

# PODIUM

## Do Protected Areas Work?

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### INTRODUCTION

The English writer George Orwell explored the power of language to control thought in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-four*. Politically-incorrect thoughts were rendered impossible by eliminating or distorting the words needed to think them. In Orwell's disutopia, one could not even conceive of "justice" or "freedom" because these words had been forceably removed from the vocabulary. Other words were used to mean their exact opposite. The Ministry of Love (Miniluv in Newspeak), the agency of law and order, routinely used torture to extract false confessions from the citizenry. In this way the word love came to connote fear, pain and loathing. The *things* "justice", "freedom" and "love", as we know them, could not exist because the language needed to think of them had been debased.

Though far less ominously, the language of the upcoming SAMPA III conference theme poses something of the same problem for me as Newspeak did for the denizens of Orwell's Oceania. I fear that the theme, "Linking Protected Areas with Working Landscapes [and] Conserving Biodiversity," in a subtle way makes it difficult for us to think about parks and other protected areas as the critical landscapes we know them to be.

### WHAT ARE PROTECTED AREAS FOR?

Do protected areas have a purpose? Are they useful for something? Few readers of *Research Links* would answer anything but affirmatively. Yet the dichotomy between working landscapes and protected areas in the SAMPA III theme clearly implies that protected areas do no work. The impression almost is left that protected areas are indolent, lethargic, wasted lands — capable but irresponsible landscapes on perennial pogeys, as it were. The danger in the theme is, frankly, that it will be inadvertently accepted as meaning just what it says.

For as we know, protected areas really *do* work. Human societies have given them many important things to do, but most park scientists and managers see that the greatest worth of protected areas is in protecting ecological function.

Eugene Odum (1993), among others, has popularized the view of natural ecosystems as the life-support systems of Earth. Natural areas (oceans, grasslands and forests), and to some extent seminatural landscapes (farms, grazing lands and managed woodlands), provide the food and most of the

other physiological necessities of life (air purification, water recycling and soil enrichment) supporting the artificial environments of cities, transportation corridors and industrialized areas. Viewing natural areas in this way, we see plainly that we cannot even exist, much less thrive, without them.

Given the life-and-death importance of natural areas to humanity, the most valuable use of protected areas is to help protect the life-supporting functions of the natural environment. Protected areas can protect natural landscapes directly of course, but direct protection of all ecologically-necessary natural lands is clearly impossible. Furthermore, few if any existing protected areas on their own are likely to maintain their full biodiversity and ecological function over the long term — they are too small and isolated from each other. Finally, all nominally protected areas in fact are subject to the general deterioration of the global environment. In the end, they themselves are unprotected.

From this we recognize that protected areas must be part of a much larger strategy to restore and maintain healthy natural ecosystems beyond park boundaries. In this role they can serve as representative models of natural-area structure and function, as refuges and as sources of organisms for reintroduction into restored natural areas. We view protected areas in this way to focus critical attention where it belongs: on the unprotected natural landscapes that must remain whole, and dysfunctional landscapes that must be restored, to sustain human life on the planet.

### THE TRUE "WORKING LANDSCAPES?"

This raises another sense for the phrase "working landscapes". We could think of them as landscapes that function properly. In this sense, protected areas and the larger natural landscapes they represent are the only landscapes that do truly work. All others are dysfunctional, at least to some degree. This sense of "working landscapes" I suggest is as useful and relevant as the first.

At SAMPA III, it is crucial that we recognize protected areas as working landscapes in both senses: as lands with an important function, and as lands that function properly. Doing so helps to focus our attention on their critical role in restoring and maintaining regional, and ultimately global, ecological health. It also will encourage others not to dismiss protected areas in general and national parks in specific as mere wasteful frivolities.

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### REFERENCES CITED

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