

UC Berkeley

Parks Stewardship Forum

Title

Re-examining Place Based Conservation: Co-Governance and Co-Management as the Foundation for, and Future of, Parks and Protected Areas

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4w46651s>

Journal

Parks Stewardship Forum, 42(3)

Author

Kiewra, Lydia A.

Publication Date

2026-09-14

DOI

10.5070/P5.69168

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

**Re-examining Place-Based Conservation:
Co-Governance and Co-Management as the
Foundation for, and Future of, Parks and Protected Areas**

LYDIA A. KIEWRA

Recent political assaults on natural resource management, scientific integrity, and historical memory by the United States' current administration have exposed some of the brittle foundations of “America’s best idea” within place-based conservation. Incremental fixes and a return to the status quo will not suffice to save our nation’s parks and protected areas (PPAs). What is needed is a deliberate refoundation, or establishing and building something anew after substantial disruption, of legal authorities, institutional design, and political coalitions so that beloved PPAs are co-governed with shared authority, durable legal protections, and reliable funding. This essay argues that co-governance and co-management can and should be the cornerstone of that refoundation, but only if they are paired with clear legal reforms, redesigned institutions, and a pragmatic political strategy.

Co-management and co-governance go beyond conventional stakeholder engagement by redistributing authority while allowing agencies to retain operational roles. In this way, they offer a viable path for agencies seeking to rebuild relevance and more sustainable resource use. Graham and colleagues define natural resource governance as “the interactions among structures, processes and traditions that determine how power and responsibilities are exercised, how decisions are taken, and how citizens or other stakeholders have their say” (2003: ii). Historically, that definition has been operationalized through state-based, hierarchical models that concentrate centralized power (Scott 1998; Lockwood 2010; Lockwood et al. 2010). However, over recent decades, many protected places have shifted toward collaborative management, formal co-governance arrangements, and community-centered strategies (Gokhale et al. 1998; Ramakrishnan et al. 1998; Lockwood et al. 2010; Borrini-Feyerabend et al. 2012).

For example, Canyon de Chelly National Monument illustrates how co-governance works in practice. The land is held by the Navajo Nation (Diné) and co-governed with the National Park Service. Diné families continue to live, farm, and practice culture within the monument while NPS manages visitor services and funding, with both parties collaborating on protection and interpretation (NPS 2024a). In Florida, after decades of exclusion, the Miccosukee Tribe and the Seminole Tribe were formally recognized as co-managers and co-stewards of Everglades National Park in 2024; the agreements give Tribal partners a formal role in stewardship and interpretation while NPS retains responsibility for visitor services and federal funding (NPS 2022a; NPCA 2024b; NPS 2024d; NPS 2024e). Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary,

designated in 2024, is the first national marine sanctuary to embed Tribal collaboration in the final management plan and to include Indigenous partners from the outset; Tribal advisors will guide federal management across 4,543 square miles of ocean and 116 miles of coastline (Ding 2024; NOAA 2024; NPR 2024). These examples show how shared authority can preserve cultural practice, improve stewardship, and legitimize federal action in the eyes of local communities.

At the same time, recent events show that the stability of place-based conservation rested on assumptions that were less secure than they appeared. Statutory protections, bureaucratic norms, and scientific authority are not guaranteed during political shifts. Those assumptions failed, in part, because legal authority and decision-making are concentrated in centralized hierarchies that are vulnerable to rapid capture. Moreover, governance arrangements too often treat communities and knowledge systems as consultative afterthoughts rather than co-equal partners. When legal protections are contested, when scientific findings are censored, and when historical narratives are erased or reframed, the formal levers managers rely on such as organic acts, regulatory systems, and agency procedures can offer little resistance and strip authority from agency decision-making. Governance theory illuminates this fragility: state-centric, top-down models can deliver consistency in stable times but lack the distributed legitimacy and adaptive capacity needed under seismic shifts (Scott 1998; Dovers 2005; Howlett and Rayner 2006; Lockwood et al. 2010).

