2011

# Developing Successful Wilderness Stewardship Partnerships

Heather Day
*The University of Montana*

DEVELOPING SUCCESSFUL WILDERNESS STEWARDSHIP PARTNERSHIPS

By

HEATHER MICHELLE DAY

B.A. Sociology, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, ME, 2006

Professional Paper

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Science
in Environmental Studies

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

May 2011
Approved by:

J.B. Alexander Ross, Associate Dean of The Graduate School
Graduate School

Len Broberg, Chair
Environmental Studies

Laurie Yung
College of Forestry and Conservation

Peter Landres
U.S. Forest Service, The Aldo Leopold Wilderness Institute

Day, Heather, M.S., Spring 2011 Environmental Studies

Developing Successful Wilderness Stewardship Partnerships

Chairperson: Len Broberg

Partnerships between federal land management agencies and non-profit organizations have existed in various forms for decades, benefiting public lands in myriad ways. However, the consistent decline in agency budgets and available staffing dedicated to Wilderness stewardship have created a need for and subsequent boom of Wilderness stewardship -focused nonprofit organizations across the country. Previous literature addresses the elements of a successful partnership in a more generalized fashion, leaving a need for more empirical examination of the key components of a successful Wilderness stewardship partnership. Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted with Wilderness stewardship nonprofit staff and staff from the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Fish and Wildlife Service. This paper examines a subset of the results, focusing on three dominant keys to success: clear and common goals, nurturing relationships, and understanding process. The findings and conclusions highlight specific recommendations for individuals and organizations in the Wilderness stewardship field who are interested in partnership development.

## Introduction

Citizens of the United States value Wilderness for a wide variety of reasons, including the protection of air and water quality, wildlife habitat, the knowledge that future generations will have Wilderness to visit, and the protection of rare and unique plant and animal species (Cordell, Betz, Stephens, Mou, & Green, 2008). For these reasons and others, stewardship of the Wilderness resource is of the utmost importance. However, the integrity of the National Wilderness Preservation System continues to be eroded by the decreasing funding and staffing dedicated to wilderness stewardship across the USDA Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service. Invasive species, intense fires, and highly concentrated use have necessitated more stewardship of our national Wilderness areas, but federal land management agencies are less equipped to adequately address Wilderness needs (Wilderness Advisory Group, 2009; Meyers & Hunger, 2006). Recent budget cuts have only exacerbated agency wilderness funding shortfalls, a trend that began in the 1980's with President Regan's initiative to downsize governmental operations (English & Skellern, 2005). To fill this void, non-governmental wilderness stewardship organizations have contributed at the local, regional, and national levels, raising funds and donating millions of dollars worth of volunteer hours to stewardship projects on federal lands (Brown, 2010). Wilderness stewardship groups present enormous potential for not only conducting Wilderness monitoring and trail work, but also maintaining an educational presence in the field. By partnering with stewardship groups effectively, federal agencies can promote greater public Wilderness awareness and create a stronger culture of stewardship.

However, not all wilderness stewardship partnerships are successful in accomplishing mutual goals and forging lasting relationships. Only modest research has been done to determine the key elements of a successful wilderness-focused partnership, and researchers have concluded that the majority of federal land management partnerships focus on collaborative land use planning and watershed management, though a focus on recreation and on-the-ground stewardship is certainly growing (Cousens, Barnes, Stevens, Mallen, & Bradish, 2006). Through this research, we have determined that the sustained success of Wilderness stewardship partnerships is dependent on the presence of certain skill sets and criteria. As agencies contemplate creating programs dedicated to working with volunteer stewards, it is critical to develop a system that promotes efficient partnerships to help optimize agency employees' time and continue advancing wilderness stewardship goals.

The purpose of this article is to present three dimensions of wilderness stewardship partnerships that emerged during interviews with agency and nonprofit staff currently involved in such a partnership: clear and common partnership goals, strong interpersonal communication and trust, and understanding federal and non-governmental processes and organizational needs. The goal is to provide a framework for agencies and non-profits to develop effective and successful wilderness stewardship partnerships.

**Literature Review**

For the purpose of this research, "partnership" is defined broadly in order to include the spectrum of non-governmental stewardship groups that are currently working in Wilderness. Drawing from the key components of agency definitions, "partnership" is defined here as a working relationship or agreement between an agency and an NGO where the two parties work together to accomplish mutually beneficial goals.

The Bureau of Land Management's *Collaboration Desk Guide* defines partnerships as follows:

> A partnership is an agreement between two or more entities, created to achieve or to assist in reaching a common goal. Partnerships may involve one organization utilizing another's unique abilities, equipment or services, or it may be a sharing of resources (money, time, knowledge, equipment, etc.) to accomplish short- or long-term objectives for one or all of the participating partners. Agencies engage in many types of formal and informal partnership arrangements including: grants and cooperative agreements, memoranda of understanding, donations to the agency, and statutory partnerships (Bureau of Land Management, 2007, p. 1).

The *Partnership Guide* published by the National Forest Foundation and the Forest Service states, "Federal policy defines partnerships as 'arrangements that are voluntary, mutually beneficial, and entered into for the purpose of mutually agreed upon objectives.' In this definition, 'mutual benefit' specifically means that each partner shares in the benefits the project provides" (National Forest Foundation and USDA Forest Service, National Partnership Office, 2005, p. 5). Both definitions highlight the accomplishment of mutual objectives or goals as a core element of a partnership, a criterion of success further defined by others who state that the needs and purpose of a partnership are readily identified and understood at the outset (James, 1999; Uhlik, 2005). These shared goals are often the motivation behind the formation of a partnership, and in his study of public-private partnerships, McLean (1993) found that through partnership success, agencies and their partners set project goals that otherwise would not have been accomplished.

