Transboundary Collaboration in Ecosystem Management: Integrating Lessons from Experience

Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE TRANSBOUNDARY DILEMMA

In the face of natural resource problems that are becoming more politically, legally and ecologically complex, many communities are finding it necessary to take a broader look at their natural resource base and consider the full range of ecosystem processes that provide and sustain those resources. This more holistic, expanded view of ecosystem management often requires more coordination between different agencies, stakeholders or governments who must work across jurisdictional boundaries. Running counter to many of our traditional paradigms of natural resource management, community, and government, this approach must overcome numerous barriers to effective stewardship. When the jurisdictional boundaries that separate a natural resource system comprises an international border, those barriers are ever more profound.

The Flathead Basin of northwestern Montana, U.S., and southeastern British Columbia, Canada, provides an interesting example of this shared resource dilemma. The Flathead Basin is recognized to be a critical component of the greater “Crown of the Continent” ecosystem, harboring pristine ecosystem conditions that provide habitat for numerous wildlife species. Threats such as private development in the U.S., and industrial logging and mining in Canada increasingly threaten the processes and habitat connectivity that sustain this ecosystem. In recent years, stakeholders on both sides of the border have been working to protect this transboundary ecosystem, but have been struggling to develop a collaborative process that can overcome those barriers to transboundary resource management.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to look at how collaborative resource management is different when an international border is involved, and then evaluate existing efforts that are dealing with transboundary resource issues. With a greater understanding of existing transboundary efforts, we drew lessons from those efforts that would be useful to stakeholders in the Flathead Basin and other areas that are facing transboundary resource issues.

The following overarching questions drove this study:

- How is the management of natural resources across international borders similar to and different from cases that involve domestic ecosystem management?
• Recognizing that collaboration is essential to ecosystem management, how is collaboration across international borders different from and similar to collaboration within a single nation?

By developing and analyzing case studies of existing collaborative transboundary efforts, we were able to draw several lessons about their structure and dynamics. Our case study analysis has focused on some of the following elements of these transboundary programs and efforts: How they were initiated, how they are structured, how they gain legal and institutional legitimacy, what barriers they have come across, and how they have been able to overcome some of those barriers. This analysis has given us a cross-section of experiences that can be useful to professionals and citizens in the Flathead basin, and elsewhere who are working to better manage their natural resources across an international border.

CASE STUDIES

After gaining a cursory understanding of the situation in the Flathead basin, we identified and researched over 22 areas along the U.S.-Canada and U.S.-Mexico borders where transboundary resource management efforts were in place. After evaluating those candidate cases we selected eight of these case studies for in-depth analysis. The case studies that were selected demonstrated a broad range of experiences and approaches to transboundary collaboration.

The case studies represent a broad range of institutional and programmatic approaches to transboundary collaboration. Two of the case studies, the Red River Basin Board and the ManOMin watershed demonstrate programs that are nested under the binational authority of the International Joint Commission (IJC). In the Red River Basin example, the IJC had facilitated cooperative efforts to manage water flows in the Red River. However, in response to increasing frustration with the IJC’s inability to respond to local issues, local stakeholders spearheaded an international, grassroots effort called the Red River Basin Board. This case illustrates the strength that such a forum can bring to a transboundary collaborative effort by empowering the participation of local stakeholders to deal with local concerns.

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<th>Case Studies</th>
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| **International Sonoran Desert Alliance**  
Arizona, U.S. & Sonora, Mexico |
| **Gulf of Maine**  
Maine, U.S. & New Brunswick, Canada |
| **Upper San Pedro River Basin**  
Arizona, U.S. & Sonora, Mexico |
| **Lake Champlain Basin Program**  
New York and Vermont, U.S. & Quebec, Canada |
| **ManOMin Watershed**  
Minnesota, U.S. & Manitoba and Ontario, Canada |
| **Okanagan River Basin**  
Washington, U.S. & British Columbia, Canada |
| **Puget Sound – Georgia Basin International Task Force**  
Washington, U.S. & British Columbia, Canada |
| **Red River Basin Board**  
Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota  
U.S. & Manitoba, Canada |
In the **ManOMin watershed**, the U.S. and Canadian governments have cooperatively managed these boundary waters under the authority of the IJC since the 1920's. In recent years, several other interrelated collaborative efforts, including one spearheaded by a First Nation, have arisen to improve the stewardship of this transboundary ecosystem. This case illustrates how the development of communication channels between stakeholders and jurisdictions can help expand resource management efforts to consider the entire ecosystem.

