

## BOUNDARY THINKING TRANSFORMED

MIKE WALTON, GUEST EDITOR

## Blurring Boundaries: An Invitation to the Imagination

*Leslie Leong*

**Boundaries are everywhere: physical boundaries from lines on a map, to fences, to an imaginary line on the car seat between me and my kid brother.** And my own personal boundaries, boundaries of others, and cultural or conventional boundaries. We spend our lifetime relating to boundaries. From my perspective, they are things to overcome. They are blurry, require navigating through, and must eventually be crossed. I appreciate the need for boundaries (most of the time), but I generally think of boundaries as temporary and changing with the times and circumstances. I don't think of them as hard and steadfast. This is a scary thought for protected areas (PAs), but maybe it depends on what they are protecting. Exploring the navigation of boundaries through personal experience, looking at advantages and pitfalls, can help reveal possibilities for parks and PAs. What follows is that exploration. I poke at memory and connect events. I draw from my life's experiences, some of which forced and invited me to examine boundaries. I hope the words and images that follow lead you to places uncomfortable at times. I ask more questions than I answer, believing that others have insights that will help figure out the myriad challenges facing parks and PAs. My connection to the natural world and big questions began early for me. They persist.

I remember sitting on the coarse gravel of a beach at Osprey Lake, in the Interior of British Columbia. Looking up at the sky, I wondered, "What made someone decide the sky was blue? Who is to say the sky is, in fact, blue? It is really just because we all agree? If I wanted to, really, really wanted to, I could convince myself the sky was green." I was about 12 years old. This moment planted the seeds of doubt in my mind. The world may not necessarily be as it seemed, or as "they" said it was. I regularly questioned why things are the way things are, which also applies to boundaries, borders, and barriers.

Then at 17 years old, lying in a hospital bed, I imagined life as a duffle bag. I decided to fill my duffle bag of life as full as possible so that at any point, I would be satisfied with what I had done in my life ... just in case. A life-long drive to do-it-all-now was born. This involved unconventional crossing of many boundaries and barriers to facilitate this drive.

The first significant crossing was over a boundary steeped in tradition. I entered engineering at the University of British Columbia in 1980 when the percentage of women enrolled was very small. From my perspective, it didn't seem out of the ordinary; I was good at math and physics; I grew up with two brothers and we were treated the same; my dad was an engineer. And my mother wanted me to do something practical to avoid being dependent on an absent husband. I was crossing a conventional boundary of that time, but to me it was straightforward and sensible. This is the nature of boundaries: what they are and what they mean depends on your perspective.





Growing up at the edge of urban development, I had little awareness of PAs. The wilderness was at my doorstep. It wasn't until after high school that I discovered wilderness experiences could be inspiring, constructive, and life-altering. My first independent trip to a wilderness inside protective boundaries was on the West Coast Trail in Pacific Rim National Park Reserve. Three friends and I organized a multi-day backcountry trip. Lessons ranged from trip planning and reworking things as they go awry, to pushing myself when I didn't want to continue. We learned about group dynamics when a tired and hungry friend blurted, "I hate f@#kin' dill!" during my lunch duty. I laughed and promised not to put dill in our food ever again! It was a good response that saved the trip from disaster.

I enjoyed the ocean spray, the wild winds that whipped up the waves, the smack of jellyfish, and soccer on the sun-heated sandy beach after the rain.

I learned exposure to the elements was not as miserable as I had thought. It was a refreshing and exciting experience to feel prolonged rainfall, which gave way to profound appreciation of the sun as it returned and warmed me to the core. I enjoyed the ocean spray, the wild winds that whipped up the waves, the smack of jellyfish, and soccer on the sun-heated sandy beach after the rain. It was all so fresh and new. An experience of

constant discovery and so much learning. The natural environment was my teacher. I gained self-confidence, became more independent, and felt at peace in the wilderness. I drew energy from nature and the elements. I completely understood the need for PAs and fixed boundaries to preserve them. I was grateful that boundaries fixed wild places in place for all of us to enjoy.

