

UC Berkeley

Parks Stewardship Forum

Title

Dear Tracy, Dear Tim: Transatlantic Reflections on Refounding Conservation

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3rw1s3jk>

Journal

Parks Stewardship Forum, 42(3)

Authors

Badman, Tim

Farrell, Tracy

Publication Date

2026-09-13

DOI

10.5070/P5.69161

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

REFOUNDATION: DOES PLACE-BASED CONSERVATION IN AMERICA NEED TO START OVER?
REBECCA CONARD, ROLF DIAMANT, DAVID HARMON & JOHN REYNOLDS, THEME EDITORS



Dear Tracy, Dear Tim: Transatlantic Reflections on Refounding Conservation

TIM BADMAN AND TRACY FARRELL

The editors invited two leaders from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Tracy Farrell, director of IUCN North America, and Tim Badman, IUCN's director of protected, conserved and heritage areas, to reflect on the connection of US and international perspectives on Refoundation. Their correspondence is shared here.



Tim to Tracy, Paris, 3 June 2026

Dear Tracy

Well here we are! We agreed together offer a transatlantic correspondence in response to the invitation from the George Wright Society (GWS) to contribute on the question of “Refoundation: Does Place-Based Conservation in America Need to Start Over?” I hope that we will enjoy finding out our answers to this big question ... we are going to write each other each week throughout June 2026, so let's see what happens.

I guess we should start out to tell the readers where we are coming from. I am IUCN director of protected, conserved and heritage areas. My history in IUCN dates back over 20 years, mostly, since 2007 as the IUCN director for World Heritage, which is where I have had regular contact with US practice down the years. Before IUCN I worked on the ground mainly in local integrated coastal zone management (ICZM) and environmental programmes in the UK, coordinated a World Heritage nomination, and worked in a national centre for environmental interpretation.

A sense of US foundations (whatever we think might need to be refounded) has been ever present through my career. The founding thinking on environment interpretation (with Freeman Tilden, and then Sam Ham) was American. As a young ICZM manager we were conscious of working on leading ideas pioneered in the USA. The organisation that I worked for managed for a time the US:UK Countryside Stewardship Exchange—recognising a special relationship for shared learning. I'll get into the IUCN years later, but have been actively engaged with GWS and US practitioners through the last two decades.

If you agree, our exchange could move on to how US contributions to place-based conservation (we should talk about this phrase) have changed over time—a trajectory that sees US work as foundational, but with more questions on the fundamentals of the US model for both Indigenous Peoples and local communities, and a seeming growing tendency of the US to self-sabotage its international leadership.

So yep, there are things to talk about, and keen to hear where you are coming from.

Good wishes, Tim

OVERLEAF Satellite image (with color-enhanced features) of San Francisco Bay—the largest estuary on the American Pacific Coast, now ringed by dense urban areas. The San Francisco Estuaries Initiative has developed the “Making Nature’s City Toolkit,” which the authors of this essay hold up as a model for Refoundation. EUROPEAN SPACE AGENCY



Tracy to Tim, Washington DC, 15 June 2026

Dear Tim

I grew up within driving distance of the Adirondacks, the largest state park in the country. From an early age, I saw the challenges and opportunities of patching together private and public lands, and balancing multiple uses, while still protecting roughly 6 million acres—about the size of Vermont.

Later, during my PhD at Virginia Tech, an early hub for the emerging discipline of recreation ecology, I did part of my dissertation in Big Cypress National Preserve, exploring how dune buggies, tracked vehicles, airboats, and other off-road vehicles could keep accessing treasured places while minimizing impact on the fragile karst ecosystem. This was my first firsthand look at how national preserves differ from national parks in management—and my first exposure to a hunting and fishing community with a deep, place-based attachment to its wetlands. Later work supporting visitor-impact planning in Mexico, Costa Rica, and Chile showed me how similar and different these challenges are across protected areas, with human dependency and emotional attachment at the center of it all. From there, I moved into broader biodiversity work—ecosystem services, freshwater protection, wildlife trade, nature finance—always with protected areas as a core part of the solution.

