

UC Berkeley

Parks Stewardship Forum

Title

Refoundation: Opportunity Out of Chaos

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6k358730>

Journal

Parks Stewardship Forum, 42(3)

Author

Reynolds, John

Publication Date

2026-09-14

DOI

10.5070/P5.69176

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



Refoundation: Opportunity Out of Chaos

JOHN REYNOLDS

Recent actions by the current administration have proven that the current structure supporting the systems of federal public lands and waters is far more easily bypassed and undermined than ever before imagined. The effects on the management of the agencies involved—their highly committed workforce decimated and despondent—and on the lands, waters, and air themselves, which seemingly had been well protected, are vivid and shockingly apparent.

The foundation is now crumbling and becoming largely ineffective, the result of a Unitary Executive and a politically complicit Congress that care mostly about power, money, and personal aggrandizement. In the process, they are upending concern for the environment and damaging the breadth and depth of our national experiment in democracy. Most recently, the Supreme Court has added the insult of making it almost impossible for citizens or advocacy organizations to have standing to bring suit.

“We the People” have been and are continuing to be blindsided.

A Refoundation of our national aspirations regarding our environment, coupled with a return to a full, honest reckoning with our richly varied history, is critically needed. They require a recommitment of the people of the nation.

What is refoundation?

Refoundation is an opportunity. An opportunity to reflect seriously on what we value most, what experience has taught us, what today’s political and judicial chaos means, what future climate and environmental disruption means. And then, in turn, what foundations of environmental protection and historic preservation are needed for the future.

Part of such reflection includes actively valuing the successes that gave us the foundations we have inherited from our predecessors’ commitments and actions. We owe past leaders of conservation and preservation activism our lasting thanks.

Refoundation is an opportunity to rethink, rebuild, and in many cases, reimagine a future framework for conservation and preservation.

The work will be hard, and perhaps often frustrating. We will have to realize and grapple with the seriousness of immensely complex problems, such as climate change and our highly partisan political and judicial environment,

to name but two. But the opportunity is there to take, and the shape of the future is deeply dependent on taking it.

Refoundation is, then:

- A critical look at the foundational laws and principles of the past, deciding what to keep, what to enhance, and what new ones to build.
- A new, solid, legal basis for conservation and preservation in the United States for federal lands and waters and as a basis for assistance to others (e.g., other nations, states, local jurisdictions, and privately protected areas such as those run by land trusts).
- A forward-looking concept and set of actions that prepare the ground for additional places and practices to reflect the country’s evolving aspirations.
- A process built on facts, tenets, and principles that anticipates the assaults on our environment as they are factually projected to be, not what we have believed them to be in the past.
- A relearning of and recommitment to civics literacy, critical thinking, and civic engagement. These are the cornerstones of our success as a nation in the past, and the key to greater successes in the future.
- A moral and ethical commitment to the future of conservation and preservation and to the benefit of future generations, at home and abroad.

Of utmost importance, it is discerning the benefits of land management for conservation and historic preservation, and building a new societal vision for retaining and strengthening them.

It is building a broadened and more fully representative commitment of all of our people.

It is creating an “ecosystem of diversity” in ways that allows everyone to feel welcome to organize and act.

It is respecting and including all who care, including Tribal Nations, all levels of our government,

international organizations, academia, and for-profit and non-profit organizations of many kinds.

It is learning about successful conservation and preservation models and structures in use today in a myriad of places, both here in the United States and elsewhere.

It is creating new legal and operating structures far less vulnerable to single-source power.

The opportunity to refound and move forward awaits. It is in the hands of “We the People” to take.

Yes, it is a big job, a hard job, and in the end a job based on a moral and ethical caring for generations yet unborn, caring for all life, and caring for the culture of the future.

It is all worth doing.

John Reynolds was born to a Yellowstone ranger and his wife, and had a 39-year National Park Service career.