

# Chapter 14: How Can Collaboration Contribute to Sustainable Recreation Management?

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We just have a whole diverse range of partners when it comes to outdoor recreation, and we want to work in the spirit of shared stewardship. We want to work collaboratively to make a difference.

—Tony Tooke, former Forest Service Chief, January 28, 2018  
(Blevins 2018).

## **Purpose**

This chapter examines the potential that collaboration holds for operationalizing sustainable recreation management on public lands. Additionally, we synthesize the professional and academic literature on collaboration and partnerships to spotlight promising new conceptual frameworks, analytic tools, and management best practices that can contribute to this goal. Finally, we identify a research agenda that can assess the efficacy of collaborative approaches to outdoor recreation governance, planning, and management. Continuous monitoring of collaboration dynamics, capacity, structures, and outcomes can contribute to sustainable recreation management into the future.

## **Problem Statement**

Collaboration has emerged as a central focus as society negotiates new interorganizational policy, planning, and management arrangements to implement the goals of sustainable development (Koontz 2006, Lozano 2007). Further, as Ostrom (1990) aptly put it, including affected individuals in rulemaking about conservation resources is critical to building sustainable human-environmental systems. This is certainly true within the narrower domain of public land management, where collaboration has been advocated as a strategy to implement landscape restoration projects (Butler et al. 2015), construct community wildfire protection plans (Charnley et al. 2014), improve forest-level planning (Cheng and Sturtevant 2012), and enhance sustainable recreation and tourism opportunities (Selin 2017). Whether the current agency terminology is recreation partnerships, all lands—all hands, or the shared stewardship goals

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of the National Strategy for a Sustainable Trails System (fig. 14.1), most recent public land management recreation planning initiatives have emphasized collaboration as a means to implement sustainable practices on the ground (Charnley et al. 2014).

By collaboration, we mean the dynamic process by which multiple parties pool resources (e.g., information, money, labor, and time) to solve a problem or create an opportunity that they cannot solve individually (Gray 1989, Selin and Chavez 1995a). We envision collaboration as a dynamic, adaptive, and flexible process. Collaboration implies a joint decisionmaking approach in which power is shared and stakeholders take collective responsibility for their actions. However, collaborative approaches to public land management remain an under-researched and contested alternative to more traditional agency-control models of decisionmaking and service delivery. Needed are more science-management partnerships in which collaboration dynamics,