Research on partnerships suggests several key components of success: personal and professional commitment to a partnership, including strong leadership (James, 1999; O'Neill, 2004; Selin & Chavez, 1992); administrative and/or organizational support and capacity (James, 1999; Uhlik, 2005; O'Neill, 2004; Absher, 2008; Wilderness Advisory Group, 2009); good communication and an environment of trust (O'Neill, 2004; Huxham & Vangen, 1996; Wilderness Advisory Group, 2009; McLean, 1993); clearly defined needs and goals that are mutually beneficial (Huxham & Vangen, 1996; O'Neill, 2004; James, 1999; McLean, 1993; Meyers & Hunger, 2006; Selin & Chavez, 1992); and a long-term process that continually evolves and requires maintenance (McLean, 1993; Selin & Chavez, 1992; Uhlik, 2005).

Meyers and Hunger (2006) provide a qualitative examination of Wilderness-focused stewardship organizations, for the first time addressing the unique qualities of this type of partnership and advancing five elements of successful partnerships, shown below. In 2009, the Forest Service Wilderness Advisory

Group (WAG) presented the top ten barriers to Wilderness-focused partnerships and proposed solutions to those issues. Selected solutions are presented below, illustrating similarities between the two bodies of research and supporting previous, more general partnership research as well as highlighting elements particular to Wilderness.

Table 1. Recommendations for Successful Stewardship Partnerships

| **Meyers and Hunger, 2006** | **Wilderness Advisory Group, 2009** (Selections) |
|---|---|
| Agency champion provides leadership, support, field presence and recognition | Create adequate Wilderness- and volunteer-focused capacity (funding); provide training in partnership skills |
| Nongovernmental champion conducts volunteer recruitment and supervision | Work to shift volunteer focus from trail work to broader Wilderness stewardship |
| Meaningful volunteer experiences inspire community and resource connection through meaningful work | Clear communication, streamlined processes, recognition of volunteer efforts by supportive agency staff |
| Academic & scientific support provides data quality assurance and long-term continuity | Provide adequate training to volunteers to implement wilderness stewardship projects |
| Meets organizational needs of both agency and nongovernmental partner | Shared and realistic expectations and goals; supports agency efficiency and effectiveness |

Of note is a particular emphasis in both papers on agency capacity specific to Wilderness. As the WAG paper notes, “Declining recreation budgets have hit wilderness programs hard. Wilderness managers have accomplished a lot with little support, but additional funding is necessary to stimulate new partnership efforts” (Wilderness Advisory Group, 2009, p. 1). Meyers and Hunger (2006) likewise note that there are fewer employees doing more work, and facilitating partnerships becomes an additional task for a staff person who often has limited knowledge or expertise in volunteer management. They found that the most successful partnerships included a fully invested agency employee who provided leadership and support.

In addition, Wilderness-specific field work often requires skills training that must be made available to volunteers in order to facilitate partnership activities. In order to conduct sufficient training for partners, additional funding and staff capacity is needed and employees must be supported in dedicating time to training volunteers to a level where they can facilitate training sessions themselves and alleviate resource strain on agency partners (Wilderness Advisory Group, 2009). Wilderness-specific partnerships will continue to encounter unique challenges and opportunities as the Wilderness program expands to include character monitoring and other new protocols which require technical knowledge and data collection techniques (Meyers & Hunger, 2006).

This research examines both agency and NGO partners' perspectives on partnerships through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The empirical, data-driven work tests some of the ideas put forward by Meyers and Hunger as well as the WAG, bringing greater depth to their findings.

**Research Methods**

In-depth interviews were used to collect qualitative data aimed at illustrating broad, conceptual aspects of partnership improvement as well as exploring the nuanced dynamics of individual partnership relationships. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two groups.

Sixteen non-governmental stewardship group directors or Board of Directors chairs in the case of all-volunteer organizations (n=16) were selected through purposive sampling with the goal of including stewardship groups of multiple sizes and different agency partners and levels of involvement. Non-governmental participants were asked to identify the agency employee with whom they work most closely, and they comprised the second group of interviewees (n=14). Two agency liaisons were not interviewed due to scheduling difficulties. Individuals engaged in partnerships on Forest Service land dominated the sample (n=24), though staff from the Bureau of Land Management (n=4) and Fish and Wildlife Service (n= 2) were also included. Attempts were made to include larger representation from each agency but locating partnerships focused on Wilderness stewardship proved to be extremely difficult. This sample was intended to describe mechanisms for success as experienced by a variety of partnerships, and is not intended to be representative.

We used an interview guide including questions about the history of a partnership; how the partnership functions and how operations have changed over time; keys to success; challenges; and suggestions or recommendations for others engaged in similar partnerships. The guide was developed to ensure consistency and comparability across the interviews, and probes were used to elicit further explanation and depth when warranted. Interviews were primarily conducted over the phone (n=28) rather than in person (n=3) and tape recorded, then transcribed verbatim and coded using WeftQDA software. Open coding for emerging concepts and themes (Strauss & Corbin, 2007) was used, and as only one researcher was involved in coding and analysis, coded data was then sub-coded to draw out deeper themes and subjects and subsequently analyzed.

**Results**

This section focuses on three prominent themes that were discussed at length by many interviewees. Though interviewees' experiences and recommendations varied widely, these broad concepts were present across both agency and NGO samples and together paint a conceptual picture of how to build a successful Wilderness stewardship partnership.

<u>Clear and Common Goals From the Start: Collaborative Planning</u>

> I would say… they need to sit down really early on looking at the needs of both the agencies and the NGO and how they can work really effectively. I think they need to clearly define what it is that they want to do, and then talk with the agency on what the agency thinks that they need to have done and be working that out really early on. –NGO Partner

The process of establishing a partnership is as nuanced as the individual places it seeks to steward. Of the fifteen partnerships examined, the majority of both agency and NGO partners emphasized the importance of delineating clear goals and expectations for the partnership from the outset. The proportion of comments directly focusing on clear goals was more heavily dominated by agency staff, though many NGO interviewees discussed clear expectations using other language such as addressing needs, understanding the “role” of the organization, and moving in “the same direction”. Methods of achieving common objectives included a formalized MOU or other agreement, an intensive examination of NGO mission and structure in the case of a group being formed explicitly for this purpose, or a more informal discussion at the start of each field season lining out projects and needs with continued communication throughout the year. Agency expectations included consistent quality of work, attention to safety, consistent quality reporting, and a commitment to abstain from litigation surrounding the projects addressed by the partnership. NGO expectations focused on committed funding and/or resources from the agency, an open door and open line of communication, support both from on-the-ground staff as well as high-level managers, and clearly explained policies and regulations for volunteers.

