

# Coming Together to Overcome Challenging Times

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AS I SAT DOWN TO WRITE THIS PIECE, my phone began to buzz with a “flash flood warning.” I automatically thought of the climate change studies predicting more intense and more frequently occurring precipitation events in the coming years (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2014). This led me to think of the other issues our planet faces: species extinctions (Ceballos, Ehrlich, and Dirzo 2017), land degradation (Bai et al. 2008), and pollution (World Health Organization 2016), among others. With such pressing challenges it is difficult to understand why more action and resources are not dedicated to solving them. As someone who cares deeply for the environment, it can be tough during times when policies do not address—or actually hinder—conservation.

During these times, I remember that the history of conservation is varied: sometimes bounding forward, sometimes stalling, and sometimes falling behind other interests. The important message I’ve taken from history is to not give up. If conservation is important, then it’s worth pursuing. We may not be able to change everything at once or set the world on a sustainable path immediately, but each of us can act within our spheres to make small steps toward the future we seek. For me, researching the development of values and beliefs that can influence individual environmental behavior has been important. And working with park and recreation agencies on training needs assessments to better develop capacity to protect resources has felt valuable. I believe that my small contribution, when combined with the work of others, can be magnified to keep conservation moving forward.

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I also take heart from those around me. I think we'd all be surprised by the number of people we know doing great things. During my graduate school education, I was fortunate to have Edwin Sabuhoro sitting in the cubicle in front of me. Prior to becoming a doctoral student, Edwin had been a warden in Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda. After an experience where he saved a baby gorilla, which led to the imprisonment of poachers, he went back to the village to understand why the people had poached. He found that they were faced with the choice to poach or watch their families starve. Edwin took this knowledge and created the Iby'Iwacu Cultural Village. This village is dedicated to tourism, which helps support the communities neighboring the park and motivates them to help protect the park's resources to sustain tourism. When I am faced with adversity, people like Edwin help me remember that just one person with the right amount of dedication, courage, and passion can make a difference.

As I made the transition from graduate school into a career just a little over a year ago, and as others embark on conservation careers during a time when positions may be limited, or job security is uncertain, the best advice I can offer is to reach out to others. Identify mentors. There are many who have walked this path before, who have also seen ups and downs in the conservation movement, who can share valuable insight, provide support, and be partners on projects. I was lucky to have an incredible advisor during my doctoral degree, someone who led by example in his work ethic and dedication to the field. Find that person. But don't stop there. Find more people. Make connections with peers. As a graduate student, a few friends and I at different universities thought it'd be great to bring students together for a summit to talk about some of the issues facing the National Park Service in its second century and consider them from our perspective. After a successful summit, we sat down to reflect on what worked well. We all came to the same conclusion: the summit was successful because we worked together. We enjoyed the process of planning; we identified logistical gaps as we planned, and filled them; and we communicated. Together, we were able to accomplish what may have been much harder alone. As we face challenges, there might be others able and willing to help, if we seek them out.

I think it's important to expand our circle outside our fields or areas of expertise as well. The issues the planet faces are not singular to any one discipline and cannot be approached as such. During graduate school I spent time with engineers, materials scientists, ecologists, biologists, economists, and educators. If we all sat down together to solve a problem, imagine the possibilities. Think broadly about the people needed to solve the issues that the environment faces. Working with others can bring new perspectives, additional opportunities for funding, and more support for conservation.

For me, the George Wright Society has been integral in the strategies I have used to face adversity and challenges. The core goal of the George Wright Society is to be an organization that connects people, places, and knowledge to foster innovative solutions in natural and cultural resource management. As a graduate student representative to the Board of Directors I witnessed organizational leadership and members embody this goal. In my first board meeting, we discussed developing student chapters as an aspect of our strategic plan. The board members were quick to help identify potential schools for student chapters and to make con-

nections. I was connected to Parks Canada's campus clubs for information sharing, a connection that led to communication between their representatives and GWS student chapter members at the first student summit, which I mentioned above. When we initially discussed the idea of planning and hosting a student summit, board members immediately supported the idea and offered sites for hosting and organizational support. When we broached the idea of publishing the discussions from our summit in *The George Wright Forum*, we were offered a special issue. The George Wright Society showed me that the development of connections and providing support for others makes it possible to positively influence conservation, even in difficult times.

Serving on the George Wright Society Board of Directors allowed me to grow and develop—to develop the skills necessary to succeed in the profession. The autonomy given to students by the organization allowed for creativity and innovation. I had the opportunity to take on diverse projects such as the student summit or seminars with National Park Service professionals. I was given the opportunity to work on the bylaws for the first student chapter and to assist with a membership assessment for the organization. These opportunities for involvement helped me to hone communication, leadership, and research skills. These skills are integral to success in the profession and have enabled me to meet personal goals.

As the George Wright Society looks forward, I see opportunity for increased commitment to the goal of connecting people, places, and knowledge. There are a variety of organizations and conferences that have similar goals, and connections with these entities could prove beneficial. Identifying conferences that land management agencies attend and pursuing a jointly hosted conference could be a way to sustain the organization's mission in times when travel funding is scarce for many members. In my experiences with the George Wright Society the members and conference attendees have been highly successful professionals, incredibly humble, and eager to connect with others to protect the natural, cultural, and historic resources we all care so much about. The knowledge and passion of the members makes them ideal for helping to develop future stewards and professionals. I believe a sustained mentoring program for students as well as young professionals could be an area where the George Wright Society could excel. The relationships, ideas, and projects that could develop from such a program would be an asset to the field.

As I reflect on the chance I've had to serve and engage with the George Wright Society, I feel fortunate for the many opportunities it has given me. The skills I've gained, the connections to colleagues, the friendships developed, the stories shared, and the memories gained will be carried with me throughout my career. When I think about the challenges we face as a field, and the world at large, instead of despairing I am hopeful. I know that I and countless others are dedicated to and constantly working for a brighter future for all of us.

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