And so began a fixation with experiences in the wilderness. After overcoming fear of the unknown, of unfamiliar wilderness, comes confidence, empowerment and realization of belonging and a sense of awe. I wanted to relive, recreate, and revive the sense of wholeness and completeness I experienced in the natural world.

I began to seek out special wild places to explore, to be inquisitive and to learn. Naturally the locations were usually in parks and PAs, because information was available about these places. To experience wilderness safely, I needed special training to access places I could see but were out of reach. I enrolled in backcountry travel courses through the Federation of Mountain Clubs of British Columbia.

Crossing a personal barrier during the rock climbing course further reinforced the conviction that things are not necessarily as they seemed. I watched the instructor do a lay-back up a vertical crack, so logically I knew it was





possible. But standing at the bottom of the crack, it certainly did not feel like it was possible. Surely a person would fall to the ground if no part of the body was beneath to hold them up! I knew all about gravity, and not just from engineering classes. I put my hands on the crack, but there was nothing to hold on to. I was told I needed to put my feet on the face and push against my hands to have something to hold on to. I put one foot up but putting the other one up was counter intuitive. It was really hard to trust that my body could do this and I would not fall to the ground. It was a leap of faith. Up on the very tip of my toe, I finally lifted the second foot and slapped it sideways on the face. It was not until you commit to the position that it actually works. Your hands have nothing to grip until the counteracting force of your feet is in place. I just hung there in amazement. Wow, it worked! Eventually I crawled, in spider-like fashion, up the crack. It was empowering to find that my body could do something that I felt was not possible in the physical world. My mind had created a mental barrier for self-preservation purposes that had to be crossed. Pushing past this barrier was difficult but beneficial.

Every time I have an experience like this, I become more comfortable with being uncomfortable. It develops confidence in my ability to push through barriers and boundaries and achieve a successful outcome and learn something new.

Readied with courses in rock climbing, snow travel, glacier travel, ski touring, and avalanche awareness and training, I wanted to get out of the city every weekend, and on annual holidays, to go rock climbing, alpine climbing, ski touring, or whatever was necessary to get to the special places of choice in PAs north and east of Vancouver.



I became aware of the paradox of PAs: preserved for all to enjoy, the enjoyment which would eventually be detrimental to preservation. Where was the balance between encouraging visitation while preserving the natural wildness of the place? I was anxious about contributing to changes in the environment due to my presence.

Pushing boundaries does not always end up with good results, but it always teaches me something new. One year, I climbed Mount Colin in Jasper National Park with a boyfriend. It was an 18-pitch alpine rock climb—the finish of which proved to be the end of our relationship. It was May in the Rockies, cold and remote. We hadn't done a multi-pitch climb together before this trip. He was confident beforehand, and I trusted that. We needed a 5 a.m. start to make the climb in a day, but he felt it was too cold and began to show signs he was getting psyched out even as he continued to profess confidence. This was the first indication that things were not quite right, but my inexperience and his professions of confidence suppressed thoughts of abandoning the climb. After another attempt the next morning, I decided to lead the first pitch to help him get over his mind block. We got on the face and climbed reasonably well, but we got off route about half way up, which increased the difficulty of the climb beyond the 5:7 rating we expected. And we were too slow. Unfortunately, we were also past the point of return, as the top (and the hiking route down) was closer and safer than abseiling into unknown territory.

As darkness fell, we got stuck on the mountain face, with no overnight gear and a small remainder of the day's food supply. We slept (if you could call it that) huddled together on a ledge with a meager crevice not even big enough for one person. In the night, the snow began to fly. In the morning, we tried to continue the climb but our hands were too cold to properly grip the wet rock, making it unsafe. So we waited until the sun came around to the face and warmed us enough to resume. The rest of the climb was, for the most part, uneventful.

