



BOOK REVIEWS

Meanings that matter: A review of Jon Kohl's *Interpretive Theme Writer's Field Guide*

Jon Kohl. Published by Bloomsbury 2026

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Drawing the map that Florida (and the world) followed

Regional Landscape Conservation Planning: Wildlife, Connectivity, and the Florida Model. Edited by Reed F. Noss and Thomas S. Hoctor. University of Florida Press, 2026

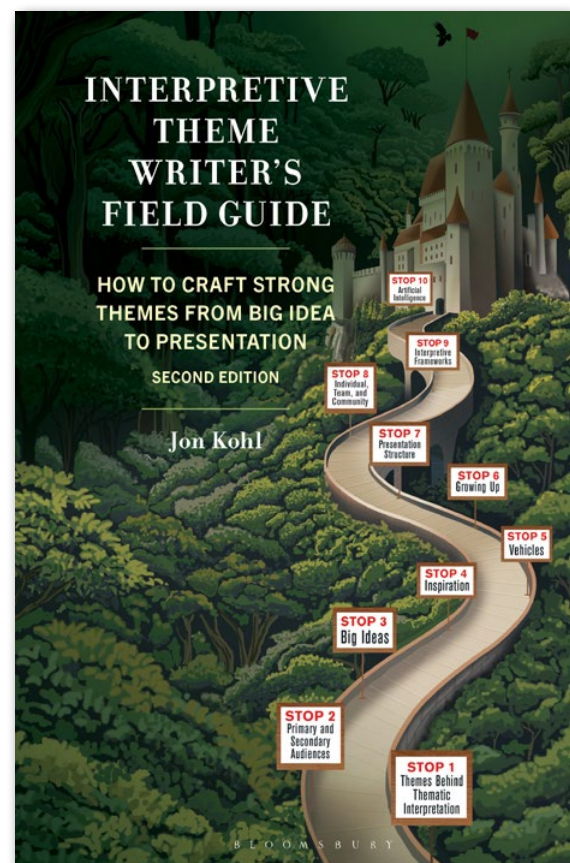
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Meanings that matter: A review of Jon Kohl's *Interpretive Theme Writer's Field Guide*

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Interpretation in protected areas is often expected to do much more than convey information and provide visitors with an enjoyable experience. Its true potential lies in helping visitors make meaning, revealing the extraordinary in the familiar, fostering connections to place, nature and culture, and inspiring reflection and transformation in service of the greater good. This is a hefty task for both the novice and experienced interpreter alike. Jon Kohl's *Interpretive Theme Writer's Field Guide*, now in its second edition, builds on Sam Ham's thematic interpretation tradition while expanding and modernising the 2018 *Field Guide*. Kohl's greatest contribution is not simply providing practitioners with a recipe and tools for writing better themes, but treating theme development as a deliberate process of discovery, creativity, self-reflection and collaboration.

The *Field Guide* organises the main text as a journey through ten 'stops', a guided experience that should feel familiar to any interpreter. Through these chapters, readers are directed to consider thematic interpretation and its distinguishing features; opine on 'Big Ideas' and develop vehicles to operationalise them; lead with curiosity and practise creativity; consider audiences' needs; structure experiences intentionally; and



effectively collaborate with both teams and technology. Kohl envisions themes as more than a product or takeaway message, and rather as practical tools and design decisions that guide interpreters in crafting transformative experiences. For protected areas to endure, we must do more than pass knowledge and culture from one generation to the next; we must create opportunities for visitors to encounter and grapple with Big, meaningful, messy Ideas that change how we interact with, govern and protect these sacred sites. To

riff off Kohl's analogy, interpretation is precisely the arrow for this target, and themes set its trajectory.

