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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



Renewing the US National Park Service's International Mission

JONATHAN PUTNAM

The 250th birthday of the United States has stimulated a great amount of discussion and debate regarding the founding ideals of our nation and the extent to which it has (and often has not) lived up to those ideals over its

history. Despite acknowledging our nation's shortcomings, there has been broad (if not quite so universal anymore) agreement that it is those ideals which define us and continue to serve as a guiding star and a measuring stick for progress toward a more perfect union.

I see the US National Park Service (NPS) in a similar light—the agency's organic act, subsequent legislation, management policies, and official mission statement and values have together formed an organization with one of the most noble missions (or set of ideals) of any in the world, including a specific call to work internationally. Over more than a century, NPS's record of living up to its mission is mixed, but having that North Star nonetheless has proven essential in guiding the agency, its leadership, and employees, making it the pride of the US and envy of the world. Much like the US as a whole, the NPS mission and ideals are now challenged by an administration that has frequently shown itself to be at best lukewarm in supporting fundamental American and NPS values. More than most government agencies, NPS and the United States are inextricably linked in the world's eyes: much as NPS has served to enhance the American brand, the perception of the United States internationally impacts the extent to which NPS can be viewed as a global leader. As bad as so much is now, I have to believe at some point there will be an opportunity to rebuild; doing so will require a concerted effort to reset NPS. In my most optimistic moments, I believe that the current crisis, which has led to numerous initiatives to reimagine the future of conservation at home and abroad, could ultimately bring NPS closer to its highest ideals than ever before.

For my entire career, I have worked to promote both US and NPS ideals at home and abroad—as a park ranger, Peace Corps volunteer, US Army soldier, environmental specialist with the US Agency for International Development, and, for nearly 25 years, in a variety of positions, including acting chief, with the NPS Office of International Affairs (OIA). Though little known (even inside NPS), OIA was established in 1962 by Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall at the First World Parks Congress (also initiated by NPS) to advance international cooperation between NPS and park agencies across the world. It was the first official program focused on international conservation created by the United States

government. Over its first three decades, OIA facilitated NPS's leadership in the global parks community: among much else, the NPS International Seminar trained over 1,200 park managers (and many thousands of international volunteers) from across the globe, an NPS partnership with Peace Corps provided critical technical assistance to scores of protected areas, and NPS played key roles in the development of the World Heritage Convention and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Man and the Biosphere program.

By the time I joined OIA in 2001, its staff and budget were shadows of what they were at its height in the 1960s–1990s, but nonetheless I and my OIA colleagues all believed we had some of the very best jobs in NPS and indeed in the entire US government. Through OIA, NPS continued to advance the causes of nature conservation, historic preservation, and outdoor recreation around the world, while simultaneously promoting many other US interests and American values with international partners—a textbook example of American “soft power.” Representing what some describe as “America's best idea,” (and without a doubt representing many of America's most important places, stories, and values), NPS was much sought after by US Ambassadors, other Embassy and State Department staff (and many other US government partners), other nations' park agencies and embassies, and by international organizations such as the World Bank and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for support and assistance.

We in OIA stressed, though, that international cooperation has always been a two-way street: NPS and the United States have gained as much as we have shared with other countries. NPS has learned from and adopted practices of many other park agencies across the globe over the last century—ranging from the very concept of the ranger naturalist/interpreter (learned from Switzerland) to the All-Taxa Biodiversity Inventory (Costa Rica) to the Healthy Parks, Healthy People initiative (Australia).

OVERLEAF The USNPS Office of International Affairs oversaw the US's involvement in the World Heritage program, including the nomination of Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, which was accepted in July 2026, becoming the nation's 27th World Heritage Site. It is unclear how the US will handle its legal obligations under the World Heritage Convention in the future. GEORGE GENTRY/US FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE

Even before the second Trump administration, though, NPS's international leadership had been on the decline for at least 25 years. OIA's budget continued to shrink relative to the overall NPS budget (and became far smaller than similar programs in the US Forest Service and US Fish and Wildlife Service), staffing was cut from over 20 to only 6 permanent employees, the International Seminar and Peace Corps partnerships were discontinued, and OIA's support from the top leadership of the Department of the Interior (DOI) and NPS ranged from moral—if not financial or legislative—support to outright skepticism, occasionally bordering on hostility. As DOI's international programs grew, it was frequently at the expense of NPS's ability to lead globally. NPS's engagement with the World Heritage Convention and (to a lesser extent) the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Program (in which the NPS Natural Resources Stewardship and Science program had the lead) continued, but with less support than in earlier eras. Proposals prepared by OIA for congressional legislation authorizing and encouraging NPS to work internationally (an authority long held by the US Forest Service and US Fish and Wildlife Service) never made it very far with NPS leadership—they were always among the first legislative proposals cut from NPS's congressional packages.