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At the top, my friend stood on the highest rock, reaching to the sky in exaltation. From his perspective, he had conquered the mountain. I sat nearby, humbled by the experience, in awe of the scenery in front of me, unable to understand how a person could have had the same experience as me and be so arrogant. This was not the way a trip should unfold; it was not something to be proud of. Yes, it was amazing to be there and to have made it, but there were many mistakes and dangerous moments that should not occur on an alpine climbing trip. One might say the wilderness was unforgiving, but it was just doing whatever it was doing. And we happen to be ill-equipped, on a climb that was over our skill level, at the wrong time of year for our preparations.

Although the trip was a bit of a disaster, I learned important things about the indifference of nature, about the human ego, and about what not to do on an alpine climbing trip and preparations that should be made next time. It was a humbling experience that resulted in a deep veneration for raw wilderness and amplified the need to protect wild spaces for humans to learn from. It was empowering, but in a different way than previously, and perhaps more intense.

### **The insatiable drive to be in the wilderness directed my future.**

In the early days of frequent flyer points, I had enough points to make a trip anywhere within Canada. So I looked long and hard at the map, searching for the farthest place I could go that fit my drive for wilderness, exploration, and expedition. Auyuittuq National Park and the Pangnirtung Pass met the requirements. Four of us went to Baffin Island in the High Arctic. In addition to the spectacular experience in the park, I was smitten by the Inuit community and culture. It was a completely different culture, right here in my own country!



I went back home to my city job. I found that the portion of my weekends in the wilderness, once I subtracted the hours consumed by driving out of the city, wasn't enough for me. The drive in the mad weekend rush was a waste of time. The meager annual holidays of the working junior engineer were also not enough. I needed to find myself a job closer to the wilderness. I decided to look for one in the Northwest Territories (NWT).

As I was looking, my job dissatisfaction grew and boundaries revealed themselves. Hired into a non-traditional role, my workplace hadn't altered their thinking and misconceptions about engineering and women in that role. Eventually, my job was assessed by a committee on women in non-traditional jobs. They compared my work to newly hired male engineers and discovered I was doing the same job, but was being paid less. I finally saw that there were, in fact, consequences for crossing traditional boundaries. This realization was blurred by

being inside the boundary of a particular workplace, and for a time believing all was copacetic, until I learned otherwise. This was a lesson for me about different perspectives from the other side of a conventional boundary.

I felt disappointed and undervalued and I left. I opened a graphic design business with my partner, a trained graphic designer. We targeted engineering companies because they were underserved, as evidenced by bad logo and ad designs.

I continued to search the newspaper regularly for job ads with the NWT polar bear logo. Eventually I found one: regional manager with NWT Parks in the South Slave Region. "Surely," I thought, "there is a way to cross the eligibility barrier." The position was clearly out-

side of my work experience but not my ability. I could shape my work experience, in combination with my personal experience, to fit the job, and perhaps even show it from an advantageous perspective. A helpful aspect was that NWT Parks are little sanctuaries of human comfort in a vast wilderness, contrary to parks in the more developed south. The agency was in the process of building park facilities for visitors, as well as the regular work of providing seasonal operations and maintenance. I was an experienced manager of capital projects much bigger than those in the parks, so it would be easy! And I am an avid user of parks and their facilities. Who would be better to develop them than someone like me?

Apparently, they agreed with the argument. I got the job and moved North. When we cross a boundary, alter a barrier, or an eligibility requirement, we venture into unknown territory. It is more of a risk but we can also gain benefits we didn't even recognize would occur. There are things that "you don't know that you don't know." In my role, I discovered all sorts of boundaries to cross. That first spring, park operation and maintenance (O&M) contractors were incessantly complaining to government ministers and members of Parliament about who got the contracts. Each complaint initiated a mad panic that would trickle down to the top of my in-box, with "URGENT" scribbled across it. For my own sanity and to avoid spending a lot of time writing briefing notes for the deputy minister, I developed a new standardized contracting system for parks O&M services in my region. Supported by my contract management experience, I developed a tendering process for awarding contracts with a quantitative grading system. It was stimulating because I am motivated when creating; I like doing new things, trying them and learning from them. During the first year of implementation, complaints were addressed using the grading system to compare tenders. The answers were clear, concise, and immediate. The deputy minister



was pleased; I was pleased; and contractors understood their strengths and weaknesses. By the following year, complaints were minimal, and eventually the contract tendering and award system was adopted across NWT Parks. No one knew this would happen, but the director of parks took the risk of hiring from outside the parks sector and benefited.

