

Making Collaboration Work

Lessons from a comprehensive assessment of over 200 wide-ranging cases of collaboration in environmental management

CONSIDER THE CAMERON COUNTY AGRICULTURAL COEXISTENCE Committee, an unlikely alliance of farmers, government officials, and environmentalists formed in the late 1980s in south Texas. At issue was the protection of endangered species and their habitat on the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. In 1988, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) began evaluating the effect of pesticides on endangered species. Simultaneously, the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) was trying to reintroduce Aplomado falcons (*Falco femoralis septentrionalis*) at Laguna Atascosa. After consulting with FWS scientists, EPA proposed significant reductions in pesticide use on citrus, cotton, and other crops in the agricultural area surrounding the refuge.

From the farmer's viewpoint, this was analogous to eliminating cotton growing in the Rio Grande Valley altogether. According to Laguna Atascosa Refuge Manager Steve Thompson, "On one side we had this bird that was trying to make a comeback, and we needed everybody's cooperation, and then all of a sudden EPA comes down with an edict that you're not able to use these certain pesticides."

At first, the farmers responded with anger and fear. In time, however, they began to search for alternatives to fighting over their differences in courtrooms and capitol buildings. They began by convening an ad hoc group, which came to be called the Cameron Coexistence Committee. That committee had its beginning on the back of a napkin in a Mexican Restaurant. Eventually, the committee grew to include the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service, federal and state wildlife agencies, agricultural chemical field representatives, and environmental-

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ists. Although they wanted a coalition that was broad enough to get sufficient ideas, they were hesitant to lose control of the group.

Critical to overcoming mistrust and developing the committee was a joint learning process in which all parties were seen as contributing expertise to the problem at hand. Thompson explained, “One of the first things we had

to do was to let each of us be our own experts. We quit telling the farmers how to farm. But what we did tell them was that if they used, for instance, granular pesticides, that birds were picking it up, and eventually being poisoned. They said, ‘We have another method.’ But that same pesticide can be injected into the ground, for instance. Or they asked about the rate at which it was harmful to the birds. We were just using the label rates. And they looked around and said, ‘We never use the label rate; we use half the label rate.’ So we ran that through our models and found it wouldn’t be a problem. In some cases they could continue to do what they were doing. We just weren’t communicating.”

The Cameron Coexistence Committee represents a different approach to problem solving than had become the norm among agricultural, environmental, and government interests in south Texas. By building relationships with former adversaries, individuals, and organizations were able to establish a basis of common concern that let them approach their differences creatively. As a result, environmental goals including reintroduction of endangered species and safer use of pesticides were promoted while reducing conflict and increasing trust and communication within the community.

There are literally hundreds of these kinds of success stories throughout the United States. Some efforts, such as the Applegate Partnership in Oregon, the Chicago Wilderness project in Illinois, and the Malpai Borderlands in New

Mexico, have received considerable public visibility, while others are striving quietly to make a difference. Such efforts are sometimes called public-private partnerships or alternative dispute resolution approaches. Elsewhere they are described under the labels of ecosystem management, collaborative stewardship, community-based environmental protection, civic environmentalism, and sustainable development. Whatever terms are used to describe them, they are generally place-based, cooperative, multi-party, and grounded in high-quality information. Of necessity, they involve building relationships between individuals and groups who have been isolated or alienated from each other. And by all accounts, they are pioneers in a new style of natural resource management.

Much can be learned from these pioneering efforts about how to make resource management decisions that are scientifically sound and publicly acceptable. Why has collaboration become a dominant characteristic of most successful ecosystem management efforts? What are the lessons from past experience about how to make collaboration work?

What follows are some answers to these questions derived from a comprehensive assessment of almost 200 wide-ranging cases of collaboration in natural resource and environmental management. Most of the successful efforts we studied fostered opportunities for greater levels of interaction among agencies, community groups, interest groups, and private landowners, by creating working groups, coordinators, and the like. More importantly, they developed effective processes that leveraged those opportunities into real dialogue and substantive involvement. What are some of the ways that they achieved this?

Recognizing Interdependence

Successful collaboration helped people realize their need to work together by focusing participants on shared goals, common problems, a

sense of crisis, or a strong sense of place. Strong identification with a geographic location or community provided the foundation on which many cooperative efforts were built. For example, the Applegate Partnership in south central Oregon was built on a strong identification with the Applegate River watershed. Logger Jim Neal, one partnership member, noted, "Once you can sit down and talk about a definable piece of land, you can get beyond philosophy, and things start to fall together."

