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REFOUNDATION: DOES PLACE-BASED CONSERVATION IN AMERICA NEED TO START OVER?

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Advocates for Public Lands and Waters Must Help Shore Up Democracy's Foundation

DAVID HARMON

When we speak about “Refoundation,” the very first question we need to ask ourselves is: Why are we having to talk about this? What brought us to this extraordinary, dismal point in American history? And the answer is that tens of millions of voters, roughly half the number who cast ballots, in three consecutive elections, thought it was a good—or good enough—idea to invest Donald J. Trump with the most powerful office in the land. This is a calamitous failure of American civic democracy as it *should* work if you believe, as I do, that it ought to be primarily based on reason and rationality and not on resentment, grievance, and retribution.

Emotions certainly have a place in democratic decision-making. But the point of democratic governance is to produce policies and actions that improve things, and history demonstrates that you can’t feel your way to solving complicated problems. So, for democracy to function properly, the majority of voters must make their choices based on deliberation, not emotion or intuition.

Democratic deliberation—democracy’s foundation—is anchored to two pillars: critical thinking and civics literacy. Ultimately, our systems for managing the national conservation lands, forests, marine sanctuaries, parks, and wildlife refuges spring from, depend upon, and perpetuate a healthy democracy. That is why advocates for public lands and waters, and the agencies that manage them, need to become directly involved in encouraging critical thinking and rebuilding civic literacy.

It’s a big ask. Doing it would take advocates and agencies outside—maybe far outside—their comfort zones, and requires a commitment measured in decades, not election cycles.

As I see it, there are three main tasks: reviving and expanding the agencies’ existing initiatives in civic engagement, providing critical thinking justifications for interpretation in key areas, and, most importantly, driving home at every opportunity the essential insight, often implied but rarely made explicit, that America’s public lands and waters are not just amenities—they are an indispensable public institution, part of the nation’s core identity as a democracy. That is my action list for Refoundation. In the remainder of this short essay, I will review what critical thinking and civics literacy are and why they are declining, and suggest a few specific examples of how my action list can be turned into reality.

THE TWO PILLARS AND THEIR CORROSION

Critical thinking is the process of analyzing facts and arguments to reach sound conclusions. Informed choices

are made by recognizing underlying assumptions, providing (and demanding) justifications for ideas and actions, and evaluating these justifications through comparisons with varying perspectives. The final step is assessing the rationality and potential consequences of the alternatives. Critical thinking is not the natural way humans think, as many psychologists have shown; it is a competency that must be learned and then reinforced so it becomes habitual.¹

Civics literacy is the capacity to apply critical thinking skills to enable people to effectively participate as citizens in the public life of democracy. For Americans, it includes understanding the three branches of government, the legislative process, and how policies are formed. Civics-literate American citizens have a basic knowledge of world affairs and history. They are familiar with founding texts such as the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Declaration of Independence. They understand and embrace civic duties (e.g., voting, jury duty) and defend constitutional protections (e.g., freedom of speech, due process). Civics literacy imparts the motivation and skills to actively participate in public life; this may include attending and providing comments at government meetings, volunteering for community initiatives, and running for elected office. Like critical thinking, civics literacy must be learned and practiced.²

Unfortunately, critical thinking skills among the public are widely thought to be in long-term decline, accelerated now by constant exposure to clips, TikToks, reels, and other short-form digital distractions. Combined with increasing use of algorithmic news curation and generative AI assistants, more and more people are at risk of “cognitive atrophy,” the inability to think deeply and autonomously. As for the civics literacy of Americans, several studies have found that it is nearing full-on collapse. For example, in a 2024 survey, over 70% of adults failed a basic civics literacy quiz—not surprising when you consider that the time devoted to civics

education in public schools has been falling continually since the 1960s.³

This corrosion is a serious detriment to American society, and has exposed the fragility—now being ruthlessly exploited by the current administration—of the legal/social system our public lands and waters rely upon. Advocates for the public estate, both inside and outside of government, can no longer ignore these deficits. Here are three actions that can be taken under a more favorable administration. Now is the time to lay the groundwork.