In the absence of an international authority like the IJC to provide a foundation for transboundary collaboration, several cases demonstrated the effectiveness of a formal organizational structure and non-binding international agreements. With a highly formal organizational structure and a diverse base of stakeholders, the **Gulf of Maine Council** has provided a central focus for coordinating the management of the region’s economic and ecological resource base. As a long-standing transboundary organization, the Council has been effective in improving cross-border communication. Similarly, the **Lake Champlain Basin Program** has made noticeable progress towards improving the lake system with a formal collaborative process that is bolstered by several state-state and state-province agreements. This program is a good example of how a such a formal process can maintain broad stakeholder representation and achieve positive ecological outcomes.

Differences in governmental structures are an inherent difficulty with transboundary collaboration. Recognizing this barrier, several of the case studies have adapted to work with, rather than against the existing governmental and institutional structures. Created under an international state-province agreement, the **Puget Sound-Georgia Basin International Task Force** brings together government agency and tribal representatives to mitigate the inherently transboundary threats to the ecosystem. With a formally organized parallel structure, the Task Force illustrates that joint management efforts can work within existing governmental frameworks and realize tangible ecological results.

The **Okanagan Basin** provides a more grassroots example of this approach. Recognizing the imperiled status of transboundary sockeye salmon populations, resource managers in the Okanagan basin have been able to incorporate transboundary ecosystem goals into a larger regulatory framework. While the Okanagan case represents a relatively young effort, it is a strong example of how existing institutional structures can be shaped to address transboundary resource protection.

While the transboundary efforts along the U.S.-Mexico border demonstrate many of the similar themes as the other cases, they take place in a much different cultural and economic context. These examples, however, demonstrate several different and creative approaches to facilitating transboundary collaboration. Despite the numerous barriers to transboundary collaboration in the **San Pedro Basin**, several separate but interrelated programs have made significant progress towards protecting the basin’s shared natural resources. These efforts provide a good example of how the influence of political leaders can help build the momentum for improved collaborative management of this important transboundary resource.
Executive Summary

Stakeholders in the western Sonoran Desert have been able to facilitate transboundary collaboration from the ground up. Aimed at encouraging community based environmental stewardship, the International Sonoran Desert Alliance (ISDA) has established a number of environmental education and sustainable business initiatives throughout the region. ISDA is an interesting example of a transboundary collaborative effort that has attracted attention and funding because of its local, citizen-based approach.

FINDINGS

The case studies revealed a variety of different approaches to facilitating transboundary collaboration. While there were similarities between these eight approaches, none of them conformed to any prescribed approach or structure. Instead, each was uniquely tailored to fit the existing natural, cultural, political and economic situations in the area. These efforts revealed several aspects of transboundary collaboration that are no different then any collaborative efforts, and also demonstrated how collaboration is different when the dynamic of an international border is added to the process.

The transboundary efforts in the case studies exhibited many of the same barriers to collaboration that exist in a domestic arena, and utilized many of the same strategies to overcome those barriers. However, what is different about transboundary situations, is that the international border amplifies some of those barriers. While this added complexity makes it much more difficult to develop a collaborative process, it also necessitates such a process to effectively address transboundary natural resource issues.

There are four main types of barriers that appeared be much more prominent in transboundary situations. These barriers are:

- Legal and governmental differences that complicate coordination and implementation;
- Barriers to communication, movement, and information;
- Social and cultural differences including language differences that inhibit the development of trust and a common sense of community; and
- Economic disparities that constrain certain stakeholders’ willingness or ability to participate in the process.

In order to overcome these barriers to transboundary collaboration, the case studies illustrate the following strategies.

- **Overcoming Legal and Governmental Differences**
  - *Transboundary Agreements*, such as Joint Declarations and Memoranda of Understanding that can facilitate commitment to transboundary goals and also leverage funding and legitimacy for an effort.
  - *International Institutions*, such as the International Joint Commission or the Commission for Environmental Cooperation to provide forums for dialogue or channels for management decisions.
Executive Summary

– **Political Champions**, who have included Bruce Babbitt in the San Pedro basin and several Senators in the Lake Champlain basin can help bring recognition, resources and legitimacy to an effort.