Many groups established processes to articulate shared goals, which enabled them to realize their interdependence. The effort of creating joint mission or vision statements encouraged groups to begin attacking a common problem rather than continuing to attack each other. Such statements can lead participants to imagine solutions to shared problems. In the process, they develop a sense of accomplishment and start to build relationships and faith that the group can work together. For example, groups that agreed to participate in the Coalition for Unified Recreation in the Eastern Sierra (CURES) were wary of each other's motives and believed their interests were fundamentally opposed. Nancy Upham, facilitator of the coalition's early meetings, sought common ground by focusing the group on a common vision statement. After a year's work, CURES

celebrated the completion of its vision statement in 1993: "CURES is dedicated to preserving the Eastern Sierra's natural, cultural, and economic resources and enriching the experiences of visitors and residents." The cornerstone of the agreement was the group's recognition that "a sustainable economy is dependent upon a sustainable environment." Although the content of this statement is not earth-shattering, getting conflicting groups to recognize a common problem was critical.

Another strategy for helping people recognize their interdependence is to focus on the places that they share. Many groups fostered a sense of place by organizing joint field trips or clean-up activities. In doing so, they simultaneously promoted a sense of community, built relationships, and demonstrated the potential for improvement. For example, an annual Russian River Cleanup Day has been organized by Rebecca Kress, a resident of Hopland, California. In six years, over 2,250 tires were pulled from the river, along with many other materials. Kress developed creative strategies to reach different segments of the community. She produced a video that she shows at schools and even recorded a song about the river. She also made special cleanup t-shirts with a slogan in Spanish as well as in English to reach out to the Hispanic community. As a result, the annual

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Why Collaborate?

- ♥ Collaboration is critical to an ecosystem management approach. Given that most landscapes are fragmented geographically, politically, and by ownership, cooperation across boundaries is essential.
- ♥ Collaboration is part of life in a diverse society. Either we find ways to deal with our differences creatively or decision-making institutions will bog down in familiar impasses. We can try to mandate behavior through command-and-control regulation, but such programs rarely get results in isolation from other strategies.
- ♥ Collaboration can produce better decisions than adversarial processes. Building an understanding of shared and individual concerns promotes information sharing as well as creative win-win solutions. In contrast, adversarial processes like litigation create a win-lose dynamic, and regulatory programs tend to promote one-size-fits-all strategies.
- ♥ Collaboration can improve the chances that decisions are implemented. When people are not involved in change, they resist it. When they are, they are committed both to a plan of action, and to sharing resources to get things done.

cleanup has attracted what Kress describes as “a little bit of everybody.”

Focusing on the Problem

The way problems are defined has a huge effect on their solutions (1). Is the problem, “where should we site new landfills?” or “how do we deal with municipal solid waste?” Is it “how can we get rid of grizzly bears that prey on livestock?” or “how can we protect livestock and enhance grizzly habitat while reducing conflict among ranchers and wildlife interests?” The first of each pair of questions close off debate by focusing on specific solutions; the others provide a starting point for creative problem solving.

Almost all primers on negotiation argue the need to focus on interests not positions (2). In of the cases we studied, people were able to craft processes that did just that. In meetings preceding wolf restoration efforts in Yellowstone National Park, environmentalists and ranchers were stuck in traditional positions for and against wolves. Progress came when a rancher finally commented, “You need to understand one thing. It’s not the wolf we’re really worried about. We can deal with him if we need to. What we’re concerned about are all the restrictions on how we do our business that come along with the wolf.” That realization shifted the groups from polarized positions to one in which concerns could start to be understood, discussed, and addressed (3).

How can groups start focusing on problem solving? One way is to work on communication that identifies and shatters misconceptions about each other. In the Cameron County case, all sides started with erroneous perceptions framed by years of mistrust and ignorance. To the farmers, the Laguna Atascosa Refuge was the visible representative of the federal government that was “the bad guy—the one that was making their lives miserable,” according to

Thompson. Similarly, Thompson “went into that first meeting with 15 years of baggage.” He discovered during early conversations that “many of the farmers and ranchers . . . weren’t trying to do something to hurt animals or hurt other people, they were just trying to make a living . . . in a responsible way and in an environmentally safe way, if they could.”

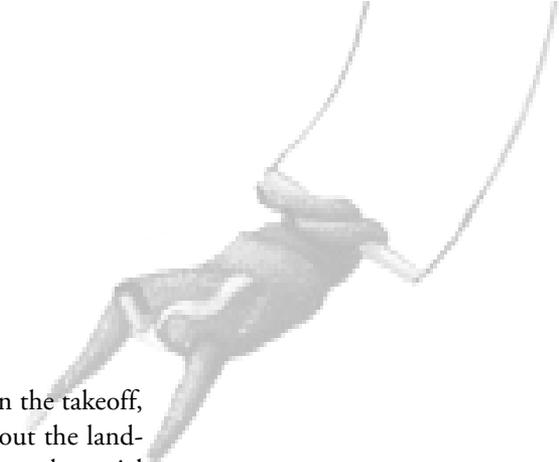
Another way to focus on the problem is to establish ground rules along with an approach that steps back from the issue of who is to blame. For example, Rebecca Kress, the entrepreneur behind the Russian River cleanup, was careful to avoid getting caught up in the often polarizing debate about resource management issues in the diverse communities where river cleanups take place. “Taking a nonadversarial role has become one of the most productive things I could have done for this,” she noted. Her strategy has been to say “Hey, the river belongs to everybody. It’s going to take everybody to clean it up. I’m not pointing any fingers.”

