

THE BIG PICTURE:

ACHIEVING LANDSCAPE-SCALE CONSERVATION ON PUBLIC LANDS

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“Public land” is land “We the People” retain and hold, not as individuals, but in common, as a nation, and for the benefit of all. Since 1802, when Georgia was the final state of seven to surrender its “western” colonial lands, the United States has, by consensus, possessed land holdings dedicated to national public purposes. There was a time when promoting settlement was a shared goal; now it is not. There was a time when values like clean air, clean water, sustaining natural plant and animal communities, and protecting cultural heritage were subordinate to other goals. Now, by law,¹ they are equal to other goals. And on lands designated to meet conservation purposes, they become primary considerations. In short, American public priorities have changed over time but the core principle remains that public lands must serve common, shared goals.

This paper examines the long-term, very-American pattern of participatory conservation involving public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) as part of large landscapes in the West. Conservation outcomes have become common, shared goals publicly expressed and supported through designations, as well as protection and restoration efforts. With varying degrees of success, communities of caring people have been the driving force underlying conservation.

Conservation values, the natural and cultural values of a place, are not generic. They are local, specific, and unique. So, in practice, conservation requires knowledge. Plant communities differ in their composition and location on the land. Animals and fish live differently. No one would expect a salmon and a pupfish, or a black bear and a bighorn sheep, or a desert tortoise and a fringe-toed lizard, to have the same habitat requirements. Informed decisions about how to sustain plant, fish, and wildlife habitats require local and specific knowledge about the species involved. Similarly, conserving cultural values requires understanding the people, events, and artifacts with ties to a specific place.

Conservation always involves a community of people willing to devote time and effort to protect and sustain the natural and cultural values of a place. Individual reasons vary, but the community is held together by shared respect, and often by a desire that the conservation value of *their* place will be intact for *their* children and grandchildren. Participation involving members,

especially youth, in on-site education, science, art, and restoration is the most common practice. Conservation has its opponents, Americans who have seen public lands as “man’s personal property, a combination of garden, zoo, bank vault, and energy source, placed at our disposal to be consumed, ornamented, or pulled apart as we wished.”² In fact, in periods of “sagebrush rebellion” those views are ascendant. Conservation champions have countered “consumption” and “pulling apart” of nature as central themes, arguing instead for the importance of conservation of nature on public lands as a more appropriate goal.³

Historically, California has been a nursery for conservation innovations on public lands. But useful ideas can, and do, develop anywhere. Large-scale conservation strategies developed for southeastern and midwestern parts of the country provide useful examples of functioning information clearinghouses.⁴ So do partnerships in western states organized around specific issues such as the “wildlife benefits of flood irrigation”⁵ or “international cooperation among related conservation areas.”⁶ This paper focuses on how conservation has occurred on public lands in western states, identifying both challenges and factors for success.

LANDSCAPE-SCALE CONSERVATION EVOLVES AND MULTIPLIES

While exceptions are noted below, significant foundations of American conservation of public lands originated in California. Half-a-century before there was a Park Service, President Abraham Lincoln signed a

land grant to the state of California conveying Yosemite Valley, a landscape Frederick Law Olmsted argued had “exquisite, dreamy charm,” with the idea a park might work there. In 1892, 13 years before the Forest Service existed, President Benjamin Harrison approved the first two federal forest reserves regulating timber harvest—one along the eastern and southern boundary of Yellowstone National Park and the other, the San Gabriel Timberland, in California. In 1930, President Herbert Hoover withdrew “Rocks and Islands” along the coast of California from disposal under the nation’s land laws. These examples illustrate how long California has been a laboratory for piloting new conservation ideas for large natural areas.

More recently, Clem Woodnutt Miller, a young congressman from northern California, saw opportunity for

Point Reyes when President John F. Kennedy sought to designate Cape Cod a national seashore. Miller and the president partnered with Senator Ralph Yarborough of Texas, who had proposed a national park on Padre Island, to push for national seashore legislation. By 1962, the country had its first three national seashores, but Clem Miller’s solo bill proposing the King Range as a national conservation area (NCA) did not pass. Congressman Miller would die in a plane crash that same year. For years, his successor, Donald Clausen, took up the cause. Finally, Clausen paired the King Range bill with legislation establishing Redwood National Park, and it became law in 1970. A decade of advocacy by local constituents turned the rugged terrain of a mountain range climbing 4,000 feet out of 35 miles of pounding ocean surf into the nation’s first NCA, and an onshore complement to President Hoover’s Rocks and Islands.

