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Collaboration in Our Backyard: Lessons from Community-Based Collaboration in the West

By Whitney Tilt, Sonoran Institute

The West has a rich history of fighting over its natural resources with timber harvest rates, water allocations, range stocking levels, and other use-related issues becoming flash points. In the beginning, loggers, miners, and ranchers traditionally controlled the allocation decisions. In the last 30 years, however, other advocates have enjoyed a greater and greater say in how grass, wood, and water are managed. Flush with a feeling of empowerment or stung with a sense of lost opportunity, these factions have proven time and time again their commitment to fight, rather than settle, with lobbying trips to Washington DC or capturing media attention by brandishing shovels or chaining themselves to trees.

To many observers, the lasting legacy of three decades of skirmishes over management of natural resources is stalemate characterized by mostly procedural battles, lawsuits that are seldom decided on the merits of the case, and the zero-sum game of lobbying (Chrislip 2000, Snow 2001). Simply put, victory in the natural resource arena has become increasingly

difficult to declare. Lost in this swirl of heat and smoke is a sense of community and the associated principle of stewardship.

Settlers to the West faced many hardships. While nature's challenges were met with individual hard work and personal courage, most settlers

discovered long-term tenure on the land required a little assistance from one's neighbors. Ranchers helped each other round up cattle off the open range, and farmers helped neighboring farmers harvest wheat before the Mormon crickets did.

Over time, this 'neighboring' evolved into social custom (Decker 2001). In recent years, with a growing population of people "from away," the cohesiveness once represented by 'neighboring' has fractured against a growing population, native and newly minted Westerners alike, who believe that they don't need, nor are they indebted to, the larger community.

Robert Putnam (2000) warns that the nation's stock of social capital (the fabric of our connection with each other) has plummeted, impoverishing both communities and their citizens. Coupled with federally mandated reforms on the western landscape, this loss of social capital has led to a growing sense that stewardship of the land is someone else's responsibility.

This is the second in our series "Reaching Across Fences" – which examines the challenges and opportunities of cooperative management in the West. In this issue we examine the environmental benefits of collaboration. Over the past decade or so, there has been a rapid proliferation of collaborative efforts around the region. What have they achieved?



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All of the photos in this article are courtesy of Whitney Tilt and the Sonoran Institute.

The Age of Collaboration?

Over the past ten years, a growing number of efforts have emerged across the rural West where citizens and local governments negotiate their way through competing interests and obligations. David Chrislip (2000) notes that these efforts, energized by a frustration with divisiveness, are created by processes that seek common ground, build social capital, gain influence through inclusiveness, and create a constituency for change that can hold formal institutions accountable for action on their recommendations.

Instead of a winner takes all approach, communities begin looking to reconcile continued economic opportunity with conservation of natural resources.

Increasingly, warring parties discover reasons to work together, if only from simple exhaustion. "The ranchers know that if they are to continue to use the public's land, they need public support. The environmentalists recognize that if they want open space and habitat and a healthy watershed, the ranchers have to stay in business" (Marston 2001).

This is the root of community-based collaboration.

volvement (IAP2 2004). Collaboration is stronger than cooperation and the over-used phrase of 'partnership' because it requires the consideration of shared power and may be defined as a "shared responsibility for achieving results" (Chrislip 2002).

During their brief history, community-based collaboratives (CBCs) have addressed a wide array of issues including water allocations, timber management, wildlife conflicts, range improvement, rural community development, and engagement of First Nations in natural resource policy. Most CBCs are not born of inspiration, but arise from raw necessity.

In the case of the Salmon Mountains Working Group in Lemhi County Idaho, for example, reintroduction of grizzly bear and gray wolf impacted livestock management, restrictions on federal land use reduced timber availability, and the immigration of retirees radically changed the area's demographics. While individual residents might disagree on the relative merits of endangered species protection, they found common ground under the umbrella of sustaining the Salmon community, and this, in turn, provides a basis for redefining their relationship with the surrounding landscape.

Early in the 21st Century, the concept of community-based collaboration began to be codified into policy and law. The Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003 (P.L. 108-148), for example, calls for the development of Community Wildfire Protection Plans that must be "collaboratively developed" by local and state government representatives in consultation with the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and other interested parties.

The challenges of policy and law dictating "thou shall collaborate" to agencies unaccustomed and untrained to undertake such activities will be a common theme in this paper.