Emergent co-governance shows both promise and limitations for addressing such issues. Examples from Canyon de Chelly, the Miccosukee co-stewardship in the

Everglades, and the Chumash sanctuary demonstrate that shared authority can sustain some stewardship when federal protections falter (Ding 2024; NPR 2024; NPS 2024a; NPS 2024d). Yet many co-stewardship agreements remain informal or depend on executive discretion, leaving them exposed to legal challenges, funding shortfalls, and political rollbacks (Nadasdy 2003). NPS reported more than 80 co-stewardship agreements with Indigenous groups in 2022, but the scope, legal standing, and resourcing of those agreements vary widely, from binding management roles to advisory memoranda (NPS 2022a; US Department of the Interior 2021). Within the Great Smoky Mountains, partnerships can operationalize governance principles for problems like air quality, aligning actions with the Clean Air Act and making monitoring data public, but also reveal how cross-sector collaboration depends on sustained funding and inter-agency coordination to be effective (NPCA 2024a; NPS 2024b; NPS 2024c; USGS 2024).

Moving forward, place-based conservation should champion shared sovereignty, durable legal protections, institutional redesign, and funding stability. That means moving beyond partnering consultation toward legally recognized, enforceable roles for Indigenous nations, local communities, and other rights holders in decision-making (Graham et al. 2003; Lockwood et al. 2010). Co-governance and co-management should be the organizing norm rather than an ad hoc accommodation.

LAW AND POLICY REFORMS

Legal reforms should begin with targeted amendments to foundational statutes, including the 1916 Organic Act (16 USC § 1 et seq.), which established the US National Park Service; the 1905 Transfer Act (33 Stat. 628; 16 USC §§ 472, 524, 554), which established the US Forest Service; and the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 (16 USC § 742a et seq.), which established the US Fish and Wildlife Service, to explicitly include statutory co-stewardship authority. This would grant co-managers decision rights on specified matters, protections for scientific integrity and interpretation that make political interference reviewable in court, and procedural standing for co-managers in rule-making and enforcement. A model co-management clause should be drafted that specifies scope, dispute resolution, data sharing, and termination

conditions so agreements are consistent and legally durable (Nadasdy 2003; Lockwood et al. 2010). Then, permanent institutional units should be created to make co-governance routine: Tribal liaison offices, joint management boards with equal representation, and co-stewardship units embedded in regional offices. These units should have delegated authority for routine decision-making and a clear chain of accountability for agency leadership. Formal dispute resolution mechanisms ought to be built, such as mediation panels or binding arbitration, to prevent ad hoc breakdowns like what we are presently witnessing. Requiring agencies to externally publish co-management agreements, decision records, and monitoring data to ensure transparency and legitimacy would be the next step in rebuilding the relevancy and stewardship necessary to save PPAs (Scott 1998; Graham et al. 2003; Lockwood 2010). However, secure and stable funding also are needed in order to enact such policy shifts.

FUNDING AND CAPACITY

Securing predictable funding through a mix of dedicated appropriations, conservation trust funds, and statutory protections that shield core stewardship budgets from political reallocation will be an uphill, yet necessary, battle. Just compensation for knowledge holders and community participants for time and expertise is critical in this model, including payment for Traditional Ecological Knowledge contributions and capacity building. Establishing grant lines for co-management implementation, training programs for joint governance, and seed funding for pilot sites that can demonstrate scalable outcomes will be critical so that a national model could then be adopted (NPCA 2024a; NPS 2024b).

Tying funding and authority to measurable outcomes, such as ecological indicators, governance equity metrics, and/or engagement metrics such as stakeholder satisfaction, as well as requiring periodic independent reviews of co-governance arrangements and publishable findings, is needed. Although this could make funding somewhat challenging, such measures are critical to prevent funding and staffing removals during times of political chaos, and to leverage best management practices of PPAs into the future. Together, these legal, organizational, and fiscal reforms would convert



Moving forward, place-based conservation should champion shared sovereignty, durable legal protections, institutional redesign, and funding stability.

promising co-governance experiments into the norm in future place-based conservation, thereby becoming capable of withstanding political assaults while improving ecological and social outcomes for all.

