Case Description

The Clifton-Chocotaw Tribe, located on a 4.7-acre reservation in Gardner, Louisiana is a small (500 person), non-federally recognized tribe that suffered adverse economic effects when the local timber industry stopped processing "short wood." The average age of the 250 or so people who live on the reservation is 50-55 years. Moreover, according to District Ranger John Baswell, "they suffer from lack of education and training that they could transfer to another type of employment . . . and are a very marginal community with little political power." Consequently, they are having a rough time making a living.

When District Ranger Baswell was put in charge of the Rural Development Program for the Vernon Ranger District on the Kisatchie National Forest in 1992, he approached the leaders of several groups that he knew would be eligible. He explained to them the program, the funds available if they were interested, and offered to help them with the application process. Baswell is adamant when he says, "it took a day or two, but I kept repeating that I didn't know what kind of project they should do . . . but was there to help out with any logistics. I kept telling them that I didn't know what they needed, but that this program was available and this was the information they needed to supply to the Forest Service to get the ball rolling. I made them come up with a proposal."

The Tribal Council came up with a proposal to construct a small tree nursery that would grow long-leaf pine seedlings and start a pine straw baling operation. In 1992 the Clifton-Chocotaw Tribe was awarded a $15,000 Challenge Cost-Share grant for this endeavor. In the first year, the group sold more than 900 bales of straw for mulch to local nurseries. In addition, they set up a small tree nursery adjacent to a gift shop where they had already been selling pine straw baskets, quilts, beaded earrings, and other handmade items. They now have a contract to supply the Forest Service with 100,000 long-leaf pine seedlings. The Forest Service supplies the Tribe with seeds and buys the seedlings at the end of the growing season.

Forest Service employees assisted the Tribe in many ways. In the beginning they offered aid with proposal writing and editing and the logistics for applying for a cost-share grant. After the project was funded and their bailing and nursery projects were underway, the Forest Service helped the Tribe to find markets for their products and helped them interface with local communities off the reservation. Anna Neal, who was Tribal Coordinator for the projects at the time, remarked that this type of assistance was very useful because "people from my tribe can work hard, but don't know much about interacting outside the reservation." The District Silviculturist also gave the Tribe advice about establishing their long-leaf pine nursery and visits the Tribe on a regular basis. According to Neal, "the silviculturist helped them out with the seedlings...proper procedures...and what to do when." Local Forest Service staff helped the Tribe obtain a second grant to increase production so that they could supply private and state forests as well as the National Forest with long-leaf pine seedlings. Forest Service staff are currently working to help the Tribe increase its water supply so that it can increase production of seedlings.

While the Forest Service helped the Tribe where needed, Baswell said that "one of the best things about this project is that it helps them to help themselves." While Baswell contacted the group about twice a month to "see how things are going," he was careful not to get involved in the decision-

Source: J. Wondolleck and S. Yaffee, Collaborative Resource Management: A Compendium of Cases (School of Natural Resources and Environment, The University of Michigan, 1998.)
making processes or give advice about how the business should be run. Alan Dorian, the current Forest Service liaison with the Tribe, noted, “It was just seed money, but it gave the tribe self-reliance and independence.”

At one level, the activities in this case may not seem that significant, but Neal noted, “for a community of people headed towards self-determination, every small project helps.” Baswell concurs with Neal and added, “we are not talking about much, but the income has really made a difference in these people's lives. It allowed some of the families to keep their children in school or to keep their lights and fuel on for the winter -- something that had been a challenge in the past. The success of this program has allowed individuals in the Tribe to improve their quality of life in measurable ways.” Baswell notes further, “this project is particularly important because the Clifton-Choctaw Tribe is not federally recognized and therefore gets no federal assistance -- we are really filling a niche here.”

Both projects do not simply help individuals, but also contribute to the entire Clifton-Choctaw community. In the pine straw baling project, $2.00 of the $3.00 selling price goes to the laborer, $0.75 goes towards tractor maintenance, and $0.25 goes directly into the Clifton-Choctaw Community Improvement Fund. Craftspeople contribute 10% of their earnings towards upkeep of their shop. Money from this fund is then reinvested into community projects such as improving recreation areas, maintaining buildings and the like. In addition, Neal says that this program has been a success because it broadens the skills base of the Tribe. Prior to the initiative, the main source of income for individuals in the Tribe came from making and selling crafts. Since the inception of the cost-share agreement and the recent contract to grow long-leaf pine seedlings, the Tribe now has two more income-generating skills that it is capable of performing. Moreover, the skills learned in the project, namely straw raking and baling, are being generalized to individual for-profit enterprises. For example, several individuals on the reservation have started raising small numbers of cattle for their families.

Both Baswell and Neal also praised the project for building a relationship between the District and the Tribe. As Neal commented, “this project exposed us to forestry and the Forest Service to us.” Because of this relationship, the Forest Service is now aware of the Tribe and can incorporate them into other activities and programs such as minority contracting. They currently have a “stay-in-school” computer student working for them that helps tutor the Tribe at night for a GED program. Baswell sees the partnership with the Tribe as building new constituents of cooperation and support. Baswell commented “historically the Forest Service has been in rural America, but not in minority areas, especially in the south.” Out of 33 challenge cost-share grants awarded in Region 8, this is the only one that includes a Native American tribe as a participant.

