

CONSERVATION IN HD



US Fish and Wildlife Service
Human Dimensions Branch

Collaborative Conservation:

What, Why, When, and How?

Across the Service, we're increasingly recognizing that we have to actively collaborate with others to address problems and achieve desired conservation outcomes. The issues we face are complex and cut across jurisdictions and boundaries. We cannot effectively address these problems without coordinating with others and working at larger scales than our own park or refuge.

*The term **collaborative conservation** is often used to describe work with private landowners, state agencies, non-governmental organizations, and others to achieve collective impacts. While we have many success stories to point to across the Service—some of which are highlighted below—collaborating with others can be challenging. When done well though, collaboration can generate more informed and durable solutions to some of our most difficult conservation problems.*

In this issue of Conservation in HD, we break down the key tenets of how to collaborate, examine the need-to-know basics for talking about collaborative conservation, provide a case study of collaboration in action, and highlight resources you can turn to for more information on how to do it.

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What is collaborative conservation?

Collaboration is a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences, and search for solutions that go beyond what any one of them might have thought possible. “Collaborative conservation” emerged in the 80’s and 90’s in response to frustration with conventional and often adversarial approaches to resolving disagreements about natural resource management (i.e., litigation). The premise of collaboration is to provide more meaningful opportunities for parties to participate in decisions, produce more durable and widely supported outcomes, improve working relationships, and minimize costs in the long-run.



Why collaborate?

Collaboration is often necessary for agencies with limited resources to tackle more complex problems. It enables agencies to work with others to pool resources, not duplicate efforts, and make a difference at larger spatial scales. In this way, collaboration can leverage the unique capacity, knowledge, and capabilities of different elements of society to creatively address shared problems. Some common characteristics of situations that might call for collaboration include:

- Large-scale, shared problems, such as wildfire or pollution. Can we only achieve desired outcomes by working with others? Can we be proactive about a problem or issue if we get others involved?
- Local actors who are involved and fairly powerful. Can we work with the personalities involved and foster a sense of shared responsibility?
- Conflict. There may be gridlock or disagreement, but is there also common ground to be found? Are there new or different ways to interact? Can we focus on the problem in a new way?

When is collaborative conservation *not* the answer?

It is important to recognize that collaborative conservation is not a panacea. It is a process, not an outcome, and as such, requires time, patience, and effort—especially when you have to build trust and work through past conflict. Collaborations sometimes fail when participants do not pay enough attention to the process, and/or are not fully committed to working with others to address a shared problem. Collaborative conservation may also not be appropriate when:

- Stakeholders must compromise their fundamental values to participate.
- A true solution will actually require policy change outside the scope of any of the parties involved.
- There is lack of incentive to meet goals or solve the problem.
- Key interests are not represented or key actors cannot or will not participate.

How do I foster collaborative conservation?

Each context is different, and there is no single how-to guide or manual for collaboration. However, successful collaborative efforts tend to share the same characteristics. Here are some tips that you can learn from them:

- 1. Build on common ground:** Successful collaborations build off of shared connections to a particular place, shared visions for the future, or desire to solve a shared problem. This approach is sometime referred to as the 80-20 rule: Work on the 80% of the issue that is held in common, instead of the 20% that divides. For example, the [Fishers & Farmers Partnership](#) focuses on protecting the health of agricultural watersheds so that farms and fish thrive together. The watershed is the 80% that fishers and farmers hold in common.
- 2. Find boundary spanners:** Boundary spanners are people or organizations that straddle divides between politics, science, and practice, and facilitate interaction among these different actors in order to make space for innovation and shared understanding. A great example of a boundary spanner is Jim Stone, Chairman of Partners for Conservation. Find out what he has to say about collaboration [here](#).
- 3. Employ systematic processes:** How will people interact? How will decisions be made? The process must be considered fair by all participants. Ensure structured opportunities for genuine involvement and two-way information exchange. When the [Upper South Platte Partnership](#) faced disagreement about forest treatment approaches, it brought on professional facilitators to develop systematic processes, including decision rules, a “one voice, one vote” model, meeting protocols, and topic-specific working groups.
- 4. Create new opportunities for interaction:** Open new lines of communication, such as one-on-one meetings with neighboring landowners to hear their stories. Some opportunities that the [Hewitt Creek Watershed Initiative](#) suggests are inviting respected landowners to demonstrate best management practices in local workshops and making education and dialogue about desired conditions a priority.



Fishers & Farmers Partnership,
Credit: National Fish Habitat Partnership



Pollinator habitat project in Illinois,
Credit: Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program

- 5. Focus on people and relationships:** Good collaborations help transform participants from adversaries who may see each other as the problem to neighbors working together to find solutions to shared problems. To achieve this, focus on building understanding and trust. Key skills for building relationships include humility, honesty, sincerity, creativity, good listening, and empathy. Scroll down to read Heather Johnson’s story about the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, which exemplifies the value of focusing on relationships, opening up new lines of communication, and building on common ground.



Credit: Heather Johnson, USFWS

“Collaborative conservation takes collaborative conversations.”

—Jim Stone, Montana private landowner and Chairman of Partners for Conservation

The role of state and federal agencies in collaboration

Collaboration raises a few additional issues specifically for staff at state and federal agencies. For instance, collaboration requires government agencies to share some decision-making power with others. However, agencies cannot delegate their statutory authority to collaborative groups, and decision-making often must be open to broader public involvement. This can be a fine line for agency staff to walk, so here are a few things to keep in mind:

Agencies need to ask the same questions about collaborative processes as any public decision-making process, including:

- ◇ Is it legitimate? Is it wise?
- ◇ Is it tied to law and regulations? Does it allow for public review?
- ◇ Is it fair? Is it open and transparent?
- ◇ Are credible representatives involved?
- ◇ Are decisions creative and do they address problems?
- ◇ Are decisions rooted in best science?