– **External Recognition and Legitimacy**, which can come through existing protected areas, legislative recognition, or focal species recognition can help demonstrate that the resources of a transboundary region are valuable and are worth protecting.

- **Overcoming Communication Barriers**
  – **Interpersonal Contact**, through structured meetings, information sharing, or informal networks can be important in developing and sustaining communication channels.
  – **Conferences**, such as those that were held in the ManOMin watershed and the San Pedro basin can be a major boost to relationships, information exchange, and public engagement.
  – **Facilitating Communication**, through such strategies as resource directories or bilingual materials which can keep participants informed and engaged.

- **Overcoming Social and Cultural Barriers**
  – **Developing and Strengthening a Greater Sense of Community**, through means such as utilizing existing social relationships or, or capitalizing on a region’s shared history, can help strengthen transboundary relationships, and develop a more cohesive sense of community.
  – **Integrating Native Communities**, can help overcome barriers if they have existing social and cultural links across the border, or can bring in a perspective that helps convene a process in a transboundary situation.

- **Overcoming Economic Barriers**
  – **Recognizing Different Priorities**, can help facilitate collaboration by helping to reconcile conflicting economic connections to transboundary resources.
  – **Facilitating Participation**, of governments and stakeholders who do not have the economic means to participate can empower them to become long-term partners in a transboundary effort.

The cumulative result of all of the barriers to transboundary collaboration is a slow and sometimes tedious process. Despite the many approaches that we saw in the case studies to overcome the barriers to collaboration, transboundary efforts can be difficult. In order to keep stakeholders moving forward towards eventual resource management outcomes, the case studies demonstrated the importance of an effective transboundary collaborative process.

- **Maintaining an Effective Transboundary Process**
  – **Organizational Structure**. While some case studies made significant progress through an informal, ad hoc process, a more structured effort can be useful in facilitating representation and participation, providing a structured forum for addressing more difficult issues, and attracting resources and legitimacy to the effort.
  – **Patience**. The case studies demonstrated that transboundary collaboration can be
Executive Summary

extremely slow, and it can take many years to achieve procedural outcomes, let alone ecological ones, so it important that participants remain patient and committed.

What are the Implications for the Flathead Basin?
For several years, stakeholders in the Flathead Basin have been working to develop a grassroots approach to transboundary collaboration in ecosystem management. From these efforts, there are already a number of ingredients for transboundary collaboration in place, including an exciting and effective vision, some preliminary ecological successes, and a growing transboundary infrastructure. The findings from the case studies suggest that in order to continue to develop an effective transboundary process, the stakeholders in the Flathead Basin should focus on three things:

• Strengthening the role of British Columbia in the effort by engaging political leaders and utilizing existing transboundary agreements.
• Broadening existing linkages by securing active participation in the effort, building from existing partnerships, and developing new channels for collaboration.
• Including Native communities, such as the Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribes in the U.S. and the Canadian Ktunaxa/Kinbasket First Nation.

As more communities, such as those in the Flathead Basin, face transboundary natural resource challenges, there will be an increasing need for transboundary collaboration and a better understanding of how it works. This study provides a cross-section of experiences from North America’s borderlands, these communities develop more effective transboundary collaborative processes that will facilitate positive ecological outcomes.

Conclusion
The case studies revealed four specific lessons that stood out as particularly interesting or unconventional.
• First, while international agreements were very useful in facilitating transboundary collaboration, international treaties were not necessary in these situations.
• Second, none of the programs that we investigated had decision-making authority over the management of transboundary resources. Instead, they generally focused on collaborative decision making and improving coordination with existing governmental agencies and authorities to implement ideas.
• Third, many of the case studies were comprised of more than a single organization or entity carrying out transboundary ecosystem management. Instead, many illustrated an interconnected web of activities, efforts and organizations that are all moving toward common transboundary objectives.
• Finally, while some of the case studies are beginning to see positive ecological outcomes, early successes are measured in terms of procedural outcomes.

The findings from this study raise a set of issues that we believe should be considered by individuals or organizations hoping to establish sustainable transboundary collaboration and ecosystem management. One of the strongest lessons from this study is that the international border is not an insurmountable barrier and, as the case studies demonstrate, effective transboundary collaboration and ecosystem management is indeed possible.