

CHAPTER 6: CHALLENGES OF COLLABORATION

Despite the numerous benefits of participation discussed above, individual trusts were frustrated by a number of challenges facing their respective collaborative efforts. Finding resources to keep the group afloat, such as time, funding, and energy, as well as distributing them, was one area of critical concern. Second, finding a successful organizational structure for the effort, given the diversity of organizations and people present, was another important area of consideration. Third, cementing a group vision, one that did not pull participating organizations away from their original missions, was also key (Table 6). (Again, it must be noted that the order in which these findings are presented does not reflect any hierarchy of importance or frequency of discussion.)

<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Challenges of Collaboration</u></p> <p><u>Resources</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Maintenance of group momentum• Members’ difficulties finding time• Negative reactions of members’ constituents• Maintaining access to additional funding• Increased competition between groups• Delayed accomplishments <p><u>Organizational Structure</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Difficulty working with a diverse set of organizations• Duplication of efforts• Creating an effective structure• Personalities <p><u>Vision</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack of a shared vision• Dilemma of mission drift
--

Table 6: Challenges of Collaboration

RESOURCES

Maintenance of group momentum

Concerns were raised repeatedly regarding maintenance of momentum. “The momentum ebbs and flows a little bit depending on what’s going on...” commented one North Quabbin participant. A Northern Rockies participant expressed a “worry about momentum...you know, I haven’t really thought about it since the last meeting. You go back and get into your world...I don’t even have time to think about it.” This detachment makes it difficult for groups to get things done.

The source of these difficulties can be traced, in part, to the problem of frequent staff turnover. “Nonprofits are so transitional, at least half of the people showing up to meetings are new, so you get a momentum going and then boom, an executive director leaves” lamented one director. When this happens, relationships between organizations must be established all over again, slowing the overall forward progress of the group.

Members’ difficulties finding time

The degree of difficulty noted regarding finding the time to participate varied considerably from person to person. One Dune Alliance member felt it was the only obstacle to his participation, commenting that “the only challenge, really, is taking time out for really busy staff to spend a whole day traveling to and attending a three hour meeting.” One Bay Area participant also felt that the time required was “the biggest downside. If you want to participate fully in it, it takes a lot of staff time to go to all the meetings. It’s a far drive and it pretty much kills the day.” As a result, this participant noted, “we don’t attend meetings that often.”

However, another Bay Area Open Space Council member felt that participation has “not required an enormous amount of time.” The “half day meeting once a month” was also not viewed as a “huge time commitment” by another Bay Area participant, who attended both the executive and general meetings. Similarly, a Blufflands participant, who figured “we meet two days every quarter and then I spend a half day doing the report” said it was really a “small percent” of staff time. Thus, this challenge seemed to depend, primarily, on individual perception.

Negative reactions of members’ constituents

Fears of negative reactions from land trust constituents stemmed from two primary sources: involvement with government partners and a potential association with advocacy organizations working on similar issues. Fears of negative member reactions caused hesitancy among some participants, impeding the progress of the larger group.

The challenges created by mixing public and private entities, especially in the field of land conservation, are well known. As described by Jean Hocker, former president of the Land Trust Alliance, “there is a small but increasingly vocal group of

people who even question our constitutional right to protect land, who oppose land conservation in the name of ‘preserving private property rights.’ They claim we are ‘locking up the land’ and cry ‘conspiracy’ whenever there is a partnership between a land trust and a public agency” (Martens and Peterson, 1992, p. 5). These troubles were echoed by one Blufflands participant, who felt that “there are certain benefits to having only private partners...there are certain groups in our region that are very suspicious of the government.” This problem was particularly acute for the Northern Rockies trusts, where “the idea of being part of a larger effort scares some.” The “suspicious, cautious, conservative” climate present in many of these trusts’ service areas means that participation in a larger effort “is not going to be appealing to everybody, and it’s going to be very unappealing to some.” Organizations working in areas where these interests are vocal will have to continually strive to strike a balance, quieting fears of government-led conspiracy while devoting significant attention to protecting land.

The concern over negative member reactions due to alignment with an advocacy organization working in the same area was really only expressed by members of the Northern Rockies Initiative. Specifically, this worry stemmed from the undefined relationship between the Northern Rockies effort and another landscape-scale initiative operating in the same geographic area, the Yellowstone-to-Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y). Y2Y is typically perceived as an advocacy organization, while land trusts have, on the whole, made a concerted effort not to be involved in controversial issues. “We can get in a lot of doors by not being an advocacy group,” explained one land trust employee. “If we become one of those in the eyes of the public, then I might have to get an unlisted number...right now everybody likes us.”