Critical to an individual’s ability to adopt a problem-solving mindset, however, is the commitment of agency leaders who provide flexibility, support, and follow-through for the collaborative effort. For example, Forest Service forester Maria Durazo-Means attributed the success of the Forest Service effort to engage the southeast Alaska community in collaborative recreation planning to the community’s freedom to be creative and innovative. “The ranger gave the group flexibility to accomplish the project. This is probably why it worked in spite of the glitches . . . He assigned the project and then let us loose.” In contrast, efforts to develop creative solutions that were met with a “that isn’t the way we do it” response by agency leaders tended to make bad situations worse.

Another way to promote a problem-solving mindset is by pursuing a process of mutual learning—in other words, sharing expertise, acquiring new information, and realizing that creative solutions are to be found by combining the perspectives of many rather than ac-

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cepting the conclusions of one. In a number of cases, groups engaged in joint research and fact finding to work through differences. Science provided a common language and procedures that were comfortable for all parties despite their interest-based differences. In some cases, technical advisory committees (TACs) were created as an adjunct to stakeholder groups to provide a source of credible scientific review. In the process of developing a habitat conservation plan for the desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*) in Clark County, Nevada, a TAC also “worked as an effective go-between in soliciting views of scientists not on the committee,” according to FWS biologist Sherri Barrett. Ultimately, the TAC’s input laid the groundwork for fundamental changes to the plan, which were adopted by the stakeholder steering committee.

Partnerships are People

Fundamentally, successful collaborative efforts are built on human relationships. Many of the participants of various groups talked about how important it was to organize shared meals, trips, or other activities outside the immediate work of the group. Steve Thompson described some of his early interactions with another member of the Cameron Coexistence Committee, “We had a few informal lunches together. We even went on a fishing trip together, me and a county agent. And I found out then that that guy and I shared a lot of common ground. I saw that his personal goals and his professional goals were not that different than mine.... You don’t build trust until you actually get to know people a little bit.”

These relationships help create a shared sense of ownership of the problem. Ownership is important because people take care of and remain committed to what they own. Critical to this sense of ownership was early and substantial involvement. As Dick Andrews, facilitator of a collaborative wilderness planning process for the Green Mountain National Forest,

observed, “When people are in on the takeoff, they’re generally a lot happier about the landing.” For many successful efforts, substantial involvement also meant going beyond the structure of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process. NEPA requires input during the scoping and comment periods on draft and final impact statements. This generates input first when issues and concerns are still unfocused, and second, after “the deal has been cut.” Successful groups went beyond the narrow requirements of NEPA and gathered feedback from stakeholders throughout the process.

Yet commitment needs to go beyond getting people involved early and often. Successful outcomes connected people’s efforts to substantive changes in decisions. For example, the Plum Creek habitat conservation planning effort in Washington provided extensive opportunities for involvement, but the “process” was not followed up by substantive changes in the proposed plan. Expectations were high and many groups spent a lot of time and money, yet stakeholders were disappointed in the end. In contrast, Clark County, Nevada, produced a much more meaningful participatory process to create an habitat conservation plan (HCP) for the desert tortoise, including a steering committee with stakeholder representatives who are now involved in implementation and monitoring. As gold miner and committee member Ann Schrieber comments, “The most important achievement I saw was that a group of people walked into a room hating each other’s guts and ready to slit each other’s throats . . . and now if you were to come visit those meetings and say something against the plan, you’re apt to get eaten up by both sides.”

An Entrepreneurial Approach

Individuals involved in successful collaborative processes were entrepreneurial. They established relationships, secured resources and institutional support, marketed the effort, and pushed for

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effective implementation. They took advantage of opportunities for collaboration and used small footholds in a conflict to chart a pathway to greater involvement. Instead of being constrained by existing procedures, they were persistent in their search for solutions. They took a chance on a different course of action and found it worth the risk.

Often, a small set of dedicated, energetic individuals catalyze an activity and drive it forward in an entrepreneurial way. For example, the Beartree Challenge, an innovative partnership focused on improving habitat and public support for grizzly bear management in northern Montana, benefited from the efforts and energies of Seth Diamond, its creator and cheerleader. According to Diamond, “The grizzly bear has the ability to stimulate great interest. Let’s transform it into something positive—to grizzly bears, ranchers, environmentalists, and the general public.” As Forest Service staff member Dave Whittekiend noted, “Seth was the one that made it happen. He didn’t let anything get in his way.”