It is important to note that community-based collaboration has its critics who charge that local groups wield undue in-

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Bull Elk.

Simply defined, community-based collaboration is the process by which perceived adversaries enter into civil dialogue to collectively consider possible solutions. As such, collaboration represents a growing obligation to public participation that builds from the act of informing, the willingness to consult, and the invitation of in-

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fluence, that urban constituencies are increasingly disenfranchised, and that participants may possess dubious political and financial motivations (Cestero 1999, Coggins 2001, Dukes and Firehock 2001).

With the critics in mind, it is important



that CBCs learn from past experience, and move quickly toward development of best practices, similar to that experienced by the land trust movement across the United States in the last fifteen years.

Methodology

This paper draws on the experience of more than 125 collaborative projects supported by the Resources for Community Collaboration (RCC) program of the Sonoran Institute in the period 1998-2004, as well as dozens of others supported by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) over the last ten years.

RCC, launched in 1998 with a founding grant from the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, works to provide financial and technical support to organizations undertaking collaborative efforts across western North America to resolve natural resource issues. NFWF is a non-profit organization, established by Congress in 1984, that develops and funds conservation partnerships benefiting fish, wildlife, and plants, and the habitat on which they depend.

Across the collaborative spectrum, some CBCs appear to succeed while others meet with limited success or outright failure.

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RCC project map 1998-2003.

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What are the lessons to be learned from these real-life experiments? How can future practitioners decide whether they should use community-based collaboration as a conservation tool? Drawing on the collective experience of RCC/NFWF-supported projects and others, a number of lessons become clear. While not presented as an exhaustive or exclusive list, eleven ingredients are critical for a successful CBC:

1. Exhaust Traditional Approaches
2. Build a Common Vision
3. Recognize Challenge and Time Involved
4. Ensure Open, Inclusive, and Transparent Process
5. Identify Stakeholders and Opinion Leaders
6. Provide Facilitation and Process
7. Develop Common Factual Base
8. Ensure Flexibility and Adaptability
9. Secure Operational Funding
10. Achieve and Communicate Results
11. Meet or Exceed Applicable Laws and Be Accountable

1. Exhaust Traditional Approaches

While working collaboratively seems like the obvious choice, it should be viewed as the method of 'latter' resort, not the first. Much like an apprentice is expected to learn for years before he can consider himself a craftsman, a key ingredient for CBC success is a realization that traditional forums for redress have failed. To be successful, all parties involved in a collaborative effort must be motivated to work together. They must be willing to share power in the search to develop alternatives to the status quo.

Since most adversarial situations are marked by divergent interests entrenched in their own camps, exhaustion of traditional approaches leads to a growing willingness to meet with 'the enemy.' It is not enough to be told that collaboration makes sense, it must be the collective experience of the group undertaking the effort.

Organizations intent on embracing collaborative approaches to conservation have

to ask themselves the question: "what would we be doing if not engaged in a CBC?" If the answer to the question is 'taking legal action,' 'maintaining our role as outside agency expert' or 'seeking a public referendum,' the issue and participants are likely not ripe for engaging in a collaborative approach. If the answer is some variation on the 'we have tried everything short of breaking the law' theme, the ground may be ripe for collaboration.



2. Build a Common Vision

The foundation for uniting a collaborative effort is forging a single vision built on a passion for place or a community of purpose. In practice, however, many efforts fail to ensure that such a vision is developed common to all at the collaborative table. While there are many potential ingredients, a core set of attributes was consistently recognized by the practitioners surveyed:

- There is a need for passionate and committed individuals. While individuals may represent one or more agencies or organizations, they draw on a personal desire to make the collaboration work.
- The group must shape its own vision rather than adopt one already fashioned. There is a need to work to jointly develop a set of goal statements and purposes, develop a common vocabulary, and ensure all stakeholders (including new members) get an orientation to place them on equal footings with their peers.
- A good vision focuses on what the group shares in common rather than where there is disagreement. Success is glimpsed

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when individuals from different views are willing, on a trial basis, to put past antagonisms aside and work to build trust and solve problems.

- A good vision statement acts as a touchstone for all members serving as milepost for where the group has been, where it is at the moment, and where it is going. It becomes the benchmark for defining success.