While enjoying successes, I became office bound as I managed the work of others closer to the parks. My love of adventure and the natural world was reduced to policy, directives and staff relations. The next boundary I had to cross was a big step out of NWT Parks and into the arts—namely, photography and graphic design.

Photography had been a long-time hobby and one that would allow me to capitalize on a gap I saw in representation of the North. It wasn't all icebergs, polar bears, and Inuit hunting seals. There is another North, that of the Dene and the northern reaches of the Métis. A wild landscape hovering below the treeline, where the

boreal forest meets the tundra. This subarctic land hosts wild herds of wood bison and caribou, packs of wolves, wolverines, and other wild creatures. *Our Forgotten North: A Glimpse of the Subarctic in Canada's North* became the title of a self-published photography book about this land. It sold 7,000 copies. And later, a second book on the NWT. Although I can explain the crossing of boundaries in a logical progression, (one of my strengths, and perhaps a strategy to make transitions

seem less scary), some kind of leap is required. Perhaps the leap is recognizing the crossing could be taken and seeing what might be possible. Once I could see this, I was confident enough to do it.

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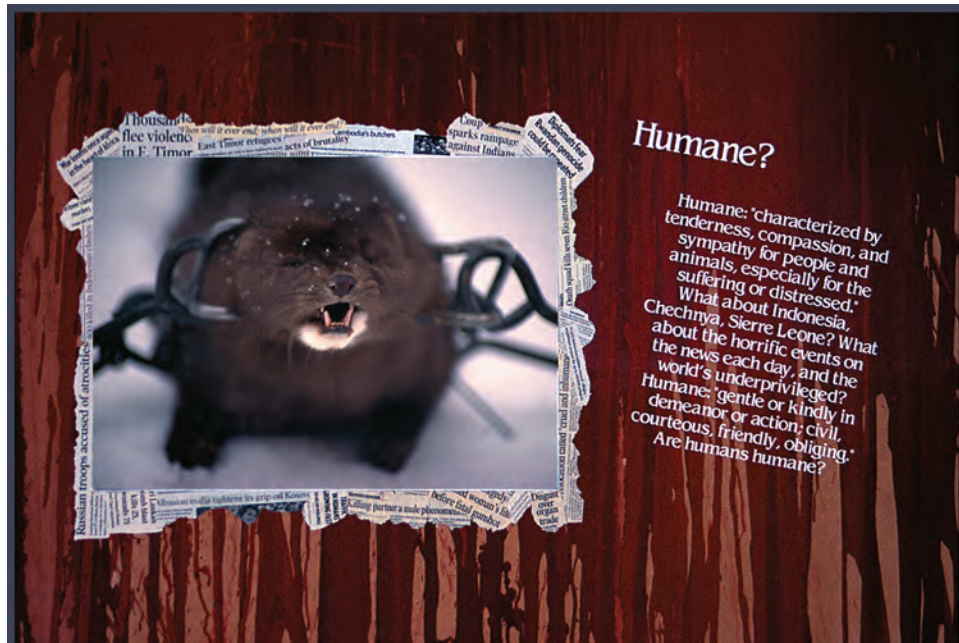


With a hobby now turned into a business opportunity, self-employment was semi-lucrative, employing photography, graphic design services, and self-publishing photography books. And I was working from home. As my son became a toddler, I in turn became more concerned about the state of the world. He was also more independent and I had more time. I took on an epic mixed-media project for the upcoming millennium. With respect to artistic media, this was outside my comfortable boundaries. Reflecting on the depressing state of the world, I couldn't fully express how I felt with just photographs. I needed to expand into mixed-media, adding text, current newspaper clippings, and an acrylic paint background of dripping blood, which included a vial of my own blood (inspired by the 1998 movie *The Red Violin* and the antiquated act of blood-letting to cure ailments). The exhibit was titled "Blood-letting: A rite of purification" because the creation of the work was therapeutic for me. It addressed what I saw as a depressing state of the world. And it was the first time I ventured into unknown media.

