

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to addressing the questions posed at the beginning of this study, this section discusses three unexpected results. Additionally, general conclusions are drawn as to the structure and function of landscape-scale collaborative initiatives. Recommendations for group capacity building, as well as for individual land trusts considering participation in landscape-scale conservation initiatives, follow.

CONCLUSIONS

Summary of findings

At the outset, this study posed the following questions:

- Why are land trusts joining together to create large-scale, regional initiatives?
- What challenges are they facing in these efforts?
- Do the benefits of working regionally outweigh the costs?
- Which structural elements of each cooperative effort would participants keep in the future, and which would they change?

All in all, the primary sentiment expressed by participants was that the benefits of participation in landscape scale collaborative initiatives outweighed the challenges and costs. The access to additional funding, the learning and networking opportunities created, and the resulting increased organizational capacity were unanimously praised by participants, as described in Chapter Four. The support for current work that participation provided was widely appreciated, as was the large-scale context in which to place this existing work.

These benefits provided the primary rationale for participation for the individual land trusts. Also evident, however, were hints at the persuasive influence of foundations. By encouraging grantees to “partner partner partner,” according to one participant,

foundations are giving clear signals regarding the types of efforts that are likely to receive funding, thereby encouraging cooperative efforts to form. Second, the growing awareness of the fields of landscape ecology and conservation biology was also evident as a rationale for participation. Participants expressed an interest in taking a larger, more integrated ecological view in their preservation efforts; for example, one participant expressed a hope that joining the collaborative initiative would “help preserve the regional context, the regional setting of our protected properties.” Communication with neighboring groups might allow exactly that.

In contrast to the widespread praise for the benefits received, most challenges were raised either by few participants or simply as areas for discussion and improvement. Only one organization was concerned enough over a challenge--the perceived lack of a shared vision--that it questioned the value of its participation. However, it was not considering dropping out of the group any time soon. Although concerns over the time, energy, and money needed to keep these efforts afloat were more widespread, this is expected with any new or additional venture, especially among non-profit organizations.

Structurally, the informal nature of many of the groups was appreciated, as was the presence of talented and motivated individuals. Although emphasized less often, a shared sense of place, the local origins of the group, a positive external environment, sense of equality between participants, and a long time frame for operation also were found to contribute to the success of the collaborative efforts. Nevertheless, suggestions for change were made, primarily focused on areas where more formal structures could be beneficial, as well as regarding the need to locate additional sources of funding. Many areas for potential expansion were also noted, from increased outreach efforts to extending the ecological scale of activities. In total, groups are functioning well, with primarily only minor areas of improvement suggested.

All in all, the fact that the benefits of participation outweighed the costs means that, despite their local, grassroots origins, joining together to form landscape-scale initiatives is a rational, beneficial decision for nonprofit land trusts.

Unexpected results

Three unexpected results surfaced from this investigation:

- The minimal discussion of threats of development and/or the need for land conservation as primary rationales for participation;
- The low amount of concern shown by participants over issues of turf;
- The successful mixing of public and private entities.

In very simple terms, many land trusts were formed to “save land from sprawl.” If a stereotypical land trust could be said to exist, it was formed when local citizens, concerned by the land use changes occurring around them, organized a land conservation organization to protect special places from inappropriate development. As such, one would think that larger land trust collaborations would form for similar fundamental reasons. However, when asked, “why did your group join the collaborative effort?,” very few organizations directly responded, “to save land.” Although many did mention land preservation directly at some point later in the interview, the *immediate* answers focused more often on indirect benefits, such as learning and networking. Indeed, land preservation was cited as a benefit, challenge, and area for future change; it was not, however, given as an immediate rationale for participation.

These results present an interesting contrast to responses given in Labich’s study of land conservation partnerships in Massachusetts. Labich found “the top four foundations for the case studies’ landscape planning partnerships formation in the mid-to-late 1990’s were: one, development/sprawl had become the number one environmental problem...” (Labich, 1999, p. 114). Why didn’t the interviewees in this study mention the threats they were facing, or their bottom-line interest (saving land) right away? Obviously they are aware of and addressing both issues, but did not focus their comments in these areas.

Although intriguing, this result is most likely due to the methodology employed. By expressing familiarity with the work of land trusts, the interviewer perhaps encouraged participants to bypass the fundamental issues and discuss more secondary topics. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to know what threats these groups feel they are confronting. What do they think would happen if they were not in existence? What

negative consequences would result? Does the scale of the solution match the scale of the problem?