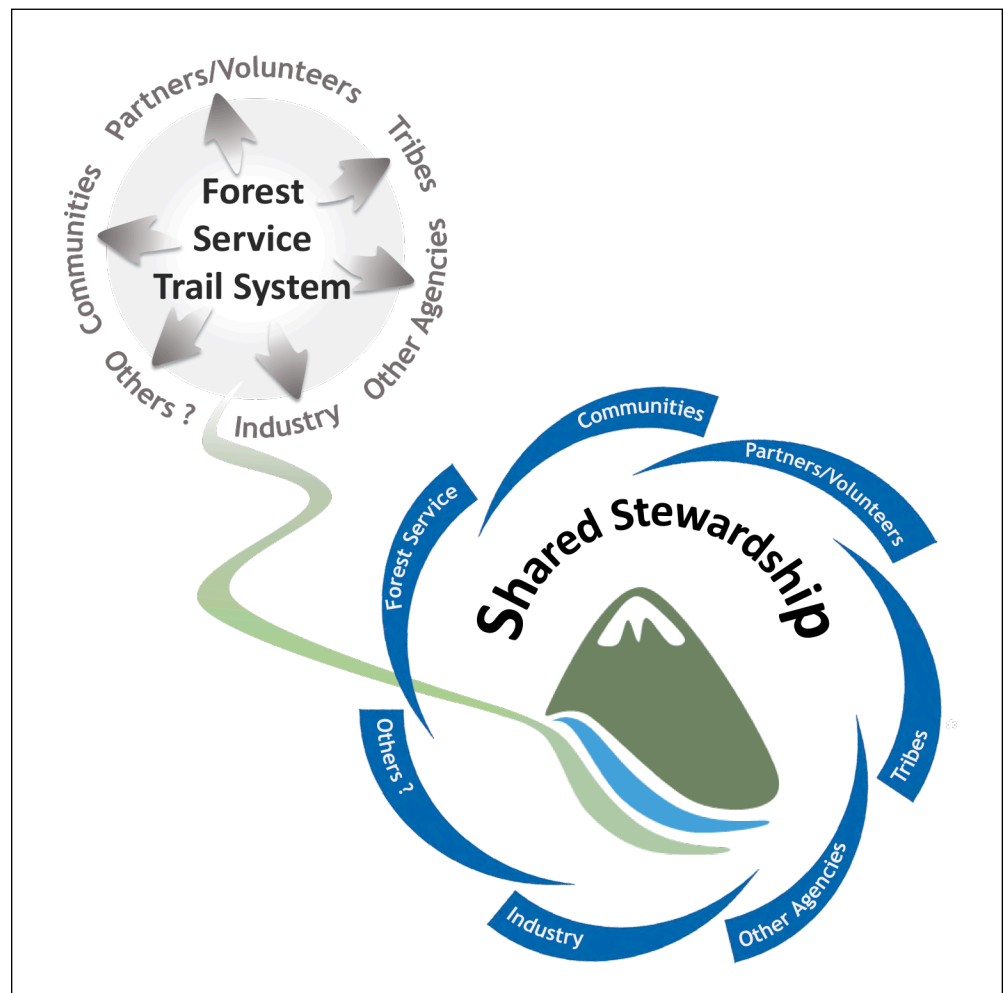


Figure 14.1—Collaboration model from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service National Strategy for a Sustainable Trail System (USDA FS 2017).

forms, and outcomes are monitored to support social learning at all agency levels. The benefits of collaboration have been well documented: it builds trust, strengthens social capital, leverages scarce resources, reduces conflict, and gets work done on the ground (Selin and Mendoza 2013). However, there are also significant barriers and challenges to achieving the potential of collaboration (Selin and Chavez 1995a).

## Barriers and Challenges

The barriers and challenges to forging effective collaboration and partnerships with recreation and tourism stakeholders have been well chronicled (Jamal and Stronza 2009, Leong et al. 2011, Selin and Mendoza 2013). Resource limitations—time, money, and personnel—are often cited by agency staff as reasons for not entering into collaborative arrangements, and yet such partnerships can help leverage personnel, equipment, and funds to help agency staff address their challenges (Selin and Mendoza 2013). Lack of ability and training is another reason given by agency staff to shy away from external collaboration. In other cases, prevailing fears, attitudes, biases, and norms stand in the way. Organizational culture and a “we know best” attitude can often create a resistance to organizational change and innovative collaboration and partnerships (Leong et al. 2011).

Other administrative, legal, and budgetary constraints can also limit the adoption of external collaboration. A perceived lack of accountability and quality control in collaborative arrangements can often slow down the implementation of these type of programs (Cheng 2007). Administrative inflexibility or “red tape” in procurement, budgeting, and legal requirements can discourage stakeholders from participating in recreation partnerships with land management agencies (Selin and Chavez 1995b). Lack of authority at a local or regional level can also constrain the implementation of collaborative arrangements as can a loss of continuity as key agency participants are transferred to other regions (Koontz 2006). Despite these diverse challenges, collaboration and partnerships are becoming more prevalent as managers and decisionmakers recognize the agency and community benefits to conservation and economic development goals that result from these coordinated arrangements.