In 2015, two secretaries of the interior, Sally Jewell and Bruce Babbitt, walked Black Sands Beach at the southern end of the King Range, the nation’s first national conservation area. A lone hiker has just about reached Shelter Cove, the likely end point for his trek. **BOB WICK, BLM**



Today, BLM manages three additional coastal localities—Piedras Blancas Light Station (California), Juniper Inlet Lighthouse (Florida), and Yaquina Head (Oregon)—as outstanding natural areas.

The California Desert, a 22-million-acre landscape, with 10.8 million under BLM management, has a 50-year history of conservation. In 1975, California Senator Alan Cranston’s bill to create a conservation plan for the desert became the backbone of Title VI of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act. When President Gerald Ford signed that law in 1976, wilderness authority was extended to BLM-managed lands, BLM was directed to get to work addressing “areas of critical environmental concern,” (ACECs) and the California Desert was added as the nation’s second NCA. Steese National Conservation Area in Alaska became the third NCA in 1980 and BLM now manages roughly 9 million acres in 19 NCAs in eight western states for conservation purposes.

In 1994, the California Desert Protection Act, shepherded by Cranston’s successor, Dianne Feinstein, created 74 wilderness areas and a special botanical area called the Desert Lily Sanctuary. An era of joint land use planning in California, involving Tribes and federal, state, and local agencies, followed. With detailed multiple species analysis as foundation, plans for the Coachella Valley and Eastern San Diego County were completed in 2002 and 2003, respectively. Even broader planning had previously been attempted around salmon issues following Oregon Senator Mark Hatfield’s Salmon Summit in 1990, but the resulting Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project⁷ closed in 2004 without producing concrete changes in existing management plans. The Desert Renewable Energy and Conservation Plan (DRECP) tracked the successful multi-species planning approach beginning in 2002, but at an even larger scale. The DRECP coordinated planning across 22 million acres, with multiple state and federal agencies, 7 counties, 5 military bases, 3 national parks, and 40 tribes.

Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument rises behind wind energy development north of Palm Springs California. Integrated planning for energy infrastructure and conservation outcomes is the goal for the Desert Renewable Energy and Conservation Plan. **TOM BREWSTER, BLM**



The DRECP conservation design for public lands located near 20 million people applied up-to-date science and data for about 50 species to establish planning designations governing activities. Plan outcomes placed about 5.2 million acres of the NCA into conservation designations (mostly wilderness and ACEC) and also led to designation of two national monuments (Sand to Snow and Mojave Trails). The DRECP involved all kinds of teams, committees, stakeholder forums, reviews, and open sharing of data and maps.⁸ It took seven years, the work of thousands of people, and technical inputs, such as Department of Defense mission compatibility reviews, climate change modeling, independent science reviews, and engineering reviews for infrastructure design delivering 20,000 megawatts of renewable energy.

Effective advocacy that delivers conservation outcomes can also be much more localized, with considerably less complexity. In the mid-1980s, passion for saving ancient

redwood trees and salmon habitat in northern California spawned about 15 years of protests and lawsuits. Then a 1998 real estate deal returned 7,472 acres of private forest, including about 3,000 acres of old-growth redwoods in the headwaters of Salmon Creek and the South Fork of the Elk River, to BLM management. The resulting Headwaters Forest Reserve reimagined the 1891 legislative concept of forest reserves, returning a privatized forest to public ownership for the purposes of conservation. Similar activism by the Alabama Hills Stewardship Group created a 18,610-acre national scenic area east of the Sierra Nevada out of what locals call a “Land of Natural Arches, Western Movies & the Oldest Hills.”