The publication is aptly titled a *Field Guide* as its strengths lie in making abstract concepts concrete. The book features clear guidelines, numerous real-world examples, exercises and worksheets, a theme inventory, and even AI prompts. In reviewing this book, I had the luxury to get lost in poetic prose, learn from the diverse perspectives within the *Voices from the Field* callouts, examine the *Theme Spotlights*, and contemplate how my own experience and training aligns with or diverts from this *Field Guide*. And while I encourage all readers to do the same, this publication can just as easily be thumbed through on a 15-minute lunch break for quick guidance or a tangible exercise before an imminent presentation. As the field of interpretation has grown and modernised in an ever-changing world, themes have remained somewhat elusive. Nearly all interpreters would say theme development is critical to their success, while few would confidently admit they have mastered the craft. This *Field Guide* moves us from the elusive towards the practical. By laying out a deliberate process and clearly explaining key components without overexplaining them, Kohl makes the hard-to-teach far more approachable.

The *Field Guide* covers much of what one might expect, from ideation to mechanics to implementation. I focus here on the more unique contributions that address present and future societal challenges. Much of Kohl's writing emphasises that interpretive theme writing is a deeply personal endeavour, requiring interpreters to conduct research from a position of curiosity, reflect on their development processes, and recognise their interests, perspectives and biases. Yet modern interpretation also demands co-creation as society grapples with questions such as: Who gets to decide what the Big Idea is? What happens when a protected area has multiple narratives informed by diverse lived experiences? Can thematic interpretation accommodate contested meanings? Kohl recognises this tension and contributes meaningfully to the conversation by providing structures and processes for developing 'Theme Teams' and 'Interpretive Frameworks' that leverage community voices, power and perspectives. He also provides critical questions for practitioners considering theme writing as a community-building process. The *Voices from the Field* callout in Stop 2 (Dr Kylie Christian and Leanne Redpath) offers a glimpse of the realities of such a process, even with highly trained facilitators. While co-creation may offer a valuable approach to theme development, practitioners should ensure they have the resources, expertise and necessary reflexivity to engage in the process effectively.

This second edition also considers the rise of AI and its potential use in interpretive theme writing. The central question is: if interpretation is fundamentally about developing meaningful Big Ideas and connecting people and place, what part of theme development should remain human? Generative AI may be able to produce grammatically sound themes, but it cannot determine what deserves attention, whose perspectives matter most, what relationship ideas and meaning have to a place, or what interpretive experience we create for visitors. Kohl establishes his own relationship with AI as collaborative, an idea that can be carried over to his concept of a Theme Team. Each member brings different strengths and perspectives. AI's strength lies in its ability to quickly generate a variety of themes that follow established guidelines. Does AI have perspectives, however? While that might be up for debate, Kohl's hope (and mine) is that the Big Ideas at the foundation of any theme remain distinctly human. For practitioners who wish to collaborate with AI, Kohl provides guidance for training AI based on the *Field Guide* and prompts to support the theme-writing process.

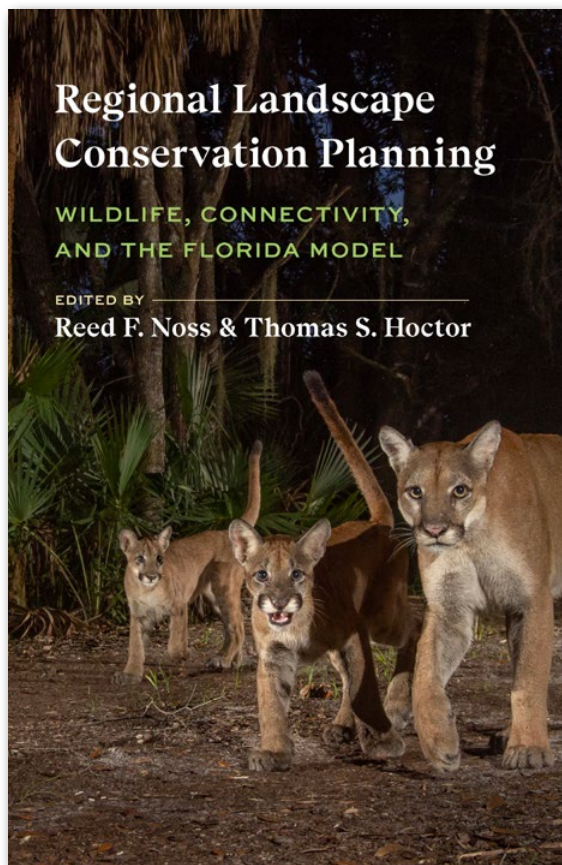
There is one question I believe remains unanswered and debated in the broader field: Can a theme take the form of an interrogative question? Kohl states that themes must be declarative, not interrogative: "A theme statement should not be a question because a theme is precisely the answer to a question" (p. 53). Current interpretive training in the US National Park Service diverges from this standpoint. Upon a close review of the guidelines presented in this *Field Guide*, one could plausibly follow all but one and arrive at a meaningful theme question. Could this theme question provoke thought, reveal meaning, relate to the audience, and serve as an organising structure? There has yet to be any empirical evidence supporting or refuting one approach over the other, so a hard line stance may be premature. The choice likely depends on the mission of the organisation, the desired outcomes, and the experience and preference of the interpreter. Kohl does make an important distinction that themes should be declarative rather than imperative, leaving room for multiple meanings. But if audiences are provoked to create their own meaning, does this leave room for more open-ended themes? While Kohl has a firm stance, this question may remain open to debate.