It was specifically the need to express myself creatively that pushed me over into new areas of artistic expression. That drive is a powerful force for most artists. It is often strong enough to push them across the boundaries of their chosen medium.

Another powerful force for artists is inspiration from the natural environment. The natural world is a very common theme in the arts in general. Artist statements often talk about the connection to nature, and an overwhelming sense of wholeness. Religiously





inclined artists often say they feel God when in the wilderness, more than in a church. The protected areas inside park boundaries are their churches.

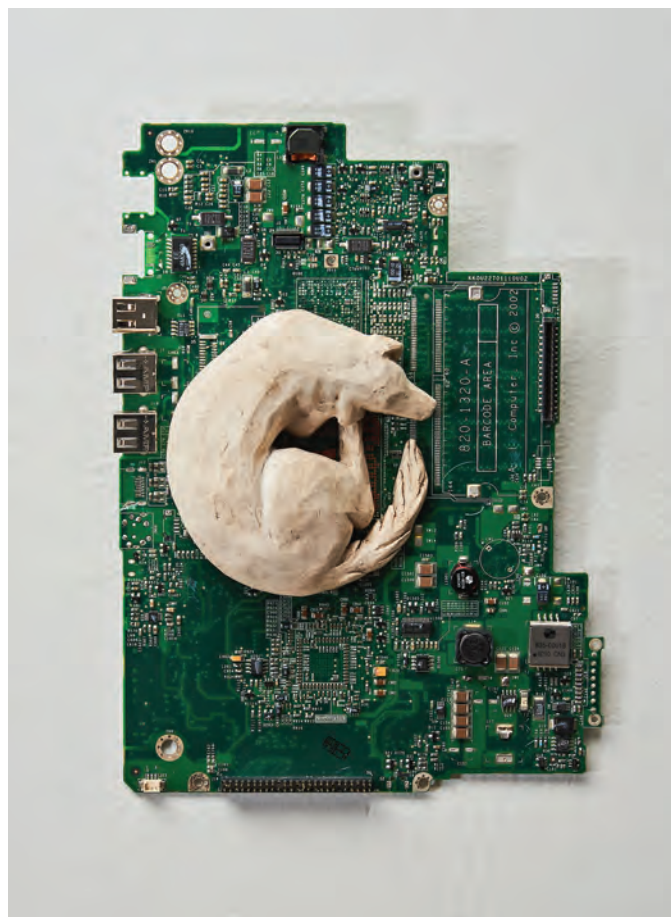
When we moved away from the NWT to the Yukon in 2005, we purged a lot of things. Unfortunately, no one wanted my husband's computer. So my oldest son and I took it apart to see what was inside. We found treasure! A bright green circuit board with shiny gold contacts. It was beautiful and I kept it. Months later I made it into a necklace for myself, and so began computer boards as a new medium for jewelry, and later, a wide range of mixed-media work. By now, crossing boundaries was not difficult. It was comfortable.

In the Yukon, I found there was an unspoken culture opposed to artists crossing over to other media. It was stifling for me at first. Then I did what I always do—cross boundaries anyway. To my surprise, more artists crossed to other media as they felt more freedom to do so. Boundaries stunt creativity, and not just in the arts. Are hard boundaries of PAs so fixed in the minds of policymakers that they restrict creative thinking about protecting nature and reducing biodiversity loss?

