

Exploring the Future of Large Landscape Conservation

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White Mountain National Forest near the Town of Berlin, New Hampshire

James N. Levitt

In the tradition of previous conservation dialogues, a cross-sectoral, geographically diverse group of conservationists convened to seek a path forward—in concert with the Obama administration’s recently released report on *America’s Great Outdoors* (Council on Environmental Quality 2011), as well as myriad initiatives at the state and local level. Their goals were to advance collaboration on a large landscape scale among landowners, land managers, and citizens from the public, private, nonprofit, and academic sectors. They also sought to understand and expand on the example set by large landscape initiatives that are achieving measurable, durable conservation outcomes that will provide benefits for generations to come.

Just as we can now appreciate the revival of the White Mountains of New Hampshire from their barren, moonscape-like conditions around 1900 to their majestic, verdant stature today, twenty-second century Americans ought to be able to appreciate how our foresight in working across

property, jurisdictional, and even national boundaries has become a key element in the nation’s multigenerational effort to preserve essential sources of clean water, sustainably produced forest products, and expansive recreational opportunities.

Speakers’ Comments

The conference speakers emphasized the importance of sustained cooperation across many organizations and sectors to achieve lasting results. Proudly recounting how some two million acres of Maine forestland has been conserved over the past dozen years, Senator Susan Collins, Republican of Maine, reported that “we have done this by building a partnership among government at all levels, the forest products industry, environmental, forestry and recreation groups, and landowners. Through this partnership, we have been able to maintain or increase productivity for wood and harvest levels, supporting a diverse and robust forest products industry that employs tens of thousands of workers who produce paper, other wood products, and renewable energy. At the same time, we have been able to protect biodiversity, old growth and late

succession forest, and public access to recreation, and also increase opportunities for tourism” (Levitt and Chester 2011, 72).

Representatives Peter Welch, Democrat of Vermont, and Rush Holt, Democrat of New Jersey, each stressed the importance of perseverance in such efforts. Welch remarked on the value of sustaining land conservation budgets during the current round of budget negotiations. He reminded the audience that in 1864 President Abraham Lincoln took his attention off a monumental crisis—the Civil War—in order to sign a bill deeding the area of Yosemite to the state of California for public use and recreation. If Lincoln could create Yosemite in the midst of the Civil War, Welch asserted, we can do our part in a time of tight budgets and economic volatility.

Holt focused his remarks on achieving a long-standing promise to fully fund the federal and stateside portions of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), as well as a number of other legislative initiatives such as the Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act. Holt was emphatic in urging the conservation community to respond to the need for urgent action for our own sake, and for the sake of future generations. He reminded the audience of the admonition of President Lyndon Johnson, signer of the original LWCF legislation and the Wilderness Act in 1964: “If future generations are to remember us more with gratitude than sorrow,” said Johnson, “we must achieve more than just the miracles of technology. We must also leave them a glimpse of the world as it was created, not just as it looked when we got through with it” (Henry and Armstrong 2004, 123).

It was evident from the discussions that leaders from every sector stand ready to help implement the cooperative conservation aspirations of Collins, Welch, and Holt. Bob Bendick, director of U.S. government relations at The Nature Conservancy, stated that “the overall objective of AGO [America’s Great Outdoors] should be to create and sustain a national network of large areas of restored and conserved land, water, and coastlines around which Americans can build productive and healthy lives” (Levitt and Chester 2011, 74). Accordingly, Bendick shared with the assembled group his personal dream that someday his young granddaughters might, as adults, look out from the arch at the gateway to Yellowstone National Park and note that “all across America, 400 million people have been able

to arrange themselves and their activities across this remarkable country in a way that reconciles their lives with the power, grace, beauty and productivity of the land and water that ultimately sustain us all” (Levitt and Chester 2011, 75).

Will Shafroth, acting assistant secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks of the U.S. Department of Interior, and Harris Sherman, undersecretary for Natural Resources and Environment at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, shared their frank assessments of the current situation. Shafroth described the hard work and extensive comments that helped shape the *America’s Great Outdoors* report. While this work serves as a good foundation for the effort ahead, Shafroth noted that it takes considerable creativity and proactive thinking to sustain conservation momentum in these times of sharp budgetary constraints.

Sherman added that the whole idea of landscape-scale conservation implies that we need to move from performing random acts of conservation to more comprehensive and collaborative large-scale initiatives that engage many agencies and ownership types. Of particular importance, he noted, will be the outcome of the debate on the 2012 Farm Bill, because its conservation provisions will be critically important to the success of large-scale conservation efforts.