This debate illustrates the usefulness and limits of a prescriptive approach to thematic interpretation. Kohl provides a clear and practical framework for developing themes, but underlying questions about what, and who, themes are for, and how much meaning interpreters should leave open to audiences, remain unsettled. These

questions matter because protected areas are not simply collections of biodiversity facts. They are places that hold and preserve ideas, meanings, and legacies. The *Field Guide* is best understood not merely as a manual for writing better interpretive sentences, but as a guide for more intentional decisions about meaning, audience and experience. Its value for protected-area practitioners lies in translating the principles of thematic interpretation into a practical process while beginning to address increasingly important questions of collaborative authorship, cultural perspectives and AI.

One potentially overlooked contribution of the *Field Guide* is its application to interpreter training. Its exercises and examples will undoubtedly help interpreters write more powerful themes. Yet Kohl's writing points to two characteristics that interpreters must develop and for which I fear we provide little time. First, interpreters must be curious. "The goal isn't to become a content expert necessarily, rather as your research progresses you may expose yourself to provocative new perspectives about your topic" (p. 38). Research without curiosity and the latitude to explore surprising connections can lead interpreters down a narrow path towards lacklustre themes. Second, interpreters must become conscious of their own development and continually practise self-awareness and self-reflection. This process allows interpreters to grapple with and refine Big Ideas and hone their craft of meaningful and transformative interpretation.

I ask the field: do we allow time for and prioritise these essential skills? While Kohl's book is first and foremost a practical guide, it leaves space for philosophical musings. Let's keep the conversation alive, sharpen these essential skills, and continue to reflect on what it means to be an interpreter of a protected area.



Drawing the map that Florida (and the world) followed

Most naturalists can name the sighting of an intriguing species that set them on a lifetime of studying nature. For conservation biologists, the epiphany can take other forms. Mine was a map: the first proposed Florida Wildlife Corridor network (reproduced as Figure 2.2 on p. 37 of this book). Reed Noss's drawing showed core areas, buffers and corridors stitched together across an entire state of interconnected human-dominated landscapes. It told me what conservation planning at scale had to achieve if we were to be serious about saving life on Earth, and it has informed my career more than any other image I have seen.

This edited volume tells the story behind that map and how Floridians put it to good use. The volume has a bit of everything. It is a comprehensive guide to large-scale landscape planning, starting appropriately by looking back at what was there in order to decide what must be conserved or restored. It covers terrestrial, freshwater and coastal realms, connectivity, climate refugia, road ecology, and the role of land trusts. The editors state their aim plainly: to give engaged citizens accessible explanations of why landscape-scale conservation matters, and of the opportunities and obstacles in carrying out ambitious plans.