Landscape-scale BLM conservation stories, some like those in California, underpin the 37 million acres of the National Conservation Lands, which is composed of national monuments, NCAs (including the conservation lands of the California Desert), wilderness areas, wilder-

Mobius Arch in the Alabama Hills, with Mount Whitney in the background, all part of the experience in the “Land of Natural Arches, Western Movies & the Oldest Hills.” JESSE PLUIM, BLM



ness study areas, wild and scenic rivers, and the national scenic and historic trails crossing public lands. Here are a few short stories:

Wilderness

Aldo Leopold urged protection of wilderness values in the Gila River country of New Mexico as early as 1924. The natural beauty of Dark Canyon in Utah led to its designation as a “primitive area” in 1970, six years before wilderness authority was extended to BLM-managed lands. In 1977, the same year BLM began developing land use plans, wilderness inventories and studies began, with reports due to Congress by 1991. The first BLM-managed wilderness area was the Bear Trap Canyon unit of Lee Metcalf Wilderness in Montana, designated in 1983. All the western states except Alaska and Wyoming have passed statewide or area-specific wilderness acts, starting with Idaho in 1980. Today BLM manages roughly 10 million acres of wilderness in 263 congressionally designated areas. And over 11 million acres are managed as wilderness study areas, protecting their naturalness until Congress decides.

Water

The Rogue River and the Rio Grande were among the original eight rivers designated by the 1968 Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The Klamath River in California and Oregon is being restored to its free-flowing state, with long-term benefits to salmon. The designation in 1976 of a portion of the iconic Upper Missouri as a wild and scenic river maintains a natural corridor in much the same condition as Indigenous people and the Lewis and Clark Expedition saw it in 1805. Critical desert riparian habitats, and the water that supports them, receive attention as BLM-designated ACECs, such as California’s Dos Palmas Preserve just south of newly designated Chuckwalla National Monument in California, and on designated conservation lands such as Arizona’s Gila Box Riparian, Las Cienegas, and San Pedro River NCAs. Today BLM manages 81 wild and scenic rivers in seven western states and literally thousands of miles of rivers and streams and water sources essential to regional, and sometimes international, ecosystems.

Trails

The first national scenic trails (1968) under the National Trail Systems Act were the Pacific Crest Trail and the Appalachian Trail. Public activism created the Pacific Crest Trail by establishing routes that linked Washington’s Cascade Crest Trail, Oregon’s Skyline Trail, and California’s John Muir and Tahoe-Yosemite Trails. Today there are 32 national trails in the interagency system, with nearly 6,000 miles of 19 designated trails in 15 states across BLM-managed public land.

PATTERNS IN LANDSCAPE-SCALE CONSERVATION: FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

With conservation outcomes occurring in such different settings, it is tempting to seek some universal set of sequential steps involving assessments, analysis, and management strategies that explain the phenomenon. However, in practice, conservation action is rarely tidy, linear, or static for very long. Work on assessments, strategies and plans occurs at multiple scales, on multiple issues, and simultaneously. Problems and barriers are normal. Still, successful large-scale landscape conservation efforts do share three characteristics worthy of emulation:

- Focus on specific *conservation values* or problems of a place (species of interest, overall biodiversity, scenic beauty, cultural history, etc.);
- A caring *community of people* who bring a wide range of knowledge and skills (frequently called a “friends” group) partnering with agencies or elected official(s); and
- A deliberate, participatory *strategy to sustain values and efforts* (frequently it includes involving young people who hope to share the community’s sense of place).

The following are on-going, long-term examples of applied conservation values in landscape-level settings where the three characteristics are, at least to some degree, present.

Biodiversity

Of the conservation values, the living landscape is probably the most widespread and frequently recurring theme driving cooperative problem-solving and leading to conservation action. When 1970s studies of breeding birds identified declines along the California coast, a coordinated 40-year sequence of conservation actions began. BLM and the California Department of Fish and Game established California Islands Wildlife Sanctuary in 1978. The sanctuary benefited from renewal of the 1930 Hoover withdrawal, and was managed as an ACEC. Today, that assemblage of rocks and islands, with six additional onshore sites, is the California Coastal National Monument (CCNM). Responsive to the initial concern, CCNM now supports an estimated 200,000 breeding seabirds,⁹ a result dramatically on display from the onshore unit at Piedras Blancas.