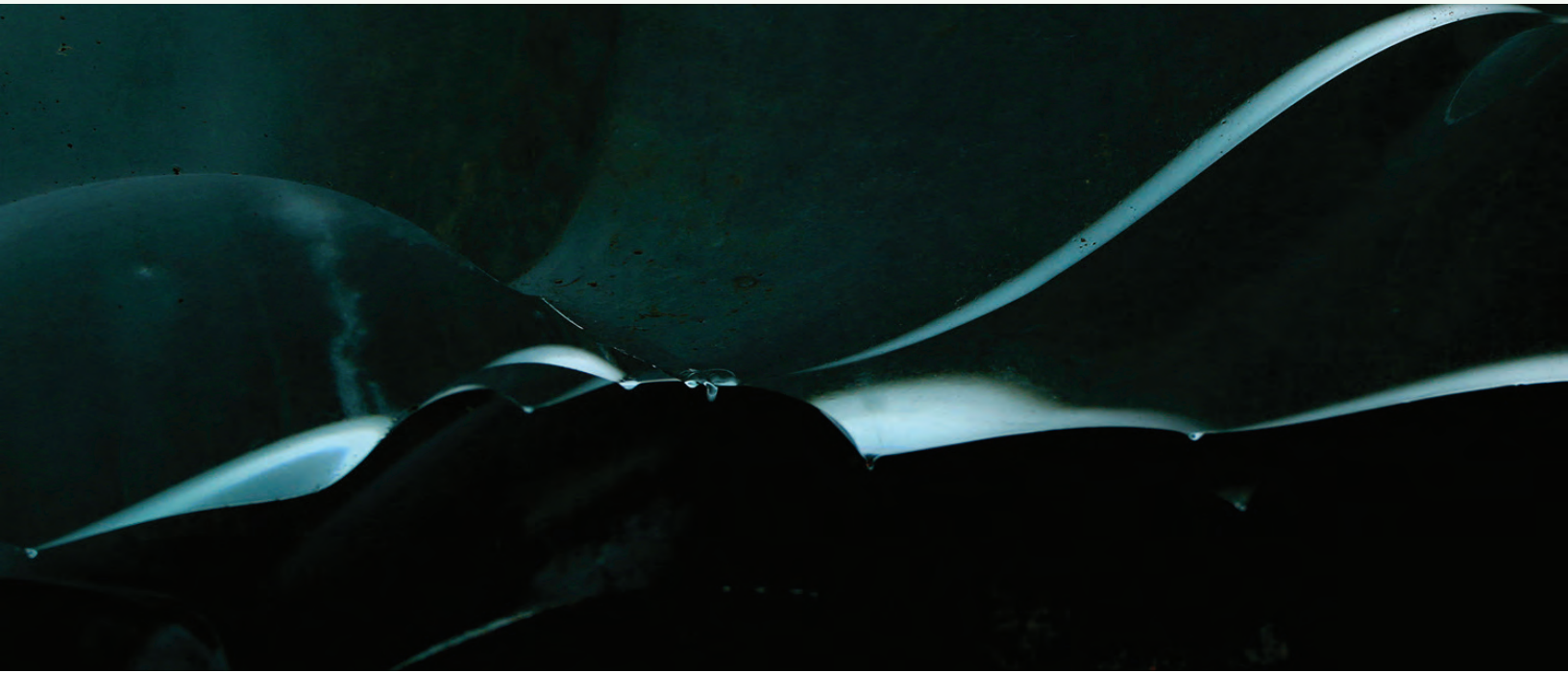
Although I was known as a photographer, I revived my ceramics practice that had developed in my late teens, and took up printmaking, painting, writing, illustration, silversmith work and jewelry making, and mixed-media in many forms. In particular, I began using cut-up circuit boards and other recycled materials. I don't want to be a fixed-medium artist; I want to explore any medium that I feel is necessary to express myself in a work of art. This necessitates crossing into various media. I find it makes me more creative, working unconstrained by boundaries and barriers. Using unorthodox materials like milk jugs and circuit boards forces me to think outside the box and use new ways of attaching them together to create my vision.