Most collaborative efforts form in the face of real or perceived crisis. Faced with this sense of urgency, it is difficult not to focus on battling for short-term outcomes rather than focusing on the broader vision. But it is the long-term vision that unites the greatest number of stakeholders and engenders the greatest sense of community. It is the ‘what’ that continually helps define the ‘how.’

For the core of like-minded people that often forms the nucleus of an emerging collaborative, it is easy to assume that others will equally share their vision and eagerness to participate. However, experience shows that the collaborative effort must budget adequate time and effort for building a common ground swell of interest, conducting outreach, and initiating project planning. Before approaching opinion leaders and other vital stakeholders, the emerging CBC must develop a compelling case for the tangible benefits the community will accrue from the project.

Lastly, as collaborative groups work to shape a common vision, there may be some stakeholders that choose not to participate for ideological or other reasons. It is important to keep in mind the stakeholders not at the table as a vision is fashioned, and to continually challenge the group to work to gain the entry of these individuals.

3. Recognize Time Involved

In a world where everything is meant to be easier and faster, community-based collaboration takes time—to explore and identify areas of potential common ground, to develop the necessary trust, to experi-

ment with possible ways to address shared problems, to build the coalitions necessary for affecting policy changes, and to conduct the necessary project work, monitoring, and evaluation.

While it is tempting to find short cuts, these tasks are very necessary to have the group—especially one that does not trust each other—work together in the same direction. At the same time CBCs must remember what many practitioners have learned the hard way. It takes weeks and months to build trust and develop relationships, but seconds to destroy them.

Another outcome of the long and potentially exhausting collaboration process is the reality that some participants will become burned out and others disinterested. Single interest ‘whiners’ will come and go, and it can take a long time and a lot of patience to get rid of them. As one practitioner dryly observed, “don’t start unless you are thick-skinned.” The outcomes, however, can clearly reward those who endure.



While difficult to quantify, the majority of organizations polled noted that the social capital of working together to forge common goals extended far beyond individual project outcomes. While difficult to measure and quantify, the impact of collaboration on social capital cannot be ignored, as many practitioners believe it to be the most significant outcome of their efforts.

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4. Ensure an Open, Inclusive, and Transparent Process

As a basic tenet of representative government, the need for community-based collaboratives to be 'open and transparent' is, at first glance, a startling glimpse of the obvious. To actually conduct a collaborative effort in such manner, however, presents more of a challenge.

Teresa Jordan (1998), member of the Toiyabe Watershed and Wildlands Management Team notes that while Wendell Berry entreats us to think locally and act locally, the dark side of local control is the potential for local tyranny. The collaborative process can escape the taint of localized tyranny only if it remains open and the 'optics' of its actions are transparent.

Two key aspects of an open process are incorporating the attitudes and viewpoints of people who are not at the collaborative table, and insisting on the inclusion of local experience-based knowledge in the collaborative project.

Practitioners also stress the need for collaborative groups to continually work to ensure that their process includes all stakeholders regardless of their views or opinions. CBCs must make sure each participant understands their role in the collaborative and work to create a climate where all participants believe their opinion is important.

The Clearwater Elk Initiative found that some members of its group wanted to jump right into solving the problem without setting up guidelines and rules. They found it important to first establish operational guidelines that ensure the process is open to all interested parties regardless of views. The Idaho-based collaborative worked to forge ground rules for meetings and discussions, and then made sure they followed them so no one felt that more than one standard of conduct existed for the project.

One final pragmatic observation from the field is to ensure the process and actions are maintained in a written record. An open and transparent process is reflected in a comprehensive set of meeting minutes that includes such obvious items

as attendance and decisions made.

5. Identify Stakeholders and Opinion Leaders

A community-based collaborative is a reflection of the strengths and diversity of its stakeholders. Failure to address the issues of inclusiveness and diversity at the stakeholder table can render the collaborative process to be little more than a replication of the power balances that already surround a set of issues. Recognizing the need for inclusiveness and diversity is a necessary step, but creating it at the collaborative table is the hard part.

Half of the stakeholders surveyed in a random sample of 76 watershed-based stakeholder efforts in California and Washington noted that some critical interests were not effectively represented in their partnerships (Leech 2004). Leech also noted that ordinary citizens often face a lack of motivation or other obstacles to participation, unlike agency, industry, and environmental representatives.

