

THE PENNSYLVANIA WILDS

The Role of Cultural and Natural Heritage in Landscape Scale Development

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Abstract. This paper explores the conservation and management of heritage resources on a landscape scale, the role of government agencies in relationship to local communities, and the outcomes on community revitalization as illustrated by a specific case study. Landscape models founded on civic engagement and governmental investments in cultural assets, and land conservation are an emerging policy direction in the United States. One of the most ambitious of these projects is the Pennsylvania Wilds. Evaluations of the project demonstrate that investments in parks and forest infrastructure, tourism promotion and local communities produced positive economic impacts primarily through increased visitation. However, the research highlights the challenges of developing a common approach between public land managers, economic development programs, and community residents including the definition of regional heritage. Today this strategy for landscape management in the PA Wilds is being severely tested by a new extractive industry, drilling for natural gas. There are opportunities to learn from European landscape scale schemes.

Managing resources on a landscape scale is fraught with complexity. The relationship between governmental agencies and local communities can be particularly challenging. One strategy that has had some success is to build on the value created by the cultural and natural heritage of a region. Europe in particular has utilized regional development models founded on a community's attachment to place, the need for economic revitalization, and public investment with the goal of conserving heritage landscapes as a social and economic asset. In the United State these efforts include the designation of state and National Heritage Areas, historic trails and corridors, and retention of regional character around protected lands and cultural sites. Recently, there has been a rapid increase in large landscape initiatives with a focus on habitat protection, water resource management, agriculture and forest production as well as the promotion of open space, and recreational resources. These large landscape efforts have been the stated objectives of

sharing information on both the science and governance of this work, building a network of practioners, enhancing funding opportunities, and shaping federal policy (McKinney et al. 2010). In the area of shaping federal policy the land and water conservation movement has been fairly successful.

At a White House Conference on America's Great Outdoors on April 16, 2010, President Obama announced a federal initiative to reconnect citizens to the outdoors and to restore and protect the nation's land and water. After extensive public input the Department of the Interior issued *America's Great Outdoors: a Promise to Future Generations – February 2011* and a subsequent progress report. The final recommendations in the reports identified preserving large landscapes, specifically working landscapes, as a priority and that this work should emphasize a locally driven approach to managing natural and cultural resources (America's Great Outdoors 2011). At this time the work on specific America's Great

Outdoors projects is just beginning. How governmental agencies actually implement this work in a living landscape is important to understand. This work also has implications for other programs such as cultural landscapes with World Heritage designation (Mitchell 2009) and other forms of protected landscapes (Brown 2005).

This paper will report on the Pennsylvania Wilds one of the most ambitious of these large conservation landscape initiatives in the United States centered on a rural twelve county region known for its heritage of public lands and small historic communities. With 2 million acres of protected land including 29 state parks, 8 state forests, and the Allegheny National Forest, it is the largest blocks of public land on the country's east coast equivalent in size to Yellowstone National Park (Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources 2010). Over the last hundred years, the region has also seen a cycle of boom and busts from timbering, mining, and oil and gas drilling. By the turn of the 21st century, the once stripped hills were thickly reforested and remediation of acid mine drainage in the streams was gaining ground. These recovering natural resources attracted visitors to hunt and fish, and more recently play

outside. A state sponsored Lumber Heritage Area and state funded initiatives to link the historic communities along historic highways offered new opportunities around heritage tourism.

These opportunities were badly needed. For many decades the region's demographic and economic trends had shown a net decrease in businesses and jobs, high unemployment rates, population loss, and a sharp decline in the numbers of younger working age residents. Shifts in demand for forest products and loss of small industry from globalization caused a loss of traditional jobs in the timber industry and small manufacturing (Econsult 2010). In 2003 Pennsylvania state government leadership launched a new vision for revitalizing this rural region: including a new brand name the PA Wilds, a major expansion of public recreational facilities, and a stated commitment to do so in a way that valued conservation stewardship. Over 5 million dollars was spent in marketing the PA Wilds and 126 million dollars was invested in state park and forest infrastructure including trails, boat launches, visitor centers, access roads and even a LEED certified nature inn (Patrizzi 2009).

At first the focus on branding and on the public lands was met with concern by some local residents.



