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Living landscape conservation is coming of age

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On February 7, 2023, US National Park Service (NPS) Director Charles Sams stood before a crowd of about 100 people gathered at the Hawk ‘N’ Dove, a well-known watering hole in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Washington, DC. Despite the cold and dreary weather outside, the mood inside was decidedly upbeat. Sams had come to the Hawk ‘N’ Dove to celebrate the recent enactment of the National Heritage Area Act (P.L. 117-339) and those in attendance were eager to hear his remarks.¹

Signed by President Joe Biden roughly a month earlier, the bill represented a remarkable accomplishment on the part of National Heritage Area (NHA) advocates. Passed with rare bipartisan support, the legislation culminated a 30-year campaign to establish an NHA system in federal law. What began in the early 1980s as a novel attempt to link preservation, conservation, recreation, and economic development along a single canal corridor in northeastern Illinois had become a true national phenomenon by 2023, with 62 designated NHAs in 36 states and territories.² Passage of the NHA Act served as a fitting capstone to this period of remarkable growth, signaling that institutional backing for the NHA model had begun to match its popular appeal.

▲ Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor is one of 62 designated national heritage areas in the US. MATTHEW F. ELKINS

The significance of the NHA legislation extended well beyond one program or federal agency. Its passage is part of a broader transformation in protected area management towards holistic approaches rooted in partnership and community engagement. The authors have witnessed this change firsthand, having worked for local, state, and federal agencies as well as nonprofit organizations in the USA, and in cooperation with international partners.³

Since at least the 1990s, there has been growing awareness that disciplinary barriers between the humanities and the sciences, as well as between “non-human” and “human” nature, are both artificial and harmful, hampering attempts to protect complex, lived-in landscapes.⁴ So, too, the field of landscape conservation has come to recognize that decision-making and management is best done via collaboration, with reciprocity prioritized. In recent years, significant progress has been made to address these long-standing divides, as exemplified by the ongoing *Nature–Culture Journey* (also called the *CultureNature Journey*).⁵ Initially launched as a special “track” at the 2016 World Conservation Congress in Hawai‘i, the Journey has continued over several additional meetings, nurturing a diverse constituency of international conservationists dedicated to better integrating nature and culture and to recognizing the leading role played by Indigenous communities in this work.

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As professionals working in landscape conservation and as scholars publishing on its history and application, the authors have sought to document, assess, and amplify initiatives like the NHA program and the Journey. In an effort to gather together writing and resources, we founded the *Living Landscape Observer* (LLO) in 2012. An all-volunteer website, blog, and e-newsletter, the LLO has provided commentary and perspective on the evolution of protected area management, with a particular focus on practice and politics. This issue of *Parks Stewardship Forum*, “Politics, practice, and the management of living landscapes,” grows directly out of our experience with the LLO, highlighting the challenges and the opportunities facing the field at all levels as well as the stakes of our shared work at a moment of grave environmental risk.

The first two pieces in this volume bring together seven leading practitioners in the field of heritage conservation: Kristal Buckley, Steve Brown, Maya Ishizawa, Nora Mitchell, Jessica Brown, Leticia Leitão, and Nicole Franceschini. Writing as the Heritage Octopus Collective, they developed an incisive Practice Note, “Integrating natural and cultural approaches in heritage conservation,” here prefaced by a separate introduction. Drawing on their collective knowledge, experience, and thinking, the Practice Note lays out a variety of approaches for effective collaboration across disciplines, training, and worldviews and—importantly—with local communities and other partners. The Practice Note emphasizes the need for mutual respect for diverse perspectives and ways of knowing, and for promoting dialogue and equity, as core values in heritage conservation.

“Heritage as a development engine for people in nature: A case study of Wulingyuan Scenic and Historic Interest Area, China,” by Feng Han and Ji Ling, is a detailed case study of holistic heritage conservation in action. In this piece, the authors assess strategies to promote sustainable tourism for people living in a world heritage site. Inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1992 for its natural values under Criteria VII (that is, by being defined as a place of superlative natural phenomena or an area of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic import), Wulingyuan is a lived-in landscape situated within a heavily populated agricultural region of 33 villages and more than 55,000 inhabitants. The original master planning for the site called for the relocation of residents from the core area for conservation purposes.

However, as the case study outlines, a different approach, one grounded in locally based tourism development, ultimately gained traction. The initiative engaged the community in identifying its values, including an emphasis on revitalizing traditional handicrafts. It offers a model for sustainable development of world heritage sites, highlighting the importance of respecting and involving varied partners. And, it has led to the development of a new, more inclusive master plan for the site that did not erase the contributions of longtime residents.

Moving from a single case study to what might be termed a “planetary” perspective is an interview with the author Tony Hiss titled “How lived-in landscapes could help rescue the planet.” In conversation with Shawn Johnson, the director of the Center for Natural Resources and Environmental Policy at the University of Montana, Hiss discusses how lived-in landscapes are and will be essential to addressing the existential challenges of climate change, species extinction, and habitat loss. Drawing on his recent book *Rescuing the Planet: Protecting Half the Land to Heal the Earth*, Hiss describes the “all hands on deck” approach needed, outlining actions from tree planting in urban areas to the designation of Indigenous-led protected areas in Canada, including some that are 10 times bigger than Yellowstone National Park.

In “Conserving an underappreciated heritage resource: The rural landscape,” by Brenda Barrett and Jane Lennon, the focus is on agricultural lands. Globally, over 40% of habitable land is devoted to agricultural uses, both as cropland and for grazing. Yet, despite such a vast footprint, land used for agriculture is rarely protected by international designations, with little attention given to either the natural and cultural heritage or the incredible biodiversity of these places. Recent efforts discussed in the article, especially those that empower local communities and caretakers in conservation efforts, are promising, though barriers remain significant.