While one or more disputes have brought people to the table, it is people, not issues that will make the collaboration succeed or fail. With that in mind, participants will likely spend much more time on people issues than natural resource issues. The field experience of Calapooia Water Council, Walla Walla Basin Watershed Council, and others offers some additional insights:

- Do not confuse constituents or partners with stakeholders. The difference between them is akin to the difference between eggs and ham—the chicken is interested but the pig is committed.
- Learn and appreciate various missions of your fellow collaborators even as you work to have them represent their learnings rather than their organizational interests.
- Protect ALL stakeholders' interests and avoid alienating a party and turning them into a spoiler.

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- Agency participants need to work on connecting with, rather than directing, collaborative efforts.

Practitioners consistently noted the need for strong leadership as an essential ingredient to the extended life of a successful collaboration. The presence of credible leaders in the stakeholder group who help convene, catalyze, and sustain the process is critical to the effort's success. When viewed from the outside, a collaborative group drawn from diverse sectors of the community demonstrates the group's commitment to inclusiveness and provides a forceful statement to outside observers on all sides of the issue.

6. Provide Facilitation and Process

Having set the collaborative table with a diverse and representative group of stakeholders, many of whom will likely be community leaders, it is now time to 'herd the cats.' Heeding the advice of more than one seasoned practitioner to "never attempt to facilitate and lead at the same time," CBCs should consider engaging outside facilitators to help the group obtain its collective goals.

In the experience of CBC groups polled, it was rare for the emerging collaborative to have strong facilitation experience internally, which required them to acquire skilled facilitation from the outside.

In selecting a facilitator, the single most important attribute is that all participants in the collaborative process must perceive any facilitator as fair and legitimate. Overall the purpose of the facilitator is to build a process, to work with the group to establish sideboards, and then work to make sure they are observed. A facilitator also makes sure the quieter voices in the process don't get run over.

Another part of a facilitated process is to keep the group focused on being proactive, not reactive—to focus on the vision, not the past. A collaborative effort must work to make progress happen rather than sit back and see what happens.

7. Develop a Common Factual Base

A major obstacle facing the resolution of most natural resource issues is the apparent complexity of the issues at hand. Creating a common factual base is critical—"to bound the problem with credible information" in the words of Wondolleck and Yaffee (2000). Many CBCs note that ideological conflicts (Republican versus Democrat, meat-eater versus vegan, agnostic versus catholic) do not prove to be overwhelming barriers to progress, but conflict over issues of fact can incapacitate a collaborative process.

Recognizing the need for a common base of scientific information is the first step. The next is to recognize that the process for collecting the information needs to be a shared effort, not merely a stockpiling of data by one or more 'experts.' As federal and state land management agencies are often the repositories of natural resource information, their involvement in a community-based collaborative must go beyond a singular role as providers of 'expert' information.

Regardless of the information's accuracy, the stakeholders around the table must come to accept the science themselves, not have the information force-fed them from a group of self-proclaimed experts who already might be viewed by many of the stakeholders as part of the problem.

8. Ensure Flexibility and Adaptability

Collaboratives should strive to be flexible in their timetables, keeping in mind that participants have lives outside the collaborative effort. In the ranching community of Montana's Madison River Valley, it is a challenge for the Madison Valley Ranchlands Group (MVRG) to keep momentum among its members on a range of issues from invasive plants to elk depredations due to work and seasonal activities. During the calving season, for instance, it proves nearly impossible to get a critical core of the key people involved.

Understanding that members of a com-

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munity-based collaboration must remain motivated, CBCs should constantly look for ways to keep the process energized. CBCs have successfully used field trips, special events, and potluck dinners to get members involved on-the-ground. More than one CBC commented on the ability of food and drink to bring a community together. Observers also comment on the need to have fun, and maintain a sense of humor. Use of informal get-togethers helps build respect and understanding among the group and throughout the community.

Finally, as pointed out earlier, things take a lot longer than anticipated. Recognizing that stakeholders have jobs and lives outside of the collaborative effort, set goals and deadlines, but be prepared, flexible and good-humored when the timetable falls apart.

9. Secure Operational Funding

The vast majority of organizations polled in this research face pressing and continuing challenges to identify sufficient funding to maintain their collaboratives. While the majority of operational budgets are small, even by non-profit organization standards, it remains difficult for these organizations to maintain stable budgets. Ironically, many collaboratives are successful in attracting sufficient funding for related restoration projects while funding for administration is unavailable from these same sources.

