

Reflections on the Nature–Culture Journey

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The human race is challenged more than ever before to demonstrate our mastery, not over nature but of ourselves. — *Rachel Carson*

JUST WEEKS AFTER I BEGAN WORK AS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF US/ICOMOS, the US National Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites, the Nature–Culture Journey kicked off in September 2016 at the World Conservation Congress (WCC) in Honolulu. A joint initiative of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and ICOMOS, US/ICOMOS was a major contributor to the Journey. I was a late registrant to the 10,000-person WCC, which is a global-in-scope, quadrennial convening of the world’s conservation community. I attended because of the significant role US/ICOMOS played in planning and execution of the Nature–Culture Journey, a thematic, 50-session mini-conference within a much larger international conference.

As of this writing I am a “youthful” baby boomer, a product of the 1960s, questioning everything. I knew before I finished high school that I wanted to work to identify, protect, and maintain the best of what surrounds us to make sure that life in our shared communities only got better. My bookshelves still hold the texts of my undergraduate schooling. Rachel Carson, Jane Jacobs, Charles Reich, Aldo Leopold, Theodore Roszak, and Carlos Castaneda are as fresh and tangibly accessible to me in their non-digital pages as in my iPhone. They helped shape my life and professional choices. And in my life and work I have confronted and attempted to address the challenges presented by the nature/culture divide in many different, often subtle ways, as many of us on the front lines have.

In my work, the premier example of this is heritage areas. Although just a handful of US states have statewide heritage area programs, there are 49 national heritage areas created by Congress and served by the National Park Service. Heritage areas provide an exceptional, not-fully-appreciated framework for recognizing, protecting, and investing in natural and cultural resources in large landscapes of outstanding value that we live in, and hope to live in in the future. The Maryland Heritage Area Program, which I helped establish and now 21 years old, may be the most rigorous and financially generous of all of the programs, requiring not

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only the completion of a detailed management plan for recognition, protection, investment in, and sustainability of natural and cultural resources, but the formal adoption of that plan by all of the governing bodies encompassed by the designated area as part of their own master development plans (Figure 1).

In both my professional and volunteer life, I came to recognize that to effectively manage growth and change in human communities and steward cultural and natural heritage requires both an inside game and an outside game. I became a founding board member of my state's 1000 Friends group, which advocates at all levels for a more environmentally and economically sustainable future that creates opportunities for all citizens through better development patterns. And I increasingly believe it is our personal lifestyle choices—the most basic demonstration of our mastery over ourselves, which Carson observed—which is the most important. Joel Kotkin, David Rusk, Alvin Toffler, Richard Florida, and others now live happily on my bookshelves along with Rachel Carson.

Experiencing the Nature–Culture Journey and participating in the many sessions dedicated to it at the WCC helped me learn even more. If we are lucky, this happens to us—especially if it informs and influences an area of our lives about which we are passionate and in which we are fortunate to work—and we can continue to see better every day. The Journey was launched as a response to the growing recognition that the construction of a nature/culture divide in the way we—especially those of us on the front lines—steward the earth's cherished resources is a symptom of larger processes that have put us on an unsustainable path. Workshops on “People-Centered Approaches to Conservation of Natural and Cultural Heritage” and “Integrating Indigenous Values and Perspectives into Conservation” and “Constructing Resilience: The Nature and Culture of Food Cultivation in the Landscape and Seascape” are just a small sample of the smorgasbord of Journey offerings that brought together professionals from a wide range of cultural and natural disciplines.

One prominent program that reflects the nature/culture divide is World Heritage. The 1972 World Heritage Convention recognized the value of both cultural and natural heritage

Figure 1. The Baltimore National Heritage Area takes on the nature/culture divide head-on with its Kids in Kayaks program in Baltimore Harbor. The inseparability of natural and cultural heritage resources is central to these people-centered programs, which touch thousands of largely minority children each year. (James Chang/National Park Service, Chesapeake Bay Office)



and established a process to inscribe those properties of Outstanding Universal Value on a list of World Heritage Sites. That list (initiated in 1978 with 12 listings, including Mesa Verde and Yellowstone national parks) in 2017 was still characterized by definitions, constructs, and processes that place the 1,073 World Heritage sites overwhelmingly in two buckets, “Cultural” (832 sites) or “Natural” (206 sites). It goes without saying that if Mesa Verde (Cultural) and Yellowstone (Natural) were being nominated and listed today, there would be considerable consternation in selecting one or the other bucket.

Since 1979, just 35, or 3.26%, of the World Heritage sites have been recognized as mixed sites, properties that are significant for both natural and cultural outstanding universal value. Papāhānaumokuākea in Hawai‘i was added to the World Heritage List in 2010 and is the only US mixed site. WCC conferees were fortunate to be in Hawai‘i to bask in the afterglow of President Obama’s quadrupling, a week earlier, of the area of the Papāhānaumokuākea Marine National Monument under the Antiquities Act. Papāhānaumokuākea is the largest marine protected area in the world and a spiritual and cultural landscape, and its expansion was one magnificent way to celebrate the first-ever US convening of the WCC. For the “true believers” in the Nature–Culture Journey, the stars were aligned as never before to see and understand the world anew and dissolve the nature/culture divide.

