

SHORT COMMUNICATION: THE WORLD PARK PROJECT

Richard Weller

Email: rjweller@design.upenn.edu

The Ian L. McHarg Center for Urbanism and Ecology, Weitzman School of Design, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA , USA

ABSTRACT

This article summarises the concept of a World Park whereby instead of continuing to invest in isolated fragments of protected areas to meet CBD targets, continuous tracts of land are connected with walking trails to catalyse landscape restoration efforts at a planetary scale. The article explains the rationale behind the creation of a World Park and argues for its potential benefits as a model of conservation that focuses on denuded lands in-between existing protected areas and opening up the possibility of large-scale landscape connectivity that actively includes humans in its construction and management.

Key words: connectivity, representation, hotspots

INTRODUCTION

For millennia, Indigenous peoples the world over have 'protected' and 'managed' land in ways that combine spiritual and material needs into a unified cosmology that situates humans as a part of rather than apart from what we now refer to as nature. In the Western canon, the Greeks, for example, set aside land in the form of sacred groves replete with temples venerating their various gods and goddesses. In the Middle Ages, although forests were feared as beyond the bounds of salvation, they were also conserved and policed as vital resources. Later, as a reaction to the ravages of the industrial revolution and inspired by the aesthetics of romanticism, the modern phenomenon of national parks was institutionalised with the protection of 3,471 square miles in Yellowstone in 1872. Later in the 20th century, building on the basis of national parks as picturesque places set aside from the ecological onslaught of modernity, the international movement to secure protected areas gained momentum and dominates global conservation efforts to this day. In 1962 there were 9,214 protected areas, today there are 265,920 amounting to a grand total of 15.6 per cent of the Earth's terrestrial area in over 266,000 different locations across 245 nations (The Global Database on Protected Areas Management Effectiveness, 2021).

By any measure, this is a remarkable achievement for the global conservation movement. But just as national parks have come in for criticism over the years, the global protected area estate also has its critics (Brockington et al., 2008; Büscher et al., 2014). The critics argue that protected areas are a land grab by a global environmental elite at the expense of not only industry, but also Indigenous communities who have in the past been evicted as their own lands are placed under 'protection' (Dowie, 2011). They also argue that protected areas are 'paper parks', more about nations meeting UN targets under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) than really saving biodiversity on the ground. They argue that protected areas enshrine 'fortress conservation'; a worldview based on a nostalgic idea of wild nature over there, and culture over here.

These important criticisms notwithstanding, if well managed and inclusive, protected areas are not just beneficial (to our physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing) but necessary. Biodiversity is invaluable: without it, entire ecosystems would collapse and, in all likelihood, take humankind with them. But the protected areas we have today are woefully inadequate because – as per the two most important words in the CBD – they are neither sufficiently 'representative' nor 'connected' (CBD, 2011). This means protected areas do not represent the world's 867 ecoregions and the full range of critically endangered species, and they are not connected with one another and with the broader landscape in a way that would allow species to migrate so as to adapt to climate change. Without being expanded and interconnected, today's protected areas are effectively big, isolated zoos, and climate change threatens to leave many of the species trapped within them, with little hope of adapting to rising temperatures and shifting ecotones.

Our best hope to halt or even reverse the loss of biodiversity and make the work of conservation and land management more inclusive, is a new form of conservation landscape that would bring nations, states, landholders and Indigenous custodians together in a cooperative effort to create, where appropriate, continuous trans-national tracts of protected and restored habitat for both conservation and recreation. Rather than perpetuating the ad-hoc collection of protected areas we have today, this approach would direct global conservation investments into a more holistic and coordinated initiative at a scale and in a form commensurate with the crisis. For argument's sake - and for want of a less colonial expression - let's call this a 'World Park'; a concept we have been developing here in the landscape architecture department at the University of Pennsylvania for several years now (Figure 1).

