

# Collaborative Conservation and Preservation Assistance

*Samuel N. Stokes*

## Background

In 1921 the first director of the National Park Service convened a conference on state parks to encourage their growth and to offer NPS support in developing these systems as complementary features in the nation's inventory of protected public spaces. Congress has reinforced this national leadership role for the Service by enacting a substantial body of laws authorizing financial and technical assistance to help states, local governments, and nonprofit organizations protect open space and natural communities, recognize and preserve cultural resources, and develop community parks. As a body, these 'collaborative' or 'partnership' programs are intended to encourage and support a network of efforts at the national, regional, and local levels to ensure that the nation's natural and cultural heritage and opportunities for outdoor recreation are preserved as integral parts of sustainable community life.

Virtually every community in the country has received assistance from these programs, which fit generally into five categories:

*Designation Programs:* Official national registries of 'national historic landmarks' (2,400 listings) and 'historic places' (1.3 million listings), both managed by the National Park Service, are the nation's lists of significant historic and prehistoric properties. National historic landmarks are designated by the secretary of the interior, while NPS managers designate properties on the more comprehensive National Register of Historic Places. The secretary of the interior also designates national natural landmarks and national recreation trails, smaller programs also administered by the National Park Service. While designation programs do not provide the same degree of protection as does inclusion in the national park system, they increase the likelihood that the listed properties will be protected, and they require no ongoing NPS property management.

*Related Areas Program:* The National Park Service manages or provides assistance to 37 national wild and scenic rivers, 19 national historic and scenic trails, and 37 national heritage areas, all designated by Congress. These programs rely on collaboration across political jurisdictions and, for the most part, do not entail federal land acquisition. (The Appalachian Trail is a notable exception.) Some see these programs as elements of a nascent national system of parks that could connect protected resources managed by federal, state, and local agencies, and nonprofit organizations.

*Technical Assistance Programs:* The National Park Service provides intensive technical assistance to approximately 300 communities a year through the Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program. The Service also helps local governments and nonprofits acquire surplus military properties through the Federal Lands to Parks Program and the Historic Surplus Property Program; and it advises on recreation access and riparian corridor protection during hydropower licensing proceedings through the Hydropower Recreation Assistance Program. The Service publishes how-to historic preservation publications, although these are not currently as comprehensive as they once were. Whether the Service provides technical assistance for a particular category of resource has largely been determined by Congress, resulting in more assistance in certain fields than in others.

*Grant Programs:* The National Park Service makes grants through the Historic Preservation Fund to states, tribes, and more than 1,200 certified local governments undertaking historic preservation activities. Other historic preservation grant programs include Preserve America (to support preservation in designated communities); Save America's Treasures (to protect nationally significant resources); grants to protect battlefields, historically Black colleges, Native American graves, and tribal heritage; and grants for research and training. The Park Service also manages the state side of the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which provides grants to states and local governments for the acquisition and development of outdoor recreation areas.

*International Program:* The National Park Service established an international program in 1962 and for many years provided extensive technical assistance to other countries. Many park leaders from throughout the world were trained through NPS courses. The national park concept is widely considered to be one of the best ideas the United States has ever had, and the Service is still looked to for its expertise on park management. Today, a much reduced international program provides limited technical assistance and prepares nominations to the UNESCO World Heritage list.

Collaborative programs project the National Park Service into many communities that would not otherwise have contact with the agency. If, in the words of the National Park System Advisory Board, "the larger purpose of [the NPS] mission is to build a citizenry committed to preserving its heritage and home on earth," the collaborative programs have been a major factor in achieving this vision.

Given the general shortage of funds, the National Park Service will never be able to fill all the gaps between its programs and provide assistance to all who request it. Fortunately, many national nonprofits, such as the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the National Recreation and Park Association, and the Land Trust Alliance, provide complementary assistance in some fields not covered by the National Park Service.