Multiple interviewees discussed the potentially negative outcomes that may result from a failure to establish clear goals. One agency employee noted “…a bit of a disconnect where maybe the foundation expectations are a little bit different [from] ours”, and an NGO partner expressed that without clear goals, a partnership “…could get kind of off on the wrong track”. Differing agendas or expectations result in inefficiencies and, in some cases, increased relational tension or a breach of trust:

> So he did shape up, and after that, everything was sort of fine. But it totally breached the trust. And I never… really fully trusted them again to be out alone by themselves doing work. I always sent [agency] people with them after that…

This agency partner worked closely with a nonprofit group that stepped too far over the boundaries of appropriate behavior for volunteers, eventually forcing the agency to temporarily bar the group from working and causing irreparable damage to the relationship. Partners whose goals and expectations are clear and communicated at the outset reported experiencing more positive and straightforward relationships with one another and less difficulty in accomplishing projects.

As an element of successful stewardship partnerships, common expectations speak directly to a partnership's ability to meet the goals and needs of both partners. As one agency employee noted, though volunteers are happy to assist the agency with priority projects because they believe in the cause, they also need to receive a benefit from the relationship beyond the "feel-good" knowledge that they helped. Furthermore, non-profit stewardship groups are, essentially, businesses: "…these groups… are ultimately a business, they need to stay in business. And so you need to figure out well, …how is this going to benefit them?" By establishing the role of each partner, the benefits to each partner, and the goals of the project from the outset, partners can assure that both agency and NGO stewards view the relationship as beneficial and positive. Such a perspective significantly increases a partner's willingness to invest time and energy into the relationship, resulting in greater sustainability and likelihood of success.

Interviewees could be placed along a spectrum from firmly nonpolitical to groups that are regularly involved in legal challenges or lobbying. NGOs involved in regular legal activity or lobbying believed such activity did not necessarily impact the quality or efficacy of the partnership. As noted by this NGO partner,

> As a group that's engaged in policy level advocacy and certainly has goals for how land should be managed on our agencies, we're often trying to encourage the agency when they do the right thing and scold them when they do the wrong thing…. While we may not agree with the agency on a lot of levels and work to try to change policies or management issues that the agency is engaged in, we have to do it in a respectful manner. And as long as we do that, as long as we're not the extreme group that's coming in and kicking, yelling, and screaming about something, it's, the agency is going to be inclined to work with us.

The term "advocacy" was used by partners in reference to multiple activities which could be separated into three categories: direct litigation, lobbying for Wilderness designation or policy change, and a more vague form of advocacy that included participating in planning meetings, providing official comment on EIS or NEPA drafts, or providing direct input on planning direction. The term was not clearly defined by interviewees, but instead used to refer to activities. This NGO, which actively campaigns for new wilderness designation, sees room within a partnership for "soft advocacy", saying:

> So [when we are doing stewardship], we're not campaigning. We're not talking about legislation. We're getting people excited about areas… So a lot of our advocacy is, for instance, when we've done a lot of work with the [agency] on upping their scores for the Chief's Challenge, and in part, sometimes we've picked areas to do that… in a county where we would like to see a wilderness bill, it's not like that we're even working outside of the designated wilderness there, but people are seeing the work that's being done, seeing that people care about those areas. And so again, we select where we work very strategically.

For previously adversarial or tense relationships, whether due to a group's role in litigation or because of strained community-agency relations, partnership and collaborative planning provided an opportunity for involvement in the agency's decision making process with the outcome of addressing disagreement prior to legal conflict. Many organizations previously involved in litigation spoke of coming to the conclusion that legal challenges to agency decisions had created barriers to constructive forward movement. Said one agency interviewee:

> I guess, it's all about whether the partner is an advocate or a true partner trying to help the [agency]. If the partnership group finds itself in the advocate role, then it's really kind of watch dogging us at the same time as trying to help us. And some of the relationships can become adversarial to some degree and telling us what we're doing wrong and what we should be doing. And it's all part of the public process, and it's all really fine to do. It's good. It holds us accountable. But that becomes a place where there becomes disagreement. And it doesn't mean that that partner group doesn't help us. It just means that sometimes we feel like it's hard to do anything right in their eyes.

Instead, a shift to partnership and involvement in the planning process allows greater community involvement in decision-making as well as promoting greater understanding of agency decisions. As these types of stewardship partnerships continue to develop, there is a notable shift in the way NGOs approach disputes. According to this NGO partner, who works with a nonpolitical group:

> …there is a new sort of feeling around, and this is what I get from [organization] and… with some of the other newsletters that I subscribe to, is that as opposed to, say, 10, 15 years ago where for want of a better expression there was an awful lot of head butting between conservation advocates and the [agency] …there's a more understanding of there should perhaps be a rapprochement between the two sort of cultures, the wilderness advocacy movements and the managers of the public lands…understanding of each other's needs, to be able to get together over a table eyeball to eyeball without having to resort to the courts constantly… there's a sort of new spirit, perhaps… there still will be a need, I think for legal maneuvers, perhaps. But I think there's a greater awareness of this is how we should proceed in the future. –NGO Partner

Furthermore, an NGO partner from an organization that once used litigation as a primary tool has now shifted to a partnership approach for these reasons:

> I think we were risking becoming irrelevant to the [agency]. I think when we become irrelevant, [they think] that we are going to sue no matter what they do… They manage the thing we care about. That's why we're here, this wilderness area, and… if we become irrelevant to the entity that takes care of this place, then we have failed in our mission to do right by the wilderness, because then. . . We're not even at the table any longer. I think we have to find a new way to

> work with them. That does not mean we never ever sue them again, but we have to make it clear that we can . . . Sometimes times change. . . The tools of the past were right for them, but today's days and issues require different tools or at least a broader set of tools than we've used in the past.

While this organization has not entirely removed litigation from the toolbox, they have shifted their approach in order to be "at the table" with the agency.

