

# A Beginning

Over the next hundred years or so, America will essentially complete itself. At least, the Census Bureau sees it that way: The current United States population of 250 million is about five-sixths of the population predicted for fifty years from now—an all-time high of 301 million people. After 2040, the numbers are expected to start gradually declining, and ninety years from now, in 2080, there will be 292 million Americans. Most of that future population will live in urbanized surroundings within a hundred miles of a major shoreline—the Atlantic, the Pacific, or one of the Great Lakes. The lasting shape of those late-twenty-first-century surroundings will to a large extent be determined by thousands of short-term decisions we will be making during the next thirty years. This is partly because most of the remaining surge of American population growth will take place before 2020. Another part is that patterns of settlement, once launched, tend to have great staying power: The sites of most of the cities in this very young country were all chosen long ago, some of them back in the seventeenth century. How can any of us see to it that the fully grown America we're already preparing for—or the America after that—will continue to make available to people the kind of richly varied and nurturing experiences people have always needed? Will the next American cities work to help people fulfill themselves? Will the city dwellers of that time have

full access to wilderness experiences, or to expanses of partnership landscapes?

We need to get started now—for our own sake, as well as theirs—and this means seeking out some experiential goals that we can use to guide the development process. For instance, there's the idea of "No Net Loss," which has recently been adopted by the state of Maryland as its official environmental policy for wetlands. From now on, any wetlands filled by developers or highway engineers must be replaced elsewhere in the state. President Bush has also declared it his intention to make No Net Loss a national wetlands goal. And we could just as easily extend this idea and adopt a new national No Net Loss policy for the place experiences that are important to people in this country. The first step here is easy enough—compiling a list of the existing experiences that are treasured.

There's also the idea of dovetailing, or reconciling, experiences—the idea that has already been put forward in a countryside context by the Center for Rural Massachusetts in its development plans for the Connecticut River Valley. Build farmland to suburban densities, if you have to, but don't interrupt the existing farming uses or the traditional countryside character. In cities, where retaining character is equally important, simulation laboratories can economically perform the same service, by helping us know in advance the consequences of any proposed development, so that we can rebuild cities without damaging their ability to help people come together.

And we can also develop habits of experiential watchfulness. For a start, here are several sample experiential checklists:

1. *America the Beautiful.* Other than parks, what landscapes do you know and care about that you would nominate to a list of Outstanding National Landscapes? How secure are these places at this point? Who's in charge of them? What kind of changes to what you see, hear, smell, or touch would damage your sense of connectedness to these landscapes?

2. *Sweet Spots*. What are your favorite nearby places—rural or urban, public or private—within walking or driving distance of where you live or work? What's the nature of the experience there, and is it different during the daytime, at night, on a weekday, a weekend, a holiday? Is anything missing, or neglected, or not regularly maintained? Have any recent changes to such places changed what you can experience? Do you go less often? How vulnerable are these places?

3. *Reaching Out to a Region*. How closely connected do you feel to the people in neighboring communities, to other living creatures around you, to the land nearby? How many towns, counties, or states are part of your region? What are the region makers in your area—rivers, mountains, valleys, forests, lakes, trails, railroad tracks? How far do you have to travel to get a feeling not available in your own neighborhood—for instance, if you live in a city, where's the nearest place that feels like countryside? Where's the nearest wilderness?

The experiences that places make available to people, as we're learning, are an inheritance that has been entrusted to our care. Guarding these experiences and championing them, as we're also learning, are skills that are natural to people—because each one of us has direct access to the experiences that pour into us at any moment. So getting good at replenishing the places around us will just need a small stretch in our understanding.