When I think about foundations, I go back to graduate school at the SUNY [State University of New York] College of Environmental Forestry, and think about how fortunate I was to have learned the history of how the US park system came into place, and to be inspired by the deeper philosophy and value of wilderness and relationships between humans and nature from giants like Aldo Leopold, Henry David Thoreau, Roderick Nash—the list goes on.

And what also came to mind, and was already making its way to graduate schools in the US in the early nineties, was the importance of examining how a place-based conservation model has an inherent challenge in that by defining requirements, rules, and regulations, protection itself could be exclusionary or limit certain kinds of engagement, with examples of Indigenous Peoples and local communities coming to mind. Was it truly possible for protection of places that accommodate biodiversity and species conservation, and ecological integrity/function, to meet the needs of people as well? With “people” being inclusive of communities, Indigenous people, and others from further afield? Much later the broader field of conservation, inspired by economists, would talk about the impossibility of having true win-wins, and the need to consider instead who is making decisions about how to place and manage parks, and what kind of willingness there is and from which constituents regarding accepting the various trade-offs that have to be made once a park is designated.

Warmly, Tracy



Tim to Tracy, Lausanne, Switzerland, 23 June 2026

Dear Tracy

Great to hear of those personal foundations, and they make clear how the US was both a founder of nature conservation practice, especially with the identification of protected areas, and in the vanguard of realising the great challenges and injustices created for Indigenous Peoples and local communities due to actions in the name of conservation.

This reply takes us to the invitation from GWS, and how US contributions have been changing over time. My thoughts from many years of engaging with GWS were already put in an article in *The George Wright Forum*, the predecessor to *Parks Stewardship Forum*—albeit pre-COVID.¹ I was recalling the inspiration of US leading practice showcased at the big biennial GWS meetings, including the strong caucus of Indigenous Peoples. And the surprise at how little of this was regularly broadcast to international audiences, and the experience of US government dysfunction when a government finance shutdown in 2013 wiped out half of the GWS conference participation.

The story of the World Heritage Convention also tells of the changing foundations of the national and international leadership of the US. The US founded—with a subvention given through IUCN from 1966—the ideas for World Heritage. This included its name, its connection of nature and culture, and its focus on a list defining international concern for our most outstanding places. The US was the first Convention signatory and led by proposing Yellowstone and Mesa Verde amongst the 12 very first listed sites in 1978. The USA sat almost continuously as a decision-taker in the World Heritage Committee in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s. But its most recent mandate is now distant at 2005–2009, so approaching 20 years in the back seat. Nevertheless it is a reality that the US continues to nominate World Heritage Sites, with the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge currently up for listing, and with a positive IUCN recommendation this year.²

The elephant in the room has been the larger US relationship with UNESCO [the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization] as a whole, and the fact of the US withdrawing this year (at the same time it withdrew from a host of international organisations, including IUCN). But, for perspective, it's important to note that the relationship has been fraught for a long time, spanning different political colours. The United States is a founding member of UNESCO and had withdrawn once before, in 1984. Then the US withdrew from funding UNESCO in 2011 and rejoined in 2023.

Right now it is easy to be baited by the conscious “shock-jock” tactics of US politics, and the basic immorality of seeking division, but I don't think much is served by indulging a reaction to the obvious extremism of some of what we currently see. People are turning off from that more and more. My sense is that history tells us that, if we look at the national government, we are at a long-term low in US international conservation leadership (and now even participation). Whilst we expect and hope that re-engagement will follow, it is hard to see a reliable and constant federal contribution. So, perhaps we need to look past the federal government for a new view of the

potential for Refoundation, and look to individual states, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and Indigenous People Organisations for a more consistent and grounded approach. In the real world, regardless of political colour, people need to live together, and in healthy and beautiful places that they call home. It is clear that some of the best conservation science and on-ground knowledge and practice is American, so any Refoundation has strong and deep roots to build on. And a free and open society means political correctness—of any colour—cannot avoid engaging with the facts and realities experienced on the ground. The real world of nature, culture, and people will win out eventually.

I am wondering how you see these last decades, and if you agree that Refoundation would bring together a different coalition, from the ground up, and not the top down? Where shall we take this correspondence next ... what does the world need from the US experience now, and how could we imagine the next steps?