Listing of the northern spotted owl prompted BLM and the Forest Service to develop the Northwest Forest Plan (NFP) in 1994.¹⁰ The plan covers federally managed land across western Oregon, Washington, and northwestern California and includes a system of reserves designed to protect old-growth forests and deliver critical habitat needs for northern spotted owls, marbled murrelets, and salmon. The 100-year conservation strategy has now been sustained for 30 years with some indications



Photographed from the air, Friends of the Dunes organize themselves on the beach to create a picture of their passion for “conserving the natural diversity of coastal environments in northern California through community supported education and stewardship programs.” (One of the first three pictures- large enough to recognize the picture is composed of people.) J PATRICK CUDAHY & MARK HARRIS

of success, such as forest stands maturing into desired old-growth characteristics, improvements in watershed conditions, and improved stability in some salmon populations. However, habitat loss to non-native barred owls and severe wildfires have combined with timber harvest to hinder spotted owl recovery. Conservation of salmon and marbled murrelet recovery are also hindered by ocean conditions sensitive to climate change and nesting, spawning, and rearing impacts on non-federal lands.¹¹ The conservation strategy has considerable merit and has made progress, but also faces challenges beyond the control of federal planning and agency actions.

Declines in sage grouse generated nine petitions to list it as a threatened species in the 1990s. With litigation still ongoing, BLM and the Western Association of Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) generated a conservation strategy that supported a not-warranted-for-listing decision in 2005. By 2011, cooperative range-wide planning by state (WAFWA) and federal agencies was underway, and by

2015 the plans were completed. However, the status of conservation of sage grouse remains uncertain since a 2017 order from the secretary of the interior undercut decades of coordinated state-federal range-wide efforts. With assistance from Congress, collaboration has been re-established under a conservation design for the sagebrush biome in the Intermountain West.¹² BLM completed the implementing land use plan amendments covering habitat in Oregon and Colorado in January 2025. But plans for the remainder of the range have not yet been updated. The concerning trend for sage grouse populations remains. Average annual decline in sage grouse abundance is 2.9%, with a cumulative 80.1% decrease in abundance over 55 years.¹³ Species recovery will require decades of sustained conservation focus across the 11-state range occupied by sage grouse.

Drastic declines in bison (buffalo) populations during the 19th century, from tens of millions to literally a few hundred, are well documented. So are the impacts

to Indigenous people and their lifeways. The keystone role in grassland ecosystems of the largest mammal in North America was largely lost, with impacts to soils, water capture, seed establishment, plants, pollinators, birds, and mammals. By 2020, Tribal restoration efforts were widespread, estimated to involve more than 20,000 buffalo in 65 herds by 82 Tribes. Federal buffalo restoration initiatives had also made progress under Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump, with about 13,000 buffalo managed as wildlife in public herds on state and federal lands. Of these, about 11,000 live on Department of the Interior (DOI) lands across 12 states. But most recognize these population sizes are just a small foothold for the largest North American mammal.¹⁴

By 2020, DOI had adopted goals to conserve bison herds; protect genetic diversity; take a shared stewardship approach with states, tribes, and stakeholders; and

take a “large landscape” approach to restoration. A Bison Working Group, with representatives from the InterTribal Buffalo Council, 10 Tribes, and five DOI agencies prepared the *Bison Shared Stewardship Strategy*, incorporating a review by WAFWA.¹⁵ And on March 3, 2023, DOI Secretary Deb Haaland issued Secretary’s Order 3410, “Restoration of American Bison and the Prairie Grasslands,” launching a promising conservation strategy to meet the 2020 goals by linking efforts of Tribes and federal agencies. In the summer of 2024, WAFWA began participating with the Bison Working Group, and a Tribal Buffalo Lifeways Collaboration formed, including the InterTribal Buffalo Council, Native Americans in Philanthropy, The Nature Conservancy, and World Wildlife Fund.¹⁶ This public–private collaboration has potential to accomplish large-scale restoration, with all the attendant cultural and economic revitalization for Native communities.