Second, it was interesting to note how few participants mentioned confronting issues of territory, or “turf.” All of the case studies have potentially overlapping (if not actually overlapping) trusts, but only two mentioned confronting issues of geographic turf. In both cases, participation in the larger collaborative effort has helped resolve these difficulties. In one effort, directors of overlapping trusts were able to meet and agree upon mutually exclusive service areas. Perhaps dealing in a concrete commodity such as land makes these issues cleaner to resolve; lines can be drawn on a map clarifying exactly who is going to work where. Directors in another effort, where such lines had yet to be drawn, expressed optimism that participation in the collaborative effort would help resolve these dilemmas. Operating under the watchful eyes of outside interests, such as sponsoring foundations, can help create internal unity, as one participant explained: “the group will help with any competition, because there is someone from the outside saying ‘work together.’”

Even if lines are drawn, potential for conflict still exists. Participants may have to decide, for instance, which organization is going to work on that exciting project right on the border between two trusts’ service areas. Again, cooperative sentiments were frequently expressed. “We haven’t run into any turf problems,” one Bay Area director explained. “Where there is overlap, we tend to be fairly collegial and consult with our overlapping groups, and I’ve found everyone tries to take the approach of being really cooperative.” Checking in with the fundamental mission of each participating organization--seeing land conserved--seems to help issues of turf diminish in importance. A North Quabbin participant explained their approach to issues of turf in the following way:

There are always issues and things talk about, but the idea is to protect land, so let’s figure out how to make the process fit the best. The politics are irrelevant when you want to protect the land, so you put those things aside. If the landowner is going to work best with “x” organization, then do that, and if they are going to work best with “y,” then do that.

Additionally, the amount of land that could potentially be conserved far outstrips any single group’s capacity. As one participant explained, “there is more than enough

land conservation to go around, you couldn't do it all if you wanted to." Another commented, "there is probably 10, 50 times the work that needs to be done than there are the people and resources available to do it...we haven't been in conflict over that, we refer people and projects back and forth."

Another area of potential competition concerns the distribution of money, as noted in Chapter Six: Challenges of Participation. How will trusts deal with the potentially unequal distribution of financial resources? When asked if they would continue to participate if no funding ever reached their group, participants responded as follows:

- "This concept is of interest to our land trust, and if we don't get dollars that's fine. Maybe another land trust nearby will get it, the point is that it's being conserved."
- "If we don't get any money that's fine, we'll be happy that it went to the next trust...there's still conservation in our region. Our animals might get over there someday."
- "If you really altruistically start to think about it, it doesn't matter *where* ultimately the land gets saved. I don't really care as long as the land gets saved."

Given the spirit of cooperation expressed above, it seems unlikely that competition between groups could ever get too out of hand.

The third interesting results topic centered upon the absence of certain dilemmas often raised regarding working with public partners. For one, the case studies with government partners involved seem to have, thus far, avoided dilemmas centered upon power differentials. Other reviews of collaborative efforts have "identified the power differential between government and not-for-profit organizations as the heart of the difficulty. Because not-for-profits are more dependent upon government than government is upon them, conflict is inevitable" (Griffith, 2001, p. 30). None of the case study participants interviewed expressed feelings of dependence; a fortunate balance seems to have been found.

Along similar lines, catastrophe has struck other efforts due to a public-private culture clash. As Gray notes, "blending the cultures of public and private sector institutions in public-private partnerships has also been an obstacle to successful

implementation” (Gray, 1989, p. 93). One could speculate that this has been avoided due to the fact that the efforts investigated are all primarily land-trust led. The pace, tone, and structure--potential “clash” points--more closely resemble the needs of the private sector, and thus this issue was not raised. This could, however, be upsetting the public sector participants involved, but those issues were not investigated by this study.

Finally, other public-private partnerships have had to deal with nonprofit partners’ fears that the presence of government members will dilute their ability to fundraise. As Myers explains, “some members of private groups have feared that accepting public funds would adversely affect an organization’s ability to raise money privately because donors would think that their funds were no longer needed” (Myers, 1993, p. 291). Neither the groups in Myers’ study or groups interviewed here expressed this fear, but it could become an issue in the future.

