

# If Our Eyes Were Open Wide Enough

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*After a career with the US National Park Service and in international conservation, **Vernon C. “Tom” Gilbert** served as the first president of the George Wright Society. He continues to be an advocate for biosphere reserves around the world.*

I WAS INVITED BY THE GEORGE WRIGHT SOCIETY (GWS) to write this essay for their journal, *The George Wright Forum*, reflecting on my career, what advice I may have for young professionals, and what the GWS could do in these troubled times. I am glad I was asked because it made me think about what lessons there are, coming from a career of 60+ years of dealing with conservation issues in many countries. The lessons come mostly from people who inspired me.

There have been many such persons, but two came to mind immediately, both pioneer ecologists: Raymond Dasmann and Sir Frank Fraser Darling. Ray wrote *Planet in Peril? Man and the Biosphere Today* in 1972. He said then it was difficult to be hopeful about the prospects for humans and the biosphere we control, but he thought if we understood not only our problems, but also the “means and machinery” to solve them, that there would be hope. He wrote that Frank Fraser Darling had summed up the situation as well as anyone could when he addressed the Biosphere Conference organized by UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) in 1968. He quoted Darling: “Ecologists can scarcely afford to be optimists. But an absolute pessimist is a defeatist, and that is no good either. We see there need not be complete disaster, and if our eyes were open wide enough, world wide, we could do much toward rehabilitation” (Dasmann 1972).

Fifty years have passed since they warned that time was not on our side. Today we are in greater peril than ever, but we still cannot afford to be defeatists. Our hope comes because much has been learned about what we need to do to reverse the trend, and I believe GWS has the capacity to collect and communicate relevant information about protected areas and

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*The George Wright Forum*, vol. 35, no. 3, pp. 269–274 (2018).

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sustainable development. A 1999 National Research Council report, *Our Common Journey: A Transition Toward Sustainability*, provides good reasons to make use of this capacity. The report concludes that a central challenge for promoting a transition toward sustainability is to develop an integrated and place-based understanding of the threats to sustainability, and the options for dealing with them. (National Research Council 1999). National parks and biosphere reserves are very appropriate places to lead a transition toward sustainability. They play vital roles in conserving genetic resources needed for global food security.

I worked in UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme in 1973–1975 to help design a world network of protected areas representing the major biotic regions of the world. The experts we convened believed these reserves would be an important means to conserve the diversity and integrity of natural areas and safeguard the genetic resources that could be used to improve cultivated and domesticated species, develop nutritious foods, and guard against outbreaks of insects and crop diseases. We thought this network, which came to be known as the World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR), would become increasingly important because of the needs of growing populations. Today, the WNBR includes 686 areas in 122 countries, and many of the sites conserve important food genetic resources, foster sustainable farming practices, and contribute to food diversity, security and education.

The US was a leader in developing this program, but it has not been easy overcoming entrenched negative attitudes about the United Nations (UN) among some Americans and their elected representatives. Some friends suggested I should write about my own experience in trying to bridge the gap with opponents of biosphere reserves, for it might encourage young people to work with those who do not share our views about natural resource conservation and environmental protection.

### **Reaching out to opponents: Biosphere reserves and sovereignty**

In 1997, US biosphere reserves were under serious threat of termination by congressional action because there was a well-organized, sensationalized campaign that alleged the UN was using biosphere reserves to take over properties in the United States and undermine our national sovereignty. A leader in this movement was Representative Don Young (R-AK), who chaired the House Committee on Resources. He introduced the “American Land Protection Act,” which was intended to terminate the biosphere reserve program in the US. He also wrote a letter to his colleagues in Congress claiming that our military personnel were giving up their uniforms for the baby-blue berets of the United Nations. He said that the lid was about to come off the “One World Zoning Enterprise” run by the White House and the United Nations.