In 1806, Captain William Clark of the Lewis and Clark Expedition recorded “a greater number of buffalo than I had ever seen ... near 20,000 ... feeding on this plain.” Today, the population of North America’s largest mammal, across the vastness of the Great Plains, is also in the tens of thousands, a number Captain Clark might have seen in just a couple days of travel along the Missouri River. These bison are in Yellowstone National Park. [NATIONAL PARK SERVICE](#)



Probably the most promising large landscape plan addressing biodiversity, given its deliberate integration of local, state, Tribal, and federal planning across broad interests and needs, is the DRECP (described above). The desert-wide plan's conservation design addresses maintaining natural communities and protecting wildlife corridors with planning designations like ACECs and provides an overall strategy buttressed by formal designations like the overarching national conservation area, four national monuments, a national scenic area, and about 5 million acres of designated wilderness. The DRECP geography has a well-established array of friends groups working to support and deliver conservation, and the plan has already survived one attempt to gut its conservation commitments.

The most obvious strategy for maintaining abundance of biodiversity is to protect it where it exists, an approach which formal conservation designations facilitate. Established in 2000, the 114,000-acre Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument is an ecologically rare assemblage of more than 300 species of birds, mammals, reptiles, and amphibians. Its forests, woodlands, grasslands, and wet meadows are located where ancient volcanic mountains converge with much younger volcanic Cascade Mountains. The monument provides an east-west linkage between the Cascades and the Coast Range occurring across elevations varying between 2,100–6,100 feet. The physical setting creates a biodiversity hotspot, so management must only sustain what exists and address localized needs like reintroduction of beavers lost during historical trapping.

Direct biological interventions, like species reintroduction, can also address issues such as connectivity, nesting, or rearing of young. The High Divide Collaborative is composed of “public land managers, state wildlife agencies, landowners, local community leaders, scientists, and conservation groups working together to conserve and restore lands of importance for local communities and to protect ecological integrity at the landscape scale” along the Continental Divide at the Idaho–Montana state line.¹⁷ Other examples include: Morley Nelson Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area (one of the world's densest concentrations of nesting birds of prey), the Peregrine Fund's California condor nursery in Vermilion Cliffs National Monument, or the mitigation project by Friends of the Arizona Joshua Tree Forest to relocate 21 Joshua Trees.

Water-Based Collaboration

Another long-standing pattern centers on a feature essential to all landscapes: water. By 1996, the work of Wayne

Elmore, a BLM biologist in Prineville, Oregon, had evolved and grown into a National Riparian Service Team (NRST) shared with the Forest Service, and embraced by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. The team sought to create lasting public-private partnerships around the physical, biological, and social attributes related to streams and wetlands. Their creek-by-creek combination of analysis, training, and negotiation was underpinned by “proper functioning condition” assessments. For decades, all over the West, community-by-community, creek-by-creek, specialists worked to help local people improve riparian conditions.¹⁸ A 2002 NRST report quantified activities that included 250 briefings and similar presentations reaching an estimated 8,000–9,000 people, 325 training sessions reaching an estimated 10,000 people, and 125 technical assistance service trips reaching an estimated 2,500 people). The NRST was disbanded sometime around 2016, but its work contributed to improved conditions on thousands of miles of streams in multiple states.

Elmore also participated in the Trout Creek Working Group, which focused on improving 64 miles of streams in Oregon's Trout Creek Mountains (covering an area of 127,000 acres) in 1987. Efforts got rolling with three years of rest from grazing on about 50,000 acres coupled with fishing closures in 1990, both anticipating the listing of Lahontan cutthroat trout as endangered in 1991. The ecological response to the revised grazing management decisions issued in 1990 and 1991 was dramatic. Woody species increased on all streams as streambank cover improved. By 1994, the annual fish populations settled at between 10,000 and 40,000,¹⁹ with numbers in the various creeks varying with precipitation. The Trout Creek Working Group sought outside expertise when needed, agreed to shared rancher/conservationist goals, and produced fish-in-the-creeks conservation results.