THE WORLD PARK PROJECT

Originally conceived to help reach the CBD Aichi Target 11 of protecting 17 per cent of the world's terrestrial area and now coinciding with the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, the World Park Project is about bringing landholders and Indigenous custodians in 55 nations who preside over 19 of the world's biodiversity hotspots together in a cooperative effort to create continuous, restored habitat for recreation and the protection of endangered species at a planetary scale. When we began this hypothetical project in 2016, the world's combined protected area was at 15.4 per cent. By our calculations the outstanding 1.6 per cent necessary to reach Aichi target 11 was the equivalent of approximately 700,000 Central Parks. If you put these Central Parks end-to-end they would go around the Earth close to 70 times. The research question we asked was where should this land be and what form should it take? In 2021 with protected areas (including Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures) now at 16.64 per cent, the outstanding land area necessary to reach 17 per cent is equivalent to 150,000 Central Parks, enough to circumnavigate the Earth 15 times. The rationale of the World Park Project is that instead of adding these 150,000 Central Parks to the world's already fragmented protected areas, they should instead be amalgamated into one coherent large-scale landscape initiative focused, as a matter of priority, on the world's biodiversity hotspots and key biodiversity areas where endemic spaces are most threatened (Weller et al., 2017).

The reason there are 55 nations in 19 of the world's 36 hotspots included within the concept of the World Park is that the project of making such a park begins with the simple principle of creating recreational trails that pass through as many as possible biodiversity hotspots and protected areas in single continuous routes. Applying this principle leads to three trails; the first from



Figure 1. The World Park concept

Australia to Morocco, the second from Turkey to Namibia and the third from Patagonia to Alaska. Extending from and interconnecting many existing shorter trails, these three major trails are routed so as to pass through extant protected areas as well as lands in need of ecological restoration in-between. The trails would include infrastructure for camping and provision of other essential services calibrated to the average distance a person can reasonably be expected to cover on foot or by bike in a day. The trails serve as low-cost catalysts for attracting people out into these remote landscapes, which can in turn lead to bringing people together to not just 'walk the world' but to also 'work the world'; to stop and participate in and draw attention to the World Park's greater mission of restoring the ecological health of the degraded lands throughout its 163,000 km2 of territory.

The park's restoration programme would come under the umbrella of a 'World Park Rangers' programme operating similar to the way in which the Peace Corps does today and the way in which the US Conservation Corps did during the US New Deal in the 1930s. With the support of the 55 nations whose sovereign territory the park includes, as well as other nations who may wish to invest on behalf of their citizens, the World Park's potential to employ people in the work of landscape restoration is vast.

It is important to note that while the World Park's core principles are to restore lands in-between currently protected areas, and thus expand and interconnect protected areas, the actual design and planning of any such work cannot be executed in broad, top-down brush strokes. It is critical that the big 'top-down' idea of creating a World Park be met in equal measure by 'bottom-up' specificity and sensitivity to the full complexity of both ecological and cultural conditions on the ground. Every piece of land is a complex interweaving of culture and biology; every piece of land is laden with vested interests; every piece of land has a deep history; and every piece of land has multiple potential futures which need to be articulated and negotiated to balance benefits to both local and global culture. In this vein, although the walking trails achieve connectivity for humans at a planetary scale, it is not assumed that forging connectivity as a blanket approach to landscape restoration and extant protected areas is automatically correct for all biodiversity. The point is that the World Park functions to galvanise people and attract resources, not to impose a single scientific world view or set of abstract landscape ecology principles, but instead to make possible a mosaic of site-specific restoration efforts, where large-scale landscape connectivity is an option. Put another way, the idea of



Cradle Mountain - Lake St Clair National Park, Tasmania is at the southern end of the proposed World Park Trail ${\ensuremath{\mathbb C}}$ Marc Hockings

creating a World Park is to piece together many site specific restoration projects so that they may add up to something that is greater than just the sum of the parts.

