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## **A National Park Roadmap To "30 By 30"**

### **Adding To The National Park System Would Reveal Overlooked Wonders And Help Protect Biodiversity**

**By Kurt Repanshek**

A million-acre basin cradling swamps, bayous, and the country's greatest contiguous bottomland hardwood forest. Sixty acres in the Allegheny River of Pennsylvania that witnessed a Revolutionary War battle. Forty peaks that climb above 13,000 feet, surrounded largely by wilderness that's home to grizzlies and wolves, moose and wolverines, eagles and hawks.

These are vestiges of America's wildness and history, places where rich wilderness and the forgotten past can be found outside the National Park System. They also are places where much progress can be made in guiding the country to "30 by 30," the international push to conserve 30 percent of the globe's lands and oceans for biodiversity and as an impediment to climate change.

There's no question society in general, and Congress and the National Park Service specifically, needs to focus even harder on conserving nature. Too little attention has been focused on the perils the world faces from the lack of biodiversity and climate-change impacts, according to a new report from more than a dozen scientists from Australia, Mexico, and the United States.

***"Humanity is causing a rapid loss of biodiversity and, with it, Earth's ability to support complex life. But the mainstream is having difficulty grasping the magnitude of this loss, despite the steady erosion of the fabric of human civilization," they [wrote in Frontiers in Conservation Science](#). "While suggested solutions abound, the current scale of their implementation does not match the relentless progression of biodiversity loss and other existential threats tied to the continuous expansion of the human enterprise."***

***"... If most of the world's population truly understood and appreciated the magnitude of the crises we summarize here, and the inevitability of worsening conditions, one could logically expect positive changes in politics and policies to match the gravity of the existential threats. But the opposite is unfolding. The rise of right-wing populist leaders is associated with anti-environment agendas as seen recently for example in Brazil, the USA, and Australia."***

While the authors didn't go into detail regarding potential solutions to the current course of events, saying the existing paper didn't provide enough space to delve deeply into them, part of the larger solution is "property acquisition" to help reverse the loss of biodiversity. Expansion of national park systems, in the United States and other countries, can, and should, help in that regard.

Four years ago, Elaine Leslie, then the National Park Service's chief of the Natural Resource Stewardship and Science Biological Resources Division, and Jody Hilty of the Yellowstone to Yukon Initiative, outlined the challenges in [an article for The George Wright Society](#).

"Connecting protected areas through coordinated transboundary efforts is one of the cornerstones of what is needed in a national conservation strategy. It is essential to do now, given the changing landscape and climate," they said in summing up the issue at hand.

In 2017, in [planning for its next century](#), the National Park Service recognized that "(T)here are important natural resources and ecosystems representative of the nation's natural heritage and biodiversity that are not yet fully or adequately protected in the National Park System or by other partners."

"Although the first-order effects of the biodiversity crisis -- the loss of species -- are dire, the second-order consequences -- the loss of species interactions -- may be more ominous," the planning document also noted. "It is widely agreed that connectivity identification, preservation, and restoration is important for natural resources conservation at all levels."

[Since those papers came out](#), the situation has only grown more dire. In the United States, [President-elect Biden is being lobbied to declare the loss of species a national emergency](#). The incoming president could position the United States as a leader in the fight to combat extinction, protect public lands and waters, curtail the international wildlife trade and restore abundant wildlife populations across the nation, say representatives for more than 135 groups that made the request to the Biden team.

"The time for half measures has passed. President Biden must take bold, immediate action to end extinction because the survival of not just wildlife but humanity is now at stake," said Tierra Curry, a senior scientist at the Center for Biological Diversity.

The groups want Biden to create 175 new national monuments, wildlife refuges, and marine sanctuaries "so that 30 percent of U.S. lands and waters are conserved by 2030 and 50 percent by 2050."

## **Building A National Conservation Strategy**

While Leslie has retired from the Park Service since she co-authored that 2016 paper, she still speaks out in support of developing a national conservation strategy.

"Biodiversity loss is at an all-time high from multiple stressors: invasive species, fragmentation and land conversion, loss of connectivity that not only supports migration and large home range integrity, but also genetic diversity," she said in an email. "Climate change is a common thread through most of these impacts and stressors, and the impacts and effects and consequences are only increasing. We could list a host of species that are shifting their ranges, and unfortunately many of those are [invasive species that are compromising habitat](#) and literally pushing out native species."

The Park Service, Leslie believes, needs to be out front in conserving biodiversity, and not just on its existing landscapes.

"Some of hottest biodiversity spots on this continent are in the south. The Mobile-Tensaw watershed is one of those spaces and so connected to our heritage, from the Revolutionary War to Civil War to Civil Rights, and a land of indigenous heritage like nowhere else," she pointed out. "This area must become preserved under our nation's most protected system. Other biodiverse hotspots include the southern Blue Ridge, Sonoran desert and its role in the Spine of the Continent, prairie grasslands and grasslands generally."

While the U.S. National Park System currently contains more than 420 units, Zack Frank agrees with Leslie that there are many more places in the country that merit inclusion. A freelance photojournalist, Frank spent four months traversing the country to capture images of 54 landscapes he believes should be added to the park system. Some of his choices already are part of the park system, but don't carry the "national park" designation

"The national parks are a collection of the greatest and most diverse natural settings our country has to offer. We were the first country in the world to set aside vast lands for preservation. Today we have 63 national parks, but even with all of those many environments, ecosystems, and land-forms remain to be protected for future generations," said Frank. "As the American population grows and expands, these unrepresented landscapes become more and more endangered. This is our chance to fill in the gaps of the national park designation and save all the lands we can before they're lost forever."