Figure 1. Pennsylvania Wilds

Assistance from state agencies or any outsiders was not always welcomed. In particular the name Pennsylvania Wild and its logo of a bull elk head was interpreted by many residents as implying they were “uncivilized”.

Residents criticized the effort for not emphasizing

construction and grants for community gateway signs and main street investments. A Pennsylvania Wilds Small Business Ombudsman was hired to connect small business start ups with funding and technical assistance. An Artisan Trail Initiative promoted the regional artisans and arts-related businesses. In



Figure 2. Wilds Brand

the region’s cultural heritage. There was also tension over what to share with visitors and which visitors should be targeted. There was concern about promoting the area for sports such as high end bicycling and motorcycle riding. Some residents were against any development in the region, while others hoped to benefit from tourism development (Patrizzi 2009). To address some of these issues, additional funding of over 3 million dollars was provided to increase local capacity. A Pennsylvania Wilds Planning Team staffed by the 12 local county planners was formed to provide local perspective, input, and management. This team undertook multi-jurisdictional projects like the Pennsylvania Wilds Design Guide that established compatible guidelines for rehabilitation and new

addition the State’s Lumber Heritage Museum received capital funds to update their exhibits and facilities. These initiatives were a focused more on the cultural values of the area and in retaining tourism dollars within the local economy.

In an effort to understand and sustain this effort, Pennsylvania state government commissioned two nationally known consulting firms to evaluate both the economic outcomes and the process by which the initiative was developed. The tourism and economic development indicators were found to be positive with earning and tax revenues, and visitation increasing over statewide averages. (Econsult 2010) This



Figure 3. Artisan Trail

information was welcomed and shared by the Pennsylvania Wilds community. The process was of more interest to state agencies. The evaluation highlighted the challenges of developing a common approach between public land managers, state economic development programs, and community residents. The study noted the differing perceptions of the cultural and natural heritage values, the difficulties of setting boundaries for the project, and the challenges of working at such a large scale hindered the effort. On a positive note the study found that the state agency was committed to adaptive management and developing a culture of collaboration (Patrizzi 2009).

Research on other regional initiatives like National Heritage Areas has observed that regional collaboration around the conservation of working landscapes are more likely to occur in regions that are subject to negative indicators such as aging population and high levels of out migration. When a way of life is threatened by obsolescence, regional strategies focused on heritage development may offer a way to manage change (Barrett et al. 2006). The research on the Pennsylvania Wilds seems to support the idea that governmental intervention in cultural and natural assets can provide a positive benefit to areas suffering from economic woes.

Government models for investment on a landscape scale are more prevalent in Europe. The programmatic approaches in England's Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and France's Parc Naturel Regionaux have important lessons to offer in taking regional management to scale. These include the importance of appropriate branding around agreed upon heritage values, the integration of cultural and natural values, the importance of governmental supported financial and technical assistance, and the central role of local communities in building support and in managing the

process for the benefit of local residents (Barrett and Taylor 2007). The next step for all parties interested in large landscape management should be a sharper focus on best practices and a better understanding of what is success.

In conclusion, what is the future of the regional conservation strategy in the Pennsylvania Wilds? In the past the past three years the story of the region has taken quite a dramatic turn. The twelve county region has become one of the centers of natural gas extraction from the Marcellus Shale formation. New techniques of drilling for gas by hydro-fracking have caused an energy boom on both public and private land. For example, it is estimated that 40% of the state forest in the region are open to drilling. (Quigley 2011) Between 2008 and October 2011 the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection issued 3,242 Marcellus well drilling permits in the 12 county area (Weigle 2011). A 2011 economic impact study showed travel and lodging revenues in the PA Wilds continuing to increase, but now being attributed to workers and investors in the rush to drill new wells and lay new pipelines (Kelsey 2011).

In retrospect the residents feelings of isolationism and suspicion of outsiders were understandable given the areas past history of resource exploitation. Fears about investors and economic forces far beyond resident's control are now being relived. However, there are also hopeful signs. The Pennsylvania Wilds Planning Team originally created to provide input into the new tourism economy, has now stepped forward to work regionally on issues of transportation, energy impact fees, and how to assist local communities to plan for the new reality of an extractive economy. (Pennsylvania Wilds Planning Team 2011).

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