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# A geography of hope: pursuing the voluntary preservation of America's natural heritage

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### Abstract

Established by Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall in March 1962, the National Natural Landmarks (NNL) Program, administered by the National Park Service (NPS), was designed to encourage the voluntary preservation of nationally significant examples of various ecological and geological features in the United States, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands and Pacific Island Trust Territories. Today there are 587 designated NNLs on lands of every ownership category. Implementation of the NNL Program, a means to provide recognition to outstanding sites, and the National Park System Plan, a method to identify gaps in park ecological and geological representation, proceeded together. After Interior Secretary Walter Hickel promulgated the June 1969 policy of identifying gaps in National Park System representation and recommending sites to fill them, a plan illustrating such gaps was published in 1972. In addition, the 1968–1986 natural area inventories were the tool to identify both potential NNLs and sites warranting future

examination as potential new units of the National Park System. Information on more than 3000 potential NNL sites was compiled. Landowners who participate in the NNL Program may recognize that private land ownership entails both freedoms and responsibilities, concepts which were part of Aldo Leopold's 1949 land ethic. The NNL Program suffered a setback beginning in 1989 when it was perceived as a threat by some private landowner rights organizations and that account is found in Addendum. Examples of NNL Program conservation success stories are highlighted. But to provide a quantum increase in the NNL Program's conservation effectiveness, private landowners should be offered substantial economic incentives for protecting their property's natural values. Some existing and potential economic options are mentioned. Such incentives should allow more NNL landowners to voluntarily protect these small pieces of America's once vast natural heritage. This result will benefit all American citizens.



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## Keywords

Natural area; National park; Planning

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**Craig L. Shafer** is a US National Park Service ecologist where he has served as a policy advisor and program administrator for three decades. Awarded masters degrees in both biological science (1979) and geobiology (1983) from George Washington University, his professional publications have focused on reserve design, protected area planning, and US national park history. Primary professional affiliations include the American Association of Biological Sciences, the Society for Conservation Biology, the Natural Areas Association, and the George Wright Society. He has visited national parks on every continent but Antarctica.

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