The enthusiasm for large landscape conservation on the part of speakers from large public and

Conservation Leadership Dialogue

On March 1, 2011, the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy hosted its tenth annual Conservation Leadership Dialogue with a focus on *The Future of Large Landscape Conservation in America*. The session was organized by James N. Levitt, a fellow at the Lincoln Institute, with support from Armando Carbonell, senior fellow and chair of the Department of Planning and Urban Form. Held in the Members of Congress Room of the Library of Congress, across the street from the U.S. Capitol in Washington, DC, the meeting took place on the 100th anniversary, to the day, of President William Howard Taft’s signing of the landmark legislation that allowed for creation of national forests in the eastern part of the country. The Weeks Act of 1911, named for Congressman (later Senator) John Wingate Weeks of Massachusetts, changed the nature of cooperative conservation involving citizens active in the public, private, nonprofit, academic, and research sectors in the United States.

nonprofit organizations was strongly reinforced by Jim Stone, a private landowner and ranch operator in Montana's Blackfoot Valley. Stone helped to start the Blackfoot Challenge, a grass-roots organization that has yielded impressive, measurable results over the last three decades using a landscape-scale approach.

Stone's colleague Jamie Williams of The Nature Conservancy explained that the Blackfoot Challenge has achieved remarkable success over the years because it has taken the time to engage so many landowners and partners in consensus-based approaches to conservation. Initial small successes were critical to building the foundation of trust that led to larger successes later (Williams 2011). In the area of stream restoration alone, the Blackfoot Challenge has helped to engage more than 200 landowners in some 680 projects involving 42 streams and 600 stream-miles that have contributed directly to an 800 percent increase in fish populations in the 1.5 million acre valley. Stone is emphatic in saying that, with the right people in the right places, what has been done in the Blackfoot region could be done across the nation.

Complementing the program was a panel of researchers and academic officials representing universities, colleges, and research institutions that are helping to catalyze large landscape initiatives. Matthew McKinney of the University of Montana moderated a dialogue with David Foster of Harvard Forest and Harvard University, Perry Brown of the University of Montana, and Karl Flessa of the University of Arizona. They explored how institutions, within their own walls and beyond, can use their analytic and convening capacities to advance initiatives with extensive impacts.

Perry Brown pointed out that those universities that will play a role in real-world conservation initiatives will not be insular, but rather will cherish their relationships with nonacademic partners such as Indian tribes, state and federal government agencies, and large national and small local nonprofits. David Foster reinforced that idea by describing the Harvard Forest's outreach efforts to develop and disseminate its recent report on *Wildlands and Woodlands New England* (Foster et al. 2009).

Large Landscape Cases

There are many exemplary cases of on-the-ground progress in large landscape conservation across the country from Maine to Montana and from South-

ern Arizona to Northern Florida. One of the longest operating and most important cases is in the ACE Basin in South Carolina's celebrated Lowcountry. The ACE Basin, comprised of some 350,000 acres that drain into the Ashepoo, Combahee, and South Edisto Rivers between Charleston and Beaufort, is one of the largest undeveloped estuaries along the U.S. Atlantic seaboard (figure 1).

In the late 1980s, a group of public, private, and nonprofit organizations banded together to form a partnership that would protect the remarkable scenic, wildlife, and water resources in the region. Among members of the ACE Basin Partnership are federal agencies such as the Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; state agencies including the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources; national nonprofits including The Nature Conservancy and Ducks Unlimited; local nonprofits including the Coastal Conservation League and the Lowcountry Open Land Trust; philanthropic organizations and individuals including the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation; and private interests such as MeadWestvaco Corporation.

Partnership members have conserved more than 134,000 acres, covering a contiguous core in the heart of the ACE Basin that stitches together easements on private land, a National Wildlife Refuge, South Carolina Wildlife Management Areas, and a Charleston County natural and historical interpretive center, among other properties.

As a large landscape initiative, the ACE Basin truly stands out from other efforts. Mark Robertson, the executive director of The Nature Conservancy in South Carolina, has noted that the effort "set a standard of how to get conservation done on a large scale using collaboration between private landowners, conservation groups and government agencies." Asked about the significance of the progress in the ACE Basin to date, Dana Beach, director of the Coastal Conservation League, is emphatic: "It's real importance is that it has given many people for the first time hope that a place of great importance is not inevitably going to be developed" (Holleman 2008).

Next Steps

The leadership dialogue concluded with general agreement that there is a great deal of work to be done, as well as an historic opportunity to expand

on initial progress in the field of large landscape conservation. The discussion of next steps was organized to focus on four types of initiatives.

Policy Dialogues

There is a need for ongoing policy dialogue, both among conservationists in the public, private, nonprofit and academic sectors and between the conservation community and local, state and federal decision makers, regarding the very timely opportunities to realize landscape-scale conservation initiatives across the nation. The dialogue should celebrate existing success stories about both cultural and nature-oriented properties (both being highly valued by the public), consider ongoing regional conservation efforts, and envision new ones.

