

# North American Protected Areas Conference: A Proposal

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## **Investing in the future of place-based conservation**

CONFERENCES THAT BRING TOGETHER protected area professionals and Indigenous and non-Indigenous practitioners are essential conservation investments. The training, experiences, and information shared at these meetings are indispensable to meeting society's expectations for the protection of natural and cultural heritage. With such collaborative knowledge, the managers, researchers, educators, citizens, and others who are the guardians of these special places are enabled to work smarter, more collaboratively, and with greater relevance to the communities they serve—benefiting local communities, the public and the planet as a whole.

Having such meetings at a mix of different scales is important. Local and regional conferences help attendees focus crisply on problems in detail. But periodic meetings that bring together an international roster of participants, charged with looking at issues from a continental and worldwide point of view, are the prime way individual members of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous protected area conservation community come to understand their work in a global context. Coming together has always been important, but never more so than today, when the entire planetary system faces unprecedented change—change that is already challenging our most basic assumptions about what it means to do good place-based conservation.

## **The North American Protected Areas Conference: Focused on results**

It is with these considerations in mind that we are proposing the first-ever North American Protected Areas Conference (NAPAC). We aim to convene key members of the protected area

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community representing Canada, Mexico, USA, and Indigenous Peoples from throughout North America for a week of critical reflection and knowledge-sharing about the state of protected area conservation in North America; discussion of trends in the health of parks, other protected natural areas, and cultural heritage sites; and co-creation of ideas that people can use going forward to meet the challenges that are defining the 21st century.

In the context of NAPAC, we are looking to include all forms of place-based conservation and related activities, undertaken by anyone, including community-conserved areas, areas undergoing ecological and biocultural restoration, sacred natural and cultural sites, private protection efforts (including places with conservation easements), land-rights defense efforts, experiments in resiliency and adaptation in the face of climate change, and so on.

The conference will be results-driven, designed to deliver value and tangible returns on investment through a set of products that will be disseminated throughout the North American Indigenous and non-Indigenous protected area community and the general public. It will build upon the results from smaller conferences of narrower disciplines or geographic scope, as well as larger international conferences.

### **NAPAC would fill a long-standing gap**

Our colleagues from other parts of the world know that professional conferences on conservation topics can galvanize diverse constituencies; produce recommendations and resolutions to promote improved law, policy and programs; and improve effectiveness and efficiency of conservation efforts. They forge and strengthen alliances of conservation agencies and diverse partners from academia, Indigenous governments and community groups, user groups, other types and levels of government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the business and philanthropic communities. They build capacity of institutions and individuals involved in conservation programs. While narrowly focused training sessions are vital foundations for developing individual skills, much learning takes place through experience and social interactions with others such as is done through professional conferences. The consensus is that such meetings provide a valuable interchange between government employees, NGOs, First Nations, Indigenous and rural communities in general, privately protected areas, and the private sector. It's been found that other technologies such as teleconferencing and video conferencing are no substitute for face-to-face dialogue.

For all these reasons, multinational, continental-scale, and global protected area congresses are regularly held in other regions, such as Asia, Mesoamerica, and Europe. Latin America is hosting the third Latin America and Caribbean protected area congress in Peru in March 2019. African and Asian protected area conferences will also be held in 2019. However, there has never been a North American-wide conference comparable to these, even though our region has long been looked to for leadership in protected area conservation. The NAPAC will fill this long-standing gap.

A NAPAC would not be an annual meeting, but rather something done every 4–10 years. It would not be intended to replace or compete with existing conferences, but instead would involve the leadership and audiences of existing national congresses so that their memberships, and their venues, could feed into this larger mission and new niche.

## What's going on already?

National protected area congresses are already held in nations throughout much of the Western Hemisphere, such as in Mexico, Brazil, Chile, and Canada. These meetings and congresses feed into and draw from the once-a-decade World Parks Congress convened by IUCN [International Union for Conservation of Nature], first held in the USA in 1962 and 1972 and last held in Sydney, Australia in 2014. (See <https://www.iucn.org/theme/protected-areas/about/promise-sydney>.) In some cases, they are planned in conjunction with other conservation congresses, to add value and create economies of scale. For example, in July 2018 Brazil's private protected areas congress and the national overall protected area congress were held back-to-back in Florianopolis.

