

Geoparks and the Emerging Practice of Large Landscape Conservation

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In the late 1990s, just before he passed away, John Sawhill, President of The Nature Conservancy (TNC), paid a visit to the Harvard Kennedy School of Government in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA. After offering a presentation regarding the groundbreaking work which he was leading at the world's largest conservation non-governmental organization (NGO), Sawhill was asked what most excited him most about his work at TNC. He proceeded to tell the story about how Chinese government officials had invited him and other members of the TNC staff to offer advice regarding the steps that China might take to expand that nation's young system of national parks. He said that it was a thrill for him to see that the idea of creating national parks and protecting land for future generations had become such a high priority in the world's most populous nation.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, enthusiasm for expanding the size and role of national parks and other protected areas in China is very much alive and well. I can report from first-hand experience that observing that enthusiasm, and having the opportunity to join the conversation about the future of conservation in China, is still a thrill.

In May 2011, I had the honor of joining colleagues from Canada, China, Italy, Japan and the United States at the Second International Forum on Geoparks organized by the International Geographical Union (IGU) in Taining, China. Following the Taining conference, I also had the chance to give a guest lecture on conservation innovation to students at Beijing Normal University (BNU), and to visit with colleagues at the Peking University-Lincoln Institute Center for Urban Development and Land Policy, as well as at BNU, in China's capital city.

For North American readers who may be unfamiliar with the concept of a Geopark, it is a relatively new designation that is given by a special committee of UNESCO, the United Nations Educational and Scientific Organization, to national parks and other nationally-protected areas that include globally significant geographical or geological features. The designation is intended to be appropriate for twenty-first century conservation areas that combine the protection of natural and cultural resources with sustainable development. At many sites, including the Geopark in Taining, sustainable development means tourism development intended to appropriately complement, but not overshadow or detract from, the natural and cultural amenities which attract both domestic and international visitors.

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Since 2004, when UNESCO first began bestowing such status, China has been particularly successful in nominating internationally recognized Geopark sites. According to Wei Dongying, the energetic assistant professor at Beijing Normal University who now serves as Chair of the IGU's Commission on Geoparks, in the year 2004 -- the first year in which Geoparks were officially designated -- there was a total of 25 sites given international Geopark status, of which 8 were Chinese. By 2011, she reports, there are 77 internationally designated Geoparks, including 24 in China. And there is a full pipeline of sites still awaiting international designation.¹ Some of the currently designated Geoparks, such as Yuntaishan, a National Park in China's Henan province, have become exceptionally popular. From a level of about 200,000 visitors per year in 2001, Yuntaishan now draws as many as four million visitors per year -- a growth of 20 times in just a decade. As Gregory Ingram, President of the Lincoln Institute,² has noted in conversation, this fact adds weight to the idea that with the growth of a prosperous middle class that has growing levels of disposable income and increasing numbers of automobiles per capita, Chinese domestic demand for parks and other tourism amenities should experience very strong growth in years and decades to come.

One of the most interesting aspects of at least some of the Geoparks in China is their design, incorporating a core area which is designated for strict protection, a buffer area that may have limited agriculturally-oriented settlements and working landscapes (agricultural fields and woodlots), and a surrounding area designated for "sustainable development" in which you will find multi-story apartment buildings, commercial stores, hotels and other tourist facilities such as tour boat terminals. In Taining, for example, the core Geopark area covers about 125 square kilometers. The core is surrounded by a buffer zone of 200 square kilometers, which is, in turn, further surrounded by a sustainable development zone encompassing the balance of Taining County in Fujian province.

Local officials in China take considerable pride in their role in such experiments in stewardship. In making her toast at a banquet dinner held in honor of the visiting IGU delegation this May, Liao Xiaohua, County Magistrate of the People's Government of Taining County, was emphatic in her declaration that Taining aimed to be a model of sustainable development for the rest of China and beyond, and that she hoped that the visiting guests would return with their friends and family to see Taining's remarkable canyons, Danxia landforms and ancient mountain temples. Follow-up conversations with our guides helped our group of visitors understand that the county executive's pride reflects not only her environmental sensitivity, but also her business acumen, given that the tourism business in Taining is an increasingly important economic mainstay in this relatively remote county.