## New Concepts and Methods

Public lands collaboration is emerging across a broad spectrum of spatial and organizational scales. Collaboration may be place-based with primarily local actors, such as local Fire Safe Councils (Charnley et al. 2014). Or they may be regional, national, or even international in scope, such as the World Heritage Site program (Jamal and Stronza 2009). Collaborations may be transitory and informal or they may be more formal and result in permanent, legally mandated, interorganizational structures. Collaboration can occur within the policymaking arena; play a role in

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the governance of complex, watershed systems like lakes and rivers; develop as an approach to natural resource planning; or provide a key focus in the management of place-based conservation areas.

Collaboration with a sustainability focus is being analyzed from the perspective of many disciplines including protected area management, tourism, forestry, urban studies, rural studies, and public administration. Much of this theoretical and empirical work has been focused on understanding collaboration from the perspective of a complex, adaptive system (Gray 1989, Selin and Chavez 1995a)—developing a deeper understanding of the external drivers that catalyze the formation of collaboration, analyzing the internal dynamics of how collaborative arrangements evolve over time, and assessing the benefits, costs, and outcomes resulting from collaborative approaches to public land management. Ultimately, much of this scholarly work is directed toward the question of how collaborative systems can contribute to sustainability in the broadest sense (Koontz 2006). Action-oriented research in this arena is informing policymakers and resource management agencies charged with managing these social-ecological systems. We next summarize three promising areas of collaboration research to sustainable recreation management: collaborative governance, community-based collaboration, and collective impact initiatives.

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### Collaborative Governance

As public land management agencies look for ways to manage recreation resources more effectively and efficiently, they are exploring a host of interorganizational alternatives to the traditional agency control model. For example, the language of networks, public-private partnerships, and cooperative associations infuses most Forest Service plans to operationalize sustainable recreation (Selin 2017). The Forest Service partnership with the Greening Youth Foundation to support resource assistant positions across the National Forest System is an excellent example of how this type of partnership with a nonprofit organization is building stewardship capacity across the agency. However, public land management agencies are still struggling with how to be effective actors in these cross-sector, multilevel governance systems (Robertson 2011). Fortunately, these disparate ideas and best practices are being synthesized into the literature on “collaborative governance,” which Ansell and Gash (2008) defined as “a governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decisionmaking process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets” (2008: 544). The col-

laborative governance literature is generating analytic frameworks and management best practices for maximizing the value of these emerging collaborative practices.

If collaborative governance is the new social infrastructure being constructed, then “social networks” are the building blocks of that social infrastructure (Flier-voet et al. 2016). Social network analysis is emerging as a powerful analytic tool to assess and predict the functionality and performance of these collaborative social systems. One can further differentiate between the degree of “bonding” social capital and “bridging” social capital (McGehee et al. 2015) present in these collaborative systems. Bonding social capital comprises the internal relationships, networks, and trust that occur horizontally within a collaborative system. Bridging social capital is constructed when the bonded group reaches out, either vertically or horizontally, to seek information, resources, or support.

## **Community-Based Collaboration**

Whereas collaborative governance often plays out over a regional or landscape scale, community-based collaboration happens at a local scale when groups come together to address natural resource management issues involving ecological and economic sustainability (Charnley et al. 2014, Cheng 2007, Cheng and Sturtevant 2012, Margerum 2007). Community-based collaborative groups are playing a more prominent role in natural resource management, from planning to project implementation to monitoring and assessment activities (Cheng and Sturtevant 2012). In fact, a number of recent federal policies and programs, such as the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (Butler et al. 2015), are incentivizing the participation of community-based collaborative groups as partners in landscape restoration projects. Much of the scholarly work in this area focuses on understanding and supporting capacity-building efforts of this community-based collaboration sector (Cheng and Sturtevant 2012, Margerum 2007, Mountjoy et al. 2013). Considerable political deliberation centers on strengthening the role of these community-based collaborative groups and on whether current environmental laws governing public forests are constraining the full application of community-based collaboration (Nie and Metcalf 2016). Although most stakeholders see a significant role for community-based collaboration, a competing point of view is that collaboration is no substitute for agency accountability. Proponents see limits to the utility of collaboration, pointing out that collaboration processes must work within the bounds of public accountability and scientific scrutiny and wider opportunities for public participation afforded by the National Environmental Policy Act process. Further research is needed to determine the appropriate and legal role for community-based collaboration.