Lessons learned regarding landscape-scale collaborative initiatives

As these initial, early efforts continue to find their way, other regional initiatives may be forming in other areas of the country. What lessons can be learned from these pioneers?

Structurally, a careful balance must be found. An informal organizational structure encourages networking and candor, especially when government participants are involved, but when accountability is required (when funding is distributed, for instance), a more formal structure is desirable. Having some ground rules and guidelines established from the start also helps in the event of a conflict, as a mechanism for its resolution will be in place. Periodic self-evaluation is also beneficial.

The size of the group can vary enormously according to the desires of participants, from the six land trusts of the Blufflands Alliance to the 150+ organizations of the Bay Area Open Space Council. However, as group size increases, individual participation can begin to decrease. More than one Bay Area interviewee was not entirely clear on what the organization was currently doing, and had missed recent meetings. It is much harder to have an absence go unnoticed in a smaller group. The possibility exists that the presence of staff in the larger efforts may give participants a sense of freedom from individual responsibility for the progress of the group. One Bay Area participant

commented that he doesn't "spend a lot of time thinking about the future of the council." He later commended the staff on their "vision and leadership;" although these two comments were not explicitly linked, the possibility that they are raises interesting issues in terms of the long-term viability of the group. If members don't take ownership or feel involved, will they stick around?

The composition of the group also can vary. For one, should government partners be involved? Although the support expressed for government involvement was surprising in general, the three case studies with government participants all seem to have figured out how to maximize the benefits and minimize the challenges, either by keeping the structure informal or by having government participants present as information sources only. Neither the Blufflands Alliance or the Northern Rockies Initiative, both multi-state efforts, had government partners involved; most likely the group size would get too unwieldy. Government participation also seemed to increase with proximity to urban areas, with the Bay Area Council highest in participation and the Northern Rockies group lowest.

Group composition can also vary regarding land trust participants. Should the group consist of only older, more established trusts, or include newer trusts as well? Although all of the case study efforts embraced organizations in all phases of institutional development, this diversity did present challenges. In the case of the Blufflands Alliance, keeping some of the larger organizations (who may be less interested in educational benefits and could be there out of a sense of obligation or responsibility) involved required significant financial incentives. One potential Dune Alliance member decided to only peripherally participate until additional funding, for projects of interest to them, became available. Older groups who did participate fully, on the other hand, seemed to buy in to the theory that the most important thing to do right away was to "raise all boats," i.e. to build the capacity of all the organizations in the region first, and then to go after the larger dollars. This seems to be the best approach for building strong, long-term conservation capacity in the region as a whole.

In terms of projects, new groups could emphasize land protection and outreach; land protection being the ultimate goal of participating organizations and outreach a critical component of a successful land protection program. Some groups may need to

focus more on creating a supportive political and social environment for both land protection and collaboration, while others may simply need to reach potential land donors. In the first case, emphasizing the local origins of the efforts may help, as could the development and communication of a common “sense of place.” Why does each landscape matter to the people in the region? What makes it unique? Additionally, what makes each group’s focus unique? Why can’t national sprawl groups address the issues participants are addressing? What unique challenges require a Mississippi Blufflands Alliance, and a Michigan Dune Alliance, to form?

Second, why does the work need to be done collaboratively? Examining the interdependence of the groups involved may help answer that question. According to Griffith, “some problems simply cannot be solved by one organization alone. The more complex the problem and the more the problem domain is marked by uncertainty and interdependence, the more likely it is that a collaborative solution may offer the best chance of a successful solution” (Griffith, 2001, p. 14). Along similar lines, Gray notes, “an important ingredient of collaboration is interdependence among the stakeholders. Initially, the extent of interdependence may not be fully appreciated by all the parties” (Gray, 1989, p. 11). If participating trusts line up their service areas, and no overlaps or gaps exist, it could seem like the problem of land conservation in the region could be solved by each group acting independently. For instance, some interviewees admitted that projects that they listed as activities done under the banner of their collaborative effort would have been done independently anyhow. Where, then, does interdependence lie? Will these groups hold together over time?

