

CHAPTER 4: WHY COLLABORATE?

Although a few difficult issues surfaced, the primary sentiment expressed by interviewees in this study was that the benefits of participation outweighed the challenges and costs. Primarily, participants cited access to additional funding, increased organizational capacity, and greater learning and networking opportunities as the main benefits of participation. An increased coordination of efforts, additional land protected, the creation of a regional voice and identity, and the ability to work on a landscape scale were appreciated as well (Table 4).

Benefits of collaboration

- Access to additional funding
- Increased organizational capacity
- Greater learning and networking opportunities
- Increased coordination of efforts
- Additional land protected
- Creation of a regional voice and identity
- Ability to work on a landscape scale

Table 4: Benefits of Collaboration

ACCESS TO ADDITIONAL FUNDING

Participation in landscape level initiatives has increased access for land trusts to a wide range of funding sources, including private foundations, government sources, and private individuals. This increased access was named as a primary benefit of participation by participants in all of the case studies investigated.

Joining together into a landscape-scale collaborative effort raises the profile of the individual groups involved. By becoming part of a larger effort, they are able to approach large foundations or agencies as a unit, initiating a dialogue that would have been difficult or impossible to start on their own. As one Northern Rockies participant explained, currently “singly, or even in pairs, we can’t attract the money that we need to affect change in the larger area.” However, “by joining in, there is a little bit more prestige, (we) can go to these national funders,” one Blufflands Alliance member explained. As one participant remarked, a main function of the Michigan Dune Alliance is to serve as “a vehicle for getting grants,” which has become possible because the group has been able “to raise (the dunes’) profile beyond what it would normally be in terms of getting the attention of the major funders.”

The fact that collaborative efforts are currently a popular foundation focus area has also helped attract revenue. A Dune Alliance participant commented that “we pulled all of these needs into a larger and greater need which is more fundable, because basically right now partner, partner, partner is what is being funded. We needed that partnership to qualify.” In addition to partnerships, foundations are also currently interested in ecosystem scale efforts. As one Northern Rockies member explained, “I think foundations like to see that we are thinking beyond our little world and are incorporating into a much larger picture.”

Participation has also increased access to state and county level funding. The Bay Area Open Space Council has been particularly effective in this arena, having initiated the Bay Area Conservancy Program, which helps administer a \$55 million park and open space protection bond. According to one participant, “the whole idea of the council is to enhance the funding capabilities of land conservation organizations and agencies in the Bay Area.” In addition to the bond funding, the Council has created, according to another participant, “a whole grant program for stewardship programs, another source of funding that I wouldn’t have been able to access otherwise. And then they started the local initiatives in the different counties within the Bay Area, and that’s also resulted in money.” Similarly, the North Quabbin Regional Landscape Partnership has been able to attract public funding to its region. According to one participant, the Partnership “has helped to...raise the importance of [the area] in the eyes of state agencies, so they have been willing to invest in a fairly significant land preservation push.” Termed the “Tully Initiative,” this state-sponsored program aims to protect thousands of acres of land via conservation easements in the near future.

Finally, participation in the collaborative efforts has helped some participants reach out to their individual members and donors. The regional focus provided by the Michigan Dune Alliance has helped increase individual donor interest, as explained by one participant:

The main benefit of the Dune Alliance is the acknowledged regional focus, because we work in our counties with donors that think, well, are you looking at the big picture? And we can say, yes, these sites are not only important for our counties, they are important to the Dune Alliance, to the Great Lakes ecoregion. That carries a lot more weight, and so we are more apt to get the donor’s attention.

Donors also appreciate the increased coordination between member groups that regional efforts promote, as one North Quabbin participant explained:

Many of our members are members of other groups in the partnership, and they contribute to several or all of the groups. There is a general sense that they would rather see the organizations put their heads together and pull together rather than compete.

Finally, donors appreciate that their dollars are stretched further by groups participating in efforts such as the Blufflands Alliance, where every \$3 they donate brings in a \$1 match from the sponsoring foundation (up to a point). Members “love that their membership money is leveraged by the grant,” one Blufflands group explained.

INCREASED ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

Participation in regional initiatives has allowed many groups to increase their organizational capacity, both by adding staff and by expanding into new project areas. Many participants cited this benefit as a key rationale for participating in the larger effort. In fact, one Blufflands Alliance member felt that the Alliance was, primarily, “a way to increase capacity for the six organizations.” Membership in the Blufflands Alliance has resulted in two groups hiring executive directors for the first time; organizations in the Michigan Dune Alliance have also been able to add staff. In the project arena, participants have been able to complete new planning projects, conduct additional landowner outreach efforts, and develop new joint projects. Examples of joint projects include the cooperative workshops held by Blufflands Alliance groups working on opposite sides of the Mississippi River, and the joint land protection efforts carried out by members of the North Quabbin Partnership. By increasing the possibility for partnering, participation in the collaborative initiative has allowed each trust to accomplish more than they could have alone.

