

# Building Community and Elevating Voices: The Impact and Role of the George Wright Society in Natural Resources

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IN 2005, I ATTENDED THE GEORGE WRIGHT SOCIETY CONFERENCE IN PHILADELPHIA where one of the plenary sessions was on environmental justice. The panelists were Charles Jordan, Robert Bullard, and Zenaida Mendez and the session was moderated by Bob Stanton. I recall sitting in one of the back rows of the hotel ballroom, next to Nina Roberts (I was a Master's student at the time and she was my mentor for the conference) and Carolyn Finney, listening to each of them speak about the steps still needed to be taken to address issues of environmental justice and the lack of representation of people of color in natural resources. I sat there holding back tears, throat tight, because it was the first time I saw a conversation about the environment that reflected me, a conversation not just about people of color in natural resources but a conversation by people of color in the environment. The stage was full of professionals from different arenas,<sup>1</sup> dedicated to the same cause and fixing the same issues that had pulled me into graduate studies—addressing historic and current environmental injustices and being part of an environmental movement that included the needs and values of all communities. Later that day, I gave my first-ever conference presentation on perceived racial and ethnic discrimination among visitors to national parks ... feeling ready to change the world.

That was my first experience with the George Wright Society. I went on to become the first graduate student representative on the Board of Directors, serving on the conference

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*The George Wright Forum*, vol. 35, no. 3, pp. 275–278 (2018).

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planning committee for both the 2009 Portland and 2011 New Orleans meetings. I think about those early years of my graduate studies and my connection with GWS, understanding the important role that the Society and the conference both played in my professional and academic development. The exposure to ideas, research, complex challenges, and a network of professionals has helped to inform my approach to my work with the National Park Service (NPS). I am grateful every day to be a public servant, working on behalf of the American people to co-create a system of national parks that speaks to and serves all communities, connecting young and old, rural and urban to the rich and complex natural and cultural history of this country. From the beginning of my career with the NPS, I have been committed to the idea that we must have people working both inside and outside an organization to create real, lasting change. That does not mean it is without its challenges, and changing a bureaucracy is a monumental task, a task that doesn't produce the kind of results that can be neatly rolled up into a spreadsheet or the executive summary of report.

A former NPS director has said many times that we, the NPS, are in the forever business. The NPS is managing parks for a generation we can't even imagine. Culture is continually changing and evolving, history is being made at this very moment, so there will always be new stories to tell, new themes studies to conduct, and social groups that we aren't even aware of today that the NPS will need to engage. For me, success will ultimately be determined by that as-yet-unimagined future generation, but in order to know that we are moving in the right direction there needs to be milestones, benchmarks, and opportunities to recalibrate goals. One of the most important skills that I am cultivating in myself and seek out in colleagues is the ability to communicate impact and identify ways that it can be measured, tracked, and widely shared. I encourage all young professionals to develop the ability to translate complex qualitative impacts into concepts that are more readily available to measure. Being able to distill the detailed metrics needed to track the impact of a youth program or measure improvement in employee engagement is critical to the long-term success of projects and programs designed to measure impacts these areas.

I have learned from exceptional leaders and mentors how to maintain optimism and stay focused on the ultimate goals of an inclusive and multidimensional NPS. One particular theory of change that has formed the foundation of my work, and that of the NPS Stewardship Institute, comes from leadership expert Margaret Wheatley. Wheatley's theory of change for organizations focuses on supporting the innovators and pioneers—shining a light on the good work happening within the system, supporting it, nourishing it, and connecting those pioneers with others. In an organization as geographically dispersed as the NPS, finding the parks and programs that are creating change and providing them a platform to share their lessons learned allows the whole organization to become more closely knit, it allows staff to have a better understanding of the challenges and success of colleagues, and lets everyone see what is possible even in times of scarcity. I have worked on many projects that have identified successes across the fields of landscape conservation, urban programming, youth engagement, and leadership development. These projects have not only highlighted some of the best work happening across the Park Service and with our partners, but they provide person-

al inspiration for times when change seems slow, hard, and unwanted. My advice to students and young professionals is to continually look for the sparks within your organization. We often only look for case studies of innovation and change from outside our organizations, but take time to find the pioneers that are already doing the good work from within as well. They have navigated the same challenges you are facing, so connect with them, learn from them, and build off of the progress they are making.

I have valued my participation in the George Wright Society because it has provided me with the opportunity to work both professionally and academically with colleagues from a variety of fields and specialties. There are many areas in which the GWS has excelled in the past and I hope to see some of these continue and get amplified in the future. First, the focus of GWS on Indigenous communities and people of color is a strength of the organization. More often now I am seeing purposeful engagement with Indigenous communities during conference planning, honoring the Indigenous communities on whose land a meeting is taking place, but this was already happening with GWS over a decade ago. GWS has a strong history of actively engaging students and young professionals of color, and today there are even more outlets and activists who can be engaged. Utilizing social media platforms to connect with the many organizations already tapped into communities of color and helping to lift up their message would only strengthen the Society and its role in supporting and developing youth of color in natural resources.

Second, the importance given to student involvement through both the mentoring at the conferences and Park Break demonstrates the Society's commitment to engaging young, emerging practitioners and academics. Like issues of relevancy in the NPS, making an investment in young professionals will ensure that not only are they being exposed to the full breadth of research and job possibilities in protected areas, but that they will be committed to the Society and its role and importance in their career. Providing more opportunities for students to share their research, connect with other students, and create long-term mentoring relationships beyond the conference will strengthen to future of the Society and create a networked and highly prepared cadre of future professionals.

Finally, *The George Wright Forum* has been a place for research, thought-provoking essays (*Letters from Woodstock*), an outlet for graduate students and academics to share research with real implications for park management, and a place to learn about new trends or concepts in natural resources that are just beginning to emerge. This is a vital role in connecting researchers with park managers, helping practitioners identify solutions to real-world problems and advancing the field of park management. The Society should look for a variety of approaches to sharing research—using multiple channels to reach audiences wherever “they get their news,” diversifying the packaging of research findings so they are accessible in various formats, and making use of virtual synchronous communication to connect people.

It is my hope that the GWS continues to invest in the engagement of all people and ensuring that supporting and connecting their community stays at the center of its work. I have benefitted greatly from the Society's efforts to be inclusive, holistic, and authentic, as I am sure others have too.

**Endnote**

1. At the time of the conference, Charles Jordan was chairman of The Conservation Fund; Robert D. Bullard was the Ware Distinguished Professor of Sociology and director of the Environmental Justice Resource Center, Clark Atlanta University; Zenaida Mendez was the director of racial diversity programs, National Organization for Women; and Robert G. Stanton had recently retired as director of the National Park Service.