All the best, Tim



Tracy to Tim, Washington DC, 25 June 2026

Thanks Tim,

I see the last decades as ones of growth and building, but also ones where we perhaps put too much faith in federal or national oversight and agency structures. The United States birthed the concept of national parks as a public trust, separated and protected from private exploitation, which was genuinely novel when Yellowstone was established. And this suggested a need for defined and empowered public institutions able to ensure protection, as well as strong legislation, policies and standards.

And for many years, this model remained fairly solid—by the 21st century, significant portions of the Earth's land surface were under some form of protected status, many modeled after the US park system while also making advances in co-stewardship and even Indigenous Peoples' governance and ownership. Global aspirations advance towards protecting 30% of our lands and waters by 2030— all of which can be linked back to the foundations provided by the initial American parks concept. Place-based conservation has a legacy of both safeguarding key areas for biodiversity as well as a dark side of keeping people out (fortress conservation).

When the federal government is a committed conservation actor, the public agencies and policies we have in place in the US are a strength. When it is not, as the past several years have demonstrated, it is a vulnerability. Drilling approvals in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the shrinking of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monuments, and multiple withdrawals from international environmental commitments such as the 30x30 target—or outright rejections, as with the US's refusal to ratify the Convention on Biological Diversity—have greatly weakened protection.

Refoundation, if it is serious, must be honest about what it is refounding from. If we are refounding from federal, large-scale, expert-managed, people-

free—a new American contribution could have four key elements that I would love to hear your perspective on:

The first is subnational leadership. The federal retreat from conservation has, paradoxically, created space for a remarkable proliferation of state, local, and Tribal conservation initiatives. California's 30x30 executive order, the growing network of state biodiversity partnerships, the urban conservation programs emerging from cities across the country—these are not merely stopgap measures. They represent a genuine experiment in what conservation looks like when it is accountable to proximate communities rather than distant federal agencies. The California Global Biodiversity Alliance, which brings together 63 cities, counties, Tribal governments, NGOs, and elected officials, is one model of this emerging subnational architecture.

The second element is Indigenous co-stewardship as the norm, not the exception. Bears Ears National Monument, co-managed through a historic agreement between the Bureau of Land Management, the US Forest Service, and a commission of five Tribal Nations—the Hopi Tribe, Navajo Nation, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, Ute Indian Tribe of the Uintah and Ouray Reservation, and the Pueblo of Zuni—demonstrated that Indigenous governance of land is compatible with, and indeed enhances, conservation outcomes.³

The third element is connecting the coasts and the interior through a shared story. One of the most damaging features of recent American political life has been the framing of conservation as a coastal, elite, anti-rural project. A refounded American conservation must recover the narrative thread that connects the Yellowstone grizzly to the urban forest restoration project in Detroit, the coastal wetland in Louisiana to the farmland easement in Iowa. A network of influencers sharing these experiences and stories, could be one means of rewriting, modernizing, and diversifying the parks narrative.

The fourth element is connecting to the multilateral system at the state and city level. No reason to wait for the United States. With the US withdrawal from multiple international environmental bodies, documented extensively in recent years, American influence has been weakened. And yet the global architecture on which all of conservation depends is still in place and has openings and opportunities to offer to cities and states. States and cities for example can proudly commit to and advance their own results towards the Global Biodiversity Framework targets.

From your perspective, Tim, is what I propose as next steps for refounding sensible? Is there more to add from a global perspective and from your experience working with World Heritage/UNESCO? Perhaps there are other countries who have leap-frogged over some of the US growing pains in moving away from a heavy top-down model?

Warmly, Tracy



Tim to Tracy, Lausanne, Switzerland, 1 July 2026

Dear Tracy

Thanks for the reply, and taking us to the sharp end of this correspondence ... the short answer is yes, those ideas don't just make sense, they resonate with the experience across many countries and communities. And they speak clearly to IUCN's values and its own journey towards locally owned, culture-centred, and rights based approaches, and away from the discredited model of fortress conservation. The other good news is that I think these are also approaches that are gaining traction with different countries in the international frameworks that guide our work.