How do you promote entrepreneurial behavior? On an agency level, incentives and reward systems need to support well-intended, creative approaches to problem solving. Leaders who focus on objectives, not procedures, and who evaluate performance in terms of how well progress towards these objectives is being achieved, tend to foster more creative, solution-oriented behavior by their employees. Similarly, budget systems that allow flexibility in the way that funds are made available across program lines and budget cycles are critical to allowing entrepreneurial behavior.

Individuals foster entrepreneurial attitudes through a contagious combination of hopefulness and persistence. According to Diamond, the biggest hurdle to the Beartree Challenge was “skepticism within the organization that this was crazy, that it wouldn’t work.” He was not dis-

suaed, however. “I just did it. Just showed results. Built partnerships. Put myself in a position that they couldn’t say no.” Success motivates agency leaders and potential partners. Nanticoke Watershed Alliance member Mark Zankel advises, “Accomplish things and show people what you have done. People are hesitant to get involved, but once something is up and running, they do not want to miss the boat and be out of the loop. Success really sells.”

Successful efforts also involved the support of “local champions” by drawing on the sets of relationships that always exist in communities. From his experience with the Cameron Coexistence Committee, Steve Thompson notes, “Every community has a leader farmer. Several of them meet at a coffee shop, and they know what is going on. . . A [Fish and Wildlife] Service person could take a report [describing successes elsewhere], go sit down and have a cup of coffee and hand it to the guy and say, ‘No, you don’t know me, and you probably think I’m an enemy, but I heard about some of these other stories that have worked, and we’ve got a big problem here. Would you just read this, and get back to me sometime and let me know what you think? I think you can set the seed a lot of times that way. . . You have to do this very informally and catch a leader in the community.’”

Individuals who adopted an entrepreneurial approach also looked for what Diamond called “seams in the bureaucratic wall.” They took advantage of existing government programs like the Forest Service’s Cost-Share Partnership program, as well as small opportunities to do things that lie in the somewhat ambiguous interface between agency rules and procedures. According to Diamond, “If you have an idea and no one has done it before, don’t think you can’t do it.” As an example, he cited how they worked around a rule that prohibits cooperators in a project from making any economic gain from it. The agency established an “admin-

istrative sale” of logs harvested as part of the habitat improvement project to local ranchers who were plagued by a shortage of post poles for fencing. Providing them with these logs at a reasonable cost was an invaluable relationship builder.

Conclusion

Collaboration in natural resource management is not without its critics. Some argue that such partnerships represent an unlawful abdication of statutory authority to individuals who may not be representative of the broader public interest and who may make choices that are not scientifically sound (4). Yet, the fact of the matter is that we have no choice. The issue is not whether transboundary groups should be involved in resource management; rather, how should their involvement be managed so that results are informed and accountable to the broader public trust? We need to ensure that such processes are accountable by 1) making them adjunct to traditional public decision making, 2) maintaining rights of public comment and appeal, and 3) incorporating independent science and appropriate performance measures.

From our perspective, the reason to develop collaborative partnerships is to improve the state of the environment. The acid test is whether these approaches promote conservation objectives in the long-run when measured against the baseline of what would realistically have happened otherwise. Our research on collaborative processes indicates that they are achieving ecological results while also improving community-level communication and cooperation. For example, a collaboration between the Forest Service, the Natural Resource Conservation Service, and local ranchers has greatly improved the quality of rangeland in the Kiowa National Grasslands of New Mexico. One environmentalist says, “I’m sold on it. Some native grasses that were thought to be locally extinct have re-

appeared; cottonwoods and willow seedlings are sprouting in the riparian area . . . Over 50 species of birds were recently recorded where previously there was only a handful. An old creek bed that had been dry since the 1950s is once again running with water.” With these environmental improvements came health improvements for the cattle. Both conception and birth rates have improved in most cases, with weaning weights higher as well, and the capacity of the land to support cattle has increased.

We should not pursue collaboration solely because “the law mandates it,” “a democracy requires public involvement,” or even “the public will agree to our plans if we tell them what we intend to do,” as many have reasoned. Nor should we promote collaboration as a means of making people feel good. Indeed, the people involved in the many collaborative processes we have studied cannot afford the luxury of believing in collaboration as an abstract “God-and-motherhood” notion in which the story ends with all parties walking hand-in-hand into the sunset. Their goals were to improve the on-the-ground situation, not to achieve some imagined state of bliss. For example, Steve Thompson notes the significance of the name of the Cameron County Agricultural Coexistence Committee: “The farmers came up with that title, and I think it’s pretty interesting because coexistence is really what it’s about. It’s not saying that we are all going to love each other. We’re just going to find a way to work together and come to some common ground.” ❧

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