

A Road to Better Futures: Thoughts from an International Perspective

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[Ed. note: The author has chosen to craft his contribution to the *Forum* in the form of an interview.]

First, on a general level, what sources and techniques have you found to be effective in developing resiliency in the face of adversity, especially during periods when the political tides have flowed against conservation ideals?

I HAVE ALWAYS BELIEVED FIRMLY that conservation loses (and then everyone loses) if we ever get painted into anyone's partisan agenda. People support our work from all points of the political compass, and we have to focus on delivering quality on the ground, and quality and creativity in our communication and outreach. I am pretty sure that my US friends and colleagues include people who come from different viewpoints, and I am glad about that.

We need, for sure, to communicate clearly when things are not working, and speak the truth without fear about the realities for the natural world of our over-consumption, and the results, threats, and prospects for the places we love. This includes, in the face of climate change, loss of species and cultural heritage, and our fundamental need for functioning ecosystems and landscapes. But advocacy needs to be to audiences of all political colours, and about bringing people together around a common cause.

And for those of us who work in protected areas—parks, preserves, and cultural landscapes—we have the great privilege to be able to serve as stewards of places that are foun-

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datations of inspiration and our most obvious places of hope. Places where we can see, feel, and understand nature, our own human history, and how change needs to be guided and managed in real places, and with the people who care about and rely on them. This is also a long-term job, so keeping a perspective on history, and that there is a world in 5, 10, 50 and 100 years to think about, is another good way to keep any short-term struggles at bay.

For practical sources of support in times of adversity, I think three are crucial: first, having people you love and put your trust in—your family and friends—sharing your concerns and supporting you, especially to keep work in perspective, is a must. Keep time for you and yours, and exercise (note to self...), eat healthily, and make sure you get enough sleep. Overworking and losing the balance of work and life will reinforce any difficulty you are facing. Second are your colleagues, and especially your trusted mentors, who may be in many different parts of your work environment. What mattered most to me in a situation where I was not coping was the ability to stop a senior and trusted colleague, tell that person I was out of my depth and needed help, and talk through the situation. So be conscious who you have to support you professionally, and thank them for it. Thirdly, stay rooted in contact with the place you are managing and the people who care about it—take the time to stop and look around, breathe the air, and speak to your visitors and your communities. We have the privilege to do a job that is about positive things ... great places that people love.

My political working world is not the US, but part of the work I do is to advise UNESCO [the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization] on the suitability of potential new sites for the World Heritage list—and it is a well-known reality that the committee in charge of these decisions sometimes approves sites that don't fully meet the standards the World Heritage Convention is here to uphold. This can be frustrating, but in my view the challenge when things don't go the way you hope is not to gather round with the people you agree with, but reach out to the people with whom you do not—not to harangue them, but first to talk and try to understand where they are coming from, and see what the options are to move forward together. A road to better futures relies on dialogue.

If you were advising young professionals in the parks, protected areas, and cultural sites field, what positive steps would you suggest they take as they approach the challenging time in which we find ourselves now?

I am not working the US, but also guess I see the question a bit differently, in the sense that I think embracing the views of young professionals is a crucial part of finding solutions to changing circumstances. I teach a few courses, and have recruited a team who have mostly started work as young professionals—and luckily most have stayed to carry on their career with us for a number of years. We also run a trainee programme with a Japanese university. My sense is that the world of work has already changed, and younger professionals have great flexibility, creativity, and resilience in the face of change ... and in general a combination of optimism and appetite to move forward ideas that is crucial to delivering results. So part of my answer is to encourage anyone managing protected areas to make sure you have space for young professional and trainee posts, and give them space to learn and lead.

Part of the mission we need to be embracing is about how to connect our work in conserved sites decisively to people ... getting outside of park boundaries to find out what our communities want, showing we are accountable and at their service, and inviting feedback and a share in the decisions about the park. Reaching out to diverse communities, and aligning our work to the aspirations and rights of First Nations, are one crucial part of the future. My guess is that we'll find the skills for this communication, outreach, and networking in the younger professionals who are the future of the conservation community, and who have the ability to reach out via social media and networking that can get us connected to our stakeholders (and also get the professional community better connected too).

Beyond that I think in any situation of adversity, we all have to keep optimistic and positive ... see my earlier comment on avoiding seeing work in conservation as part of any partisan agenda. I am convinced that what will win out is doing a good job on the ground, with local communities, and I guess as the wheel turns we'll see more actors in the voluntary and private sectors, and outside of national governments, stepping into any breaches.

My career before IUCN was in the United Kingdom, and conservation there was frequently delivered by partnerships through county governments, with a blend of finance coming from national, local, public, voluntary, and private sources. So I hope that any feeling of challenge to the conservation sector will prompt us to be resourceful in thinking about creative solutions.

For younger professionals, I would just add one golden rule for anyone looking to start out in work, which is to always apply to work on a mission that you are committed to. Be choosy and apply for roles where you are motivated. Nothing stops me reading an application for a job faster than the sense you are reading something that has been written to tens of other jobs. So research the opportunity you are applying for, and always take the time to show why *this* job, *this* opportunity fits with your motivation and skills.

On the specific level of your interactions with GWS, what has that relationship meant to you, giving particular attention to how the Society has helped inform or inspire you to meet challenges you have faced in your career? And what can GWS do better, going forward?

I think I've been to four GWS meetings during my time in IUCN (Oregon, Denver, Oakland, and Norfolk)—it's always been a tonic to be amongst the positive-minded community of conservationists that GWS bring together, and to witness the quality of the work being done across North America. The US National Park Service was what first inspired me to work in nature conservation, and US leadership was at the heart of the idea of the World Heritage Convention, the focus of the last 20 years of my career ... on the ground, and now internationally. And over the last decade in IUCN, I've been able to see the leading work that goes on in Mexico, and in Canada. So fundamentally I go to GWS to hear what the latest ideas and practice look like across North America.

GWS has also given me, just once, a sense of what dysfunction looks like in the US when a government finance shutdown in 2013 wiped, I guess, 50% of the participants off the list, as federal staff were not permitted to travel. It was a big gap, though had the positive result

to bring to the fore the non-governmental and Indigenous and local communities constituency that are part of the parks movement, and to give more space to celebrate Mexican and Canadian parks. And GWS seemed to dust itself down and emerge stronger from that tough experience.

I regularly draw on work and connections I've seen at George Wright, and the great work on climate adaptation is currently a stand-out area of focus. George Wright has also been a meeting place that has been crucial to building the network we currently have focused on how to manage places to connect the conservation of nature and culture heritage, and to deliver more results for local communities—and I am sure that will continue to be the case. The Society's focus on supporting young professionals is also an inspirational model, and I am also always impressed at the efforts that go to reaching out to diverse voices to have space to speak.

On what to do better, as I always say at GWS meetings, it seems regrettably difficult to hear about work being done on parks in the US, in particular, unless you go to the US—and that is one of the main reasons I go to GWS. There is so much leading practice on show (and occasionally some things that the rest of the world learned didn't work too). I'd love to see many more US professionals “getting out more” to international meetings, and supporting international work. So if there was one wish from me for the Society to do more, it would be to look to the ways to help get members opportunities to support international programmes, and showcase their work at international meetings. We'd be very happy to work together on that—the next IUCN World Conservation Congress will be in Marseille, France, from 11–19 June 2020, so that's a date to target for an international step forward!