Noss and Hctor open with the science–implementation gap. Two-thirds of published conservation assessments never lead to action, mostly because researchers never plan for implementation. Florida is the counterexample, by necessity. More than 1,000 new residents arrive each day, and the state has the highest rate of habitat loss in the Southeast. Even more critical is the observation that Florida anchors the North American Coastal Plain, the 36th global biodiversity hotspot, and holds hundreds of endemic plants, most of them in fire-dependent pine savannas and scrub.

What makes this hotspot remarkable is its depth in time. A recent phylogenetic analysis shows that Florida, more than California, holds a rich mix of both ancient lineages (paleoendemics) and recently evolved species (neoendemics). Florida has been an evolutionary museum, where old species survived for millions of years in a climate buffered by the sea, and an evolutionary cradle, where new ones arose. Many of the young species evolved on ridges that were islands when sea levels stood higher, between the mid-Miocene and the Pleistocene. Others live only in the Keys, which were cut off from the mainland just 6,000 years ago. The editors frame the case for their protection through irreplaceability and vulnerability, the touchstones of conservation planning for decades.

The first chapter contains a passage I did not expect. Noss, who as much as anyone made protecting large intact landscapes the gospel of conservation biology, concedes that the movement he helped start nearly abandoned small, isolated sites. Botanists criticised the early corridor plans because much of what makes Florida a hotspot is its wealth of narrow-range endemic plants, many of them on isolated fragments too small to matter in mapping large blocks of Florida panther habitat. Looking back, Noss and Hctor reveal that the right answer was always both: large connected landscapes for area-sensitive species such as the Florida panther and black bear, and many small sites for the endemics.

The science explains why. Plant communities in the longleaf pine savannas are dominated by turnover: small sites hold species that larger sites lack. Beta-diversity, the change in species composition with distance or along environmental gradients, is the variable that conservation planning most often ignores, because measuring it requires species lists and turnover rates across many sites. Yet it is among the most important variables to consider. Ecologist Jim Quinn of UC Davis once offered the most accurate and succinct, one-line definition of conservation biology and planning: “Pay attention to landscapes and beta-diversity.” This book shows what that means in practice.

Chapter 2 also sets out what survived of island biogeography in reserve design. The rule that one large reserve is always more valuable than several small ones of equal total area has not held up, because habitat quality and species turnover along environmental gradients vary too much. Two rules do persist: Other things being equal, big blocks of habitat retain more species than small ones, and connected patches persist better than isolated fragments.

The book's greatest lesson for conservationists is that what is first dismissed as radical can become the status quo within a few years. When Noss's statewide corridor map appeared in the mid-1980s, mainstream environmental groups ignored it, some ecologists opposed corridors outright, and agricultural groups fought it. It lay fallow for nearly a decade. Noss's inspirational map came back as the Florida Ecological Greenways Network in 1997, and in 2021 the legislature passed the Florida Wildlife Corridor Act unanimously. Today about 30 per cent of Florida is in conservation areas, already meeting the 2030 global target known as 30x30. The Corridor's conserved and opportunity lands cover nearly half the state. A Noss-ism: Be ambitious, and stay with a sound idea: doing less may be the bigger risk.

The bipartisanship documented here should encourage practitioners everywhere. Through governors and legislatures of both parties, Florida has paid for land conservation since committing US\$3 billion through the 1990 land acquisition programme, Preservation 2000. The state also made its land buying accountable. Florida Forever, the successor programme, set nine goals and 38 performance measures, and proposed purchases are scored against statewide data in a site-selection analysis rerun each year.

It is worth turning from Figure 2.2 to the later statewide maps in Chapters 3 and 7. It is like moving from a diagram of the body's main arteries to one that shows the smaller vessels and finally the capillaries: where each corridor should run, what it must connect and how wide it must be. That progression depended on the birth and application of a game-changing technology. Geographic information systems made components of the plan spatially explicit and shortened the time needed to make important decisions. Advances in conservation sometimes wait on hardware and software.