For NGO partners who, as a policy, did not participate in legal challenges to agency decisions, interviewees expressed that litigation undermined the partnership relationship and obstructed the building of trust. When NGOs have an underlying or even overt political agenda, their role in stewardship projects can blurred. As observed by this nonpolitical NGO partner:

> And that's where politics can make it messy. I mean, groups that are both political and stewardship, when you get involved in politics as a stewardship organization, it's just hard to move forward to the maximum extent, because there's always going to be some skepticism about what your real motivation is. Are you really just in it for stewardship? Or are you in it for stewardship, but also stewardship is sort of serving as a window dressing for a political agenda? – NGO Partner

For organizations that choose to be involved in litigation or direct advocacy, clear expectations and boundaries become even more important. Organizations that successfully straddle the line as well as their agency partners noted that the organization simply keeps the two activities separate. When in the field for a stewardship project, advocacy is left behind. For most organizations, the two activities are also kept separate through different budgets, staff, and priorities, such as with this NGO partner:

> The only time, honestly, that the advocacy stuff ever came up was when we started this interagency… partnership… I think it was just a reaction that there's another group down there that does a lot of advocacy and really doesn't have that kind of trust relationship, and so that made them a little leery… So when we were starting that initial agreement, like 18 months ago, there was a lot of discussion about that, about the advocacy and about how we would keep that separate, because we were working with some people down there with the [agency] that we had not worked with before, that didn't really know us very well. And so we did talk about that quite a bit before we went ahead with the agreement. Again, we had a fabulous partnership with the [agency] supervisor, so… we had that trust relationship with him, too, so that helped immensely. And then that was it. You know, it's just really never come up anywhere else.

As stated by this partner and others, clearly defined boundaries regarding this separation and open communication with agency partners about advocacy efforts is critical for maintaining common expectations and moving forward as partners. Without this trust, participation in agency decision-making processes is tenuous, and increased suspicion regarding NGO actions is likely.

Agency employees valued the increased citizen participation inherent in a community-based partnership. Without a direct connection to input from the community, as found in a successful partnership, they felt they lacked an understanding of community expectations:

> I mean maybe not so much like they'd be sitting in our meetings but if they have their own vision of what they think could be improved in the wilderness or even if its non-wilderness and say, here's some ideas of how we together can get there. That would be great because, sometimes I just feel like we're kind of floundering trying to figure things out and where we want to go. Just hearing from them, hearing from the community of where they want to go, we don't really hear that unless we do a NEPA document. –Agency Partner

Interviewees indicated that by allowing for the open sharing of ideas, partnerships bridge the gap between the agency planning process and citizen engagement and create shared expectations and understanding of how management decisions are made and carried out. Interviewees stated that when expectations are reasonable and based on a true understanding of each partner's intentions, stewardship activities can progress more smoothly and partners can move toward a trusting and productive relationship.

Some partners address the issue of expectations in the short-term by working to cooperatively plan projects on a yearly or even more frequent basis. Three distinct planning models emergent.

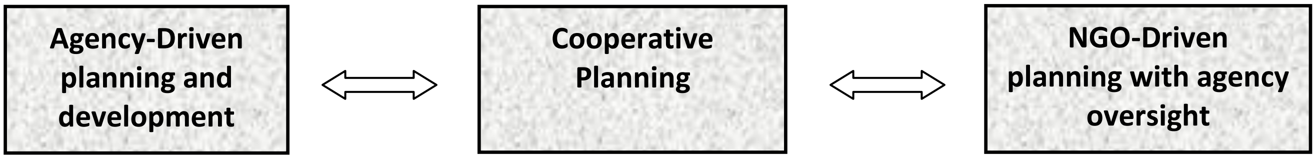


Figure 1. Wilderness stewardship partnership planning models

In accordance with the Agency-driven model, some organizations operate purely as support for agency-identified needs and priorities. This model often involves receiving a "wish list" or list of needs at the beginning of the season and working to address as many of those issues as possible. Some NGOs believe that this type of planning is the most appropriate for a stewardship group working with an agency as it keeps the agency in the position of ultimate authority rather than assuming partial responsibility for project prioritization.

The NGO-driven model, utilized largely by well-established NGO partners, allows for significant NGO autonomy in project planning and implementation. In this scenario the NGO brings project plans to the table for approval by the agency. This arrangement is believed by some to create efficiencies in repeat or long-term projects such as interpretive programming, ranger patrols, or contracted trail maintenance:

> And a lot of it is year-to-year routine where the ranger talk program is just a matter of scheduling who's going to be doing the talks on what weekend. The wilderness patrols are who's going to be patrolling what trail on what weekend. – NGO Partner

Finally, the model most frequently represented in the fifteen partnerships is cooperative planning. This model is a spectrum that combines Agency-driven and NGO-driven practices to incorporate input from both partners in project planning, ultimately arriving at a plan that meets the needs of the NGO while accomplishing agency goals. This agency partner summed up the cooperative approach:

> Oftentimes, because they're out in the field, they're able to see projects that they'd like to see get done. And then we'll coordinate together to see if that's feasible. At the same time, we also suggest projects to them that we feel that they would be either specialized in or would otherwise enjoy. And we collaborate and sit down at the table and make a decision on where we want to go for that fiscal year. – Agency Partner

As suggested in figure 2, most partnerships fall in the middle rather than at one extreme. The extent to which an NGO brings project suggestions to the table is dependent on how integrated they are with the agency, how closely they communicate with their agency partner, and the receptivity of their agency partner. The range of views regarding the appropriate role of a stewardship NGO varies both within the NGOs and across the agencies and each individual perceived his or her approach as "best" or "most appropriate." Such wide differentiation illustrates great diversity within the Wilderness stewardship community and a wide variety of definitions of "partnerships" among and across agencies. This will be addressed in a later section.

