

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE
ALDO LEOPOLD WILDERNESS RESEARCH INSTITUTE

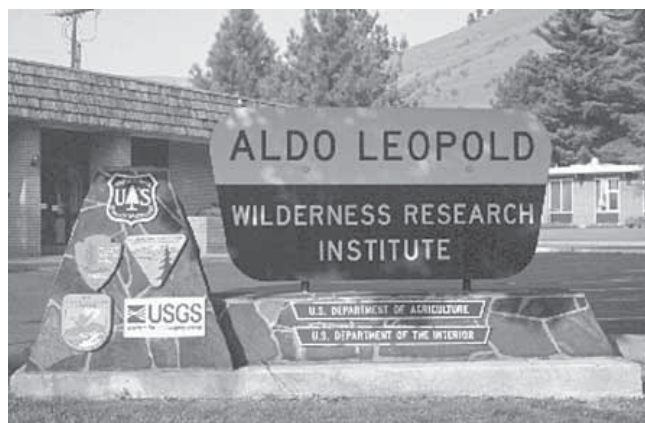
Reflections on WILD9

BY DAVID J. PARSONS

The 9th World Wilderness Congress (WILD9), held November 6–13 in Mérida, Mexico, provided a vivid reminder of the magnitude of the challenges—both environmental and human—facing advocates for the protection of wilderness resources and values. From a U.S. government scientist's perspective, it was also a reminder of the differences in wilderness focused conservation priorities and programs between the United States and much of the rest of the world.

WILD9 provided for an amazing gathering of conservationists, government officials, scientists, artists, educators, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and others interested in protecting and preserving wildland ecosystems across the globe. Under the overriding theme of Wilderness: The Climate's Best Ally, much discussion focused on the importance of large intact ecosystems for preserving both biotic and human health. It emphasized threats posed by land use change, such as deforestation and degradation of native vegetation, to local communities and ecosystems, as well as the importance of protecting natural ecosystems for the stabilization of global carbon emissions. Perhaps the primary message to come from Mérida was recognition of the importance of the conservation of large, intact ecosystems, including ecological connectivity between such areas. This message was clearly articulated by scientists, land managers, nature photographers and writers, as well as indigenous peoples. It was in turn recognized and supported by high level government officials from around the world, including President Felipe Calderón of Mexico.

For me, WILD9 reinforced the importance of supporting science that transcends spatial and temporal scales. In contrast to much of my past experience, conducting and directing research for two different land management agencies (National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service) that are primarily focused on the needs of specific designated tracts of land (either national parks or wilderness areas), it is clear



that the relevance of the science and management supported by federal agencies can be greatly enhanced when placed in the context of the broader landscape-scale issues that are the focus of international conservation. Whereas designation of parks, wilderness, and similarly protected lands is critical to global conservation, it is insufficient. Maximizing the benefits of protected lands must be viewed as a part of a larger strategy that includes protection of migration corridors, planning that focuses on watersheds rather than political boundaries, communication and coordination with local communities, and recognition and communication of the ecological and social values that generally transcend political boundaries. Effective conservation must look beyond traditional administrative, political, and even national boundaries. It must also look across disciplinary boundaries, engaging the social, biological, and physical sciences.

The importance and challenges of global conservation are of particular significance in the face of anticipated global climate change as was emphasized repeatedly at WILD9. In this vein, principle themes followed throughout WILD9 included climate change mitigation and adaptation, large landscape connectivity, water (including both freshwater

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regional scale, attempting to find a balance between preservation and use.

The passionate authors all are aware of the unique history and properties of Adirondack Park, and the range of topics and viewpoints they provide is a key strength of this book. Although pro-environmental voices dominate, those focused on championing individual and community interests are also heard. As several authors note, the essence of the lengthy, contentious debate over the management of Adirondack Park really centers around the private/public land split, and the role of government in regulating individual rights for the good of the many. As Terrie notes, "In the Forest Preserve we have nature, and on some of the private land we have often unfettered,

laissez-faire individualism" (p. 360). Or, as Schneider suggested in an earlier book on Adirondack Park, we "need to find an acceptable definition of wilderness that can survive our culture's seemingly insatiable desires" (p. 497).

The Adirondack Park is an admirable, yet highly contested microcosm of contemporary global society. Wilderness has been both romanticized and commodified, and individuals demand power and actions that diminish nature and society. How will we find that elusive balance? As the editors suggest in the final chapter, "if we are to find a means of sustaining a vibrant economy amidst a wilderness ecosystem, we will need to forge a new consensus for a shared vision not just within the Adirondacks, but within our larger

society" (p. 533). In a world seemingly becoming more divisive each day, how will we create this shared vision?

No one book can answer these questions, but this book does provide an interdisciplinary, integrated discussion of the promises and challenges of the unique microcosm called Adirondack Park. By doing so, it paints a wonderfully challenging picture of the battles we will face in maintaining both wilderness and society for a truly sustainable future. By assessing the past, present, and future of the Adirondacks, it serves as a wake-up call for those attempting to create a shared vision for humankind and wilderness on a global scale.

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and marine), ecosystem services, communicating conservation priorities, wilderness and people (including relationships with local constituencies), comanagement by indigenous communities and governments, and sustainable financing (including corporate commitment and public-private partnerships). Many of these themes are relatively foreign to the traditional focus of government scientists.

The importance of good science upon which to base sound conservation decisions has never been greater. The sustainability and resilience of our most intact remaining natural ecosystems depend on it. We need to better understand the integrity of and ecological services provided by wilderness, as well as the threats to such. We also need to better understand the human factors, including values and relationships associated with natural ecosystems. Ultimately, we need to understand, evaluate, and communi-

cate tradeoffs between the difficult societal decisions that must be made and how those decisions will affect both natural and human resources. Science can help reduce the uncertainty behind such decisions, but it will not make the decisions. It was in this context that one suggestion on how we should proceed particularly caught my attention at WILD9: the importance of managing for redundancy and surprise. This approach, suggested by Lisa Graumlich of the University of Arizona, recognizes how the uncertainties we face are only compounded by a changing climate.

Another clear message from WILD9 was that science, although important, is not sufficient. The arts, including nature photography and writing, and experiential engagement also have a critical role to play in global conservation. We have to bring all of our diverse resources to bear if we are to succeed in this enormous chal-

lenge. Perhaps Jane Goodall said it best in her plenary discussion of the reasons she sees for hope in the face of what some see as discouraging odds. She identified the human mind, the human spirit, the resilience of nature, and children as the greatest reasons she has hope that we will be able to regain the wisdom needed to save our home.

I cannot think of a more important experience for the managers and scientists working in federal land management agencies than participating in the kind of international conservation forum offered by WILD9. It broadens your perspective, putting your work in a context that day-to-day pressures make difficult to appreciate. It is both a humbling and exhilarating experience.

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