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Author

Reynolds, Michael T.

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



Managing Parks and Protected Resources with Resilient Diversity in an Era of Changing Government

MICHAEL T. REYNOLDS

I. IMPERATIVE FOR CHANGE

I have a lifelong connection with the US national parks, Yosemite National Park in particular. The granite walls and thundering waterfalls of Yosemite Valley shaped everything I understood about permanence in my childhood and in my early career. We were told, and we believed, that the laws of the land, like the National Park Service (NPS) Organic Act, with its mandate to preserve these places unimpaired for future generations, was as enduring as the granite walls of Yosemite itself. I held onto that thought throughout a 40-year career in NPS.

But that faith has been tested in ways I did not think possible these past few months. Thousands of experienced and dedicated professionals in NPS who built careers with the intent of passing a stronger system to the next generation have been driven out. The legal architecture surrounding the National Environmental Policy Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, and the Antiquities Act—laws that are foundational to NPS—took generations to construct; all have been treated as obstacles and tested in court. Funding for parks has been slashed.

This essay raises ideas for a more resilient future to manage our nation's parks and heritage. As is the case for nature and culture, an argument can be made for a diverse ecosystem of institutions: government, philanthropic, cooperative, non-profit, and civic, each holding a piece of the stewardship mission. No single one indispensable, all of them mutually reinforcing.

II. DIVERSITY OF INSTITUTIONS FOR STRENGTH AND RESILIENCE

Conservation biology teaches us that monocultures are fragile. The same logic can be applied to institutional design.

America's public lands stewardship system is, in governance terms, a near-monoculture. Through NPS and other bureaus, the federal government manages and funds the overwhelming majority of the mission. When that government is well-funded, scientifically serious, and committed to its mandate, the system works remarkably well. When it is not, the system has vulnerabilities and is subject to funding decisions that are inconsistent and almost random on four-year increments.

This does not suggest weakening federal ownership. The parks must remain in public hands permanently; the Organic Act untouched. NPS is a critical institution supported and loved by Americans for over 100 years. But there needs to be more resilience in protection. I suggest three pillars, each filling a distinct niche, to complement the current model of near-exclusive federal government control:

- Create a new Department of Conservation and Heritage (DCH), either by carving out from the Department of the Interior the bureaus with preservation missions or replacing Interior outright. This provides the mission backbone and retains ultimate accountability to Congress and the public.
- Create an independent national trust entity that can hold long-term investment and management mandates insulated from annual appropriations and political cycles. The trust would have a board of directors with accountable members.
- Establish non-profit concession operators whose entire commercial revenues recirculate directly into the resource.

III. RATIONALIZING THE GOVERNMENT FRAMEWORK

America currently manages its natural and cultural heritage through agencies spread across multiple cabinet departments: NPS, Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, and others, each operating under its own organic legislation, budget cycle, and political principal. The result is a system structurally challenged for integrated stewardship, or at a minimum, is vulnerable to quick and politically driven swings in funding and priorities that are inconsistent with cycles of managing natural places or the preservation of history.

The creation of a new DCH would represent a consequential and generational reorganization of federal land and resource management and science. It would create a single accountable cabinet-level voice for natural and cultural heritage, science, and stewardship and allow the kind of cross-agency science and planning that the current fragmented system prevents. Stewardship must be a national priority. NPS could be a key agency in DCH with its more integrated way of managing the nation's heritage and conservation resources becoming a model for the other bureaus.

Any honest accounting of what a reorganized federal framework could contribute goes well beyond the

designated conservation units themselves. NPS carries statutory responsibility for implementing the National Historic Preservation Act across all federal agencies and to states and localities. It oversees the National Heritage Area System. NPS has the National Trails, National Wild and Scenic Rivers, the Land and Water Conservation Fund's (LWCF) state assistance programs, and a suite of Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance programs that bring federal partnership to communities across the country. These cooperative and collaborative programs are not secondary to the NPS mission; in many respects they are its broadest reach, touching landscapes, communities, and heritage resources that no park unit boundary could ever encompass. They have been chronically underfunded and could be critical community conservation multipliers. The LWCF state assistance side, the heritage area system, the trails and rivers programs are precisely the kind of multi-governmental, cooperative stewardship mechanisms that a distributed institutional model is designed to strengthen, not absorb or eliminate. They would be elevated as Congress intended with a new DCH.