Equally ironic is the cold fact that an emerging collaborative effort must have some start-up resources (personnel and financial) to achieve early success or interest, however minor, to demonstrate the collaborative potential that most funding sources want to see before they fund the project.

The RCC program has witnessed these challenges first-hand. For the period 1998-2004, the program provided \$640,000 to CBCs, but the program's funding has consistently fallen short of the demonstrated need. Recognizing the challenges, here are five insights into the world of fundraising (MEB 1993, Tilt 1996):

- Remember that people give to people. Develop relationships with the funding community. Unsolicited proposals seldom get funding.

- Develop a realistic budget for project. Even volunteer organizations need more financial resources than anticipated to stay involved and vital.

- Good deeds, on their own, seldom attract funding. Develop grant-writing skills as soon as possible within the collaborative, or find someone who can provide these skills.

- Build institutional support (administrative overhead) into project funding.

- Acknowledge your supporters. Say thank you, and then say thank you again.

10. Communicate Results

The need for good communication is a constant theme heard from practitioners. While everyone acknowledges the need for it, few institutions are consistently good at it. In the arena of natural resource management, communications have too often been reduced to a governmental process of 'public involvement' where public notice is provided, a requisite number of public hearings are held, and the agency makes a decision that appears totally divorced from any public input. This serves as a good model for what CBCs should not do. Other lessons learned include:

- Involve the public early and often.

- Take full advantage of existing social networks in the community and involve opinion leaders outside of the CBC.

- Work to get the community familiar with the goals and process of the collaborative.

- Use telephone, email and web, but not at the expense of face-to-face interactions.

- Keep good records of all events: participant lists, minutes, photos, articles, etc.

The experience of the Applegate Partnership in southwestern Oregon cautions against seeking early publicity before relationships and trust are fully developed as this early notoriety can cause damaging

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internal tension and conflict (KenCairn 1999)

11. Meet or Exceed Applicable Laws and Be Accountable

In today's arena of competing interests and watchdogs, it is not enough to do 'good work.' CBCs must be capable of 1) demonstrating their adherence to applicable federal and state law; and 2) establishing monitoring and evaluation capacity sufficient to track and document the outcomes of the effort.

To be viewed as successful, both internally and externally, CBCs must demonstrate that their process meets or exceeds environmental law and policy. The Quincy Library Group collaboration, for example, is considered by many critics to have been a select group of special interests successfully gaining the intervention of Congress to circumvent existing state and federal laws (see Cestero 1999 for fuller discussion).

CBCs must also ensure that their monitoring and evaluation protocols are capable of assessing environmental, social and economic progress. When conducting monitoring, CBCs should keep in mind that more measurement does not equal more understanding, and there is a need for information triage since there is an infinite amount of information available (EMI 2004).

Finally, there is the importance of being accountable for outcomes. There continues to be concern among both supporters and critics that CBCs do not pay enough attention to monitoring and evaluating their outcomes. Too often, the environmental and social impacts of community-based collaborations remain largely unknown.

Conclusion

The power of community-based collaboration is its recognition that humans are part of the environment and a mandatory part of the solution. This paper has assembled the field experience of dozens

of practicing CBCs. Their experience confirms that community-based collaboration can be a fruitful road to long-term solutions, but it takes time, determination, and strong people skills.

Practicing CBCs have learned first-hand that good will, or at least a desire for its growth, is a fundamental prerequisite for collaboration. They point out the need to measure the benefits of CBCs in both social and biological terms, and to mark progress against a group's goals. They also point out many practical pieces of advice such as identifying an easily achievable first project to build trust and demonstrate the collaborative's worth. And practitioners stress over and over the importance of building relationships—CBCs are about working with people and building social capital. —

Wallace Stegner, quoting historian Bernard DeVoto, dryly observed that the only true individualists in the West were usually found hanging from a rope, the other end of which was held by a group of cooperating citizens (Hahn 1998). In today's West, conflicts over natural resources are too important to be left to battles between individuals, they require involvement of the community with its sense of place, its sense of economic foundation, and its collective capability to instill a sense of stewardship of natural resources.

That is the lasting impact of community-based collaboration.

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