

The Past, Present And Future Of Great Sand Dunes National Park And Preserve

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The past, present and future of Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve (GRSA/Park) offers future park planners and community supporters a useful model for how future national parks might be created. There is no question that creating a new park requires a host of factors including community cooperation, political support and some luck. In reality to be accepted as a member of any community requires much more than a big day of speeches and newspaper headlines. As an old family friend commonly many times--“That is where the trouble comes in”. However, if the park truly embraced the community from the beginning and continues to work with the old and cultivate new friends and partners then the park can truly be seen as a member and even a leader in that community. And of course the trouble is minimized. The park then becomes a catalyst for future preservation and restoration efforts.

This cooperative spirit is working extremely well in the San Luis Valley of Colorado. One of the key players in this success was The Nature Conservancy (TNC). They were able to “beat the drum” in ways that the NPS could not. Their access to funding and other mechanisms of support were very important in this effort. This continues to be a close partnership.

There is no question that the American West is changing. Development and resultant fragmentation of lands is accelerating. Just having National Forests or National Parks nearby can raise land values and create a desired place for subdivisions and even those poorly conceptualized 35 acre “lonely person” estates. Fortunately there are new methods of protecting and even restoring some of the most critical landscapes. In the spirit of this conference we are calling this new style effort to protect lands in an area as “ecoregional architecture”.

These community and private-lands friendly tools include conservation easements and other creative means of keeping the land open and protected. Many easements allow ranching and farming to continue and can actually assist with incentives to restore lands and associated ecosystems. By joining with Federal and State land protection efforts these methods help stop fragmentation and other pitfalls of poorly planned development.

Lands that remain connected benefit more than just the flora and fauna. They also benefit communities by protecting the natural systems that first attracted people to the area. It is also these systems that provide the backdrop for the tourists who help keep economies stable in a changing world. A landscape full of strip malls and pavement is not a tourist attraction and usually a sign that the town or area has lost much of its former sense of community. The San Luis Valley is rejecting that model and is a place where such a preservation effort is not only possible but being embraced at many levels.

Brief history

Great Sand Dunes National Monument was established in 1932 to protect the tallest and most spectacular sand dunes in North America. The 44,000 acre monument remained a sleepy rural site largely unknown for many years. As a foot-note, the Dunes and for that matter the entire Valley escaped a unique fate in the early 1940's when it was dropped from one of three sites deemed appropriate to test the first atomic bomb.

Following the war, visits to national parks and monuments increased and the Sand Dunes was no exception. During the 1960's visitation increased mostly with Front Range visitors wanting to play at what is commonly called "Colorado's Beach". The monument and the whole valley woke to a major threat in the late 1990's when developers attempted to sell water rights to the growing cities along the Front Range.

Water is truly the life blood of the Sand Dunes and to the entire San Luis Valley and its agricultural health. As they say, whisky is for drinking and water is for fighting. The war was on and the solution became purchasing the land with the water and making that area a National Park. Fortunately the fight was non existent due to the overwhelming level of support for what this park represented to the Valley.

The National Park Act was signed in 2004, perhaps a record time for such an expansion and Congressional approval. In addition, the Baca National Wildlife refuge became a reality on a portion of that landscape. There is no question the scientific, political and financial support of the TNC was an important to the success.

TNC became interested in this landscape in the mid 1980's. TNC uses a science-based, GIS driven system of analysis called ecoregional planning to identify high priority areas for its conservation actions and initiatives. TNC's Southern Rockies' ecoregional assessment as well as similar assessments by other conservation organizations emphasized rather dramatically the high conservation value of the Great Sand Dunes ecosystem. It became the driving force behind the organization's deep commitment to the "Park" and expansion initiative. TNC became truly vested in this landscape when they purchased the Zapata and Medano Ranches in 1999.

The bottom line is that without support of TNC as well as from almost every public entity and political figure in the region, this park would have not become a reality.

Today a large percentage of lands that are part of the greater Great Sand Dunes conservation complex are now in the hands of a few but very committed long-term conservation-based owners. The primary challenge for the partners is to wisely co-manage the many shared resources. Other partners directly involved in this stewardship challenge include the USFS, Colorado State Parks, BLM, USGS and Colorado Division of Wildlife. Common issues include fire, water, wildlife, invasive species, grazing, fencing, law enforcement, access, hunting, roads, protection of cultural resources, environmental education, and the restoration of declining and keystone species such as bison. Even with the best of intentions, significant challenges exist simply because of differences in the roles for each of the parties. On the other hand, the magnitude of the opportunity at both the ecological and the managerial level are virtually unparalleled.

The Future

The realization of the Dunes National Park in 2004 was only the beginning of what is a much larger partnership of many entities working together for the greater good. The vision is simple, just to work together in order to truly link lands along a natural north – south biological corridor that is over 250 miles long. On the north, it starts at Marshall and Poncha Passes in central Colorado and may end somewhere in north central New Mexico south of Taos. The Sangre De Cristo mountain range is the focus and backbone of this corridor. The range is spectacular with 8 peaks over 14,000 feet tall and deep canyons that drain the melting snows that of course maintain the Dunes and the communities of the valley. Due to many factors, this range and its alluvial flank has been largely un-affected by human activities such as mining, subdivisions and highway development.

Various elements in this landscape-scale corridor were identified as particularly important in TNC's original ecoregional assessment process as well as that of other conservation organizations. With the effects of Global Climate Change already a factor, it is one of the few intact migration corridors left in the southern Rocky Mountains and it will be critical to the long and short-term movements of plants, animals, birds and other species from south to north. Protecting this ecosystem is both ecologically and evolutionarily important.

The authors feel that the fortuitous creation of a new National Park in the heart of this system is the catalyst and provides a vision for future protection of this corridor. Various entities own or manage lands along this corridor and are working together to in a number of ways. The initial working goals are modest and supportable by all.

The goals are:

- 1) significantly enhance the conservation quality of established parks by creating conservation buffer lands that promote compatible values,
- 2) acquire parcels or easements on high priority properties in ecological corridors between parks and other conservation lands, and
- 3) work with NGO's private and governmental entities to record, monitor and perhaps restore keystone species in an atmosphere of cooperation and common goals.

In conclusion, the authors believe that fortuitous way that Great Sand Dunes was created is a model of how future parks could be formulated. Embracing partnerships from the beginning and then nurturing them is basic but critical to long term success. Not only was Great Sand Dunes National Park created with a minimum of angst but was accomplished in near record time. Those partnerships continue to flourish and now are providing the foundation and energy for future protection and restoration efforts. We hope that future park planners and community supporters of National Parks will look at this model for guidance. It's a far cry from the ways our early parks were envisioned and operated; almost like fortresses on a hill. I remember well the advice of a long retired superintendent. He said, "son make sure you have the US flag behind your desk and make them come to you. That way you have the power." Times have changed and I truly believe the Sand Dunes model is the way of the future.