This hesitancy towards alignment with advocacy groups can be linked to the negative reactions to Y2Y voiced by some land trust constituents. Private landowners in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming often hold firm beliefs in private property rights, leading one interviewee to conclude that, in their area, “an individual landowner would probably be threatened to find out he is part of a large wildlife corridor.” Another key constituency, the ranching community, also has felt threatened by Y2Y, given its focus on grizzly bears and wolves, potential predators of cattle and sheep.

Some groups, however, have found ways around these two dilemmas. Membership disapproval due to government participation has been minimized by the Dune Alliance by keeping the government participants as “silent partners and sources of information, not active land protection agencies.” As such, one participating trust noted that:

I know there was a lot of sensitivity in our part of the world...but I think...people know pretty well, we cooperate with government, but we are certainly not influenced as an organization, they know that, so I don't think there is any concern whatsoever that we are involved.

Solving the dilemma of an association with an advocacy group has thus far been handled on an individual basis. Although there was general acknowledgement that some of the goals of the advocacy effort may overlap with the goals of the land trusts, it has also been recognized that some may not. As such, each trust has decided how it will (or will not) be related.

Maintaining access to additional funding

Although the access to increased funding was cited widely as a benefit to participation, the challenge of maintaining these new levels of support was also frequently discussed. One participant admitted that the “biggest challenge is always going to be money.” Another acknowledged, “we need to find some other funding to replace [the existing foundation] in the future.” This desire to find additional funding was also expressed, surprisingly, by a participant in the Bay Area Open Space Council, which is funded in good part by participants. According to this member, a “challenge for the Council in the future, as its goals and programs grow, is whether its basic staff and administration can continue to be supported by its membership.” Some concerns were also raised regarding the support of individual donors. A participant in the Blufflands Alliance felt there was “opposition that would revolve around the desire to focus our efforts on other priorities,” and worried that individual donor support could wane as a result. Similarly, a North Quabbin Regional Landscape Partnership member also noted “there's not universal support for our involvement in the partnership.” If donors feel their contributions are being misdirected, it is unlikely they will continue their support.

Increased competition between groups

Currently, geographic differences and thematic differences have made competition between most participating groups minimal to non-existent. In the Northern Rockies Initiative, however, concerns were expressed that competition “could be a problem if real money shows up.” When future funding is distributed, according to one director, it is “important that there is not a competitive feeling and some trusts don’t feel left out.” Given the aforementioned foundation-based interest in collaboration, one of the smaller trusts feared that smaller organizations would be enlisted as collaborators, but funding would still go to the larger, more established trusts. Additionally, concerns were raised over deciding who, in a multiple-trust effort, would get to hold the final easement (and add acres to their total amount of land protected).

Delayed Accomplishments

Although the fundamental purpose of all participating organizations is to protect land, some expressed frustration that their participation in the collaborative effort was not necessarily augmenting this function. One participant noted that “people have given us capacity to do plans, to do studies, to do inventory, to identify long term goals....I hope that it ends up in acquiring property and getting property protected.” Many factors could be creating this dilemma: perhaps more resources, such as time, energy, and funding, are required to make additional land protection happen; perhaps the structure of the group is hindering forward progress; or perhaps the group is not entirely clear on which properties it is trying to protect.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

As with any new organization, participants in new regional initiatives have struggled to define how their group will operate and function. These dilemmas have centered around four primary areas: the difficulty of working with the diversity of organizations present, the fear of a duplication of efforts, the challenge of creating an effective structure, and difficulties related to participating personalities.

Difficulty working with a diverse set of organizations

A frequently mentioned challenge centered on working with the diversity of organizations present. Although the networking and learning opportunities provided by other members was frequently mentioned as a benefit, many groups struggled with the fact that “we all kind of have different levels of experience.” One newer participant in one effort worried, “people must think, my God, what are they asking?” According to a Blufflands participant, the different backgrounds, thematic foci, and geographic areas of interest also making working together “quite challenging for everybody.” Along similar lines, one Dune Alliance participant explained that:

The main challenge for all of us is that we are coming from different places. Some conservancies are fully staffed, and some are just getting on their feet, so the discrepancies between resources and abilities between the groups [is] something we all would need to be aware of.

Some efforts struggled less with the diversity of private organizations present and focused instead of dealing with the challenges of government participation. Working with government partners caused concern on two fronts: fears of negative reactions from members, as described above, and a fear of a slower pace of accomplishment. Working with public entities can slow group progress at times due to the red tape that often accompanies government actions. According to one Bay Area participant, “working with government agencies is a pain in the neck from start to finish. They are much more bureaucratic, and are not as able to move as nimbly as a land trust.” Even more distressing, “the money always comes with strings attached.” Thus, this participant felt “there are always challenges with government entities.” However, a North Quabbin participant, after lamenting the slow pace of government action, admitted that “in this case they have been pushing quite hard to do a lot of projects quite rapidly...the Secretary of Environmental Affairs has really pushed to have it done.” Thus, it is perhaps possible to have government partners involved with minimal distressing consequences.