## Challenges and Opportunities

### *Public Understanding*

Because of differing enabling laws and executive branch initiatives, understanding the array of offerings available through the Service's partnership programs—and taking advantage of them—can be daunting.

### *Ensuring Protection of Designated and Related Areas*

The protection of designated properties is largely voluntary. The programs require only that those proposing federally funded or permitted activities consider what impacts they might have on listed properties and that those impacts be mitigated where possible. Although communities can realize substantial economic benefits due to the status and attraction to tourists conferred by NPS designation, in some cases the resources are endangered by inappropriate development adjacent to them.

In response to concerns about impacts on property rights and potential takings, the National Park Service and Congress have not sought to require protective action by state and local governments as a condition of designation. Owner consent is required before individual properties can be listed on the national registers for natural and historic properties, or as national historic landmarks. These requirements have limited the effectiveness of the programs in assuring long-term protection of some of the nation's most significant resources.

### *Administrative Challenges*

Collaborative program staffs (and their supporters outside the National Park Service) often feel that their work is undervalued by the NPS leadership. Indeed, some supporters of the parks do see these programs as taking funds away from the parks, even though collectively they account for less than 5% of the NPS budget. This attitude is less prevalent than it once was. In fact, if the Service did not have responsibility for these programs, it would undoubtedly lose the congressional funding that comes with them.

Increasingly, park superintendents see some of the collaborative programs as assets, in that they increase support for the mission of the Service and protect related resources. The Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program gives priority to requests from communities adjacent to parks. Some superintendents now have specific responsibilities to assist with conservation beyond park boundaries, for instance acting as NPS liaisons to nearby national heritage areas. While some believe the collaborative programs should be even more closely integrated with the national parks, advocates of the programs believe it is important that the Service continue to serve all American communities, regardless of their proximity to parks.

No matter how much the collaborative programs are valued, when NPS funds are scarce, which they almost always are, these programs are generally the first to

be cut. From fiscal year 2001 to fiscal year 2009 (the current budget request), the historic preservation programs have been reduced 30%, from \$94 million to \$66 million; in the same time span, the national recreation programs have been reduced 25%, from \$60 million to \$45 million.

#### *Lost International Opportunities*

The National Park Service was once regarded as a preeminent U.S. representative to other national governments in the arena of natural and cultural heritage preservation. Many opportunities exist to enhance the U.S. image worldwide by offering more assistance on conservation topics for which the NPS expertise is universally respected.

Protecting many of our park resources often requires international, as well as regional or national, cooperation. Parks share ecosystems with neighboring countries, and many endangered species protected in our parks migrate between the United States and unprotected habitats abroad. Given current financial limitations, the NPS international program can only provide technical assistance overseas when funds are provided by a third party, such as the Agency for International Development, rather than assessing where help most needed and then being proactive in providing it.

#### **Samuel N. Stokes**

Samuel N. Stokes has over thirty years' experience working for NGOs and government agencies as an expert on heritage conservation and the protection of natural areas. From 1991 to 2006, he directed the National Park Service's Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program. During five of those years, he also led the NPS program to establish National Heritage Areas. Prior to joining the Park Service, he advised local governments and community groups on land protection and taught conservation courses at the University of Vermont. The Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies awarded him the Richard King Mellon Fellowship in 1983-84. Stokes is the principal author of *Saving America's Countryside: A Guide to Rural Conservation* (1989; second edition, 1997, Johns Hopkins University Press). He was the first director of the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Mid-Atlantic Regional Office, and established the Trust's Rural Program to assist communities wishing to protect cultural landscapes, natural areas, and farmland. Stokes is a Fellow of the U.S. National Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites. He has had extensive overseas experience advising on heritage conservation, wildlife habitat protection, and tourism, including assignments in Morocco, Canada, Senegal, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and China. After completing his undergraduate degree in history at Yale, Stokes became a Peace Corps Volunteer in Côte d'Ivoire and was named the first Peace Corps director in Benin. Currently, he is the president of the Marpat Foundation and a consultant to the Land Trust Alliance.