In spite of these challenges, OIA and its partners in NPS and elsewhere continued to provide a high level of service to both domestic and global conservation—numerous sites were successfully nominated and inscribed on the World Heritage List, NPS staff provided immensely important technical assistance to international colleagues around the globe, and NPS continued to learn from the global parks community.

And then of course came the second Trump administration and DOGE, the self-styled Department of Government Efficiency. After over 60 years (approximately the same age as USAID, also sent to the wood chipper), OIA was abolished, with what remained of its functions consolidated into DOI. All but one of OIA's staff “voluntarily” retired

(with a metaphorical gun of likely layoffs understood as the other option). Any chance of transitioning to new staff was also eliminated. As of today, there is nobody left in the US government with any experience in World Heritage, a US treaty obligation, with decades of institutional memory of NPS's international activities having been wiped out in a few days.

SO WHAT NOW?

To state the obvious, nearly all of what follows assumes a supportive administration, from the White House to the Department of the Interior to the National Park Service. While DOI maintains some of its international role, including a staff member who serves as a “liaison” for NPS international activities, NPS no longer has a dedicated international office responsible for advancing a key component of the decades-old NPS mission highlighting its global reach: “The National Park Service cooperates with partners to extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout this country and *around the world*.”

The key steps to renew NPS's international role include the following:

1) Re-Establish the NPS Office of International Affairs

A rededication to that global mission will require a lot of work, starting with the re-establishment of the Office of International Affairs within NPS.

While I would not expect (though would welcome!) NPS to bring back an OIA of over 20 people (as it once had), to truly be effective in carrying out NPS's international mission will require an office of at least 10 professionals, with expertise in protected area management, historic preservation, foreign languages, and regional knowledge as well as the World Heritage Convention—a very specialized program which requires specific expertise. These positions will be highly attractive opportunities and should receive significant interest from potential applicants in and outside NPS.



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After decades of decline—even before DOGE—OIA’s budget will also need to be increased to be able to more fully accomplish the international mission. For the last 20 years, OIA’s budget was barely sufficient to cover the staff’s salary and benefits, with essentially nothing left to actually carry out technical assistance or other international projects. Below I will delve into some of the areas where a more robust NPS international program could focus.

2) Congressional Authority for NPS’s International Mission

While NPS has always been able to point to a variety of existing legislation to authorize its international work—particularly regarding World Heritage—and the reference to that work in its mission statement, it lacks the explicit congressional authority (and encouragement) held by similar programs in the US Fish and Wildlife Service and US Forest Service. Proposed legislation has been drafted previously and could easily be updated as appropriate and re-submitted for consideration by Congress, but seeing it through will need a more serious commitment by NPS and DOI leadership. Supporting the international promotion of “America’s best idea” should not be controversial nor partisan!

3) Develop and fund NPS-Managed International Technical Assistance and Exchange Programs

With a more robust international budget (even if still only a fraction of what other US government agencies have had for international work), a new NPS OIA could be strategic and proactive in how it works internationally, as opposed to the more reactive paradigm under which I worked for most of my time with the office—with limited exceptions, we could only respond to what other entities were proposing, rather than developing activities of most interest to NPS and its mission. While NPS should always welcome opportunities to support international activities proposed by other US government partners, other countries, international organizations, NGOs, and individuals (including retired NPS staff with international interests), it is vital that NPS be able to prioritize projects of direct benefit to itself.

Shared migratory wildlife species populations, climate change, transboundary pollution, wildlife disease, and invasive species are just a few examples of the many issues that cross international borders and have a major impact on the health of the US National Park System. Establishing a dedicated funding source for international technical assistance would allow NPS to proactively address the most significant international threats to the health of the US park system. This funding would enable NPS to focus its international technical assistance on priority geographic and thematic areas, responding to issues of mutual concern. Working with other parts of NPS, OIA would develop strategic priorities for international assistance.