For some agency partners, NGOs are involved in planning but only to a certain extent: "It's cooperative. I wouldn't necessarily call it collaborative, because I have the final decision-making authority. I mean, there's only so much power sharing that's happening, but we definitely cooperate". For others, the partnership involves complete shared responsibility: "I would say it's more 50-50 in that respect. You know, I listen to them, they listen to me, and we just come to an agreement…"

Partners described many complex elements at play in setting clear expectations and common goals. At the base, partners believe it is important to conduct a self-examination to determine what goals or expectations each partner has for the partnership and how those expectations may or may not align. Partners emphasized the importance of agreeing upon clearly defined goals to ensure both partners understand the project and/or relationship clearly and experienced both the benefits of such planning as well as the pitfalls of miscommunication. If the NGO is involved in advocacy or litigation, partners set boundaries to ensure that agency partners understand when an NGO is involved in stewardship versus advocacy. In some cases this involved differentiating between staffing roles or funding sources. Due to the unique nature of each partnership, it is clear that a "one size fits all" solution does not exist. However, partners must be cautious that the power dynamic between agency and partner desires is negotiated carefully so as not to create a real or perceived imbalance in power. Such an imbalance can cause resentment or distrust and could be detrimental to levels of respect between partners.

### Nurturing Relationships: Communication and Trust

The most highly successful partnerships relied on strong personal relationships between an agency employee and the NGO partner organization. These relationships in some cases pre-dated the partnership, but in others were initiated simultaneously. Interviewees say that these relationships began with open communication, worked to build trust over time, and continue to need "maintenance" in order to keep the partnership strong. Across the board, the importance of building strong interpersonal relationships came through clearly:

> I don’t think you can have a good partnership if you don’t have awesome relations both on the NGO and the agency side at the local level. I mean, the Chief can say partnerships are the way to go… they can write declarations, statements. They can send instruction memos. They can make policy. They can do everything, but it’s going to come down to a one-on-one relationship on the ground. And without that, it’s not going to work… --NGO Partner

The importance of communication was mentioned repeatedly among many agency and NGO interviewees, who emphasized its value not only in ensuring that projects proceed smoothly but in building trust and preventing tension. This was particularly true of partnerships where the NGO currently or historically engaged in advocacy or litigation, and for multiple partners provided a path away from a litigious relationship toward a partnership focused on finding agreement where possible. Both NGO and agency interviewees believed in the need to sit “at the table” together, seeing “eyeball to eyeball” and “Keep talking, keep talking, keep talking. You’ve got to communicate”. As mentioned by this agency partner:

> And I’m sure that you are aware that [my partner organization] has been an appellant of the [agency] in the past. So the partnership and the relationship was developed to have a positive working relationship so that we could work together and accomplish forest restoration here.

Another agency partner further spoke to the importance of conversation:

> But what’s needed, then, is that level of relationships that we can really sit down and talk about that, disagree and agree. And out of those conversations will come something more than we ever had before.

For most partnerships, that “something” is trust, as stated by this NGO partner:

> …it’s no different than any other personal relationship or trustful relationship that you’d have with a friend or a partner or a family member. It’s just building trust with the actual individuals who are on the ground and not breaching it. Because as everyone knows, like when you build trust and then breach it, it takes a lot more time to repair that trust than it did to have it initially.

To achieve this goal, interviewees suggested spending time together socially at volunteer celebrations or other community events; building a personal relationship prior to initiating partnership projects or agreements; inviting one another to meetings, office parties or work days to foster a “team” mentality; scheduling regular face-to-face opportunities to talk about partnership activities and projects; emphasizing personal communication rather than email or indirect methods as much as possible; taking initiative to welcome new employees personally; building relationships at multiple levels within the agency to ensure sustainability in the face of employee turnover; and recognizing that a good relationship takes a commitment of time and energy over the long-term. This agency partner spoke to the long-term investment required to maintain a strong partnership, stating:

> I’m always looking for ways to improve our relationships with the individuals. I think that never can stop. You can’t like get to a certain point where you fit. You know, okay, well, we have a good relationship now, so I can just kind of like put that on the back burner and move on to something else.

Maintenance of the relationship becomes all the more crucial when agency employees rotate through job roles frequently. Some partners reported significant gaps during which positions went unfilled, or quick successive turnovers that left them unsure who to work with on previously planned activities:

> God, we were without a district ranger for a year and a half…Effectively we had acting, in-house acting rangers, we had interim rangers for a year and a half. And then our ORA vanished the first of the year. Our forest supervisor… is transferring…the first of the year. We don’t even know who our new forest supervisor is going to be. The wilderness manager…at the regional office …she’s moving to another position and we’re getting another wilderness manager, rec specialist in the regional office. There’s this constant turnover in agency personnel. And it really, the nature of… our partnership…is determined by who that person or who those persons happen to be. –NGO Partner

This seems to be a challenge inherent in the way the agency hiring process functions, encouraging employees to move between positions and offices in order to advance. This observation was made by both agency and NGO partners, but seems to be accepted as status quo by both parties despite the frustrations expressed by NGO partners regarding such frequent change. The difficulties presented by this system can be mitigated by building relationships with multiple agency employees at multiple levels and creating sufficient institutional memory to sustain the partnership through staffing changes. One NGO partner described her well-tuned system for welcoming new agency staff to the local office, sending the individual a letter, a calendar, and scheduling a meeting immediately. By creating a positive first impression as well as drawing on relationships with other agency staff in the office, she believes her organization has maintained a strong partnership and made smooth transitions.

Above and beyond the procedural elements of building a strong partnership, interviewees stressed the importance of building trusting relationships through communication and time spent in face-to-face interaction. As one interviewee emphasized, partnerships are between people, people who have opinions and feelings. By nurturing the interpersonal relationships that are at the core of both personal and professional dealings, partners found themselves able to work through challenges and conflicts more smoothly and were more likely to feel driven to make the partnership succeed. Partners who described seeing one another both in the professional sense as well as the personal sense, in many cases interacting outside of work in social situations, said that the bond created between individuals creates a lasting dedication to the stewardship projects and the partnership as a whole.

Understanding the Challenges of Process: Rules, Regulations, and Funding

The steps involved in building a partnership between an NGO and a federal land management agency can range from simply obtaining a signed volunteer agreement for each individual on the ground to writing a Memorandum of Understanding or Cost Share Agreement. The details of such agreements vary widely between as well as within agencies, and consistently are a challenge both agency and NGO partners as they struggle to navigate policy and regulation.