POLITICAL STRATEGY AND COALITION BUILDING

Such refoundation could be met with initial unease, because it asks for both stronger legal protections and a redistribution of authority. There is a certain degree of resistance to be expected, from three sources. First, bureaucratic inertia within agencies often resists changes that alter chains of command or require new capacities (Lockwood 2010). Second, partisan actors who view federal land management as a site of cultural contest will most likely oppose reforms that constrain executive discretion or shift narratives about history and science. Third, private interests that profit from extractive uses or regulatory uncertainty will likely lobby against statutory protections and stable funding. Historical grievances and mistrust also complicate coalition building; for example, Marginalized and Indigenous communities may be reluctant to engage because of past dispossession and exclusion from resource management and decision-making with federal partners (Kosek 2006; Finney 2014).

To remedy these issues, framing co-governance as a bipartisan solution that advances public safety, economic resilience, and local stewardship would combine principled reform with broad, practical coalitions. Additionally, this would emphasize job creation from restoration projects, improve visitor experiences that boost local economies, and reduce litigation costs due to clearer governance. Local champions, such as Tribal leaders, county officials, and park superintendents, should be recruited at the forefront of such efforts as they can demonstrate pilot successes like the Miccosukee co-stewardship in the Everglades and the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary (Ding 2024; NPS 2024d). Using non-governmental organization or academic partnerships to provide independent evaluation and translation of Traditional Ecological Knowledge into policy-relevant evidence without erasing its cultural form will be key in ensuring future mandates are adhered to (Nadasdy

2003). For example, start with pilot projects that codify co-management clauses, document ecological and social outcomes, and then scale up through model legislation and targeted appropriations. Where Congress is slow, pursue executive action and agency rule-making to institutionalize co-stewardship while working in parallel to secure statutory change. Investing in public communications that highlight shared stewardship successes at places like Canyon de Chelly and beyond to normalize co-governance as both practical and patriotic, especially during these unprecedented times, may be enough to propel PPAs into a more sustainable future (NPS 2024a).

RISKS, VULNERABILITIES, AND METRICS FOR SUCCESS

Refoundation carries real risks that must be acknowledged and mitigated. Co-governance can be reduced to tokenism if agreements are symbolic rather than binding. Informal arrangements dependent on goodwill are vulnerable to political rollback, executive discretion, and funding shortfalls. Undercompensating knowledge holders reproduces extractive dynamics by asking communities to contribute expertise without payment or capacity building (Nadasdy 2003). Legal uncertainty is another vulnerability: co-stewardship that lacks statutory backing can be overturned or ignored in litigation. Unequal capacity among communities can produce uneven outcomes, leaving some groups marginalized even within co-governance frameworks (Kosek 2006).

To manage these risks, we must adopt clear metrics and monitoring systems. For example, legal durability can be measured by the number of statutory co-stewardship clauses enacted and by the presence of procedural standing for co-managers in rulemaking. Funding stability can be tracked by the share of core stewardship budgets protected through dedicated appropriations or trust funds. Governance equity should be assessed with indicators such as the proportion of joint decisions, compensation paid to Traditional Ecological Knowledge holders, and participation rates across demographic groups. Ecological outcomes should use standard resource condition indicators, for example air quality trends in the Great Smoky Mountains, where



Framing co-governance as a bipartisan solution that advances public safety, economic resilience, and local stewardship would combine principled reform with broad, practical coalitions.

cross-sector partnerships have aligned actions with the Clean Air Act (NPS 2024b; USGS 2024). Finally, measuring community impact and legitimacy through periodic independent surveys and independent reviews of dispute resolution outcomes, where funding and authority are tied to these metrics so that co-governance arrangements that fail to meet basic legal, fiscal, and equity thresholds are reformed.