In response, I wrote to Vice President Al Gore and members of Congress about the values of biosphere reserves, which had been recognized by both Republican and Democratic administrations, and that members of Congress had applauded the US–USSR agreement of 1974 to establish biosphere reserves in both countries and expand cooperation in the field of environmental protection. I described how this support for biosphere reserves was in accord with requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which directs all federal agencies to recognize the worldwide and long range character of environmental prob-

lems and lend appropriate support to programs to maximize international cooperation in addressing them, but members of Congress were not deterred. Amendments were attached to agency authorization and appropriation bills, and most of the modest federal funding for MAB was terminated. The program was decimated. I did not realize at that time that a fellow Tennessean, Henry Lamb, had founded a group called Sovereignty International, which led the movement against biosphere reserves (and also convinced Congress not to ratify the Convention on Biological Diversity, an international treaty that has become a centerpiece of international protected area conservation).

Lamb and his followers won that battle, but in 2003, under President George W. Bush, the US rejoined UNESCO after a 19-year hiatus and pledged to participate fully in its programs.<sup>1</sup> This presented an opportunity to renew the biosphere reserve program. I succeeded in getting a US Biosphere Reserves Association chartered to work with the US Forest Service and National Park Service (NPS) to reconvene the MAB National Committee and begin planning the renewal of the biosphere reserve program. We made good progress in 2004 and 2005, but Lamb and his allies were alarmed and convinced Congress to investigate MAB. On May 24, 2005, Representative Richard Pombo (R-CA), chair of the House Committee on Resources, wrote to Mark Rey, undersecretary of the Department of Agriculture, to have the Forest Service turn over all records relating to MAB dating back to January 2001, when the Forest Service took lead responsibility for the program. The investigation was to be led by Kurt Christensen of the Committee's Oversight and Investigations staff.

I wrote to Pombo and Representative John Duncan (R-TN) and offered to provide information for the investigation. Pombo did not reply, but Duncan's staff did, and they asked Christensen to contact me. He called me on October 4, 2005, and his bias against MAB was clear. He had already asked the executive director of the US National Commission for UNESCO to disband the US MAB Committee. Then, to my surprise, he asked if I would meet and "break bread" with Henry Lamb. I said I would be glad to do so, and Christensen made arrangements for a meeting, which was to include Tom McDonnell, a board member of Sovereignty International and vice president of the American Sheep Ranchers Association, which had prepared a report on biosphere reserves. Christensen wrote on October 12 that Pombo and Duncan were happy that such a dialogue was in the works, and we agreed to the following agenda:

1. Discuss the McDonnell report, "How does the U.S. reexamine all current biosphere reserves to determine if they conform to current MAB and domestic considerations?"
2. How does the program secure support from state and local governing bodies?
3. Clarify the purposes and goals of biosphere reserves.

On November 8, 2005, Lamb, McDonnell and I met at the Alexis Inn in Nashville, Tennessee, for five hours. The discussions were courteous and constructive, and we reached the following conclusions:

- All biosphere reserves must recognize and respect the rights of property owners, but realized that rights to protect natural resources, such as clean air and water, require

effective collaboration with others, and the involvement of local and state governing bodies to achieve these objectives. MAB was encouraging this approach, but Lamb and McDonnell expressed deep concern about the potential of US biosphere reserves to violate the rights of property owners because of the US administration's compliance with the provisions of Article 4 of the Statutory Framework of the WNBR, which call for policies, plans, and mechanisms to manage human use in buffer and transition zones. (This was evidence that they knew a great deal about the program and its problems.)

- We recognized the role of biosphere reserves in conserving genetic resources, especially for agriculture, and the need to collaborate with other countries. (McDonnell was a rancher, so he had special knowledge of this need.)
- Lamb suggested that to resolve the issues, congressional legislation to authorize the biosphere reserve program was needed. I said I thought that NEPA provided adequate authority, but that members of Congress did not use it, so I agreed that more specific legislation was needed, and we proposed to draft a bill in support of biosphere reserves.

On October 25, 2006, I made a presentation to the MAB International Coordination Council in at UNESCO's headquarters in Paris about the US experience with biosphere reserves and the dialogue with Henry Lamb. I said it was civil and constructive, and that we were drafting legislation to support biosphere reserves. I related that Lamb himself had described our efforts to resolve conflicting interests as precedent setting, and that they might provide an example for others to solve problems in their own communities. We both thought that a greater focus on conservation and use of genetic resources of value to farmers and ranchers (e.g. crops and livestock), and related educational initiatives, would entice private property owners to participate in biosphere reserve activities.

