

Historical Lessons of Successful Conservation Efforts

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Some conservationists have forgotten how to be successful-

We do not want those whose first impulse is to compromise. We want no straddlers for in the past they have surrendered too much good wilderness and primeval areas which should never have been lost. -Bob Marshall on founding of the Wilderness Society

INTRODUCTION:

There is an unfortunate tendency on the part of conservationists to forget or ignore history. A greater appreciation of past conservation victories as well as defeats can inform current efforts. In far too many cases, there is a tendency to believe that it is necessary to appease local interests typically by agreeing to weakened protections or resource giveaways in order to garner the necessary political support for a successful conservation effort. However, this fails to consider that in nearly all cases where there have been effective protective measures enacted, it has been done over almost uniform local opposition.

In those instances where local opposition to a conservation measure is mild or does not exist, it probably means the proposal will be ineffective or worse—even set real conservation backwards.

Nevertheless, many environmentalists now believe—due to regional parochialism and lack of historic context—that significant compromises are necessary to win approval for new conservation initiatives.

This simply demonstrates a failure to learn the lessons from conservation history. In particular, it is striking that in today's era of greater environmental awareness, many environmentalists are willing to propose compromises that offer far weaker protection for our public lands heritage than what was accomplished decades ago, when resource extraction industries had a much greater influence over local and regional economies.

LESSON ONE; Nearly all worthwhile conservation successes were established over strong local objections. This is not surprising. Current land users have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Though environmental protection has been shown time and again to provide long term economic and social benefits to regions, those who benefit are often different than those who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. We nearly always hear that protection will ruin the local economy.

Thus Yellowstone National Park was created by Congress largely over the opposition of locals in Montana Territory who wanted the park to remain open to homesteading, logging, and ranching. Indeed, annually for twenty years after the establishment of the park, Montana's Congressional representatives introduced bills into Congress to undesignate the park. Fortunately due to strong support for the park from the "dreaded eastern establishment" these efforts did not succeed.

Similarly when Grand Teton National Monument was established by Franklin Roosevelt in 1943, the local leaders of Jackson declared that Jackson would become a "ghost town" and Wyoming's Congressional delegation introduced a bill to eliminate the park. The bill successfully passed both branches of Congress. The monument only survived because Franklin Roosevelt vetoed the bill.

There were early efforts to create a park in the Olympic Mountains with the first park bill introduced in 1904—a bill

that was vigorously opposed by local timber interests. Teddy Roosevelt responded and established Olympic National Monument in 1907 and put huge tracts of virgin timber off limits to logging at a time when logging was king.

Nevertheless, opposition from logging interests continued, however, in 1938 outside interests lead to the establishment of Olympic National Park. In the long run the creation of the park has been shown to have huge long term benefits to the residents of the Olympic Peninsula. However, those who made their living by cutting down the trees of the Olympic Peninsula are not necessarily the same people who are now making a living from the park's scenic, ecological, and tourism values.

LESSON TWO: Don't assume all locals are opposed. Typically the most vocal opponents are those with the largest vested interest in maintaining the status quo. There may even be a "silent majority" that is at least neutral or mildly supportive of your proposal, but they are not the ones who control the local politics. However, whether one or many local supporters, nearly all successful conservation efforts rely upon outside leadership that makes the issue a state or national concern. And there is usually some visionary (or group of visionaries) that led this national campaign ala John Muir (Yosemite), David Brower (Dinosaur), Bob Marshall (Gates of the Arctic), Olaus Murie (Arctic Wildlife Refuge), Willard Van Name, Rosalie Edge, and Iving Brant (Olympic), George Dorr (Acadia) etc.

LESSON THREE. Creating and generating the political case for strong conservation protection, as opposed to more limited or weak gains, often takes a while, sometimes a long time. For instance, in the 1930s Bob Marshall publicly called for protecting all of the Brooks Range north of the Yukon River as a national park. It took until the 1980s for his vision to become reality— if you look at a map of northern Alaska you will see that between national wildlife refuges, national preserves, and national parks, nearly the entire Brooks Range is now in some kind of protected status.

LESSON FOUR; Pragmatists in the end leave messes for future generations to clean up. Capitulating to local interests with half baked compromises in the interest of expediency typically produces uneven results that either does not adequately protect the land or creates huge headaches for future conservationists to undue often at great political and economic expense.

For instance, when the national forest system was first established, the lands were largely protected from commercial uses much like our current national parks. However, in 1905 when Gifford Pinchot proposed expansion of this system of national forest reserves into a national forests, opposition to the forest system from mining companies who wished to use timber from national forests for mining timbers and other mine construction lead to a compromise that permitted commercial logging. Some conservationists like John Muir were opposed to this compromise, but they lost in their efforts because others felt that a compromise was needed, and besides it was reasoned such a compromise would be harmless because most of the best timber was outside of the forest preserves and on private lands. No one could imagine there would be much demand for logging on national forest lands.

A similar compromise was also made regarding commercial livestock grazing to win over western ranchers. So commercial logging and ranching was put in place to neutralize western opposition to the forests—but we are still paying the price for that decision today.

