identified in the park's enabling legislation. It was anticipated that the ranch management plan would further cooperation between ranchers and NPS and encourage farming practices that improve the land and better protect park resources. The plan would also promote greater sustainability, including organic certification and energy efficiency.

However, just as the last remnants of the oyster farm were being hauled away from Drakes Estero and that controversy appeared to be winding down, the promised NPS ranching management plan and new leasing arrangements were stopped in their tracks by a lawsuit, filed in February 2017, by a trio of environmental nonprofits—the Center for Biological Diversity, the Resource Renewal Institute, and the Western Watershed Project. These organizations sued to block the ranch plan and implementation of longer-term leases, arguing for a more thorough park-wide assessment of the impact of grazing on water quality, wildlife habitat, and public recreational access. Though the plaintiffs stated that they were only seeking greater environmental review of ranching activities, some people have questioned whether the ultimate goal is really to end agriculture at Point Reyes.

In July, an agreement was reached between the three environmental groups, NPS, and local ranchers that halted the litigation, and appeared to offer something for everyone. The parties agreed that the park would continue to renew ranch leases for five-year terms. The seashore would also, in lieu of the ranching plan, complete an amendment to its 1980 general management plan (GMP). According to NPS, the GMP amendment would still consider management actions brought up in the suspended ranch plan such as "agricultural diversification, increased operational flexibility, the promotion of sustainable operational practices, and succession planning." However, it was agreed that the GMP amendment would, in addition, consider planning alternatives that might scale back or even end agriculture at Point Reyes. NPS was given four years to complete this new plan.

As the clock is once again reset at Point Reyes, I will use this 17th Letter from Woodstock to offer a few observations of my own.

The early groundwork done for the ranch management planning appeared promising. As the new GMP amendment planning process is launched at Point Reyes, I sincerely hope

NPS will follow through on the pledge made by Point Reyes Superintendent Cicely Muldoon when that earlier ranch plan was launched—to have the park and ranchers work together to "strengthen our shared stewardship of these lands."[3]

There is now an opportunity to create what has always been missing at Point Reyes (and which was notably absent in our 1980 GMP)—a more intentional and mutually beneficial working partnership between NPS and the ranch community. To see how such reciprocity can work, it is instructive to take a closer look at the successful Countryside Initiative leasing program at Cuyahoga Valley National Park. Of course, Point Reyes, in coastal California, and the Cuyahoga Valley, in the heartland of Ohio, are different in many respects, but there is still much to be learned from the latter's initiative, started in 1999, that has revitalized their historic farming community. In particular, attention should be given to Cuyahoga's experience with 60-year farm leases, encouraging organic "environmentally friendly" farming practices, farmers' markets, and cooperative educational and visitor programing.

I believe NPS can use the GMP amendment planning process to encourage a much-needed dialogue on the indivisible web of natural and cultural attributes and values found at Point Reyes. Without a stake in pending litigation, NPS is free to host a long-overdue dialogue that can broaden the frame of reference and vocabulary of various interested parties. Such a conversation would focus attention on the complete assemblage of seashore resources—including the value of a peopled cultural landscape with a ranch community that represents a living, tangible connection to Point Reyes history. Referring to the work of this community as generic "commercial cattle ranching"[4] misses this cultural/historic connection by a mile and overlooks the fact that the seashore's iconic pastoral scenery is still maintained by grazing.

**Figure 2.** Goat herd, Cuyahoga Valley National Park. (National Park Service)

The challenge facing Point Reyes, as with so many other national parks, is when nature and culture, in effect, overlap each other and constantly interact in both useful and sometimes problematic ways. As Watt points out in her new book:

> The continuing presence of cattle ranches on Point Reyes' rolling grasslands offers a vision of how working landscapes—places characterized by 'an intricate combination of cultivation and natural habitat,' maintaining a balance of human uses and natural forces—should be recognized as part of both natural and cultural heritages worth protecting.... Point Reyes offers the suggestive possibility of protecting all types of heritage resources together, as a landscape whole, rather than separately.[5]

What makes Point Reyes so unusual is its fascinating variety and complexity. There are beaches, grasslands, lighthouse facilities, tide pools, working ranches, early maritime radio structures, archaeological sites, streams and wetlands, scenic roads and trails, and an extraordinary variety of animals and plants. The elusive prize is to connect experiences that have too often been separated and compartmentalized in people's minds and, as Watt says, recognize "that the wild and the pastoral can not only coexist but also strengthen each other."[6] The seashore can continue to provide a wide range of recreational, educational, and wilderness experiences for the body and mind, as well as an opportunity to see how our food can be grown in an environmentally and socially responsible manner that conserves natural and cultural heritage. Point Reyes can become a powerful example of what a more sustainable future might look like someday beyond the boundaries of a national park.