Duplication of effort

On the whole, very few other large-scale efforts were identified as potentially duplicating the work of the collaborative case studies. Some participants, however, did

identify this topic as a possible area of minor concern. In the Bay Area, one participant noted some overlap with the Bay Area Business Council, which is focused on the issue of sprawl. Another Open Space Council participant pondered that “there might be some perceived overlap between the Council and the Land Trust Alliance,” but felt that the two organizations were basically complementary.

Only a North Quabbin Partnership member noticed some overlap with more ecologically-based initiatives, citing the state’s new watershed basin planning initiative as an “overlapping effort.” However, this participant felt that, overall, the watershed level efforts really “supplement our work.” Similarly, one Blufflands participant felt that, in general, “there are far too many duplicative conservation organizations,” noting that “it’s the most incredible fractionalization I have ever seen in my life.” Nevertheless, this participant supported the Alliance wholeheartedly.

Creating an effective structure

Challenges regarding the structure of the group centered on two categories: operating policies and procedures and issues concerning the group’s meetings. One Blufflands participant, concerned over cost allocation procedures, commented that “I feel like we should set some basic rules. You have to have oversight of yourselves. I’m not for being bureaucratic but I am for fairness.” Another participant expressed similar worries concerning “allowing there to be enough flexibility within the organization that it is not a bureaucracy, but on the other hand enough structure so that we are able to count on grant checks and allocation of funds and other things in a timely manner.” Policies and procedures regarding funding distribution, perhaps, need to be clarified.

On a different note, a Bay Area Open Space Council participant expressed concern over the lack of an established conflict resolution mechanism. When “talking of controversy, there was another issue that came up,” and the way it was handled upset some members. Fortunately, “in a friendly way, we are able to resolve these things,” but no formal procedure was in place.

A third procedural concern was raised regarding the endorsement process of the North Quabbin effort. The procedure for approving projects “is relatively new, and [the group] is still working out the logistics,” according to one participant. When this

participant brought a project before the group for review and approval, “it was not clear what the process was, so when we asked for endorsement somebody said, well, is this how we endorse it?” This caused frustration, and a desire for clarification of the group’s policies and procedures.

Regarding meetings, the main concerns centered upon frequency and chairmanship. “I think the Dune Alliance could meet less frequently, but still get a lot done,” commented one participant. Other groups raised similar concerns, but their comments centered more directly on individual meeting time length. Second, the Blufflands Alliance meetings are often chaired by a participating member, which also raised concerns. One participant remarked, “I do think there are times when it is awkward to have a participant running the meetings.”

Personalities

When asked to identify the most significant challenge to working with their collaborative effort, one participant remarked that “without a doubt, the biggest challenge is working with those personalities.” This was echoed by another participant, who felt that “part of it [the challenge of working together], as always when working with groups, is personalities.”

A corollary to the above dilemma (of having certain personalities in the room) is the challenge of *not* having certain personalities in the room. One participant identified a “leadership void” in his effort, lamenting the fact that “no one was stepping up and drawing group forward...the group has the potential to do some really dynamic stuff, but they need someone with charisma to step up.” Another member of a different effort also proclaimed, “I think it suffers from a lack of leadership.” On a broader scale, another participant expressed frustration that “one of the challenges has been getting involvement from some of the groups...some of the agencies haven’t recognized the benefits to them of working with us.” Perhaps recruitment of new members and personalities could resolve some of these difficulties.

VISION

Even if the necessary resources are in place, little will be achieved by a collaborative initiative without a clear direction and focus. Participants identified the lack of a shared vision as a major challenge to the forward progress of some efforts. Individual members also struggled with the dilemma of “mission drift.” Was participation causing them to “drift” away from their original mission, pulling them away from their central purpose and goals?

Lack of a shared vision

The maintenance of a clear group focus was cited by some as a major challenge. This is not surprising given the diversity of organizations participating, as discussed above. As an example, one member of the Dune Alliance felt “there has not been a 100% consensus of what activities we should undertake.” This dilemma centered upon the confusion over the ecological focus of the group. Was the Dune Alliance going to focus on sand dunes? Or freshwater aquatic sites, as indicated by the first grant they received?

Similarly, the Northern Rockies group continues to define its objectives and goals. Given the large number of potential projects and limited resources of the group, one director felt strongly that “we have to set priorities,” perhaps using scientific or social criteria (such as imminent development), to designate the most important projects. However, another director felt that “if the goal is to get everyone to buy into a single map and a single set of priorities, it’s not going to happen.” Given the “different mission, priorities, land, landowners, and board of governors” of each trust, coming together to define the most important projects in the region was felt to be a nearly impossible task.