Since 2015, a number of Canadian park and protected organizations at all levels of government and with multiple other partners have collaborated on national conference development, delivering a 2016 Canadian Parks Summit and 2017 pan-Canadian parks conference. Planning for a 2019 Canadian Parks Conference is just starting to get underway. The host agency (Sépaq) has already booked the dates and location (Quebec City, October 7–10). This would need to be considered when planning the scope and date of the NAPAC. Ideally, one or several convening organizations could hold their own conferences before or after the NAPAC, reducing costs and maximizing participation.

Several organizations in North America, such as the Canadian Parks Council, the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association, the George Wright Society, the Natural Areas Association, the Land Trust Alliance, American Trails, the National Association for Interpretation, the Society for Conservation Biology, the American Cultural Resources Association, and the National Association of State Park Directors (USA) hold professional conferences focusing on distinct aspects of park and protected area management. Mexico's National Science Council (CONACYT) through its network on protected area management has likewise organized protected area congresses in Mexico in 2016 and 2018. Mexico also participates in a Mesoamerica-wide protected area congresses that are held every 3–4 years. The federal governments of the three North American countries also have been collaborating on yearly meetings of a Trilateral Committee for Wildlife and Ecosystem Conservation and Management for nearly 25 years, and over the past decade have also collaborated in a North American Committee on Cooperation for Wilderness Conservation. Some, but not all, of these initiatives are more broadly open to all types of protected areas (including cultural heritage sites) and related conservation agencies and management institutions.

US/ICOMOS (The US Committee for the International Council on Monuments and Sites) is advancing the conservation connections between cultural and natural heritage through sponsoring the symposium, "Forward Together: A Culture–Nature Journey Towards More Effective Conservation in a Changing World" (<http://www.usicomos.org/symposium-2018/>). This November 2018 conference in San Francisco is based on the recognition among international professionals that integration of cultural and natural heritage conservation and stewardship across professional boundaries and disciplines is essential to improving conservation outcomes. It is the 4th Culture–Nature Journey. The first one was at the 2016 IUCN World Conservation Congress, the second in New Delhi at the 2017 ICOMOS General Assembly and Symposium, and a third in 2018 in Fiji for the Pacific region.

The Network for Landscape Conservation advances cross-border, collaborative conservation as a vital approach to sustain nature, culture, and community. The network is a national community of practice for a growing group of landscape conservation practitioners to share information, develop effective tools and strategies, advance best practices and policies, and build capacity and expertise in this evolving field. The network recently published a report on collaborative conservation at various landscape scales based on a national 2017 Forum; see [http://landscapeconservation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Pathways-Forward\\_2018\\_NLC.pdf](http://landscapeconservation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Pathways-Forward_2018_NLC.pdf).

Many conservation agencies throughout North America likewise have regularly scheduled conferences for their own staff and partners. But again, these have not been focused on protected areas of all governance types and categories in the North American region, and on a wide range of managerial themes, but rather have been more limited in scope geographically and thematically. Each of these conferences focuses on different subsets of participants, such as federal, state, or local government employees; students; NGO activists; user groups; academics; or land trust and tribal and private conservation advocates. The business community and Indigenous peoples are in general not well represented at most such events.

### **The parks community in our region is calling for a NAPAC**

A survey undertaken by the George Wright Society (GWS) of its membership showed a strong interest in having GWS become involved in convening a protected area practitioner conference for North America. Given the importance of Indigenous peoples' involvement in the establishment, management, and protection of important lands and waters, GWS welcomes focus and discussion with Indigenous knowledge keepers about parks and protected areas.

### **Who would attend NAPAC?**

Participants would come from federal, state, and local governmental protected areas and cultural heritage sites as well as those owned and managed by local and Indigenous communities and private landowners, representatives from Indigenous governments and leadership, academia, user groups, conservation advocacy groups, the philanthropic community, youth and young professionals, and the outdoor industry.