To address the specifics, for subnational leadership, fully agreed, and furthermore we need to distinguish subnational government at all levels—the big states/provinces/regions, some of whom have economies and populations that are bigger than most individual countries—but also recognising more local—counties and parishes. And non-state actors that organise subnationally are also important, as you note with Indigenous and NGO organisations and federations. Local governments can also have an important role in facilitating those local partnerships. Different countries work these dynamics in different ways, but localism is relevant everywhere. IUCN can support this agenda much better now, with our new categories of membership for Indigenous Peoples' Organisations and Local Governments. This new foundation both helps as it recognises the realities of how action happens (nature is local), but also gives more resilience to a reliance on national states, as you note so clearly—including on where US international leadership can come from.

Refoundation definitely needs to be based on the rights and consent of Indigenous Peoples, and recognition and respect for Indigenous leadership. There is a need to enable a diversity of responses, which can include co-stewardship, but also full stewardship, and with action to redress the issues created by unjust past practices. I would also add the importance to look at traditional management systems that may not only involve Indigenous Peoples. Recognising where local land, water, and sea management has led to co-evolved natural and cultural values needs to be universal as the approach. We recognise this in IUCN's new Global Standard for Protected and Conserved Areas, and the IUCN Green List programmes, but we still see many gaps in knowledge understanding and capacity of the cultural connections to nature. An additional point is also the role of the private sector where landowners can be supported to make a more direct contribution.

Your point on coastal and inland linkage sounds a bit more uniquely American, but makes sense both in terms of the realities of linkage between ecosystems (“ridge to reef”), and the need to push back actively on the idea that a good environment is some kind of elite project. Poor environments hit poorer communities the hardest—though we all lose from them. But the refoundation to focus on nature and cities is clearly a compelling priority, and a place where the US has leading practice to share. For the proof look no further than the nascent IUCN Urban Programme, which has much of its roots in US practice, such as the brilliant “Making Nature's City Toolkit” developed by the San Francisco Estuaries Initiative. We need to move beyond the idea though that the focus is

on nature *in* cities, and see the connections from cities to the nearby protected and conserved areas that are their recreation areas, as well as the source of their water and environmental quality. There are challenges here too, such as fire impacts, which we can see call out for new practices and approaches.

I am wondering what is missing from this list; one point is the need to bring technology and innovation into our work—another place where IUCN is acting, but the US could be leading. And putting the decision-taking in the hands of the next generations ... I am going to be interested to see what this GWS volume brings forward as perspectives from young leaders and practitioners. And the big one is securing consistent, directed-to-ground-level action; the US philanthropy sector, and perhaps especially the smaller funds, is important. We need to have a conversation about avoiding the reliance of conservation on the small ground of the very wealthiest private individuals. Localism is about accountability.

But let me wrap up here, and hand you the last word, before we hand this correspondence over to our friendly editors in GWS. I guess the summary is that we can see a Refoundation coming, one that can benefit not only the US, but also reposition the US contributions internationally as more of a celebration of local leadership and results. Ideally this local leadership will work hand in hand with local, state and federal governments, with a realistic level of expectation on consistent national leadership. I'll close with one question to you: in just over a year, IUCN will host our most critical event for the future of protected areas, the World Protected and Conserved Areas Congress, happening in Panama in 2027. Formerly the World Parks Congress, this is an event that sets the agenda. So, what are your hopes for how the Congress can learn from, and help, Refoundation of conservation in the US?

Thanks again for this last month of being my new American pen-pal, and looking forward to reading your reply.

Good wishes, Tim

Tracy to Tim, Washington DC, 6 July 2026

Dear Tim

What a correspondence we have had! I think we've done what GWS asked of us and what we agreed to do—which was to show what Refoundation looks like from an international to US perspective and vice versa.

You're right that subnational leadership needs the fuller texture and we need to be careful to not infer that the national government does not continue to play a critical role in our protected areas in the US, while also recognizing states, counties, parishes, and the non-state actors, Indigenous and NGO, who organize below and across those federal lines. I take real encouragement from IUCN's newer membership categories for Indigenous Peoples' Organisations and Local Governments. That's not a technical fix to our statutory rules for membership, it's an admission that the old assumption, that nation-states are

the only actors who count, was always partial, and now needs to be corrected in practice, not just in aspiration.