One Blufflands participant identified the “lack of a shared vision, for either a conservation vision for the blufflands or a shared vision of what the Alliance should be doing” as the most significant challenge facing the group. It was explained that since “we don’t share a vision, there isn’t really a way to prioritize projects.” This was felt to be impeding the immediate progress of the group, in terms of distributing funding, as well as stalling the long-term advancement of attracting additional funding. Another

participant also felt that the group was somewhat stalled: “we have shifted from a focus on getting the groups up and running to thinking okay, how do we get more sophisticated and think about these big issues?”

Last but not least, participants in the North Quabbin effort also expressed concern over the need to “find a common agenda that would make it worthwhile for everybody to make the time to meet.” Despite the fact that a mission statement is in place, “agreeing on priorities is a subject that takes energy,” one participant observed. This challenge has yet to be fully resolved.

Dilemma of mission drift

Potentially even more challenging than defining a vision for the group is to then stick with it. According to one Dune Alliance participant, the most significant challenge facing the collaboration is “not changing our mission or our goals to qualify for money.” This participant continued, “we started out concentrating on dunes and dune ecosystems. When the money came forward that was aquatic,” the group had to ask if, by accepting it, “were we changing our mission to qualify for money?” Another Dune Alliance participant expressed the worry that the current sites the Alliance is focused on “don’t have much to do with dunes.” This shift from the group’s original focus has two likely sources: one, the initial target sites were not identified by the participating trusts, but rather through The Nature Conservancy’s ecoregional planning process. (However, most participating trusts felt that their common emphasis on natural area preservation meant that “taking on TNC’s recommendations isn’t a problem.”) Second, the source of the new focus on freshwater aquatic sites could perhaps be due to the fact that, as one participant described, “if you are dependent on one funder, you are in the pocket of that funder, and their mission has to become yours.” Perhaps the group will be able to return more directly to its original focus as it diversifies its financial support over time.

In addition to the challenge of setting a vision and priorities as a group, each participating trust must then make sure that this vision supports their individual missions and goals. In the case of the Dune Alliance, “I think each organization has pretty much asked itself, is this off mission for us, or does this really fit in with what we want to do overall?” Participants in other efforts answered this question as follows:

- A North Quabbin participant commented that “our board and members would not want to see us putting too much time and effort into a partnership that didn’t directly further the mission of the organization, so we are always careful not to spend too much time in administrative and support roles for things that aren’t furthering our goals.”
- One Northern Rockies trust also decided that individual missions come first: “we would work on a project within [the collaboration] if, first of all, it fit our mission.” Similarly, another trust concluded, “we’re not changing our mission, direction, or focus. If ours overlaps with theirs, that’s fine.”
- One Blufflands participant felt likewise, and commented, “frankly, we wouldn’t belong if we had to change our mission.”

One obstacle discussed by La Piana in his investigation of strategic restructuring of nonprofits centered on participants’ fear of losing control. “Mergers, consolidations, and other forms of strategic restructuring can be perceived as threats to organizational and individual autonomy,” he noted (La Piana, 1997, p. 10). “They require nonprofit leaders to yield some of their autonomy, to make themselves vulnerable, and to open their organizational cultures to outside influences” (La Piana, 1997, p.3). These fears have been made manifest by participating organizations while discussing mission drift. Each trust, understandably, holds tightly to their individual goals and aims. It is possible that these fears are rooted in a fear of change. As Gray explains, “people resist change for several reasons: they do not like the uncertainty associated with change; they feel insecure or afraid of expected consequences of the change; they have an investment in the status quo, or they do not understand or agree with the consequences of the proposed changes” (Gray, 1989, p. 247). Although reasonable, these frames of mind could impede the forward progress of the group.

Has the fear of mission drift led to non-participation? In some cases, yes; in most cases, no. One Dune Alliance participant felt that their “situation is a little different than some of the others,” and chose not to participate in this first early project phase. In a second example, an original founding member of the Blufflands Alliance, the Wisconsin-based Philadelphia Community Farms, “felt that land protection was diluting its original

mission” (Engstrom, 2000) and left the Alliance. Tensions also apparently rose when the North Quabbin Regional Landscape Partnership dabbled in community development, rather than land protection, but these issues have since been resolved.

Fortunately for most groups, the mission drift dilemma has not been a visible problem. The Bay Area Open Space Council interviewees resoundingly proclaimed that their participation supported their mission--“absolutely,” according to one member--and that “drift” was a “non-issue.” Another commented, “I don’t feel like we have been diluted in the least,” while another said that participation had in fact “enhanced our ability to achieve our mission.” This sentiment was also expressed by a Blufflands Alliance member, who felt that participation was “flatly in the complimentary area,” and in fact was “critical” to advancing the goals of that particular organization.