For NGO partners, the regulations and processes of the federal government can be confusing and seem to impede progress and work, one NGO partner stating:

> It is sometimes a little frustrating that they have a procedure for everything, virtually everything they do. And, again, I'm being somewhat a little metaphorical there. But it can be a little bit of a challenge that.

Interviewees said that these processes and regulations impact training and certification, NEPA, EIS and EA requirements, and what sorts of activities a partner can undertake in the field with what level of certification or supervision. Wilderness stewards face particular challenges in the use of primitive tools like crosscut saws. One NGO partner was particularly frustrated that agency certifications vary significantly and a certification from one agency is not considered valid on another agency's land. From the perspective of a partner group ready to begin work in local Wilderness, the processes involved with agency work seem arduous, endless, and confusing, dominating the time of their agency partners and impeding their ability to "make a difference on the ground". This NGO partner described bureaucratic barriers, saying:

> And so I think that oftentimes we are running up against… the bureaucracy of the agencies in terms of their ability to react in a timely manner… in order to engage in some of these stewardship projects.

For some partners with agency employment experience, this procedural timeline is understood, but no easier with which to work. NGOs often function on different budgetary timelines or need to work within the confines of restricted donations or grant funds for projects, resulting in differing needs for project prioritization. The NEPA process was mentioned numerous times as a particularly time-consuming step in project planning and as a barrier to implementing projects NGOs deem necessary and time-sensitive.

Frustration with this particular policy seems to be dependent on what level of Cooperative Planning the partnership employs, and NGOs that are more active in suggesting projects experience greater frustration with agency timelines. Generally, once a partnership has been active for multiple years, the NGO's frustration diminishes as they gain increased understanding of agency policies and restrictions. For an NGO partner to be successful, they must endeavor to understand agency policy and procedure and then learn to work within it, ideally with the guidance of their agency partner. Gaining such insight helps to mitigate frustrations as well as provide common understanding from which to plan and collaborate with the agency partner to move forward with the most suitable and mutually beneficial project plan for the partnership.

This frustration is echoed by agency partners who struggle to implement projects brought to the table that haven't been integrated into their plan of work, or to work within a budgetary structure that restricts what money can be spent on which project. One agency partner said:

> Ultimately Congress tells us here's your money, and this is what you're supposed to do with it. And when we start trying to do more than what we're funded for and we don't have the personnel to facilitate a partner group doing certain work, we get into a bind because we're not able to do any of the work we want to do effectively when we spread ourselves too thin trying to suit everybody's needs.

As a result, both agency and NGO partners made two recurring and similar requests: a dedicated agency partnership or volunteer coordinator on a local level to help both agency and NGO partners work through the necessary processes and paperwork; and a “handbook” to explain to NGO partners the individual steps and options each partnership encounters as well as the details of agency policy. Smoothing out the process of beginning and maintaining the procedural side of a partnership would be aided greatly by a dedicated staff person with an in-depth and working knowledge of partnerships. A handbook laying out agency operations, policies and procedures would bolster strong communication and understand between agency and NGO partners.

Some partners recognized that partnership coordinators or a similar position existed in other areas of the country, or had previously existed in their area. However, as agency budgets continue to decrease and positions are removed, it was felt that partnership coordinator-type positions were frequently among the first to be eliminated. It can be concluded that many partners felt inadequately equipped to begin a partnership without guidance, struggling through procedural steps and unsure of how to properly address the finer, interpersonal points of building a relationship between the agency and a non-profit partner. This is likely why the fifteen partnerships included in this study varied so greatly in structure and history, and though the agencies continue to place greater emphasis on partnerships, these types of challenges will likely continue to surface unless greater guidance is provided at the leadership level.

Lastly, though partnerships for stewardship are not new, many interviewees felt like they had to "reinvent the wheel" with each step. This agency partner developed a partnership despite a lack of information, saying:

> We didn't know that we could do that. We didn't even know to ask that question when we started out. So you kind of do things the hard way until you just figure it out or you get so burned out it's like there has got to be an easier way. And that's kind of what happened here.

There exists no singular definition of a Wilderness stewardship partnership and there seems to be little sharing of information between NGO partners or agency staff. In their personal recommendations, a number of interviewees suggested that new partners share resources with other partnerships, including an agency partner who said:

> I think not only additional federal funding to facilitate access to collaborative events but also I think interagency workshops would be an excellent tool, getting all the land management agencies and possibly state agencies together who utilize similar partners. Bring them together and brainstorm how we can improve what we offer, what the partners offer, and what we expect.

This agency interviewee is fairly new to partnerships. However, this sentiment was shared more implicitly by others in statements indicating that interviewees aren't completely aware of what other agency employees are doing, how other partnerships operate, or how many partnerships exist focusing on Wilderness stewardship. This agency partner stated,

> Almost every task we do out there nowadays requires some kind of certification. Driver's training, radio training, crosscut saw training, sign training, trail maintenance training. It's everything under the sun. Recreation site monitoring training, GPS training, map reading skills, public contacts. All of it comes with time. But I feel as though I have to put together a separate training manual and maybe I need to explore the wilderness.net more and contact my other wilderness managers in the nation that maybe have something similar.

A call to share information and resources is clear, and must be addressed from both the NGO and agency perspectives.

**Implications**

Our findings clearly indicate that Wilderness stewardship partnerships require a significant amount of nurturing and commitment, supporting previous findings (Meyers & Hunger, 2006; Wilderness Advisory Group, 2009). In order to foster trust and maintain strong and clear communication, partners must both be willing to commit a considerable amount of time to developing interpersonal relationships. This finding brings into focus the recommendations made in the WAG paper (2009) to promote communication and provide the capacity needed to foster a strong friendship. However, a number of interviewees suggested this is often best done outside of the work context, requiring partners to spend personal time building the foundation for a partnership. Indeed, many of the agency interviewees indicated that they had spent personal time attending meetings or partner social events in order to maintain a strong relationship, and many NGO partners are engaged solely on a volunteer basis. While previous partnership literature certainly highlights the importance of time spent developing these relationships, the importance of spending time building friendships "after hours" adds greater nuance to just how much dedication is required beyond the normal scope of work for an agency employee. While both the WAG paper (2009) and Meyers and Hunger (2006) identified the importance of capacity, we suggest that perhaps this element requires greater attention.