ACTION ONE: REVIVE AND EXPAND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Civic engagement is “as an ongoing process of public conversation that allows people to collect information, share common values, and wrestle together with tough issues where values may be in conflict.” Civic engagement “builds public knowledge and leads to better, more widely accepted decisions, more public confidence in an agency or organization’s decision making, and”—within the agencies—“a deep knowledge of the community that doesn’t go away with staff turnover.”⁴ In the early 2000s the National Park Service developed a robust program of civic engagement and involved its key on-the-ground decision-makers through an open-ended series of park superintendent roundtables. Now, this work and similar efforts in the other agencies that manage public lands and waters have been thrown into reverse.

The principles behind civic engagement can be applied to these agencies across the board. An ongoing colloquy should be convened to bring them together to create a coordinated federal civic engagement initiative. It should include an explicit civics literacy component to explain that these public service agencies are created by and answerable to the American people through Congress, operate according to laws and regulations governed by the Judiciary, and are part of the Executive branch headed by the president. Then the initiative should be incorporated into the DNA of each of the agencies by policy and, where necessary, regulation and law.

ACTION TWO: JUSTIFY INTERPRETATION

The best interpretation is founded on solid scholarship, which in turn is informed by critical thinking. However, that basic dynamic is almost never made explicit, with visitors given no justification for what they are reading, seeing, or hearing. That has to change. In key interpretive areas that are under attack by the Trump administration—climate change, the history of slavery, the struggle for civil rights, and the like—materials need to explain the difference between empirical fact and asserted belief. No longer can we afford to leave this all-important distinction unsaid.

When a brochure in Glacier National Park explains that the park’s namesake features are being destroyed by human-caused climate change, it needs to go on to say, “We know this to be a fact because thousands of scientists around the world and here in the park have conducted painstaking, critically reviewed studies that overwhelmingly point to this conclusion. Posts on social media that claim otherwise do not have this backing and that is why they are not true.”

When, someday, the panel describing how George Washington contrived to continue his subjugation of enslaved people while living in Pennsylvania is restored at Independence National Historical Park, there should be an additional context panel along these lines: “This information was taken down for a period of time because some people believe that sharing America’s flaws undermines patriotism and creates divisiveness. That is mistaken. Such information must be shared with you because, although it’s painful to point out the failings of an American hero, it’s an important part of the whole truth about George Washington the man. We know the account presented in this panel is true because it came from actual documents from Washington’s time. Historical scholarship is an ongoing effort to discover as much as we can about America, no matter where those stories lead.”



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Such justified context is, by current interpretive standards, cumbersome and obtrusive. No matter. For certain topics—the very ones targeted by Trump’s censorship campaign—it has to be done.

ACTION THREE: DEFEND AND PROMOTE THE ESSENTIALNESS OF PUBLIC LANDS AND WATERS

Advocates and the agencies themselves need to make a full-throated case that the federal public lands and waters of the United States are essential to preserving our national identity and character, one of the principal objects of national defense, and—when functioning at their best—a prime example of democracy in action.

Making such unabashed statements doesn’t exempt advocates and agencies from justifying their own decisions and actions, nor is it a permission slip to avoid self-disclosure of the failings of American conservation. It does not shut down the continuing evolution of our understanding of what constitutes genuine democratic management of these special places, such as future developments in Tribal co-management and Indigenous assertions of sovereignty. What it does do is take beliefs that many of us, in our hearts, hold to be true and make them explicit. It elevates unspoken—but viscerally powerful—ideals and put them on a rational, and ultimately actionable, footing.

One could easily imagine any number of changes to agency foundational laws (e.g., the Bureau of Land Management’s Federal Land Policy and Management Act, the National Park Service Organic Act, the National Marine Sanctuaries Act) that could spring from the full-throated case envisioned here. Instead, I want to argue for something even more far-reaching: We need a mandatory national service program with a public lands/waters option.