IV. AN INDEPENDENT NATIONAL TRUST: THE FIREWALL MODEL

Federal ownership of public lands should be non-negotiable. But federal ownership and politically vulnerable federal management are not the same thing. The current crisis has proven that management can be catastrophically disrupted by a single administration, a single budget resolution, or a single ideologically driven appointment.

The solution is not to remove management from the public sphere; it is to insulate it from partisan political cycles through a distributed institutional structure. The precedents are already here.

The Presidio Trust, established by Congress in 1996 to manage the former Army base in San Francisco, is an instructive proof of concept. Created as a federal government corporation with a mission-driven board of directors, the Trust was required to become financially self-sufficient by 2013—a goal it met. By fiscal year 2025 it was generating over \$230 million in earned revenue annually, reinvesting 100% of its net operating income

into Golden Gate National Recreation Area, the park of which the Presidio is a part, and had leveraged more than \$750 million in private investment since its founding. It operated without annual federal appropriations while remaining a federal entity, fully accountable to Congress and open to the public without charge.

The Presidio model demonstrates that an independent federal corporation, properly structured, can be both self-sustaining and deeply public in character.

The United Kingdom's (UK's) National Trust, founded in 1895, is Europe's largest conservation charity. With over 5.3 million members, an annual income exceeding \$907 million, and stewardship responsibility for more than 618,000 acres of farmland, 890 miles of coastline, and 500 historic properties, it operates almost entirely independently of government. Its governance is democratic in the most direct sense: the board of trustees is overseen by a council of which half are directly elected by the membership, and members may propose and vote on motions at the annual general meeting. The organization is not immune to controversy, but its independence from government appropriations and its mass membership base make it structurally resistant to political capture in ways that federal agencies simply are not.

The National Trust for Scotland operates on a similar model, with trustees directly elected by members who must themselves be Trust members. Both Trusts operate independently of government, but constructive working relationships have developed a unique system over time. These can be models worth adapting alongside the current philanthropic organizations already supporting parks.

I propose an American Park Stewardship Trust chartered by Congress as a public benefit corporation with a board of trustees drawn from three streams: representatives nominated through the philanthropy and conservancy ecosystem (organizations like the National Park Foundation, regional conservancies, and friends groups would hold seats proportional to their investment and demonstrated stewardship record); a public nomination



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process giving civil society organizations, Tribal Nations, and local communities the ability to propose trustees; and a set of seats reserved for scientific and cultural heritage expertise, nominated by the National Academy of Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Senate confirmation of all trustees would provide democratic accountability.

The Park Stewardship Trust could hold long-term management authority over designated natural lands and wilderness areas within the new DCH structure, and be empowered to accept philanthropic gifts, issue conservation bonds, enter into long-term partnership agreements, and maintain a multi-year capital investment fund. The annual appropriations process as a mechanism for long-lived infrastructure stewardship has proven to be problematic. The Park Stewardship Trust model offers a structural path out of that trap. It could also complement NPS-authorized programs that often match funds.

The National Park Foundation and dozens of park friends groups and conservancies nationwide are doing extraordinary work, but they operate as fundraising and program delivery partners, not as governance entities as well with membership-elected boards and civic ownership of the mission.

A consolidated Park Stewardship Trust, drawing on the UK model, could become the civic institution that binds together the philanthropic, cooperative, and government structures described above. A membership of millions would not only generate sustainable revenue; it would create a constituency for public lands stewardship that crosses political lines, because it is built on direct personal connection to place rather than on partisan identity.

Public lands are among the most tangible expressions of American culture and common ownership. They are places that a family from any zip code, any background, any income level can experience and connect to their many stories and lessons, knowing that these lands belong to everyone.