In May 2007, Lamb and I submitted a draft bill to the House Committee on Resources. It was widely reviewed by biosphere reserve representatives and Lamb's associates before it was submitted. Over the next few months we worked to generate support for the bill, and in August we signed a joint statement of support, which was submitted to the House Resources Committee.

From June to October, I focused on preparing briefing materials and distributing the draft authorization bill to key administration and congressional staff. Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR) offered to host briefings of congressional staff. We had support and funding assistance for the briefing from the United Nations Foundation, but our timing could not have been worse. The economic crisis that led to the global recession was causing panic, and the Congress was focused on a bailout bill. MAB would not get the attention it needed, so we decided to wait for a more suitable time.

That time has still not yet arrived, unfortunately. Henry Lamb continued his support for the idea of harnessing the resources of biosphere reserves for food security until his death in 2012. Christensen agreed to stop the investigation of MAB, but looking back on events now it is evident that we failed in our main objective. That said, the criteria we developed for biosphere reserves has proved useful, and there is more attention to property rights and community engagement among those who work on behalf of biosphere reserves. So a lesson

to take from my experience is: reaching out to opponents is a long and difficult process, but even if you do not reach your main objective, the process itself is valuable and is likely to produce side benefits.

### **The multiplier effect of strategic partnerships**

Another useful lesson I've learned is about developing strategic partnerships because they can achieve a "multiplier effect." In 1971, upon my return to the US from teaching at the College of African Wildlife Management in Tanzania, I proposed that NPS should partner with the Peace Corps to assist their volunteers in conservation work. NPS Director George B. Hartzog, Jr., supported the idea, so we negotiated a cooperative agreement with the Peace Corps. During the Carter administration, George Mahaffey, an experienced NPS resource management specialist, was assigned to the Peace Corps Office of Environmental Training and Support. In his remarkable 17-year tenure with the Peace Corps, Mahaffey and his staff expanded its work in the conservation and resource management fields—a multiplier effect that the agencies could not have achieved separately.

This leads me to suggest that GWS should seek partnerships with interested organizations to create greater impacts in this movement toward sustainability. Examples of strategic partnerships might include the Peace Corps, the UNESCO biosphere reserve program, the Buckminster Fuller Institute, and perhaps others.

- The Peace Corps, with support from the US Agency for International Development, has a program to build local capacity in food security, which is moving to extend and support activities throughout the world.
- Biosphere reserves and national parks can contribute to the Peace Corps program. Biosphere reserves work with local communities to foster good farming practices, and conserve vital agricultural genetic resources at a time when crop wild relatives are being depleted, even as the capacity to use a greater variety of these species in crop breeding is increasing.
- The Buckminster Fuller Institute has outstanding capacities in art, design, and communication to facilitate collaboration among programs, disciplines and technologies. BFI has supported mapping projects working to regenerate social-ecological health in more than a hundred countries.

Together, these organizations can identify places and programs where people can collaborate to achieve a multiplier effect. Some of these places might become "cooperative regional demonstration Projects," and serve to exchange ideas internationally. The Southern Appalachian Man and Biosphere–Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians Project on Culturally Significant Plant Species is a good example.

### **Conclusion: A reason for hope**

Sir Frank Fraser Darling was right. Our eyes should be open—world wide. I often think about how much better off the world would be if we had done more to heed his advice.

Yet there is reason for hope. As I complete this essay, I note that Peter Yeo, president of the Better World Campaign, sent an email dated September 18, 2018, about the UN General Assembly in New York to take place the following week. By the time you read this, hundreds of leaders from around the world will have gathered to discuss the planet's most pressing issues, such as ending poverty, hunger, protecting the environment, and defending human rights. Yeo's email said that a majority of young Americans want the US to be actively engaged in addressing these issues. It appears, then, that the young people of our country are heeding Darling's advice. That is a very good sign indeed.

### **Endnote**

1. In October 2017, the Trump administration announced that the US was again withdrawing from UNESCO, effective at the end of 2018.

### **References**

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