In addition, managers need to be willing to:

- ◇ go beyond minimum requirements for consultation and collaboration;
- ◇ empower others, including their own staffs, to be creative and take ownership over solving a problem; and
- ◇ shift from saying, “this is the way we do things” to “how can we do things better in the future?” and being open to trying something new.

Finally, be aware that if you are seeking consensus advice from a formalized group external to the federal government, you may be subject to requirements of the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA). See FAQs and other resources below under “Where can I find out more?”

Collaborative Conservation In Action

by Heather Johnson

I am out on a working cattle ranch for a field visit with a group of partners, listening to the landowner tell his story. He is a humble man, not necessarily comfortable talking in front of this large group. He starts by saying that the “Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program changed his life.” He stops speaking for a moment and takes a pause—he got a little choked up. He talks about being at the cross roads with his working cattle ranch, uncertain if he was going to be able to keep the ranch profitable for his family. There is nothing that means more to him than his family and this piece of land that he hopes to pass on to his children and grandchildren.



Heather Johnson is the Chief of the Partners for Fish and Wildlife (PFW) Program in the Mountain-Prairie Region. She has worked for the Service for 28 years and been with the PFW Program for the past 14 years.



Credit: Heather Johnson, USFWS

Wyoming landowners sharing their story about releasing Wyoming toads on their private land, as part of a larger community-based effort to recover this highly endangered toad.

He then shares about the day when the Partners for Fish and Wildlife (PFW) Program biologist approached him “like no other government employee had.” He mentions that this person actually came by the ranch and wanted to know specifically what would be helpful for him. The PFW biologist spent all day with him, driving around the ranch and asking what his needs were to improve the pastures and increase his bottom line. The biologist asked about his family and was sincerely interested in helping. “He really listened and was honest when he spoke, even if he had to tell me something I didn’t want to hear.” The landowner was impressed that the PFW biologist sat right at the kitchen table and worked through a variety of options for projects, providing lots of flexibility to make sure it was a win-win project for both wildlife

and him as a cattle producer. He starts to choke up one more time when he says “that was years ago. Today my ranch is profitable, and I am going to be able to stay on this land and pass it down to my kids and their kids for generations to come”. He mentions that having the PFW biologist help out with on-the-ground projects and technical assistance made all the difference in the world to him and he will remain forever grateful.

The PFW program is the Service’s voluntary private lands habitat restoration and enhancement program. The program started over 30 years ago, when the Service recognized that it could not meet its mission without working with private landowners across the country. There are currently 240 PFW staff in the Service, and more than 50,000 projects have been completed with private landowners since the program’s inception. Although these projects were all unique and benefitted a wide variety of high priority federal trust species, all of the landowner partnerships had one special thing in common—collaboration! In addition to having the right size of pipe, the correct mix of native seeds, or the specialized equipment, the “secret sauce” to successful projects was the collaborative partnerships, which we in the Mountain-Prairie Region call our *PFW Cornerstones*. The ingredients that make up our cornerstones include trust, respect, honesty, flexibility, friendship, and two-way communication. Focusing on people and relationships is key. The partnerships are taking place, one ranch or farm at a time, across the country and providing wildlife habitat at state, regional and national scales.



Credit: Heather Johnson, USFWS

“Partners working together helped me accomplish long-term goals and support the future of healthy grasslands and sustainable, profitable ranching”

—Bill Barby, PFW Cooperating Landowner

**Want to get up-to-date announcements on HD happenings?
Email Human_Dimensions@fws.gov to be added to our email list**

Also, check out the [FWS HD Resource Portal](#) for more resources!

Where can I find out more?

Take a look at the following websites and resources, many of which helped inform this newsletter:

Partners for Conservation Learn more about this grassroots movement of private landowners working with agencies, non-profits, and policymakers on conservation projects.

Fishers & Farmers Partnership This program provides an excellent example of bridging across seemingly-opposing interests to reach a common goal of healthy farms, healthy fish, and healthy streams.

Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program Learn more about the Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, highlighted in the In-Action piece above.

Nature's Good Neighbors Check out this national storytelling campaign about the Service working with private landowners to do conservation work.

Network Models and Lessons from Across the U.S. This report discusses collaborative conservation in the context of network governance and provides examples of collaborative networks as well as lessons learned.

FACA FAQs Take a look at these frequently asked questions to find out if FACA applies to your collaborative effort.

What's the FACA? You can learn more about FACA and how it relates to collaborative processes in this Managing by Network blog.

Jim Stone, Conserving the Future Take a look at this 20-minute video for a presentation by Jim Stone at the 2011 *Conserving the Future: Wildlife Refuges and the Next Generation* conference about collaborative conservation in Montana and the success of the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program.

Bodin, O. (2017). Collaborative environmental governance: Achieving collective action in social-ecological systems. *Science*, 357(6352). <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aan1114>

Scarlett, L. & McKinney, M. (2016). [Connecting people and places: the emerging role of network governance in large landscape conservation](#). *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 14(3), 116-125

Wondolleck, J. & Yaffee, S.L. (2000). *Making Collaboration Work: Lessons From Innovation in Natural Resource Management*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press.