Critical thinking doesn’t happen in an information silo whose walls rise higher by the day through the relentless application of algorithms. People—especially young people—need to spend time with others who have different experiences and worldviews, and not just on a cursory and sporadic basis. Many observers have

proposed a mandatory national service program for 18-year-olds as a way to combat polarization and instill a shared sense of national identity. Advocates for the public estate, and the agencies themselves, need to throw their weight behind this idea. Offering enrollees the option of a one- or two-year stint working on a national forest, at a national wildlife refuge, in a national historical park, and so on—and making sure recruitment efforts reach all young people, urban or rural, and push them to serve in a location unlike their home—would create a vast cadre of citizens newly eligible to vote who have sharper tools for critical thinking *and* a deeper understanding of and appreciation for our public lands and waters.

A LOST CAUSE FROM A LOST WORLD?

As I prepared this essay I happened to read a long analysis by the media director of the 2024 Harris campaign about why it failed and what is coming next. How people find and consume information, and who they are trusting to give them the truth, is changing at such a head-spinning pace that even savvy campaign strategists can barely keep up. The conventional wisdom—I had thought—was that everything comes down to which party masters social media better. Not so:

Social media is basically over; the friend-to-friend conversations have largely moved underground to texts, Snaps, and DMs. What’s left is a series of endless, personalized feeds that filter you into interest-based niches. You’re watching content or chatting with your friends.⁵

If the author is right, Americans online are now busy walling themselves off. That would seem to dash any hope of building a broad, deliberative, civics-aware community.

But here is where our country’s public lands and waters hold (dare I say it?) a small-t trump card. I am convinced that their widespread bipartisan support, as shown in poll after poll, comes from what I think of as their “analogue authenticity.” They are non-digitized and unprogrammed, existing in palpable three dimensions where experiences flow in real time. When



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you see a whale breach in Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary or feel a catch in your throat gazing up at the Statue of Liberty for the first time, those are experiences that can't be deepfaked. When you are standing at the trailhead and your knee is feeling a bit twinge-y and hey, those clouds on the horizon are looking a little darker than you'd like, consulting AI on your phone is not going to help you decide whether to go back to the car and grab that poncho and do three miles instead of six, or simply bag it altogether.

When you step into one of our national protected places, it's like flipping a "Be Here Now" switch. And there are glimmerings that people, even Gen Z-ers who

have "grown up online," are looking to disconnect and return to a more unfiltered, present mode of existence.⁶

So while what I have talked about in this essay will be really difficult, we have to try. I believe our public lands and waters, born of democracy, can be one of its bulwarks.⁷ It will take a coordinated and committed campaign by advocates, and some new thinking and bold actions by the agencies themselves, to achieve that goal. A more critically thoughtful and civics-literate public will help ensure a more stable, optimistic future for the federal public domain—and for the American democratic experiment.

David Harmon is the executive director of the George Wright Society. He writes here in his personal capacity.

ENDNOTES

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2. See, for example, the introduction to Purdue University Fort Wayne's Civics Literacy Proficiency Program, <https://library.pfw.edu/civicsliteracy> (accessed May 17, 2026).
3. US Chamber of Commerce Foundation, "New Study Finds Alarming Lack of Civic Literacy Among Americans," <https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/civics/new-study-finds-alarming-lack-of-civic-literacy-among-americans> (accessed May 17, 2026); Sandra Day O'Connor Institute for American Democracy, "When and Why Did America Stop Teaching Civics?," policy brief, September 2024, https://oconnorinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/When-and-Why-Did-America-Stop-Teaching-Civics_.pdf (accessed May 17, 2026).
4. The Harwood Institute, *Standards of Excellence in Civic Engagement: How Public Agencies Can Learn from the Community, Use What They Learn, and Demonstrate that Public Knowledge Matters* (Bethesda, MD: The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, 2005), 6–7; quoted in Jacquelyn L. Tuxill, Nora J. Mitchell, and Delia Clark, *Stronger Together: A Manual on the Principles and Practices of Civic Engagement* (Woodstock, VT: National Park Service Conservation Study Institute, 2009), 3.
5. Rob Flaherty, "Here's What I Told the DNC Autopsy," *The Bulwark*, May 14, 2026; <https://www.thebulwark.com/p/heres-what-i-told-the-dnc-autopsy-biden-harris-2024-lessons-democrats-2028> (accessed May 14, 2026).
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7. A classic study of the intersection of democracy with protected places is J. Ronald Engel, *Sacred Sands: The Struggle for Community in the Indiana Dunes* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1983).