On Indigenous co-stewardship, I want to hold on to your caution against making this only about Indigenous Peoples, important as they are. Traditional and local management systems such as the ranching families in the American West, the watershed associations, the fishing communities, and so many others have vital natural and cultural values too, and they deserve the same seriousness we're finally extending to Tribal Nations. Refoundation has to mean a diversity of arrangements, not a new orthodoxy to replace the old one.

Your point about the private sector is also one I'd like to reinforce. Land-owners from family forests to corporate lands are a constituency we haven't included in our dialogue as we've included governments—though they are increasingly finding roles within our broader membership and partners. If Refoundation is about resilience beyond the federal government, it has to include the diversity of actors who own and manage US lands and waters.

And yes, cities. Ridge to reef, and reef to rooftop. The Making Nature's City Toolkit is proof that American practice has something to teach the world here, but you're right that we've been too quick to stop at "nature in cities" instead of asking how cities connect back out to the protected and conserved areas that supply their water, their fire resilience, their weekend escape. The fact that a degraded environment impacts heavily the communities with the least power to address impacts related to degradation is a reality we also need to keep presenting, as it stands against a tired caricature of conservation as an elite hobby. It never was, nor will it ever be.

On technology, generational leadership, and philanthropy—you're naming other critical areas underpinning Refoundation that I wish we had more time and space in our exchanges to unpack. Refoundation must consider innovative financing, where there have been significant advances over the years, as part of expanding prior philanthropic and tax-based models. And we must pay more than lip service to involving youth in decision-making such that they can have true leadership and impact. Both deserve more room than a closing letter allows—but they belong on the list.

Now, to your question about the World Protected and Conserved Areas Congress 2027. My hope is twofold in ways that might seem contradictory, but perhaps this is the only way to reflect the long history of protected and conserved areas in the US.

First, I hope that Panama becomes a place where the US story is told honestly, in its own diversity, rather than as a single national position, or worse, offered only as a single snapshot in time given the long history of accomplishments and firsts. National agencies have historically had a hard time keeping pace with the needs of protected areas in the US, supplying steady funding and other means of support, while states, Tribal Nations, cities, and NGOs are able to be more nimble and responsive, doing some of the most consequential conservation work anywhere. By way of a few examples of successes and potential future directions, I'd like to see examples where the US is advancing towards models such as Canada's Indigenous Guardians program, where co-

stewardship, traditional ways of knowing, and data collection become integral components of managing lands and waters falling within and adjacent to protected and conserved areas. I'd like to see models of larger scale protection models, such as large land-, water-, and seascapes under protection to allow for flows of ecosystem services to, within, and outside of areas under formal legal protection. These could include OECMs,⁴ as well as other areas not yet recognized as OECMs. I'd also like to see models presented where river management organizations, land trusts, and other bodies contributing to protection are doing work that supports US conserved and protected areas, even if they are not yet widely recognized as such.

And on the flip side, it would not be right to not acknowledge what American conservation has experienced in the short term, somewhat contradicting what I said earlier, but we do need to show how, within a very short period, we have been forced to learn in public what happens when place-based conservation loses its most powerful institutional patron. That is not a comfortable lesson, but it's one every country will eventually need, given how fragile national commitment to conservation can be even in what would have been considered to be one of the most stable of all democracies. Taking this thinking further, if Congress can take our reckoning and treat it as an early warning rather than an American peculiarity, then Refoundation stops being a US story and becomes a global one—which, I think, is where you started this correspondence back in June, and where it should end.

Thank you for your letters, Tim. I hope our editors—and our readers—find as much in this exchange as I have.

Warmly, Tracy

Tim Badman is IUCN's director of protected, conserved and heritage areas.

Tracy Farrell is regional director of IUCN North America and chief executive officer of the IUCN US Fund.

ENDNOTES

1. Tim Badman, "A Road to Better Futures: Thoughts from an International Perspective," *The George Wright Forum* 35:3 (2018), 282–285.
<https://www.georgewright.org/353badman.pdf>
2. *Ed. note:* In July 2026, after these letters were written, Okefenokee was named a World Heritage Site at the World Heritage Committee's annual meeting.
3. *Ed. note:* In July 2026, after these letters were written, Trump rescinded the co-management agreement.
4. Other Effective Conservation Measures that exist outside of protected areas, but which now can attain formal recognition as such through IUCN.