Likewise, building consensus around mutual goals and expectations requires an up-front investment of time and energy in the creation of an agreement, MOU, or other form of partnership arrangement. Broader partnership literature (James, 1999; Huxham & Vangen, 1996; O'Neill, 2004; Selin & Chavez, 1992) identifies the importance of working to establish common goals with mutual benefit early, and the importance on this task as heard from participants was likewise important with an emphasis on the potential for negative outcomes without such boundaries. Neither of the two Wilderness-focused pieces of literature featured this concept prominently, but our research suggests that in the Wilderness context, with a large number of stewardship organizations simultaneously lobbying for the designation of more acreage of Wilderness, such a document is critical. Additionally, the added component of advocacy work may create greater urgency in the context of Wilderness stewardship partnerships; McAvoy et al. (1991) acknowledge that a history of conflict or litigation can "impede communication between groups, which, in turn, exacerbates and perpetuates the conflict" (pp. 44). This would suggest the heightened importance of establishing an agreement early on, but this particular dynamic could use to be explored in greater depth.

Referring to Figure 1., partners should identify which decision-making process they will adopt early in the process to establish a common understanding of ground rules, at the same time acknowledging that this process may be dynamic over time as the partnership grows. This specific schematic further narrows recommendations in previous literature that partners establish common goals and objectives, and to some degree supports recommendations by McAvoy et al. (1991) that partners employ a "transactive process" that acknowledges human limitations on knowledge and doesn't assume that the agency can always identify the "best" approach. Huxham and Vangen (1996) likewise found collaborative decision making, incorporating different parties' agendas into the partnership's agenda, to be the most highly effective method of addressing potentially incongruous objectives. However, some partners believed that agency-driven or NGO-driven decision making models, falling at either end of the spectrum in Figure 1., could also work within the context of Wilderness stewardship partnerships, Jacobi and Wellman (1983) observed in five non-profits that volunteers required a certain level of autonomy in order to maintain independent motivation. This aligns with the "NGO-driven with agency oversight" model. Because no previous literature found that an entirely agency-driven model was the best approach our research adds a more nuanced approach to decision-making possibilities, supporting previous literature but also suggesting that there is not one best practice in decision making. Instead, what works best for each partnership depends greatly on the past and present dynamics between an organization and the agency, as well as the capacity of each partner to participate in the decision making process.

Subsequent planning sessions and regular meetings further require both parties to be accommodating, committed, and prepared to work within the established guidelines of the partnership. The importance of compromise (Huxham & Vangen, 1996), communication and "leaving your ego and control at the door" (O'Neill, 2004), cooperation (McLean, 1993), Each yearly cycle requires active and engaged project planning, implementation, and evaluation in order to nurture a sustainable and effective program.

The importance of a dedicated agency liaison to the success of a stewardship partnership must not be underestimated and thus frequently changing agency employees may prove detrimental to the success of a partnership. Meyers and Hunger (2006) refer to this individual as the "agency champion", highlighting the amount of energy that goes into fostering a strong partnership and the importance of that one person's support. As liaisons change NGOs may need to be prepared to deal with varying levels of dedication to working with volunteers. While this cannot easily be remedied, agency employees working with partner organizations need to work to create a sustainable partnership that can continue to thrive should they take another position.

Challenges with process and procedure require patience and clear communication between agency and NGO partners regarding policy, regulations, time requirements, and any confusion that may arise around these issues. During these discussions plans should also be made to address potential staff turnover, an issue identified by Selin and Chavez (1992) as endemic to the structure of the agency career ladder. Turnover can similarly effect NGO operations, and McLean (1993) suggests planning more generally for the loss of key people in a partnership, identifying contingency plans to maintain cooperation.

Interviewees frequently expressed frustrations with agency timelines and policy requirements, a challenge that must be addressed through clear communication and peer education between partners. Previous literature identified operational factors or “red tape” as constraints or challenges to partnership (Selin & Chavez, 1992; James, 1999; O'Neill, 2004), and our research supports these findings. Partners should address the specific components of NEPA and the Environmental Assessment/Environmental Impact Statement process required for project implementation very early in the partnership so that both parties understand the timeline and steps required. Likewise, NGO partners should explain the particulars of non-profit organization and operation in terms of fiscal year, funding sources, grant timelines and personnel needs. If advocacy or political campaigning is a part of an NGO’s operational structure, clear boundaries must be established between stewardship and campaign activities to ensure that both partners understand the roles and expectations of the partnership.

In truth, managing volunteers and facilitating a partnership is a considerable undertaking for both agency and NGO partners. As recreation and Wilderness budgets continue to diminish, the emphasis on partnerships will likely continue to grow. Those interested in pursuing partnerships must first consider:

- Am I committed to expending the time and energy required for a successful partnership, possibly dedicating time outside of my normal working hours?
- Do I have the capacity, expertise, and administrative support to begin a partnership?
- Is there a supportive NGO/agency candidate who would champion this partnership with me? Do I have existing relationships that I can build upon? What do I need to do to ensure a strong relationship that will last if I change jobs?
- Are we able to establish shared and mutually beneficial goals? What type of decision making process will we adopt to accomplish those goals? Do we need to examine the role of advocacy or politics in this partnership?
- Do I have sufficient understanding of the agency/NGO processes necessary to begin a partnership? Can we cut through the “red tape”?

Following such an assessment, if an agency or NGO partner is committed to a partnership, this research advances three recommendations:

1. Establish clear and common goals for the partnership in the form of a written agreement. Prior to beginning a partnership agreement, both parties should ensure that their organizational mission and goals will be benefitted or met by engaging in the partnership. Identify what type of agreement is best: a Memorandum of Understanding is often required if funds are to be exchanged, but requires greater administration. A volunteer agreement may be sufficient if services or volunteer hours are involved.