INTERNATIONAL IMPLICATIONS AND SCALING

The Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary highlights how Indigenous partners can be included from the outset of designation and planning, and the Miccosukee agreements in the Everglades demonstrate how formal co-management can help correct long histories of exclusion and create durable local custodianship (Ding 2024; NPS 2024d). By codifying model costewardship clauses, protecting scientific integrity, and securing predictable funding, the United States can offer legislative and administrative templates that other nations can adapt and adopt to meet their needs. Comparative models from countries with longer histories of statutory Indigenous rights and co-management can inform US design choices (e.g., Canada), and international partnerships can provide technical assistance, comparative evaluation, and support for transboundary conservation challenges. Elevating Indigenous leadership in US protected areas positions the United States to be a credible partner in Indigenous-led conservation initiatives worldwide (Borrini-Feyerabend et al. 2012; NPR 2024). In time, hopefully the US will facilitate a reciprocal sharing of this knowledge beyond national boundaries as part of an organizational learning effort with other governing systems.

CONCLUSION AND CALL TO ACTION

The urgency of refoundation is immediate within US PPAs. Incremental adjustments and a return to the status quo will not protect these landscapes from future political failures, nor will they address the structural

inequities embedded within existing systems of governance. This essay proposes a set of interlocking pathways forward:

1. Legal changes that establish statutory co-stewardship and co-governance authority, safeguard scientific integrity and interpretation, and grant procedural standing to co-managers;
2. Institutional changes that create more resilient Tribal liaison offices, joint management boards, and formal dispute-resolution mechanisms; and
3. Fiscal changes that secure predictable appropriations, establish conservation trust funds, and compensate community members and Traditional Ecological Knowledge holders for their expertise and contributions.

The path forward begins with action at manageable scales. State-level and site-specific pilot programs can test co-management frameworks, codify model governance provisions, and generate evidence for broader implementation. Coupled with independent evaluation and dedicated statutory drafting efforts, these initiatives can lay the groundwork for meaningful legislative and institutional transformation.

Refoundation will not be simple. It requires governments, conservation organizations, Indigenous groups, scientists, and local communities to share authority in ways that challenge longstanding assumptions about who governs, whose knowledge counts, and what conservation should achieve. Yet the alternative, and our current reality of maintaining systems, remains vulnerable to political instability, exclusion, and declining public trust. By embracing co-governance and co-management, we have a novel opportunity to rebuild and better protect our conserved areas in ways that are not only ecologically resilient, but also more just, legitimate, and capable of serving future generations.

Lydia A. Kiewra is a PhD candidate in Sustainable Tourism and Protected Areas Management at Michigan State University, and serves as a graduate student representative to the George Wright Society Board of Directors.

REFERENCES

- Borrini-Feyerabend, G., J. Johnston, and D. Pansky. 2012. Governance of protected areas. In *Managing Protected Areas: A Global Guide*. M. Lockwood, G. Worboys, and A. Kothari, eds. London: Routledge, 146–175.
- Ding, J. 2024. Chumash people in California to co-steward marine sanctuary in historic partnership. *The Associated Press News*, January 22. <https://apnews.com/article/marine-sanctuary-chumash-indigenous-california-tribes-9f38e061464c14473c5da6e11a17cb3f>
- Dovers, S. 2005. *Environment and Sustainability Policy: Creation, Implementation, Evaluation*. Alexandria, NSW, Australia: Federation Press, *Evaluation*, 174–182.

Finney, C. 2014. *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Fish and Wildlife Act. 1956. 16 USC § 742a et seq.

Gokhale, Y., R. Velankar, M.S. Chandran, and M. Gadgil. 1998. Sacred woods, grasslands and waterbodies as self-organized systems of conservation. In *Conserving the Sacred: For Biodiversity Management*. P.S. Ramakrishnan, K.G. Saxena, and U.M. Chandrashekara, eds. New Delhi: Oxford and IBH Publishing, 365–396.