In Arizona's San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area (SPRNCA; 57,000 acres), groundwater levels are a dominant influence on surface river flows. Located roughly midway between the Rio Grande and Colorado River corridors, the San Pedro's location makes it a critical north-south corridor of cottonwood-willow habitats for hundreds of bird species and amphibians. The San Pedro River is a classic biodiversity hotspot, with those values entirely dependent on surface water. In 2021, the state of Arizona reported that groundwater levels in the Upper San Pedro Basin had declined an average of 3.9 feet between water years 2007 and 2019. A 2023 court order required monitoring wells to be installed, and by 2024 four of those wells were below required minimum levels. While groundwater hydrology

can be complex, over-pumping is certainly a factor in the decline. Encouraged by Senator John McCain, the largest water user in the lower basin, Fort Huachuca Army garrison, developed “green” initiatives about 15 years ago that included achieving “net-zero” water use by 2025. Playing fields were converted to artificial turf and base facilities were updated, but the fort’s commitment to sustaining the river has lost luster, and state and local governments haven’t meaningfully addressed water table decline. With current long-term trends in groundwater levels, the future is uncertain. The SPRNCA designation will continue to promote conservation, and the Fort Huachuca base has made substantial commitments to conserving water, but those commitments have not yet been matched by non-federal entities.²⁰

The most ambitious river restoration is focused on salmon habitat in the Pacific Northwest and is just getting underway. Before four hydroelectric dams (built from 1918 to 1964) blocked salmon access to about 400 miles of streams, the Klamath River and its tributaries supported the third-largest salmon population in the West. After dam construction, fall chinook salmon numbers declined 90%, and the spring chinook run disappeared.²¹ Subsequent drought conditions, water diversions, and mass die-offs of salmon prompted “decades of advocacy from Klamath River Indigenous peoples, community members, conservationists, and fishermen.” Finally, during the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission relicensing process, the PacifiCorp electric power company, the California

Salmon field trip at Headwaters Forest Reserve. Salmon recovery has long been a goal for the Forest Reserve, the Interior Columbia Basin Project, and the Northwest Forest Plan. Most recently, it is the primary goal of the Klamath River Restoration. Fish biologist Zane Ruddy discusses restoration with school children. ZANE RUDDY



and Oregon state governments, Tribal governments, conservation groups, commercial and recreational fishing organizations, and the affected counties all reached a settlement agreement in 2016 to remove the dams.²² The dams have now been removed, promising a huge increment in salmon recovery. Multi-year studies are underway, including the use of fish-tagging and sonar to monitor the response by fish. Already, on a single day in October 2024, 290 fish over 20 inches long passed in the still-murky waters at the former site of Iron Gate Dam.²³

One of the most creative collaborations around wetlands is the Cosumnes River Preserve Partnership in California. Public lands are integrated into the joint management efforts of seven private, state, and federal partners across 50,000 contiguous acres of floodplains, wetlands, valley oak riparian forests, vernal pool grasslands, and compatible agricultural lands. The partners seek to optimize their conservation value in the lower Cosumnes River watershed and the upper Sacramento–San Joaquin Delta. With high-quality riparian habitats, the preserve supports resident fish and wildlife, significant bird migration along the Pacific Flyway, and guided recreation uses such as on-site classes, bird surveys, historical walks, sandhill crane tours, and canoe outings.²⁴ Year after year, the working partnership delivers critical conservation outcomes on the Pacific flyway, while also supporting the quality of life in the local region.

Working Groups

While water is essential to conservation undertakings in much of the arid West, getting a NRST- and Cosumnes-style collaboration to negotiate delivery of conservation can work in almost any setting. Today, many similar collaborative approaches to problem-solving and creating sustainability operate across the West, each operating in its own way, such as the Ranchers Stewardship Alliance on the northern Great Plains, the Colorado Forest Collaboratives Network, and the Blackfoot Challenge in western Montana.²⁵ In Oregon, a Trout Creek Working Group meeting produced an exchange between two women that is a powerful metaphor for public–private partnerships. One, a Trout Unlimited representative, said, “All we want are baby fish, and teenage fish, and mother fish, and grandmother fish.” The other, a rancher, replied, “And all we want are baby ranchers, teenage ranchers, mother ranchers, and grandmother ranchers.” Throw in some scientists with land management expertise and you have a pretty good shot at sustainable conservation.