Landscape conservation is inherently political in that it involves competing interests, ideas, values, and strategies. “Regulating the landscape of protest: The National Park Service National Capital

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Region as testing ground for First Amendment rights,” by Roneva Keel, explores these tensions in one of the most high-profile settings possible: Washington, DC. In the USA, the National Mall, which is part of NPS’s National Capital Parks administrative district, is unique in that it is considered, both by virtue of tradition and in law, to be public space where the expression of American free speech rights is not just tolerated, but facilitated. The challenge for NPS has been to weigh these rights—which are not unlimited—against other valid concerns, such as general public safety in this (very much!) lived-in landscape. The article traces the evolution of regulations on demonstrations in the

National Capital Parks as NPS balanced historical and cultural values with civic engagement over the course of the 20th century and into the 21st.

While assembling this special issue, the authors reflected on their own careers, in particular lessons learned regarding change, innovation, and the long-term durability of ideas and institutions. The NHA Act served as a fitting starting point for this discussion. Congress first considered a bill to establish a NHA system in the early 1990s. It would take 30 years and dozens of attempts before legislation finally succeeded in passing both houses of Congress and gaining an executive signature—as noted at the beginning of this introductory essay. This achievement was owed, in large part, to the tenacious activism of grassroots NHA supporters, but also necessitated the support of NPS champions and elected officials. In this, it typifies many efforts at truly collaborative landscape conservation. Community members, advocates, bureaucrats, politicians,

and others come together to discuss, debate, and plan how best to protect and, if appropriate, interpret the places they cherish. Politics is often at the center of this work, but so too are partnership and exchange. As the articles in the special issue reveal, there is no “one way” to do this work, but there are principles and practices that can guide the field moving forward, so that the ambitious “planetary” vision laid out by Tony Hiss might one day become a reality.

Finally, we should recognize that landscape conservation is also, inherently, creative work. People come together not just to protect what already exists, but to create something new from it. It was this aspect of the endeavor that Director Sams alluded to in his remarks at the NHA Act celebration that February day. “National Heritage Areas represent the unique fabric of America and serve as points of community pride, where locals and visitors alike can come together in the spirit of unity and share in collective experiences,” he told the gathering. “The NHA Act formalizes the relationship between the National Park Service and National Heritage Areas and will further paint America’s heritage landscape beyond the canvas of national parks.”⁶ By likening NHAs to tapestries and paintings, Sams reminds us that there is an art to collaborating well.

Conservation of living landscapes is coming of age.

Conservation of living landscapes is coming of age, its maturity marked by savvy political acumen, sensitivity in partnership and exchange, and flourishing creativity. What comes next? We can’t wait to find out.

ENDNOTES

1. To consult the full text of the legislation, see the National Heritage Area Act, Public Law 339, 117th Cong., 2nd sess. (January 5, 2023).
2. More information on the National Heritage Areas program is available at National Park Service, “Learn about NHAs,” accessed September 1, 2024, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/heritageareas/learn-about-nhas.htm>. For articles exploring the history of the NHA program, see Brenda Barrett, “National Heritage Areas: Places on the Land, Places in the Mind,” *The George Wright Forum* vol. 22, no. 1 (Winter 2005), 10–18; Brenda Barrett and Eleanor Mahoney, “National Heritage Areas: Learning from 30 Years of Working to Scale,” *The George Wright Forum* vol. 33, no. 2 (Spring 2016), 163–174; and J. Glenn Eugster, “Evolution of the Heritage Areas Movement,” *The George Wright Forum* vol. 20, no. 2 (Spring 2003), 50–59.
3. Passage of the NHA Act served as a major inspiration for this special issue. Both guest editors worked in the NPS NHA program office in Washington, D.C., during the early 2000s. During that time, they saw firsthand the challenges and possibilities of managing an innovative grassroots program, which linked nature, culture, and community development together.
4. Among the greatest challenges to implementing more integrated approaches to landscape conservation is a credentialing regime that too often separates natural and cultural heritage values. For example, the International Council on Museums and Sites (ICOMOS) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) still maintain separate criteria. Similarly, administrative structures at public lands agencies and non-profit organizations also have similar divisions in their programming. As a case in point, NPS is organized into distinct directorates for cultural resources and natural resources.
5. For an excellent overview of the planning, intention, and impact of the Journey, see Nora J. Mitchell, Jessica Brown, and Brenda Barrett, “Nature–culture Journeys: Exploring Shared Terrain,” *The George Wright Forum* vol. 34, no. 2 (Spring 2017), 123–127. Over the past several years, the *Living Landscape Observer* has published a series of articles providing updates on the Journey. See Brenda Barrett, “The Nature Culture Journey Continues: The Presidio in San Francisco,” *Living Landscape Observer*, December 10, 2018, <https://livinglandscapeobserver.net/the-nature-culture-journey-continues-at-the-presidio-in-san-francisco/> (accessed August 25, 2024); and Brenda Barrett, “Culture Nature Journey, New Delhi, India,” *Living Landscape Observer*, December 27, 2017, <https://livinglandscapeobserver.net/page/3?s=nature+culture> (accessed August 24, 2024).
6. “NPS celebrates landmark National Heritage Area Act legislation with National Heritage Areas,” press release, February 8, 2023, <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1207/nps-celebrates-landmark-national-heritage-area-act-legislation-with-national-heritage-areas.htm>