### **How would NAPAC be structured to deliver tangible benefits?**

Rather than a conference that serves only as a venue for delivery of scientific or policy papers, what is being proposed is one that would also serve as a working meeting, analogous to the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference (NAWNRC), which serves Canada, Mexico, and USA. Although it has major plenary and paper presentations, NAWNRC's value to attendees also stems from it serving as a working meeting involving committees and workgroups that develop best practices, research recommendations, and action plans prior to the conference that are then refined and finalized during the meeting itself and presented to a concluding policy plenary session for approval.

Planners for the NAPAC could adopt a similar model, building from an initial list of committees and working groups proposed by a steering/planning committee. Where appro-

appropriate, working groups could be formed by individuals from Indigenous, national, federal, state, and local governments, and from areas managed by local and Indigenous communities and private landowners. Other working group members may be from the private ecotourism sector, environmental NGOs, and other similar groups.

### **How would the content of NAPAC be decided?**

Topics would focus on major issues of concern addressed by Indigenous and non-Indigenous protected areas managers and practitioners. Interested participants could be Indigenous, national, state, regional, or urban/local agency employees. They could also be representatives of rural communities, Indigenous lands, NGOs, and private and corporate landowners, from throughout North America. To gather broad input and opinions from the North American protected area community on what topics should be addressed, an online questionnaire will be employed, beginning with GWS and IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) membership. One way the topics could be organized is by adopting the eight broad categories established by IUCN for their 2014 World Parks Congress. These categories, or “streams” as they are called by IUCN, are reflected in the planning document produced at the Congress, “The Promise of Sydney.” They are: Reaching Conservation Goals; Responding to Climate Change; Improving Health and Wellbeing; Supporting Human Life; Reconciling Development Challenges; Enhancing Diversity and Quality of Governance; Respecting Indigenous and Traditional Knowledge and Culture; and Inspiring a New Generation.

### **The concluding plenary session: Challenging, but rewarding**

The summit-type conclusion to the meeting will admittedly be challenging to organize, with federal, state, regional, and local leaders in attendance from Canada, Mexico, and USA plus Indigenous nations/governments, but past regional and international experience shows that it is achievable and could result in agreements to move certain types of action or emphasis forward, with unified messages to use in advising governmental bodies at all levels.

### **How would NAPAC be funded?**

The funding for a large Protected Area Conference such as this could follow the same model as the NAWNRC. This would include use of private-sector sponsors, conference fees, and grants. Sponsoring organizations could provide discounted conference fees to their members to increase attendance.

### **NAPAC will collaborate to initiate a shared vision for protected areas absent international boundaries to forge a long-overdue regional vision for protected areas**

Each of the three North American nations has over a century’s experience in protected area conservation efforts. The first national park and national parks agency, along with pioneering subnational, municipal, and private conservation initiatives, originated in North America. Tribes and Indigenous peoples in North America have a multi-millennial tradition of honoring and setting aside sacred sites. In 2018, Canada announced a first Indigenous Protected Area established in cooperation with local Indigenous peoples. In addition, the terrestrial and marine protected area systems of the three nations share many attributes and challenges.

Each North American nation and Indigenous communities have unique leadership in several distinct governance and management techniques and approaches that deserve wider emulation. However, unlike our colleagues in the wildlife conservation and cultural resources management arenas, who for many decades have been meeting regularly to develop and promote a shared vision and program of work in their professional fields, protected area conservationists in North America remain challenged in articulating a common vision that energizes management agencies, collaborating institutions, and conservationists.

NAPAC would be unique in that it could provide a forum where persons from different cultures, geographic areas, organizations, and disciplines can sit down to address some of the more difficult issues that protected areas face both internally and externally, locally and internationally.

A broad-based, highly participatory, results-driven, and cost-effective North American Protected Areas Conference will help focus and direct the energies of the vast but often uncoordinated protected area community so that protected areas across North America can continue to survive and thrive in a rapidly changing global, hemispheric, national, and local context.

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