Another example is Lake Tahoe—gem of the Sierras. Initially there was a movement to protect the lake as a national park. But in the interest of expediency, and due to local opposition that wanted to log the great pine forests surrounding the lake, the park proposal was dropped in favor of national forest status. Today many of the problems that plague the Tahoe basin including water quality decline are a consequence of this decision, including the abundance of private lands (which could be settled within national forests but not parks).

We'll never know whether these compromises were necessary. One could argue that we would not have any national forests today if we had not made such compromises, but again this mostly conjecture. National support for parks and other preserves was very high, and it is likely national forests without logging and grazing would have

won Congressional support.

LESSON FIVE: Over time most locals come to view conservation areas as an asset and source of pride. This change typically takes a couple of decades, but I know of no exceptions. Despite this realization that any particular park, wilderness, etc. is overall a benefit to the local and regional society does not typically result in local support for new conservation proposals as they come along. In other words, though people in Montana have grown to love Yellowstone National Park, there was still stiff local opposition to new wilderness areas adjacent to Yellowstone National Park like the Absaroka Beartooth Wilderness when it was created in 1978.

To illustrate one example, I will highlight the chief milestones along the way towards today's Grand Canyon National Park.

GRAND CANYON

1. 1882. Senator Harrison (later president) introduces 3 proposals for a Grand Canyon National Park into Congress without success.
2. Harrison elected president in 1893 creates 15 forest preserves including one surrounding the Grand Canyon.
3. 1898. Coconino County Board of Supervisors passes resolution opposing new forest preserve—and attempts to have protections lifted.
4. 1903. Teddy Roosevelt visits the canyon.
5. 1906. Roosevelt signs a bill to create a large game range at canyon again over local opposition.
6. 1908. Roosevelt asks his attorney general whether there was any limit on the size of areas that could be protected using recently passed Antiquities Act (1906). The Act was created to protect “small” sites like Indian ruins. However, according to the attorney general no size limit exists—so Roosevelt uses Antiquities Act to create a million acre Grand Canyon National Monument.
7. Residents in Arizona were outraged. Arizona's congressional delegation succeeded in blocking all funding for implementation of monument protection. They sued the federal government and went all the way to the Supreme Court. They argued that Roosevelt exceeded his powers and the original intention of the Antiquities Act. Supreme Court upholds use of Antiquities Act and Grand Canyon National Monument remains.
8. Failing to eliminate the monument, opponents took a new tact—like Healthy Forests Initiative—they used the language of the conservationists to hide their real intent—to undercut protection. Knowing the national popular support for parks, in 1917 Arizona Senator Henry Ashurst introduced a bill to make the Grand Canyon a national park.

9. 1919. Grand Canyon NP was signed into law—but freed up much of the valuable mining, timber and grazing lands to satisfy local interests. The bill removed monument and park protection to key grazing and timberlands, reducing the overall acreage protected by the national monument by 2/3!

10. 1927. Growing popular support for parks and the Grand Canyon lead to expansion of Park boundaries to 646,000 acres.

11. 1932 Herbert Hoover declared a new Grand Canyon NM to protect an additional 273,000 more acres surrounding the existing national park.

12. 1969. Marble Canyon NM created.

13. 1975. Grand Canyon Enlargement Act adds both Marble Canyon and Grand Canyon NM to the existing Grand Canyon National Park. Creating a park of 1.1 million acres that finally equals in size the original national monument that Roosevelt had protected in 1908.

14. 1979. UNESCO declares Grand Canyon official World Heritage Site.

15. In 1990s when federal budget issues threatened to close the park to visitor, the state of Arizona offered to pay rangers salaries to keep the park open—illustrating the complete change in attitude that now prevails.

16. 2000 President Clinton designates just over 1 million acres as the Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument to protect much of the North Rim region of the canyon over objection of locals. I predict that someday these lands will be added to Grand Canyon National Park.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

The most important lesson is to not be discouraged because your idea for conservation protection is not widely held by local people. This should not prompt an immediate compromise to whatever legislation or goal you are pursuing. Rather stick to the goal, and in many instances, you will prevail. Try to neutralize local opposition, but generate outside support—if at all possible make the issue a state or national issue.

For instance, it was down state supporters in New York City that provided the political muscle to create the Adirondack State Park over the objections of local residents. This park now 6 million acres in size has a clause that prohibits all logging on state lands. If early park advocates had tried to mollify locals just to get acceptance of park

establishment, there would have undoubtedly been logging permitted in the new park. Instead park supporters successfully rallied people from outside of the region to help create the wilderness park we have today.

All legislation is compromise, but don't be the one to do the compromising—that's the job of Congress. Make your best case for the best protection. If you don't achieve that goal in any particular legislation you can decide to oppose it and attempt to stop it or accept it with the compromises. For instance, if you want all the roadless country in a particular area designated as wilderness—than propose it all as wilderness and make your best case for saving it all. If Congress cuts that in half, you have still successfully made the case that all the roadless lands are qualified for wilderness, and you can always try to enact more protective legislation in the future for these lands. However, in attempting to secure local support, you automatically say or accept the notion that some of these roadless lands are ecologically unimportant or are throw away lands that can be developed, you have lost your moral authority to fight for protection later.

When and where you compromise affects the outcome not only current issues, but shaped future expectations. Thus a long term vision should always be kept in mind.