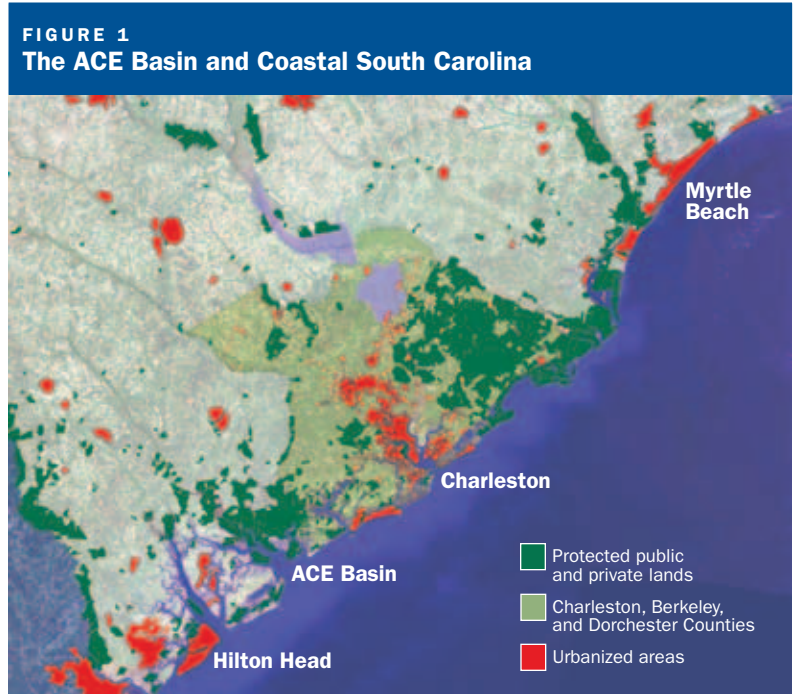
In the political sphere, these dialogues should connect with conservation caucuses at multiple layers of government (local, county, state, federal, and international). In nonprofit and academic contexts, the dialogue should reach across disciplines and institutional boundaries. Such intersectoral, interdisciplinary discussions are most likely to come up with creative solutions and novel ideas. While the dialogues may be able to take advantage of the socially neutral nature of universities as conveners, they nevertheless need to be responsive to the practical, on-the-ground issues of vital concern to field practitioners and landowners.

Research

Another immediate need is to build on existing maps and inventories (e.g., the Regional Plan Association's Northeast Landscape Partnership database) to offer a more comprehensive picture of existing public, private, and nonprofit initiatives. A more comprehensive overview of nationwide efforts should be of particular use to groups and networks working to advance the practice of large landscape conservation, including the Large Landscape Practitioners Network, a program of the Lincoln Institute, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs).

Such research efforts should be more regionally relevant and cost-effective if they involve cooperation among a wide assemblage of public and private organizations. They might also serve to augment environmental education initiatives that already are spread thin.

Additional research is also needed to measure the impacts, performance over time, and conserva-



Source: South Carolina Coastal Conservation League.

tion outcomes of landscape-scale initiatives, and to identify the key factors of success for initiatives that are able to show significant measurable results. Of particular importance is research that is able to identify where, when, and how certain efforts are able to yield measurably improved ecosystem services, such as improved water quality, increased wildlife populations, and enhanced sustainable production of forest products.

Networking

A number of large landscape networks have been created recently or are now emerging, including the Large Landscape Practitioners Network and the LCCs mentioned above. As they evolve, the networks are likely to nest within one another at larger and larger geographic scales, but they will also need to focus on sharing knowledge and building capacity at the local level to yield lasting results. Notwithstanding the need to be grounded in local realities, the networks have an opportunity to reach out to international partners with lessons to share. Within their own territories, large landscape conservation networks need to be linked to diverse constituencies, including philanthropists interested in landscape-scale conservation, university faculty and students, a range of public agencies, and, most importantly, property owners and land managers.

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Demonstration and Implementation

Given what are expected to be very tight constraints on new conservation programs at the federal, state, and local levels over the next few years, participants focused much of their attention on the creative use of existing budgets for landscape-scale conservation purposes. One noted the significant role that is already being played by the Department of Defense to conserve (and limit development on) lands adjacent to active military reservations. Such programs are now being used effectively to protect habitats and working lands from development and to limit landscape fragmentation. They also may be used in the future to address water supply protection issues. Another participant noted the potential significance of state and federal transportation budgets that could be used to mitigate the disruptive impact of new roads and highways.

Particularly enthusiastic support came from several participants for public-private-nonprofit partnerships that have a proven track record for protecting and enhancing locally valued natural and cultural resources to form the backbone for a regional green infrastructure. Examples include Santa Fe, New Mexico; the Chattahoochee/Apalachicola basin in Georgia, Mississippi, and Florida; the Crown of the Continent in Montana, Alberta, and British Columbia; and the New Jersey Highlands.

Additional opportunities for funding large landscape conservation initiatives include state incentives for private land protection that can be used to match selected federal programs (e.g., the matching monies required by funds provided by the North American Wetlands Conservation Act); community forest programs that are now gaining momentum around the nation; selected opportunities for foundation Program-Related Investments (PRIs); and emerging ecosystem service markets assisted by federal policy and public-private partnerships, including mitigation banking and statewide markets for carbon credits, such as those in California.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding evident federal budget constraints, myriad opportunities are available to pursue conservation projects that are expansive in scale, extensive in scope, able to achieve measureable conservation outcomes, and enduring. The conference participants themselves offered clear evidence that the concept of large landscape conservation has spread to initiatives across the continent. These individuals and their colleagues at home and abroad are now and will continue to be at the forefront of initiatives that protect nature in the context of human values at a scale commensurate with the conservation challenges they face. **L**