I also push boundaries within specific media, like printmaking. I understand printmakers want to make a perfect print. I can appreciate the skill in trying to do this. From my perspective, I don't like to make perfect prints; they look like a computer-generated version of the printing block. It is specifically the imperfections that create the handmade effect. Rather than being fixated on the past and constrained by tradition, artists need to look around and see where we are headed in society. There is artificial intelligence (AI) art happening in the world and it is not going away. Artists need to make work in a way that separates it from digital productions and AI art, and retain the human element. Or we need to embrace it and make AI art ourselves. Traditional barriers need to become more contemporary and adjust to the direction society is headed. Maybe park boundaries also need to do the same to adjust to a changing world, to changing climate. If it is a particular species of wildlife we are preserving in a PA, maybe boundaries could move with migration. If it is a particular type of vegetation or ecosystem, maybe boundaries can move to places more suitable for growth as the climate changes. We need more practice with impermanence.

When I look at art, I am drawn to work that blurs boundaries, and edges. I don't particularly like realism; I understand the skill involved, but visually, a photograph will have the same presentation. I like artwork that makes you think and gets you to imagine. The viewer becomes part of the creation as imagination fills out the blurred areas, the blank areas, and the areas outside the piece. The artwork and the experience of it intertwine to create a uniquely personal experience.







**Are there boundaries that still need crossing? Yes, of course. For me personally that's what keeps life interesting.**

Crossing boundaries from engineering to parks, from parks to photography, and from photography to visual art mixed media revealed possibility and inspiration. I realized that boundaries aren't necessarily fixed. They can be blurred, moved, and erased. Actively transforming boundaries, whether those externally imposed or internally built, can be scary. I learned to let go of the fear of being wrong. When I did, new ways of doing and being in the world became available.

I wonder if we can blur boundaries of PAs and re-imagine parks and PAs? Can boundaries of PAs be vague enough to ignite creativity and imagination? How might these re-imagined boundaries achieve protection in perpetuity? I look forward to the George Wright Society's continued exploration of these questions.





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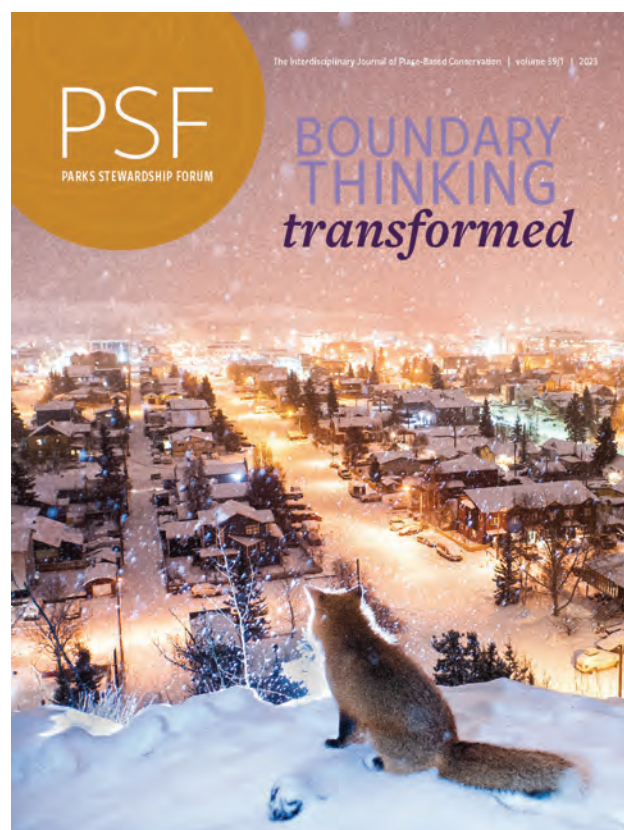
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#### On the cover of this issue

A red fox on the clay cliffs above the city of Whitehorse, Yukon Territory.  
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