

The George Wright Society: Collaborating Across Disciplines

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I FIRST LEARNED OF THE GEORGE WRIGHT SOCIETY IN 1989 when a member of the Board called to tell me that I had been elected secretary of the Society. I was surprised. The 1980s for me was a pretty busy time, with a move across country, agency reorganizations, and two babies. So, I was not familiar with the Society, but I was curious. On further inquiry—my boss Rich Winters was a member, as were other colleagues I respected—I agreed to serve. I had the privilege of serving two extended terms on the Board, supporting its growth over the next two decades as it became a significant voice for parks and protected areas in North American and other international forums.

What initially attracted me to the Society was its interdisciplinary focus. My graduate program was interdisciplinary, with a cultural anthropology foundation emphasizing the interactions of humans with their environment. Founded by NPS leaders from both the natural and cultural resource programs, the Society represented a unique opportunity for practitioners from across the resource management spectrum to come together and look at

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issues from an interdisciplinary perspective. Ronald Johnson, in a 1983 essay for *The George Wright Forum*, wrote:

... we want to redouble our efforts to turn the *Forum* dialogue toward a discussion of continuities ... between cultural and natural resources, between a park's internal communities of plants and animals and historic landscapes and visitors, and its surrounding external communities between local and regional and global issues.

This perspective was very much in sync with both my background and the growth of the National Park Service's cultural resource management programs in the 1980s, when the cultural landscape and ethnography programs were both launched. The Society's *Forum* and conference sessions have hosted important and continuing discussions of such topics as the definition and management of wilderness resources, cultural landscapes, traditional cultural knowledge, interdisciplinary inventory and monitoring strategies, and climate change. While not necessarily creating consensus on sensitive topics such as the management of cultural resources in wilderness, these sessions paved the way for greater understanding and collaboration between the natural and cultural resource programs. Two important Park Service documents from recent years, *Revisiting Leopold: Resource Stewardship in the National Parks* (2012) and *Director's Order #100: Resources Stewardship for the 21st Century* (2016), reflect many discussions hosted by the conferences and the *Forum*. Inclusion of representatives from the Canadian and Mexican park systems in the Society, together with the Society's involvement in international forums such as IUCN conferences, provided our members with valuable information on how our counterparts were dealing with a wide range of shared management issues.

Over the course of my career, support for the NPS mission of resource protection has ebbed and flowed under different administrations and congresses. While the emphasis on energy development in the 1980s and 2000s posed threats to park resources, the Natural Resource Challenge brought critically needed new funding for managing park natural resources in the late 1990s. Small increases in funding to support cultural resource management (CRM) in the areas of cultural landscapes, ethnography, and museum collections in the 1990s were eroded by stagnant funding levels for park operations in the 2000s, resulting in the loss of a quarter of CRM positions between 1997 and 2007. As the national debate on climate change gained momentum, and administrations took radically different positions, NPS had to move forward with strategies for managing the very real impacts of a changing climate on both its natural and cultural resources.

Negotiating a path through changing administration positions and funding uncertainties, while striving to meet our mandates for resource protection, is a continuing challenge for NPS leadership and resource management professionals. For me and many of my colleagues, the Society's conferences and publications provided an important forum for sharing information and strategies to deal with critical resource protection issues, regardless of whether these issues were priorities for the administration at the time.

Prior to the explosion of the internet and social media, the *Forum* and the Society's conferences provided important opportunities to meet and exchange ideas with other resource

management professionals. Even with the online options we now have, I strongly believe such opportunities are invaluable for individual professional growth and supporting the agency's mission. The networks that I built with other resource managers at the Society conferences, particularly in the natural resources fields, provided information, new ideas for dealing with shared problems, and, very importantly, mutual support in difficult times.

Strengthening the ways in which the Society supports this networking should be a critical part of any plan for its future sustainability and relevancy. Many of our resource management professionals work in relative isolation, both physically and professionally. The *Forum* provided a unique interdisciplinary platform to our far-flung members for sharing ideas, research, professional practices, and developing programs. Although the *Forum's* format may need to evolve to better reflect current research practices and needs, it should continue to be a critical service of the Society.

Developing personal networks in your field is an important step in building a career and remaining professionally current. Attending training and professional conferences was long considered a primary pathway to building these networks, but current restrictions on travel and conference attendance have limited these opportunities. The Society needs to explore other ways to encourage the exchange of ideas among its members through personal interactions. An expanded Society website that supports member discussion groups and provides access to the expertise of experienced resource managers could be one way to attract new members and support their professional development. Posting reviews of current literature recommended by Society members is another way we can meet the need of our members to stay current in their fields. Online seminars hosted by the Society on current resource management topics is also an option that should be considered. In place of the large conferences, smaller sessions created by the Society under the umbrella of the NPS career academies could be designed to address specific topics and provide opportunities for personal networking.

All of these options support the Society's commitment to "promoting professional research and resource stewardship across natural and cultural disciplines." This interdisciplinary approach to the management of parks and protected areas attracted me and many of my colleagues to the George Wright Society. We need to work together to ensure that this integrated approach continues to frame our efforts to address the many challenges affecting our natural and cultural resources today and in the future.