Although these increases in capacity have largely come as a result of the increased funding available, two other sources were mentioned as well. One Blufflands Alliance member organization felt it had expanded its capacity due to the fact that, “if you have any kind of desire as an organization at all, you want to try to bring your

organization to the level of whatever the best organization in the Alliance is.” This peer-to-peer inspiration has most likely helped other organizations improve and expand as well. Second, another participant appreciated the accountability that participation in the Blufflands Alliance provided. This participant explained, “you end up really helping one another be accountable both to your own goals and objectives as an organization and also to the mission of the Alliance.” These new sources of motivation and accountability can help participants carry out the pressing task of land conservation.

Finally, although not recognized by participants of other efforts, members of the Bay Area Open Space Council emphasized the benefits they have received, in terms of external support, from the staff of the Council. The fact that the staff was “doing the stuff we don’t have time to do” meant that participation in the Council increased their capacity in the following ways:

- access to technical expertise regarding model stewardship programs and model conservation easement enforcement programs;
- assistance staying up to date on conservation efforts in the region via advisories sent out by staff;
- access to informative maps and reports produced by Council staff;
- finally, the “policy issues, the stewardship issues, the legislative issues being addressed” by the staff brought “a whole other level of accomplishment” to members of the Council, according to one participant.

Other coalitions, without dedicated staff, were unable to enjoy these benefits as of yet.

GREATER LEARNING AND NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTICIPANTS

In addition to the workshops and presentations most groups host, invaluable learning opportunities are created as participants meet and interact. These opportunities have been especially valuable to newer directors. As one new participant explained, “my first meeting, everything went way over my head. Now I actually know what everybody is talking about! I have just learned so much. The opportunity has just been wonderful.” A Bay Area Open Space Council participant also commented on how valuable it was “to meet with all these folks with tremendous experience. I learn so much just by getting to

know various people.” This sentiment was also expressed by more experienced staff members; one veteran remarked that there was a “good learning curve for new and old. I’ve been in the field nine years and still learn something every time we get together.” One longer-term participant especially appreciated getting “input and response to projects and ideas that come forward. It gives you that extra boost, [knowing] that you have been through that initial review process. You know whether or not the [project] idea is good.”

Equally valuable has been the opportunity to network and build relationships. Members of the Bay Area Open Space Council especially appreciated this aspect of participation; one commented that one of the main benefits of participation was “the actual, working relationships that get built up with the other groups.” Another appreciated “being able to talk to one another in an informal setting, rather than having to do everything by the phone and being separated by our various offices. Knowing the person, seeing the face of the director...there is that personal connection.” The personal connections created by regional efforts were also highly valued by some of the smaller, more scattered organizations. As one Blufflands Alliance participant explained, “one of the real values of the Blufflands Alliance is having a place for very small organizations to get together so they weren’t so isolated.”

Connections with other participants were seen as especially valuable in groups with government representatives involved. By and large, having government partners at the table was seen as beneficial. One Bay Area Open Space Council participant explained, “it is really important. We all partner with them in our acquisitions, so they should be there at the table. You can’t do it without them.” Another Bay Area participant expressed a keen interest in the Council’s role in “keeping the vitality going between the government agencies and the nonprofit land trusts.” The North Quabbin Partnership, it seems, has been able to successfully play a role in keeping this relationship strong. Land trusts appreciated the government’s presence in the North Quabbin Partnership for two reasons. First, government partners “bring a lot of resources with them, including access to grant money, computer mapping, and mailing costs and labor.” Second, the presence of agency representatives during project discussions meant that they could learn more about Partnership projects, and thus could “be a better advocate” for them when the projects came up for funding approval or review down the road. A Michigan Dune

Alliance participant was also thankful for governmental presence as it related to funding possibilities. She was “grateful that they are there, because they have insight into where the money is going and what is going on. It’s been good having them involved.”

All in all, the learning and networking opportunities created by participation in the larger-scale initiatives were highly valued by interviewees.

INCREASED COORDINATION OF EFFORTS

Participation in collaborative efforts has allowed member land trusts to coordinate their land protection efforts. This can be seen most concretely through the dialogues that have occurred regarding service areas. The Northern Rockies Initiative provided a “forum for communicating about underserved areas,” according to one director, and allowed the trusts to identify gaps in service as well as areas of overlap. Similarly, the efforts of the Michigan Dune Alliance led to an identification of a lack of land trust activity along certain portions of the Lake Michigan shoreline. One participant explained that “when we looked at a map of Michigan we realized there were still big gaps, so together we decided we could probably cover the gaps if we built more capacity.”