Of course, things quickly get very complicated when we ask how to finance and govern said World Park. Obviously, the concept requires an overarching and representative form of governance that builds on and includes not only the 55 nations but also Indigenous nations and landowners whose territory is - only with permission - incorporated into the park's jurisdiction. Working through existing UN institutions and the IUCN, the World Park would also need to include a strong representation of the world's environmental and conservation NGOs. Similarly, the World Park would require its own scientific network to develop its research programmes to not only steer the work of determining appropriate forms of restoration but to also direct ongoing monitoring. Indeed, the ethos of the park is not that it is a quick fix 'nature-based solution' but rather an ecological and socio-political experiment in designing and managing ecosystems about which we still have everything to learn – an experiment that could become the first citizen science programme coordinated on a planetary scale.

Regarding cost, in 2012 conservation scientist at BirdLife International in Cambridge, UK, Stuart Butchart calculated the cost of meeting Aichi Target 11 of conserving and maintaining 17 per cent (25 million km2) of the world's terrestrial area at US\$76.1 billion, adjusted to today's dollar value the cost is US\$91 billion (Cressey, 2012). Until the lands involved are properly analysed, it is impossible to say exactly how large and how expensive a World Park would be. According to our extensive mapping of its potential territory (in terms of planning the trails and the land area required to achieve connectivity), it is reasonable to surmise that it is about 163,000 km² – an area equivalent to 0.08 per cent of Aichi target 11. Using Butchart's calculus (Cressey, 2012), the cost of restoring and managing this amount of land would be in the order of US\$7 billion per annum.

To be sure, this is an expensive park. But the better question to ask is not what it costs but what is it worth? In an ideal scenario, the World Park would not siphon money away from existing conservation projects but stand alone as a new form of conservation venture. For (a mere) US\$7 billion, nations and philanthropists can come together to create something that would help solve two of conservation's biggest challenges: the lack of both landscape connectivity and ecological representation. For US\$7 billion, a World Park could provide meaningful experiences and jobs for legions of the world's youth. For US\$7 billion, a World Park presents a profound sign of hope that humanity can work together to be a constructive force for nature, instead of its destroyer. Thought of in these terms, the park's value far outweighs its cost.

ENDNOTES

ⁱThis figure rises to 16.64 per cent if you include OECMs (Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures) (The Global Database on Protected Areas Management Effectiveness, 2021). ⁱⁱFor more information and detailed mapping of the World Park's proposed territory see: https://theworldpark.com ⁱⁱⁱSee Neil Maher, Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Weller is a professor and chair of landscape architecture at the University of Pennsylvania, where he is the executive director of The Ian L. McHarg Center for Urbanism and Ecology. He is the author of 6 books including Design with Nature Now (Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2019)

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RESUMEN

Este artículo resume el concepto de Parque Mundial, según el cual, en lugar de seguir invirtiendo en fragmentos aislados de áreas protegidas para cumplir los objetivos del CDB, se conecta extensiones continuas de tierra con senderos para catalizar los esfuerzos de restauración del paisaje a escala planetaria. El artículo explica los fundamentos de la creación de un Parque Mundial y aboga por sus beneficios potenciales como modelo de conservación centrado en las tierras denudadas entre las áreas protegidas existentes, y abre la posibilidad para favorecer la conectividad del paisaje a gran escala mediante la participación activa de los seres humanos en su construcción y gestión.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article résume le concept de Parc Mondial selon lequel, au lieu de continuer à investir dans des fragments isolés d'aires protégées pour atteindre les objectifs de la CDB, des étendues de terre continues sont reliées par des sentiers pédestres pour catalyser les efforts de restauration des paysages à l'échelle planétaire. L'article expose la raison d'être de la création d'un Parc Mondial et plaide pour ses avantages potentiels en tant que modèle de conservation qui se concentre sur les terres dénudées entre les aires protégées existantes, et ouvre la possibilité d'une connectivité paysagère à grande échelle qui inclut de manière active les humains dans sa construction et sa gestion.