## Collective Impact

Finally, the “collective impact” literature (Hanleybrown et al. 2012) is revolutionizing how we think and act about collaboration and partnerships. The authors developed a conceptual framework to describe collective impact initiatives, which they describe as highly structured collaborative efforts that have achieved substantial impacts on a large-scale social problem. Five key elements were found in all collective impact initiatives, including having a common agenda, collecting common impact measures, coordinating mutually reinforcing activities, being committed to continuous communication, and having the presence of a “backbone organization” to coordinate efforts by participating organizations. The backbone organization, which consists of only two to four staff members, is the key distinguishing feature of collective impact groups. Literally hundreds of organizations have an interest in the sustainable management for any given set of public lands, and the role of the collective impact backbone organization is **not** to actually conduct stewardship or restoration activities, but to identify, organize, and arrange funding for a logical set of partners to implement specific sustainable recreation management practices on public lands. Thus, it is an independent, boundary-spanning type of organization that seeks to implement the shared goals of all the sustainability stakeholder groups. Further, Hanleybrown et al. (2012) identified three preconditions necessary to achieving collective impact: (1) the presence of an influential champion, (2) adequate financial resources, and (3) a strong sense of urgency for change. Measured against the standards of true collective impact initiatives, many sustainable recreation partnerships clearly lack capacity at present. Although most collective impact initiatives focus on social service goals, a few backbone organizations have regional environmental sustainability goals such as the Chicago Wilderness program (Gobster 1997) and the Intertwine Alliance (DeNies 2013) operating in the greater Portland, Oregon, area. Although there are few case studies in the scholarly literature about conservation backbone organizations, the collective impact literature provides powerful lessons for aspiring resource managers and conservation scholars.

## Compelling Questions

This growing body of knowledge on collaboration and partnership dynamics has generated significant and compelling research questions—

### **Contextual factors—**

1. What are the underlying initiating factors that lead to the formation and persistence of enduring recreation partnerships?

2. What type of incentives and management guidelines can be provided to catalyze the formation and strengthening of effective recreation partnerships?
3. What significant barriers constrain the adoption of effective recreation partnerships?

#### **Collaboration and partnership dynamics—**

1. Can keys to success and lessons learned be synthesized from both successful and struggling partnerships?
2. What roles do key individuals, leaders, or changemakers play in the partnership development process?
3. Can case studies of successful collaboration and partnership initiatives be archived to support collaborative learning and training programs?

#### **Collaboration outcomes and impacts—**

1. Can we monitor and evaluate the outcomes of collaboration and partnership programs to support collaborative learning at all levels and to build recreation program capacity?
2. What contributions do collaboration and partnerships make to sustainable agency operations as well as to community resilience and livelihood?
3. What are some problematic or negative outcomes of applying collaboration to sustainable recreation and tourism management?
4. Can we develop effective training programs to build the competency and confidence of agency staff and public and private sector collaborators to facilitate enduring recreation partnerships?

## **Conclusions**

Clearly, the transition to more collaborative approaches to managing public lands recreation will be challenging. Building effective partnerships and strengthening collaboration with external stakeholders including other public agencies at all levels of government, recreation user groups, nongovernmental organizations, foundations, academia, and the corporate sector holds part of the answer to this challenge. Collaboration research may inform and strengthen agency efforts to build effective and efficient external collaboration and to support collaboration training. Collaboration and partnership dynamics are a complex and dynamic endeavor. Building a toolbox of best practices, capacity building approaches, and leadership strategies is essential to this task. Social science research and engagement is needed to study collaboration in action and illuminate strategies for success.

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