As noted in the National Park Conservation Association’s Second Century Commission report, “The future of many park resources depends more on what happens outside of the United States than on park management within the national park system itself.” Providing targeted technical assistance to non-US parks on issues of shared interest is therefore a critical step in enabling NPS to fulfill its mission of preserving the National Park System and its resources unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.

4) Resume the NPS–Peace Corps Partnership

For over 30 years, NPS and the Peace Corps collaborated closely on protected area and related projects in dozens of countries. It has been described as among the most effective things the US government has done in international conservation, but was ended during a period of fiscal austerity in the early 2000s.

Somewhat miraculously, the Peace Corps has survived (so far) the cuts to foreign aid by the current administration. Even so, its applicants and activities have dropped significantly. NPS and the Peace Corps can both separately and together provide amazing service opportunities to a generation that frequently seems lost. A new emphasis on global conservation projects could help attract many young (and not so young) Americans who are looking for a way to con-



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tribute to our global biodiversity and climate change crises. It can also provide a pipeline of future employees for NPS and other federal conservation agencies.

5) NPS International Seminars and Capacity Building

The former NPS International Seminar (mentioned above) was among the flagship programs of OIA from the 1960s–1990s. OIA and partners began the development of a new international capacity building initiative in 2024 that would have focused on activities to support both NPS and international colleagues—recalling that NPS has as much to learn from the experience in other countries as we have to share with them. With the significant cuts to NPS over the last year, this approach will be only more important in the future as NPS staff will likely benefit even more from guidance from experienced park managers internationally.

6) Re-connect with the global conservation and heritage preservation communities

NPS has a long history of leadership in the global conservation and preservation communities, and while this was diminished even before DOGE, it is now essentially gone. Any attempt to revive NPS's international role must include active involvement with these organizations and initiatives, including in particular the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which the Trump administration specifically targeted by having the US government give up its long-standing membership. IUCN's many protected area initiatives long supported (until now) by NPS include the World Commission on Protected Areas, the World Protected Area Leaders Forum (started by NPS in 2000), the World Parks Congress, advice on World Heritage, and much more.

There are dozens of other global conservation and preservation initiatives relevant to NPS, including, for example, ICOMOS, the International Council on Monuments and Sites, and ICCROM, the International Council for the Protection and Restoration of Cultural Property, both important leaders in cultural heritage management. A new OIA should conduct its own review to advise NPS leadership on priority (re-) engagement opportunities.

Jonathan Putnam retired from NPS in 2025; he is currently involved with the World Commission on Protected Areas, US Biosphere Network, and Conservation Volunteers International Program.

7) Develop staff with World Heritage expertise

With the abolishment of OIA in 2025, the US government lost all of its institutional memory regarding the implementation of the World Heritage Convention within the United States—there is nobody left in the US government with any experience in preparing World Heritage nominations, moving such nominations through the bureaucracy, responding to World Heritage Committee concerns about existing US World Heritage Sites, etc. If the US is going to have any role with the World Heritage Convention in the future, there will need to be some development a new World Heritage team —preferably while some of the former OIA staff are still available to provide advice on the convention and its processes.

8) Biosphere Regions

The US Biosphere Network (USBN) is a group of 28 UNESCO Biosphere Regions (part of a global network of over 700 such areas) that work at land- and seascape levels to promote sustainable development compatible with nature conservation—where both humans and nature can thrive. While the current (and correct) approach of USBN is to move away from a US government-led network and focus more on NGOs, NPS and other federal agencies involved would benefit from providing more support to USBN both at home and abroad.

NPS, the US government, and the United States itself have all suffered significant damage in the last 18 months—with perhaps more to follow. But we need to be thinking now about how to rebuild, because that opportunity will come and it is essential to have ideas ready to go when it does.

At its most basic, NPS's mission is focused on (a) connecting Americans (and others) to the natural world, and (b) connecting them to their fellow Americans through a shared history. The international mission adds another key role: connecting Americans with the rest of the globe. This role, both through parks welcoming international visitors and through a new and improved OIA, will no doubt prove critical in helping to restore both NPS and our nation itself.