Early work on sage grouse conservation as part of the Central Oregon Initiative was organized around a collec-

tion of high-desert grazing allotments near Bend, which featured off-highway vehicle trails, but very little water. Several “members of the Trout Creek Working Group participated in a collaborative group planning for the Leslie Ranches and the Millican OHV (Off-Highway Vehicle) Trail System. The “generations of fish and ranchers” story quoted above served as a group reference emphasizing “respect each other and work it out.” Working groups are challenged to blend understanding of broad-scale species requirements and ecological processes with local and regional socioeconomic considerations and land management processes. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of site-specific questions about watersheds, creeks, species, cultural attributes, and economic uses enter the dialogue. Geographically specific knowledge and experience become the most potent assets in making sustainable conservation decisions that both respect the complexity of nature and work for the local community.

CULTURAL FEATURES, SCENERY, AND RECREATION VALUES

The combination of cultural features, scenery, and recreation values has proven to be potent in driving conservation. For some BLM conservation lands, the designation itself is evidence. The long-recognized historical significance of the Old Spanish and El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro National Historic Trails derives from the Spanish era of the Southwest. Many trail routes still in use today follow footprints that pre-date European arrival. In American culture, these have become pervasive “values of place” fundamental to conservation on public lands, both legally and socially, even though the full depth of the land-based story may not be widely understood and appreciated.

The first legislated national monument in BLM’s National Conservation Lands system, Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument (SRSJMNM, 280,000 acres), provides an illustration of how partnerships around cultural features, scenery, and recreation values can mature. SRSJMNM, bordering the Coachella Valley in California, is homeland to the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, and for them a place of bird songs²⁶ that speak to creation. The mountains also still echo with the passing of Juan Bautista de Anza in 1776, and later, of Army Lieutenant W.H. Emory, who in his 1846 journal described “the beautiful valley of the Agua Caliente.”²⁷ Today, the Friends of the Desert Mountains are also passionate about the scenic backdrop to their valley, trail-based recreation, and peninsular bighorn sheep. Local people are very aware of park proposals early in the 20th century that were deaf to cultural history and the reservation commitments made to Cahuilla people.

So, when a multiple-species plan for the Coachella Valley and adjacent mountains was being cooperatively developed, multi-year dialogue and collaboration with the Tribe were integral to the monument legislation proposed through the planning process. The 2000 legislation explicitly recognized a role for the Tribe, respecting their deep knowledge of place. Cahuilla names for springs, rock formations, and literally “all the places in the mountains and the flat (lands)” reflect centuries of hunting, food gathering, and cultural practices—the long experience of humans, plants, animals, and all natural elements as an interdependent whole.²⁸ The legislation was deliberately inclusive, recognizing roles for San Jacinto State Park, the University of California research site in Deep Canyon, and the adjacent Coachella Valley cities. To this day, SRSJMN’s visitor centers and trails are largely staffed by Friends of the Desert Mountains and rangers of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians.

The Cotoni–Coast Dairies unit of the California Coast National Monument provides another example of the potent combination of cultural history, scenery, and trails. For centuries, Cotoni people lived in coastal fishing villages until “sacred” military missions of the Spanish forced the Cotoni to move to *rancherías*, and then *ranchos*, before Mexico gained independence from Spain. The 1860s brought Swiss farming families and the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco prompted construction of a cement plant that would become part of Coast Dairies and Land Company, a mainstay of a former whaling sea captain’s wharf called Davenport’s Landing. More recently, many local people opposed conversion of the Cotoni Coast Dairies property with its broad marine terraces and six forested, perennial streams above Davenport into luxury home lots. They worried about the risks to coho salmon, steelhead trout, and California red-legged frogs. So, a community partnership assembled funds to purchase the property and donated it to enable creation of Coast Dairies State Park and BLM’s Cotoni–Coast Dairies unit of California Coastal National Monument. Ever since, the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, descendants of people who lived in the Cotoni coastal villages and missions, has worked with BLM and cooperators like Santa Cruz Mountains Trail Stewards to conduct cultural surveys, create a management plan, and thoughtfully locate and build public trails. The land has been conserved as part of the national monument since 2017, and about 70% of the trails are built.