In the American West, much of the land is federal, and conservation can advance through changes in agency policy. In the Southeast, most rare elements of biodiversity occur on private land. The chapters on acquisition priorities and on land trusts show how Florida has dealt with that directly, with easements that keep ranches

going while removing the threat of development. Florida is larger than many countries and, in places, as densely settled as small crowded nations. Its methods for planning amid rapid growth should transfer well.

One ally will surprise many readers: the US military. Florida has 42 military facilities, several among the nation's largest and biologically richest. Through several Department of Defense Environmental Protection programmes and landscapes partnerships, the military pays for land and easements around its bases to keep development away from training ranges. In northeast Florida, Army and Navy funding helped launch the Ocala-to-Osceola corridor. The bases matter for habitat management as well as protection. Eglin Air Force Base in the Panhandle holds the largest remaining tract of old-growth longleaf pine savannas in the world. Munitions testing sparks fires there, and the base burns regularly to keep fuels down. Many of Florida's rare species need periodic fire to persist, and fire is hard to apply in a fragmented heavily populated landscape.

The road ecology chapter deserves attention. Vehicle collisions are a major cause of death for panthers and bears, and for deer, the panther's main prey. According to Noss and Hootor, Florida now has 223 wildlife crossing structures, and dozens more are planned. We have the means to make such engineering the rule rather than the exception. The US Army Corps of Engineers already runs an Engineering with Nature initiative; I would like to see a much larger part of the Corps given over to green infrastructure. A new administration in Tallahassee or Washington could put many people to work retrofitting our major transportation corridors so that wildlife can cross them safely.

I found the growth-modelling chapter among the most useful. Teams have modelled Florida's future again and again, under business-as-usual, sprawl, and conservation scenarios. The Florida 2070 study (2016) reached a finding relevant to planners: even modest increases in development density save large areas of natural and agricultural land. Florida's planners show how looking 50 years ahead is essential, not an academic exercise.

Climate change sharpens the problems facing the state. Florida is nearly flat, and sea level is projected to rise about 0.9 m by 2070 in recent scenarios, potentially displacing an estimated 900,000 people inland and converting natural land. The climate chapter, however, also offers a surprise. Flat terrain is usually assumed to leave species nowhere to go. But the sea surrounds Florida on three sides and buffers temperature extremes, and during Pleistocene cold periods Florida was actually warmer. Florida has been a climate refugium for

millions of years, which helps explain its treasure chest of endemics. Freshwater springs, which hold a near-constant temperature, serve as microrefugia; manatees now depend on them in winter, though degraded vegetation, heavy recreation, and dams have reduced their value.

The chapter's conclusion is, to me, the most important passage in the book. Many of Florida's key refugia, including springs, caves, sinkholes, ravines and the remnant ridges that will stand above a rising sea, are small and isolated. They do not fit inside broad corridors designed for panthers. Protecting them requires the same small-site strategy that Chapter 1 calls essential for the rarest endemics. The book comes full circle, recommending large cores and corridors, plus small sites, for both biodiversity and climate adaptation.

Conservation planning grew up terrestrial. For a peninsula with this much coastline, freshwater and marine systems came late to the mix. The chapter on aquatic and coastal conservation now gives them their rightful place. The final chapter, on Florida's influence from Yellowstone-to-Yukon to Bhutan, feels tacked on rather than integral, and the shifts between co-authors' voices interrupt the flow. A few other quibbles: the Seminole Tribe appears only as a source of gaming revenue for land acquisition, and other tribal lands are barely mentioned at all. Their role in the conservation landscape deserves a chapter in the next edition.

A question I would put to the editors: when planning began in the 1980s, who foresaw what invasive species would do to the native biota? Burmese pythons have nearly removed the mesopredators of the Everglades, and some of the herbivores with them. Neither pythons nor climate change shaped the original plans. Again, a topic for the next edition.

This book is a tremendous accomplishment and, in many ways, the culmination of Reed Noss's extraordinary career as one of the founders of modern conservation biology. It is a large part of his legacy, and it should be read wherever people are trying to conserve nature at scale.