Graham, J., B. Amos, and T.W. Plumptre. 2003. *Governance Principles for Protected Areas in the 21st Century*. Ottawa: Institute on Governance, 1–2.

Howlett, M., and J. Rayner. 2006. Convergence and divergence in ‘new governance’ arrangements: Evidence from European integrated natural resource strategies. *Journal of Public Policy* 26: 167–189. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0143814X06000511>

Kosek, J. 2006. *Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Lockwood, M. 2010. Good governance for terrestrial protected areas: A framework, principles, and performance outcomes. *Journal of Environmental Management* 91(3): 754–766. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2009.10.005>

Lockwood, M., J. Davidson, A. Curtis, E. Stratford, and R. Griffith, R. 2010. Governance principles for natural resource management. *Society and Natural Resources* 23(10): 986–1001. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920802178214>

Nadasdy, P. 2003. *Hunters and Bureaucrats: Power, Knowledge, and Aboriginal-State Relations in the Southwest Yukon*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.

NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration]. 2024. Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary. <https://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/chumash-heritage/>

National Park Service Organic Act. 1916. 16 USC § 1 et seq.

NPCA [National Parks Conservation Association]. 2024a. Clearing the air in the Smokies. <https://www.npca.org/articles/3777-clearing-the-air-in-the-smokies>

NPCA. 2024b. Parks group lauds historic Tribal co-stewardship agreement at Everglades National Park. <https://www.npca.org/articles/4799-parks-group-lauds-historic-tribal-costewardship-agreement-at-everglades>

NPR [National Public Radio]. 2024. The U.S. gets a new national marine sanctuary, the first led by a Tribe. <https://www.npr.org/2024/10/13/nx-s1-5147914/the-u-s-gets-a-new-national-marine-sanctuary-the-first-led-by-a-tribe>

NPS [US National Park Service]. 2022a. National Park Service issues new policy guidance to strengthen Tribal co-stewardship of national park lands and waters. <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1207/national-park-service-issues-new-policy-guidance-to-strengthen-tribal-co-stewardship-of-national-park-lands-and-waters.htm>

NPS. 2024a. Canyon de Chelly National Monument Arizona (Learn about the park). <https://www.nps.gov/cach/learn/historyculture/index.htm>

NPS. 2024b. Air quality, Great Smoky Mountains National Park. <https://www.nps.gov/grsm/learn/nature/air-quality.htm>

NPS. 2024c. Meet the managers: Air quality monitoring. <https://www.nps.gov/grsm/learn/nature/dff509-meet.htm>

NPS. 2024d. Fact Sheet: Recent National Park Service work with Indian Country.
<https://www.nps.gov/articles/nov2024-indiancountryfactsheet.htm>

NPS. 2024e. Co-Stewardship Agreement between National Park Service and Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida.
<https://www.nps.gov/ever/learn/management/co-stewardship-miccosukee-tribe.htm>

Ramakrishnan, P.S., K.G. Saxena, and U.M. Chandrashekara, eds. 1998. *Conserving the Sacred: For Biodiversity Management*. New Delhi: Oxford and IBH Publishing.

Scott, J.C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Transfer Act. 1905. 33 Stat. 628; 16 USC §§ 472, 524, 554.

USGS [US Geological Survey]. 2024. National Atmospheric Deposition Program (NADP).
<https://www.usgs.gov/mission-areas/water-resources/science/national-atmospheric-deposition-program-nadp>

US Department of the Interior. 2021. Secretarial Order No. 3403, Joint Secretarial Order on fulfilling the trust responsibility to Indian Tribes in the stewardship of federal lands and waters. <https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/elips/documents/so-3403-joint-secretarial-order-on-fulfilling-the-trust-responsibility-to-indian-tribes-in-the-stewardship-of-federal-lands-and-waters.pdf>

Wilderness Act. 1964. 16 USC §§ 1131–1136.