**Figure 3.** A mosaic of habitat at Point Reyes: in the foreground, quail use a boardwalk through a wetland; in the background, pasture. (Rolf Diamant)

There are legitimate concerns about the state of farming at Point Reyes. On a recent spring visit to the seashore I was troubled by the appearance of some of the ranches where I saw evidence of long-deferred maintenance. Longer-term leases from NPS would certainly help with securing loans and other funding needed to upgrade ranch facilities and overall management practices. The irony is not likely lost on many people, particularly the ranchers themselves, that postponing a decision on issuing more economically viable 20-year leases—for a minimum of another four years while the plan is completed—will probably only exacerbate existing challenges they face. In any case, there is an opportunity with the GMP amendment—as before with the interrupted ranch management plan—to take a fresh look at ways to establish a more proactive, cooperative, and mutually beneficial relationship between ranching families and the seashore.

I have a few suggestions for staffing the GMP amendment planning team. I would strongly recommend against a "business as usual" approach for pulling together a team. This recent agreement, for better or for worse, has given NPS yet another opportunity to finally get it right at Point Reyes when there still may be just enough residual public trust and good will to transcend a growing polarization that can all too easily propel a bitterly contested plan into the hands of Congress or the courts to resolve. I would suggest to NPS to treat this planning process like a major fire or hurricane—all hands on deck—like John Cook's mobilization of the NPS Alaska Task Force in the 1970s. NPS should be drafting its best and brightest from across the service for this effort. It is vital that seashore personal who know the park and community the best give this process their all, even if NPS may have to backfill some of their regular duties. In particular, spend time looking at the example of Cuyahoga Valley and,

**Figure 4.** Historic ranch, Point Reyes National Seashore. (Rolf Diamant)

if possible, recruit someone from the Marin Agricultural Land Trust, or a similar organization knowledgeable about sustainable agriculture and partnerships, to help. And last but not least, there needs to be someone on the team experienced in the stewardship of park cultural landscapes.

Historian Dwight Pitcaithley reminds us that "the National Park System today is vastly different from the one envisioned and managed by Stephen T. Mather and Horace M. Albright…. The complexity of issues confronted by park and program managers today could not have been envisioned by the first generation of Park Service administrators." Point Reyes National Seashore has always presented NPS with an unusual opportunity to expand the concept of what a national park can be. Deborah Moskowitz, president of the Resource Renewal Institute, commenting on the July agreement, recalled the contributions of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who, in her words, "vastly expanded the national parks system as a way to create jobs and convey hope during the hardships of the Great Depression."[7] Roosevelt envisioned national parks providing spectacular scenery but also meaningful work, ecological diversity, history, craftsmanship, and recreational opportunities. Later on, wilderness was added to this growing mosaic of park values. Today, in our continuously changing, climate-challenged world, parks also provide opportunities for real-world learning, cultural continuity, and lessons about social justice, resilience, and more sustainable ways to live and work. Much of Point Reyes is a landscape that can be meaningful to people on so many different levels—indivisible now—hopefully indivisible for a long time to come.

## Endnotes

1. National Park Service, *Point Reyes General Management Plan* (Denver: NPS Denver Service Center, 1980), p. 12. Online at https://www.nps.gov/pore/learn/management/upload/planning_gmp_1980.pdf.
2. National Park Service Stewardship Institute, *Stewardship Begins with People: An Atlas of Places, People, and Handmade Products* (Woodstock, VT: National Park Service Stewardship Institute, 2007).
3. "Point Reyes National Seashore Initiates Ranch Planning," NPS press release, April 21, 2014, online at https://www.nps.gov/pore/learn/news/newsreleases_20140421_ranch_cmp_scoping.htm.
4. Jeff Miller, Center for Biological Diversity, quoted in Tara Duggin, "Ranchers Allowed 5-Year Extension to Graze Cattle in Point Reyes National Seashore," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 13, 2017.
5. Laura A. Watt, *The Paradox of Preservation: Wilderness and Working Landscapes at Point Reyes National Seashore* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), p. 4.
6. Ibid., p. 232.
7. Deborah Moskowitz, Resource Renewal Institute, "Marin Voice: Point Reyes Legal Settlement a Victory for National Parks Everywhere," *Marin Independent Journal*, July 15, 2017.