Finally, groups should consider a focus on achieving larger-scale land protection. One method of providing direction for landscape-scale conservation work is to create a conservation plan. Only one region-wide, proactive conservation plan was obtained from case study participants, although initial elements were occasionally in place in others. If a conservation plan can be put together through a resource inventory and needs assessment, perhaps using a Geographic Information System (GIS), followed by a criteria selection and prioritization process, many groups are headed in the right direction. For instance, the Northern Rockies Initiative has begun mapping the region using GIS. The Blufflands Alliance has produced collaborative work plans and reports, and the Michigan

Dune Alliance has selected 14 priority sites. However, only the Bay Area Open Space Council appears to have put all of the pieces together. The “Regional Needs Briefing Book,” prepared by the Council in 1999, outlines protected lands, proposed trails, and areas for increased acquisition/protection efforts across the nine county region (Bay Area Open Space Council, 1999a). Without such a plan, can integrated, landscape-scale conservation still result? Will overall ecosystem structure and function of the Michigan Dunes, or the Northern Rockies, be maintained? Perhaps the individual land conservation efforts of the trusts involved will cumulatively sum to this result, but it seems as though additional coordination and planning would make this result more likely.

Finally, other successful efforts have taken time to learn from each other. According to Wondolleck and Yaffee, success “simply takes seeking ideas, advice, or models from others who have confronted and grappled with a similar issue or situation” (Wondolleck and Yaffee, 2000, p. 202). Perhaps a representative from the Blufflands Alliance could come to a Northern Rockies meeting, for instance, and offer ideas from their experience to help the newer group progress.

Given the wealth of knowledge that exists in participants of these current efforts, new groups should have ample resources to get started. If and when more landscape scale collaborative initiatives form, it will be interesting to see how these groups interact. Will relationships be primarily competitive, as limited financial resources are commonly sought? Or will even larger-scale conservation result?

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for group capacity building

As described earlier, foundations and the Land Trust Alliance have been sources of encouragement and support for collaborative efforts. What could these organizations do to help get a new regional collaborative effort off the ground? What types of assistance might be beneficial to keep group efforts afloat and achieving on-the-ground results?

Great potential exists for the formation of additional landscape-scale collaborative efforts, from the temperate rainforest ecosystem of the Pacific Northwest, to the Hill

Country of Texas, to the barrier islands of the Southeast coast, just to name a few. Prior to launching an initiative, however, the focal ecosystem must be identified. The boundaries of the ecosystem may be known intuitively, or may readily available through a large-scale conservation mapping project such as The Nature Conservancy's ecoregional planning process. If not, a critical first step may be to support a general ecological and cartographical inquiry into the landscape under question.

Second, a potential instigator (or small, core group of instigators) for the new group effort must be located. These people might be from a Land Trust Alliance regional office, a land trust, a related outside organization (including government agencies), or from an interested foundation. Once these conveners are identified, support for a gathering of all the land trusts operating in the identified ecosystem would be beneficial. Provision of meeting space, a designated facilitator, and reimbursement for travel expenses will encourage initial participation.

If interest is expressed among the land trusts present, a commitment to continue funding the effort over multiple years would be ideal. Building successful collaborative efforts takes time; it is unlikely the necessary relationships will form and trust will be established with a one-shot deal. If sufficient financial support is not readily available from a single foundation, assistance in locating additional resources will help keep the group afloat.

Subsequently, the group will need to begin to identify how it will function. What general operating format will it utilize to make decisions? Who should participate? How will lines of communication be established and maintained? Assistance in establishing an operating structure could come from two key sources. Early on, it might be helpful to bring in representatives from established efforts to describe how their group operates. What kinds of questions did the Blufflands Alliance, or the Bay Area Open Space Council, confront in their first year, and how did they answer them? Second, financial support for a coordinator, who could take the lead in helping the group navigate the process of institutionalizing, could be beneficial. (This addition would, of course, require the backing of the groups involved.) Having a coordinator could also help ease the dilemma of the limited time commitments possible on the part of participants (who all

have full time jobs already), as well as difficulties surrounding the maintenance of momentum. A designated taskmaster can do wonders for group progress.

Once a basic structure is in place, resources to carry out a conservation planning process, on a group scale, would be beneficial. What important areas will the group focus on for conservation? As it is impossible to ‘do everything at once,’ which resources will be targeted for preservation at the outset, and which may have to wait? A large-scale planning process may be difficult to carry out if individual participants have not carried out strategic planning or conservation planning processes internally; funding for these efforts could be beneficial as well.