These are just two of many examples that illustrate how scenic places with cultural history and modern

recreation interests inspired years of cooperation between Indigenous people and other local interests to deliver conservation outcomes. Other prominent examples include the work of Cochiti Pueblo at Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks National Monument in New Mexico, the multi-Tribe coalition involved with Bears Ears National Monument in Utah, and the multi-Tribe coalition advocating the recent designation of Avi Kwa Ame National Monument in Nevada.

LOOKING AHEAD

In the early 20th century, Americans allowed natural systems to deteriorate across much of the country. The result was the Dust Bowl era. Now, as climate change increases the severity of storms, drought, and wildfire, we face similar challenges and choices about how we integrate human land uses with nature. Although co-opted by other interests in recent decades, multiple use and environmental movements between 1934 and 1980 focused the country on the future generations and “the quality of the environment.” Our laws embedded “recreation ... watershed, wildlife and fish, and natural scenic, scientific, and historical values” into multiple use, putting them on equal footing with “range, timber, (and) minerals.” The same legal definition deliberately de-emphasized “the greatest dollar return or the greatest unit output.”²⁹

Americans have achieved worthy conservation goals by focusing on the right values in the right places, working together as local communities, including Tribes and governments at all levels, to drive toward shared goals. We know from history that participatory strategies can sustain both on-the-ground values and commitment over time.

Likewise, the nation’s framework of environmental laws and regulations has contributed to addressing and solving environmental problems by promoting conservation responses. In America’s national history, land use planning and conservation designations have clearly delivered results. Wilderness areas deliver naturalness and primitive recreation. National conservation areas emphasize a broad assemblage of values across a large landscape. National monuments place emphasis on specific, enumerated “objects” in a large landscape. Wild and scenic rivers and national historic and scenic trails protect corridors of human, fish and wildlife travel. In addition, planning designations (ACECs) can organize management to address critical environmental concerns. Each designation has its place on western landscapes.

American conservation history provides a solid foundation to address current challenges. Communities of

people have been able to meet shared goals and deliver conservation outcomes with participation in planning, restoration work, and protective designations. The future we leave our grandchildren will continue to rely on the work of many communities of people working

at ground level to conserve specific values they can describe in detail. Places they know well have inspired “friends” to create the environment they want to leave for future generations.

Endnotes

1. Section 103(c) [43 USC 1701], Federal Land Policy and Management Act.
2. Thomas, Lewis. 1974. Natural man. Essay in *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher*. New York: Viking Press.
3. See, for example: Babbitt, Bruce. 2000. From Grand Staircase to Grand Canyon Parashant: Is there a monumental future for the BLM? Transcript of remarks by Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt, University of Denver College of Law Carver Lecture, February 17. *University of Denver Water Law Review* 3(2). <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/wlr/vol3/iss2/95/>
4. The Southeast Conservation Adaptation Strategy (SECAS) and the Midwest Landscape Initiative (MLI) are regional intergovernmental collaborations that function as information hubs for identifying, producing, and delivering science, data, and tools for decision-makers in their respective regions. <https://secassoutheast.org/>; <https://www.mlimidwest.org/>
5. Intermountain West Joint Venture. <https://iwjv.org/state-conservation-partners/>
6. The Crown of the Continent is a platform for collaboration covering parks in Montana, British Columbia, and Alberta.
7. Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Plan. For a short summary of the joint BLM–US Forest Service project see: https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r6/landmanagement/planning/?cid=fsbdev2_027027.
8. This state–federal collaboration approach has historically received bipartisan support. For the DRECP, see <https://www.congress.gov/event/111th-congress/house-event/LC4425/text>. The use of Data Basin as an information clearinghouse is similar to the SECAS and MLI landscape planning platforms.
9. <https://www.blm.gov/programs/national-conservation-lands/california/california-coastal>
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Kit Muller retired from BLM after a 38-year career focused on better understanding landscape-scale changes on the American West. The vision for this article was his, but he passed away before it was completed.

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