Clearly outline the boundaries and expectations of the partnership and commit to maintaining them, and if the NGO partner is involved in advocacy, communicate openly about how that role does or does not impact the partnership.

2. Communicate openly and often to build trust. Spend time together socially and during projects to nurture the interpersonal relationships that can help carry a partnership through challenges. Involve both partners in recognition events. Schedule face-to-face meetings at least twice yearly, during pre-season project planning and as field season follow-up to assess successes and challenges. If possible, meet more frequently.
3. Educate yourself on agency and NGO processes, policies, and regulations. Identify at the outset any outstanding procedural challenges that may exist for the partnership, such as NGO funding, agency NEPA challenges, or unique regulatory issues. Ask questions when you don't understand, and be patient in navigating required paperwork and trainings. Share information between partners as much as possible to mitigate issues with "red tape" .

Wilderness stewardship partnerships are increasingly important as federal public land agencies work to effectively manage the Wilderness resource in the face of decreased staffing, and increased visitor use and environmental threats. This research highlights the commitment of agency and NGO partners to working together to steward this resource, and suggests great potential for increased partnership activity.

# Bibliography


Absher, J. D. (2008). Partnerships and Volunteers in the U.S. Forest Service. *Proceedings of the 2008 Northeastern Recreation Research Symposium* (pp. 110-114). Newton Square: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Northern Research Station.

Arthur Carhart Center. (2010, March 31). *Creation and Growth of the National Wilderness Preservation System.* Retrieved April 11, 2010, from Wilderness.net: http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec=fastfacts

Brown, C. (2010, February 26). National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance.

Bureau of Land Management. (2007). *Bureau of Land Management Collaboration Desk Guide 2007.* Retrieved March 15, 2010, from Bureau of Land Management: http://www.blm.gov/pgdata/etc/medialib/blm/wo/Law_Enforcement/nlcs/partnerships.Par.36368.File.dat/Collaboration_Desk_Guide.pdf

Bureau of Land Management. (2008). *Knowing Your Non-Profit Partners: A Desk Guide for Federal Employees.* Retrieved March 15, 2010, from Bureau of Land Management: http://www.blm.gov/pgdata/etc/medialib/blm/wo/Law_Enforcement/nlcs/partnerships.Par.25719.File.dat/Nonprofit_Desk_Guide.doc

Carroll, B., & Loudon, B. (2002, March). *A Look at Partnerships in the Pacific Southwest Region.* Retrieved March 15, 2010, from Partnership Resource Center: http://www.partnershipresourcecenter.org/resources/publications/r5_partnership_report_2002/R5reportcolorfinal.PDF

Cordell, H. K., Betz, C. J., Stephens, B., Mou, S., & Green, G. T. (2008, January). *How Do Americans View Wilderness- Part I.* Retrieved June 10, 2011, from IRIS- Internet Research Information Series: http://warnell.forestry.uga.edu/nrrt/nsre/IRISWild/IrisWild1rpt.pdf

Cousens, L., Barnes, M., Stevens, J., Mallen, C., & Bradish, C. (2006). Who's your partners? Who's your ally? Exploring the characteristics of public, private, and voluntary recreation linkages. *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration, 24*(1), 32-55.

English, L. S. (2005). Public-private partnerships and public sector management reform: A comparative perspective. *International Journal of Public Policy, 1*(1), 1-21.

Hansen, W. (1989). Things That Work: Practical Partnerships in Wilderness Management. *Managing America's Enduring Wilderness Resource*, (pp. 239-242). Minneapolis.

Hendee, J. C., & Dawson, C. P. (2001). Stewardship to Address the Threats to Wilderness Resources and Values. *International Journal of Wilderness*, 4-9.

Huxham, C., & Vangen, S. (1996). Working together: Key themes in the management of relationships between public and non-profit organizations. *International Journal of Public Sector Management, 9*(7), 5-17.

Jacobi, C. D., & Wellman, J. D. (1983). Recreation Management In Cooperation with Nonprofit Organizations: Pros and Cons. *Journal of Forestry, 81*(9), 589-592.

James, K. J. (1999). Understanding successful partnerships and collaborations. *Parks & Recreation, 34*(5), 38-46.

McAvoy, L. H., Schatz, C., & Lime, D. W. (1991). Cooperation in Resource Management: A Model Planning Process for Promoting Partnerships between Resource Managers and Private Service Providers. *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration, 9*(4), 42-58.

McLean, D. C. (1993). Partnering: extending resources and building networks. *Parks and Recreation, 28*(12), 48-52.

Meyers, C. G., & Hunger, D. (2006). Components of and Barriers to Building Successful Interagency Wilderness Citizen Stewardship Programs. *International Journal of Wilderness*, 33-36.

National Forest Foundation and USDA Forest Service, National Partnership Office. (2005, May). *Partnership Guide: The Power of People Working Together.* Retrieved March 20, 2010, from Partnership Resource Center: http://www.partnershipresourcecenter.org/resources/partnership-guide/Partnership-Guide.pdf

National Park Service. (2002, June 6). *Wilderness Education and Partnership Plan.* Retrieved March 15, 2010, from National Park Service: http://wilderness.nps.gov/document/wilderness%20education%20and%20partnership%20plan.pdf

O'Neill, B. (2004). *21 Partnership Success Factors.* Retrieved March 23, 2010, from California State Parks: http://www.parks.ca.gov/pages/735/files/oneill%20partnership%20success%20factors%202.doc

Selin, S., & Chavez, D. (1992). Developing a Theory of Recreation Partnerships in the National Forest System. *Recreation Working Group, Society of American Foresters National Convention* (pp. 427-432). Richmond: Society of American Foresters.

Strauss, A. C., & Corbin, J. M. (2007). *Basics of Qualitative Research, Second Edition.* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Uhlik, K. S. (2005). How and Why: Partnership's Unanswered Questions. *Parks and Recreation*, 26-33.

Wilderness Advisory Group. (2009, March 26). Creating Shared Stewardship of the Wilderness Resource through Partnerships and Volunteers: The Top 10 Partnership Challenges and Solutions. United States Forest Service.