Finally, financial assistance will be required to produce tangible results. Land conservation in any shape or form (donated or purchased conservation easements or properties held in fee simple ownership, for instance) costs money, both for initial project costs and for long-term stewardship. Education, landowner outreach, and establishing a revolving loan fund or collective easement defense pool all require financial resources as well.

Recommendations for individual land trusts

If an individual land trust was thinking about participating in a landscape scale collaborative initiative, new or old, what issues and concerns might they want to think about before joining?

1. *Benefits received.* What benefits will participation bring to my organization? Is there potential to access new sources of funding? Some of the more established groups with multi-year foundation funding may have already allocated money for the next few years; would it make more sense to wait a year to participate? Will there be opportunities for learning and networking? What are my goals in participating?
2. *Relation to current mission.* Does it make sense for my organization to think about working at a landscape scale? Do my service area and thematic focus fit in with those of the larger effort? Will participation cause “mission drift?” An organization dedicated to providing public access to recreational trails, for instance, may want to consider the logic of becoming involved in an effort focused on wildlife corridors.

3. *Reactions.* How will my constituents react? Will potential negative publicity be minor compared to the benefits I will receive? Or could working regionally be something of great interest to my members and community?
4. *Group relations.* How will I deal with the diversity of organizations present? Am I willing to be a “teacher,” if my organization is more established than others in the partnership? Am I willing to take on a leadership role, if the need exists?
5. *Resources.* Do I have the time to participate? Do I have another staff member who could go? What will it cost to join, or to travel to the meetings? If these resources are not readily available to me, will participation allow me to increase my organizational capacity rapidly so that they are?
6. *Internal capacity.* All in all, most of these concerns revolve around questions of internal capacity. Is my organization ready to participate? Are we meeting our current obligations, in terms of land protection and stewardship, before we take on additional projects? Or will participation in the larger group effort help us meet those needs? Second, can we take advantage of the services the group offers? If they are creating a GIS database, for instance, do we have a computer system on which to view or manipulate the layers? Finally, do we have a strategic plan in place, so we can see if participation meshes with our current goals?

Often, decisions are made by looking at what others in similar situations have done. Overall, current land trust participants expressed positive feelings about their decision to participate in larger-scale collaborative initiatives. Statements such as “the benefits far outweigh the costs,” and that “I would do anything for my counterparts” indicate the strength of some participant’s convictions. While obviously a wide range of challenging issues was also raised, none of the land trusts interviewed expressed plans to leave their efforts any time soon.

The belief in the beneficial value of participation can be seen quite clearly in the case of the Bay Area Open Space Council, where members pay fees to participate. Financial returns on their investment are possible for these groups, but not guaranteed, and yet they still contribute hundreds to thousands of dollars a year in order to participate. North Quabbin and Northern Rockies participants are also not guaranteed funding.

Although they are able to access significant, dedicated pools through their participation, even members that may not receive funds yearly continue to participate.

The Michigan Dune Alliance and the Mississippi Blufflands Alliance, however, have received consistent foundation support, which is distributed regularly among participants. In order to assess the degree to which trusts in these efforts valued their experience, interviewees were asked if they would continue to meet if funding was eliminated. On the whole, a keen desire to do so was expressed, but concerns were raised as to whether or not it would be fiscally possible. One Dune Alliance member commented, “I think there would be reason to meet, but it would make it much tougher to continue if the funding disappeared.” Similarly, a Blufflands participant commented, “I would want to continue with the Blufflands Alliance because of all the benefits of the endeavor. We would really like to continue to be involved, but the lack of funding [would make it difficult].” Another Blufflands member mused, “Would we continue to participate? I scratch my head about that, I don’t know, they [the board] might be compelled to drop it, but if they did, it would be purely financial. Their philosophic support of it is very strong. The results have been demonstrated. The Alliance as a whole is getting one hell of a lot done.”

Given sentiments such as those expressed above, it seems likely that additional trusts around the nation will consider joining together into landscape-scale initiatives. The decision to invest limited resources into these efforts will have to be made on an individual basis, as each trust weighs the benefits of participation against the costs. Analyzing the experiences of the pioneering organizations described in this study can help new trusts decide. Additionally, these experiences offer useful suggestions for the structure, projects, and composition of future efforts. Nevertheless, future investigations into the institutionalization and sustainability of these innovative landscape-scale collaborative efforts would be beneficial. How have these early efforts matured and changed over time? As always, there will be many additional lessons to learn.