Regular communication has also educated participants about the work of neighboring organizations. A participant in the North Quabbin Regional Landscape Partnership explained, “the whole reason for creating a partnership is to facilitate dialogue and cooperation among existing groups that are doing good work that can do better work if they talk once in a while.” By getting together to “air concerns and priorities and make sure everybody was aware of what we were doing, and vice versa,” organizations are able to see how their work fits together, and make changes if needed.

Participants were also able to refer queries from landowners to other organizations because, according to one participant, “you know about that other organization and their mission because you met them at the partnership.” In addition to these referrals, organizations can learn about, understand, and advocate for other people’s projects, according to one North Quabbin participant. This benefits all participants in the larger collaborative effort.

ADDITIONAL LAND PROTECTED

As a result of participation in collaborative efforts, trusts have been able to “pool resources and try to get more land protected,” according to one participant. Almost 12,000 acres of land have been protected either through acquisition or conservation easement by members of the Blufflands Alliance since 1998. Funding from the Bay Area Conservancy program has helped participating land trusts in the Open Space Council protect land. The North Quabbin partnership was able to work together to protect Tully Mountain and establish the Tully Mountain trail. This is a compelling reason for groups to participate, as one member commented, “we participate because we are interested in land conservation in this area...the idea is to protect land.”

CREATION OF A REGIONAL VOICE AND IDENTITY

One Bay Area Open Space Council participant explained that they decided to join “really to contribute to the regional voice of the Open Space Council...we support the cause of acquiring public open space, and the Council is out there moving that agenda forward.” By providing a regional voice for land conservation in the Bay Area, the Council was able to, according to another participant, increase “collective momentum of all of us working together in support of legislation and area wide efforts.” Another Bay Area participant expressed feelings that participation in the larger effort strengthened the overall case for land preservation in the area, given the fact that participation created “strength in numbers.” The Council’s efforts have resulted, among other things, in the passage of the aforementioned \$55 million park and open space bond.

On a related note, a North Quabbin participant felt that “the Partnership has helped to establish an identity for the North Quabbin area.” This identity has helped to raise the profile of the area in the eyes of the state Office of Environmental Affairs, which has resulted in increased funding for the area, as described earlier.

Another benefit of becoming part of a regional group has been the shared enthusiasm generated. Participants often expressed appreciation for the new energy participation in the larger group provided. One participant in the Blufflands Alliance expressed his gratitude for the “camaraderie” of his group; another appreciated the

feeling of “pulling together for the common good.” A Northern Rockies participant elaborated:

I think the process has been good for all of us, I really do. Again, building relationships, and it’s been neat to work together. I think it’s exciting, the momentum, when you get everyone together...to see what you are doing, how it does all fit into a bigger scale. No matter what you are doing, no matter what you call it, it gives you a lot more enthusiasm and positive feedback for your work. You are really making a difference, and that’s been as good as anything.

The enthusiasm generated by the group can then be carried back to each participating trust and shared yet again, benefiting land conservation all around.

ABILITY TO WORK AT A LANDSCAPE SCALE

Participants in all five case studies expressed appreciation for the fact that participation allowed them to work on a landscape scale. One participant in the North Quabbin Regional Landscape Partnership joined because their organization was “interested in a broader landscape scale vision for this area;” another was concerned about working to “help preserve the regional context, the regional setting of our protected properties.”

Similarly, the Bay Area Open Space Council allows groups in the region to begin working across boundaries through their “landscape initiatives...larger open space landscapes that cross different counties, with a number of different agencies and non profits [involved].” These efforts have allowed the individual organizations involved to coordinate their efforts for the benefit of a larger ecosystem.

This desire to work at a larger scale has extended beyond some of the participating organizations to their members. According to one Blufflands participant,

A question I always get is, do you work in Minnesota too? And it’s great to be able to say no, I don’t, but [the Alliance has] someone in Minnesota. People love that. I think people who are interested in the environment have learned a lot in recent years about the importance of landscapes, of not thinking along political boundaries.

Other efforts identified specific ecological needs for their larger-scale efforts. One Northern Rockies director was concerned about the area’s wildlife, and explained

that “going from local to regional scale, we have to do that. We just have to, these animals are moving up and down.” Participation in the Initiative has allowed her organization to begin to act on a larger scale. Similarly, a participant in the Michigan Dune Alliance commented that “in Michigan, we have great lakes, but we don’t have many mountains. We *do* have the largest freshwater dune system in the world, which needs special attention and special focus.” Participation in the Dune Alliance provides that ecosystem-scale focus.