Perhaps the most significant outcome of the Nature–Culture Journey is the *Mālama Honua—To Care for Our Island Earth*. This statement of commitments was developed by Journey participants in Honolulu, and signed by many at the closing event of the Journey and in a follow up event at the 2017 George Wright Society conference in Norfolk, Virginia. It is an inspired start. It pledges those who have signed on, among other things, to recognize that cultural and natural diversity and heritage are seriously threatened around the world by challenges including climate change and that integrated nature–culture approaches improve conservation outcomes, foster cultural diversity, and support human well-being.

I eagerly anticipate the upcoming Culture–Nature Journey, at the ICOMOS General Assembly in New Delhi in December, where many discussions initiated in Hawai‘i will contin-

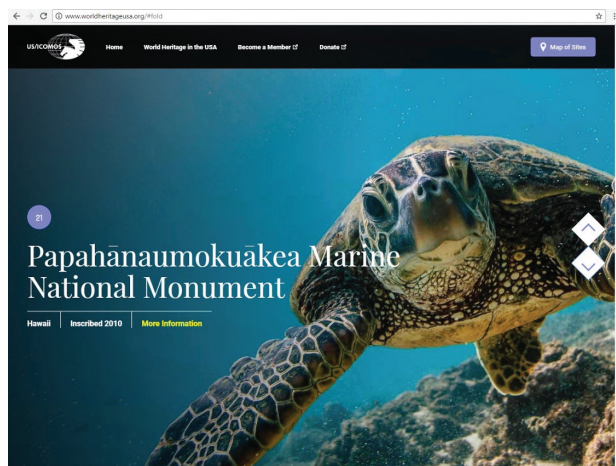


Figure 2. A screenshot from www.worldheritageusa.org, the new microsite of US/ICOMOS dedicated to the designated and tentative-listed natural and cultural World Heritage Sites in the US. Papahānaumokuākea is the largest marine protected area in the world and a spiritual and cultural landscape, and was added to the World Heritage List in 2010, the only US mixed site. (Brenda Barrett)

ue. I look forward to conversations with colleagues who, since the Nature–Culture Journey in Hawai‘i, have also been thinking about what specific areas of improvement can be made in our ways of thinking. During this Journey, I hope we will make substantial progress on the maturation of essential perspectives and components of conservation that consider both natural and cultural values. I will join our global community of front-liners to explore ways to bridge the nature/culture divide in our work, so key to the sustainability of life on the planet.

The *Mālama Honua* contains great, spirit-lifting prose. If it feels so right intellectually and emotionally, so obvious to you, that you are not alone. That is, in part, because in decades of natural and cultural heritage conservation work at the local, state and regional level we *have* begun to crack the code by discovering and implementing many good practices that break down the nature/culture divide that are eminently scalable and adaptable worldwide. It is some of this past work as well as some new revelations shared in Honolulu that I and others will explore in Delhi.

In conclusion, all of us have great additional examples from our work and experience around the world that can be brought to the dialogue at Culture–Nature Journey and in the months and years ahead. But there are a few types of activity that hold special interest for me as we move forward. Most are tethered to the need to demonstrate mastery over ourselves as individuals as well as the organizations we represent:

- **Move across the culture/nature divide and put people at the center.** In inventorying, identifying, and implementing best practices, we should look broadly at the many successes in the cultural *and* natural heritage conservation realm. I have met too many cultural heritage professionals, especially and not surprisingly those involved with regulatory programs, whose work placed site or object preservation at the center as an end goal rather than the people and communities whose lives should be demonstrably enriched by that work. And I have met too many natural heritage professionals, especially and not surprisingly those whose work involved land acquisition, who would limit energies to the more “natural” or “unspoiled” site or resource, undervaluing natural resources that may have greater intrinsic community connections (e.g., past industrial or resource management activity; closer proximity to population centers; etc.). At a time when humans are looking for “One Square Inch of Silence,” and confronting a ton of plastic garbage for every person on earth, continuous striving for nature/culture solutions is the very least we can do for ourselves. *Mālama Honua* is a starting point. We likely will need new vocabulary, new prescriptive principles, and new performance measures, but these are exciting challenges.
- **Embrace the old and the new.** *Mālama Honua* recognizes that we need to celebrate the inherent value of indigenous and local knowledge. Science is increasingly verifying for place after place the wisdom of the elders and how we would be wise to pay attention. In multiple sessions at the Nature–Culture Journey and GWS2017 conference, this became abundantly clear. Nevertheless, we must continue to stretch the limits of the new. For example, the advantages of using modern technologies to crowd-source nature/culture conservation solutions has been highlighted by US/ICOMOS in *With a World*

of Heritage So Rich: Lessons from Across the Globe for US Historic Preservation in its Second 50 Years. And we need more of our colleges and universities to provide graduate degrees in heritage conservation that incorporate natural and cultural subjects and studies, resulting in trained heritage professionals for whom the disciplines are merged.

- **Walk the walk.** Remember the inspired enthusiasm that got you into this line of work in the first place, but clear any remaining scales from your eyes. Know that as a front-liner you are doing the essential work of stewarding the planet every day and take responsibility in your personal life to reflect *Mālama Honua*. Regularly evaluate how you are mastering yourself.

We live on a small, amazing, fragile, resilient planet. US/ICOMOS is committed to continuing the Culture–Nature Journey, in partnership with ICOMOS, other national committees of ICOMOS, IUCN, and other organizations to advance this important work. The challenges are great but the potential rewards of the Journey are much greater.

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