The Park Stewardship Trust model could be designed to enhance this connection to people and transcend the federal-versus-local argument that has often made public land management controversial. By giving communities, conservancies, friends groups, and Tribal Nations genuine governance roles, the Park Stewardship Trust could create stakeholder investment across a wide political spectrum.

V. NON-PROFIT CONCESSIONAIRES: RECIRCULATING THE REVENUE

Every year, concessionaires operating inside national parks generate hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue from the privilege of providing commercial access to and services within America's most beloved places. Under the current system, a fraction of that revenue flows back to NPS while the bulk leaves the National Park System entirely, enriching private corporations at the public's expense.

Benefitting NPS and the new Park Stewardship Trust, all NPS concession franchises should be restructured as non-profit entities supporting the parks completely. These entities would retain the operational expertise and hospitality talent of their predecessors, but would be structured so that net revenues, after operating costs, capital reinvestment, and reasonable reserves, flow directly to the park through the Park Stewardship Trust. Friends groups and park conservancies would be eligible to hold governance seats on these non-profit concessionaire boards, creating direct alignment between visitor experience, operational quality, and conservation re-investment. The Park Stewardship Trust itself could manage retained revenues on behalf of the parks and places.

This is not a radical idea. The model exists in the non-profit hospital sector, in community development financial institutions, in the cooperative grocery and utility sectors, and in the public radio and television ecosystem. What it requires is the institutional will to insist, at the moment current concession contracts expire, that the public's lands deserve a public return and to take on a byzantine set of laws around concessions in NPS.



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VI. WHAT THESE PLACES ARE FOR—AND WHAT WE OWE THEM

It is worth pausing, in the midst of structural argument, to remember why any of this matters.

All of the above describes what could be built. But the parks and the people who care for them need help today. Whatever administration follows must immediately undertake a restoration of the National Park Service to operational health: re-instating the thousands of employees driven out; restoring the science and data infrastructure that has been dismantled; lifting political censorship of interpretation, science, and history; and re-establishing where lost the collaborative relationships with Tribal Nations, academic institutions, and non-profit partners that have been severed. This is not a return to the status quo; it is a bridge to Refoundation and new models.

The idea of setting aside land not for extraction, not for private wealth, not for the advantage of any single class or generation, but for the permanent benefit of all people was, when it was first proposed, genuinely radical. The Yosemite Grant of 1864, the establishment of Yellowstone in 1872, the NPS Organic Act of 1916: these were acts of institutional imagination and gifts to the people. The United States invented the democratic park, the place that belongs to everyone. That invention inspired the world.

Parks have an economic reality as well. National parks alone generate more than \$50 billion in economic output annually and support nearly 400,000 jobs in gateway communities across the country. The return on the public investment in these places in tourism

dollars, in ecosystem services, and in climate resilience dwarfs what any private extraction could yield. Like any sound investment, it compounds with time rather than depleting.

A new institutional model, one that distributes the stewardship mission across a diverse ecosystem of government, trust, non-profit, and civic institutions, is not a retreat from that founding vision. It is its logical extension.

The granite walls of Yosemite will still be standing when the current political moment is a footnote. The question is whether the institutions we build now will still be standing with them and supporting them. As the NPS Organic Act requires, leaving them unimpaired for the generations that come after us is the core mission. We know how to do this. We have the models, the precedents, the partners, and the knowledge. What is required now is the courage to act beyond the horizon of the immediate, on behalf of people not yet born, for places that have no voice of their own.

The lands and resources themselves are older than the nation. The stories they hold, of geological time, of Indigenous and later people who fought to protect them, of the struggles and triumph of a nation and its people, are not the property of any administration. They are the common inheritance of a democracy that has not yet finished becoming what it promised to be. It is our story unfolding. We owe future generations a system that is resilient so parks, trails, history and waters remain so. The brilliance of their creation could be the long luminescence of our future.

Michael T. Reynolds has worked to achieve place-based conservation in a variety of positions over a long career.