Frank, a former Smithsonian Institution staffer and National Park Service ranger, traveled more than 10,000 miles, hiked hundreds of miles of trails, and took more than 10,000 images for ***Undiscovered America, Unknown Natural Wonders and Potential National Parks***. The new book divides the 54 settings into two groups. The first, according to the photographer, "are virtually unknown but deserve greater appreciation and awareness." The second batch "is made up of well-known landscapes that are surprisingly not national parks, but people often assume they are."

"All of these natural wonders deserve greater protection and to be considered alongside the best natural icons the country has to offer," believes Frank.

In pursuing this project, the photographer traveled to Louisiana to explore the Atchafalaya Basin, to the Upper Mississippi River in Wisconsin to visit a place known as "Driftless Rivers" that already is being lobbied for inclusion in the park system, to the Hell's Canyon area of Idaho, along with many other locations from Maine to Southern California.

The [Atchafalaya Basin](#), a place that's been dubbed "America's Foreign Country," encompasses an 800,000-acre chunk of swampland that holds the country's largest contiguous bottomland forest and where presumed extinct Ivory-billed woodpeckers once filled the air with calls that sound similar to tooting a tin horn. The basin is larger than the Everglades in Florida, and said to be "five times more productive than any other river basin in North America." It is home to shrimp, crocodiles, spoonbills, snakes, and hundreds of other plant and animal species.

Though the Atchafalaya Basin has been recognized as a National Heritage Area since 2006, that designation doesn't carry the protection, or the funding, conveyed by "national park" status.

The proposed [Driftless Rivers National Park](#) would wrap a stretch of the Upper Mississippi River and protect an area "filled with stunning scenery, bizarre microclimates at the extremes, and deep caves," say its promoters. The idea, launched in 1999, revolves around 375,000 acres in Wisconsin.

"The fact that the Midwest's only national park is the rather inaccessible and remote Isle Royale, which is surrounded by Lake Superior and prohibits use of any wheeled vehicles, including bicycles, makes the Driftless Area a prime location for a national park and infinitely more user friendly," they add.

Rugged, mountainous landscapes also came into focus for Frank. The Wind River Range in Wyoming, and the Sawtooth Range in Idaho, which has in the past come up in discussions about potential parks, both were captured by his cameras.

"The Sawtooth Range is named for a group of jagged peaks that rise and fall across 678 square miles of Idaho. The region carries the nickname the 'American Alps' because of the sharp, picturesque rock faces and the Swiss-themed architecture dotting towns alongside the more typical rustic buildings found in the West," wrote Frank in his chapter on the Sawtooth Range.

"Individual mountain peaks are surrounded by rivers, lakes, and pine trees, creating a steady display of scenic vistas. Along these vistas, small, quiet campsites provide the perfect setting to watch the world-class sunrises and sunsets that highlight Idaho's secret mountains."

In Wyoming, he notes, the Wind River Range holds "a glaciated canyon valley that lies at the center of the peaks. These enormous granite walls are reminiscent of Yosemite Valley in grandeur and scale. It even boasts a competitor to the famous El Capitan named Squawtop Mountain, which towers higher above the valley floor than its California counterpart."

## **Not To Be Overlooked Again**

"The majority of these landscapes have been considered as national parks in the past, but fell short. Because they failed to become parks, they don't exist in the national consciousness," Frank told the **Traveler**. Every American has a mental picture of Yellowstone, the Everglades, and the Grand Canyon, but the average person doesn't know what the Adirondacks, Ozarks, or Glen Canyon actually look like. The label 'National Park' is often so impactful, it can elevate a place to national awareness. How many of these landscapes have been left out of the story of the American landscape is shocking."

When it comes to adding units to the park system, the process really needs to be deliberative and not solely rest on gorgeous views or rich history, said Leslie.

"I think [Mobile-Tensaw is critical to get in the system](#)," she said. "There's no other place on our continent like it. And we really need to look at marine priorities as well, for all the same reasons: connectivity, migration, genetic diversity, etc. And look at specific at-risk species and habitats."

To take such approach, Leslie said, it's vital to gain a better understanding of what lives and breathes and grows on the land.

"It is difficult to protect or understand what you don't know exists," she said. "It is critical to conduct comprehensive inventories of species in park units, synthesize and analyze that data in context not only within the park unit but at varying scales, including large landscapes and watersheds, both terrestrial and marine."

A perfect model of such analysis can be found today at [Great Smoky Mountains National Park](#), where the [All-Taxa Biodiversity Inventory](#) has identified more than 1,000 "new to science" species, as well as more than 21,000 species that call the park home.

"More of those need to be funded and undertaken," said Leslie. "You may know all about your charismatic megafauna or redwoods, but little understanding or knowledge of non-vascular plants or the vast world of invertebrate species and their habitats and roles in our ecosystems. So information gain is critical to combating biodiversity loss."

At the end of the day, she said, "Biodiversity conservation should be at the top of the National Park Service and Department of Interior lists!!!"