In addition to the tangible benefits to members of the Clifton-Choctaw Tribe, the Forest Service has also benefited from the interaction. The agency is now seen as “the good guys,” says Baswell. Such successes are good publicity for the Rural Development Program and the Forest Service. Baswell went on to say that “the trust that has been developed is the major accomplishment...and provides a place for recruitment and visibility of the Forest Service to the Tribe.” Neal says that she has “nothing but praise for the Forest Service employees she works with.... They are genuinely concerned and sincere.” She goes on to say that “the Forest Service is the first government agency that truly appears to be interested in self-determination.” It is clear that Neal’s image of the Forest Service, as a whole, is a positive one and that it has been developed at the ground level by her interactions with Baswell and others. According to Neal, the Tribe now invites opportunities to work with the Forest Service: “If they come to us with something, we’ll take a look at it...we would love to do more projects with the Forest Service.”

Not only are Forest Service staff on the District “very enthusiastic” about the project, but the Forest Supervisor is “tickled,” said Baswell. Susan O’Dell from the Chief’s Review Staff in the Washington Office told Baswell that she “was amazed that they had gotten so far with so little money.” The group received a Rural Development Award from the Forest Service for being one of the top three projects in the Southern Region. The partnership has continued
even after Neal and Baswell departed. The Tribe did not receive a grant for a year after Baswell left as things got lost in the transition, but Alan Dorian, Baswell's replacement, has been working with the Tribe to continue the partnership.

Why was success possible?

Baswell believes that his "hands-off" approach helped facilitate the success of the program. Because Baswell did not tell the Tribe what he thought they should do, they ended up with a project in which they had a great deal of ownership and one that fit in well with the needs of both individuals and the community as a whole. Also, because members of the Tribe designed the project themselves, the goals and work plans melded easily with the operations of the Tribal Council and traditional customs and methods of doing business. Baswell feels that because of these factors, "it is one of the smoothest projects we've got going." Yet it was also helpful that the project fills a need of the Forest Service. As Dorian noted, "Everything just gelled. We were realizing that we needed to do something with the long-leaf pine source and here was a tribal group that had long-leaf pine as part of their cultural tradition and it was a natural for them." This has led to strong support from the Forest Supervisor and other Forest Service employees who "know that their long-leaf pines result from the economic recovery project."

Another factor that contributed to the success of this endeavor was the cohesiveness of the Clifton-Choctaw Tribe, which Neal attributes to a very good tribal council. The Tribal Council places a premium on keeping its members informed. Neal commented that "you need to let people know what is going on," and that because of the council, "there is very little infighting...we've got a lot of dedicated people who work for the good of the community." Neal also says that the fact that there are many skilled people in the Tribe assists them in being able to do a lot with little money. For example, rather than hiring an expensive contractor, the Tribe did almost all the carpentry and plumbing themselves on the craft shop.

What barriers were faced and how were they overcome?

According to Baswell, one of the biggest barriers to this program was an initial distrust by the Tribe of Forest Service employees. "Initially, they thought that we would tell them how to run the show," Baswell said. It took a little time, but with patience the group was finally able to get rid of their basic "anti-government" feeling. "Our strength really came in us letting them choose what they wanted to do and helping them out with the logistics," says Baswell.

Neal also felt that the approach that the Forest Service employees took contributed to success in this case, but for a different reason. Neal was impressed by the sincerity of Forest Service employees. She described her dealings with Baswell and others as "genuine" and "honest" and said that the Forest Service employees "tell it to you like it is. If John can't do something, he'll tell you; be honest with you." According to Neal, the Tribe is generally hesitant of any promises made by government agencies and fears that they will take control of tribal projects. But it was the sincerity and genuineness of the Forest Service employees that established the positive relationship between the Tribe and the agency.

Turnover had some effect on the partnership after both Baswell and Neal left the project, but it is back on track and seems stronger than ever. The new Forest Service liaison seems fully committed to the partnership and seems to have built strong ties to the Tribe to replace the personal connection that Baswell had built.

Neal mentioned that the Tribe "needs more movers and shakers," people who are willing to go out and do what she does and interface with the non-reservation world. She stresses that these "movers and shakers" should be from the local community, "we don't need hotshots to come in and organize...let the people do it themselves." She said that most people in her Tribe "don't know much about interacting outside the reservation," which makes it
difficult to find opportunities for collaboration with other communities, businesses or public agencies.
Neal has been doing intensive training within the Tribe to get some people to do more of what she does. She says that she has “several people really pumped up.”

What lessons can be drawn for future bridging?

A major lesson Forest Service staff learned in this case is the need to be proactive in looking for parties with which to collaborate. Baswell cautioned that one should not assume that parties are not interested simply because they have not approached you. He said, “we have got to go out and find them. They won’t beat down the door looking for grants.” This case is a good example of a District Ranger understanding the communities around him and creating opportunities for collaboration in a culturally-sensitive and productive manner. The partnership has been a long-term success in large part because it meets mutual needs of the Tribe and the Forest Service.

Neal said that her biggest revelation was that she “learned that you can do quite a bit with a little money if you get together and know where you are going,” and that, “you can get much accomplished if somebody gives you a break and you have dedicated people.” In order to be able to accomplish a lot with a little you need to “follow your money and put it to good use...do the best you can with what you have got.”

Neal also gives the same advice to the Forest Service as it relates to their funding of projects. “There are people making money hand over fist in the name of the poor,” she noted, and a lot of the money for some projects is going into the organizer’s pocket. She recommends that the Forest Service “make sure that money is spent wisely.” Neal feels that the way to do this is through funding more projects such as theirs — “smaller scale projects with communities who truly need it.”

For further information

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