Geoparks, as described above, can be fairly considered similar in many ways to cross-sectoral, multi-jurisdictional large landscape conservation initiatives (LLCIs) emerging across the North American continent, such as the regional initiatives envisioned in the 2010 publication by David Foster and colleagues at the Harvard Forest,

¹ Indeed, as of May 2012 China has a total of some 182 "national" Geopark sites, a number which includes the nation's 24 internationally designated Geoparks.

² Gregory Ingram is based at the Lincoln House, the headquarters of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA.

Wildlands and Woodlands: A Vision for the New England Landscape. A Geopark can, as in Taining, combine several levels of protection across the jurisdiction (or at least management responsibility) of multiple units of government (for example, governments operating at the County, Provincial and National levels), forming a land mosaic of sorts. The mosaic pattern at a place like Taining can be particularly complex, given that it may have multiple protection designations—Taining, for example, enjoys status as a National Park, a National Forest Park, a National Scenic Park, and a Geopark, as well as several other designations. Better understanding the benefits and difficulties associated with such multiple designations may be particularly useful to land managers attempting to chart a long-term management course for the site.

At the same time that Chinese Geoparks are in some ways similar to large landscape conservation initiatives (LLCIs) now emerging in North America, they also have important differences. Most importantly, LLCIs in the United States often involve large private land parcels, as well as land owned and managed by NGOs and governments. In China, while land leases as long as 70 years may be acquired by private interests, long-term land ownership remains in the hands of the state.

Furthermore, while many North American LLCIs can cite specific, measurable conservation outcomes as commonly shared goals (for example, the Blackfoot Challenge in state of Montana has explicitly tracked progress towards such goals as increases of in-stream fish populations, reduction of human-bear interactions, and the use of local water resources for irrigation³), it does not yet appear that Chinese Geopark managers, at least in Taining, are readily able to enunciate such goals. Over the long term, setting and steering towards specific conservation outcomes may help Chinese Geopark managers provide detailed accounts of the environmental and economic value of their efforts.

International cooperation to share best management practices is likely to benefit park and large landscape managers from China, the United States, Europe and many other regions. Already, Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona, USA, and the Yuntaishan National Park in China have formed a productive sister park relationship. Managers from each park have paid extensive visits to their respective sister park, yielding both tangible and intangible benefits. Rudy D'Alessandro, International Cooperation Specialist at the US National Park Service is quite enthusiastic about the progress made and warm relationships formed in the exchanges made to date by managers of the two parks. He reports that the Grand Canyon-Yuntaishan relationship may well serve as a model for future international partnerships. These partnerships, as described in a National Park Service press release, are designed to “promote international cooperation and support for the mutual benefit of both parks and the peoples of both countries. The relationship allows the parks to benefit by sharing experiences and approaches to collaboration, including local efforts to work with gateway communities, regional and local economies, friends groups and partner organizations” (Maureen Oltrogge, 2007).

Indeed, if the invention of national parks, land trusts, and early examples of large landscape conservation initiatives are among the “best ideas” (David M, 2009.) that

³ See, for example, the data collected and used to steer resource management by the Drought Commission of the Blackfoot Challenge, described at <http://blackfootchallenge.org/Articles/?cat=53>.

America has ever had, further collaboration and exchange between US and Chinese managers of protected areas offer us all an extraordinary opportunity to share best practices from “east-to-west” and “west-to-east,” and to help shape the course of conservation and development worldwide over the coming century.

References

- David M. Kennedy. *High Country News*. “National Parks: Another Idea.” October 26, 2009. Available at <http://www.hcn.org/issues/41.18/americas-national-parks-another-idea>. Kennedy writes: “In 1912, James Bryce, the British ambassador to the United States, proclaimed that the national parks are ‘America’s best idea.’ ”
- Maureen Oltrogge, *NPS Digest*. “Grand Canyon National Park Superintendent signs Sister Park Arrangement with Yuntaishan World Geopark in China today.” August 7, 2007, available at <http://home.nps.gov/applications/digest/headline.cfm?type=ParkNewsEvents&id=25029&urlarea=npsnews>.