

# Partnerships: Innovative strategies for wildlife conservation

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**A fresh look at the partnership approach and a springboard for future conservation partnerships profiles for the *Wildlife Society Bulletin*. The authors share thoughts on public-private partnerships.**

When 2 or more people combine their resources to accomplish a common goal, a partnership is formed. It is not surprising, therefore, that "partnership" and "partner" are prominent words in the contemporary vernacular of wildlife conservation. In recent years, these terms have become ubiquitous in usage by agency administrators, resource professionals, university professors, and environmental activists. Throughout the conservation community, "partnership" appears in such diverse places as promotional brochures, mission statements, briefing books, conference themes, program presentations, budget proposals, and newspaper headlines. Standard dictionary definitions are inadequate as these words take on new meanings and uses, such as the use of "partner" as a verb as well as a noun. To paraphrase a prominent American, "I don't know what a partnership is, but I know one when I see one."

With its popularity, partnership risks joining buzzwords like "biodiversity" or "sustainable development" as yet 1 more compelling but vague politically correct term in the lexicon of wildlife professionals. Murphy and Noon (1991) cautioned wildlife biologists and managers against the proliferation of more jargon and "sloppy terminology". Therefore, to prevent this important concept from becoming trite, we offer the following working definition: a partnership is a voluntary collaboration of individuals, organizations, or both to achieve common goals on a specific project within a definite time.

Partnerships require meaningful, participative relationships among 2 or more partners. The best partnerships are among individuals (not necessarily organizations) where each contributes a combination of *time, talent, and treasury*. Partners need not agree on politics, the weather, or sports, but they are bound by a common interest in the project at hand. Partners express this interest through a commitment of their time, their talents (ranging from business acumen to political connections), and treasury (be it their own or an ability to ask others). All have expressed their willingness to INVEST. Without investment, a partnership is a mislabeled public relations event.

Expanded mandates and reduced budgets are forcing natural resource agencies to seek new ways of doing business. The need for partnerships is written on the steps of Capitol Hill. For the foreseeable future, the federal government will be forced to deal with its budget deficit. While natural resource management budgets form a tiny portion of the federal budget, they stand to bear a disproportionate burden of reducing the budget deficit. As entitlements rise, other budget items feel the pressure. The fact that natural resource budgets comprise less than 1 cent of the federal tax dollar also illustrates, in a very real sense, the challenge facing conservation. Partnerships provide 2 powerful incentives that help in the competition for a share of the budget pie—they leverage available funding while building constituencies.

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Partnerships must be more than a process and they must have an on-the-ground connection. Partnerships, like the politics of the late Tip O'Neill, must be local. Successful efforts entail much more direct involvement and organizational commitment of the partners than merely entering into a cooperative or contractual agreement. History is replete with examples of conservation failures that have been developed and implemented by outside parties without the benefits of local input. Such failures are often caused by well meaning conservationists seeking to achieve their worthy goals without taking on partners from locally affected areas.

In the quest to conserve our threatened biological diversity, partnerships are increasingly the tool of choice among state and federal agencies resulting in new and nontraditional alliances with private organizations and corporations (Manage. Inst. for Environ. and Business 1993). Endicott (1993) traces the emergence of the public-private partnership movement in land conservation over the past 2 decades. Our purpose is to identify some of the key elements of conservation partnerships.

### **Beyond cooperation**

From a historical perspective, cooperation and successful conservation are synonymous. Most of what has been accomplished in the name of conservation over the past 50 years is the product of public agencies, private organizations, and dedicated individuals working together in a common cause. Landmark legislation, species protection, habitat management, resource planning, and biological research have all benefited from this collaboration and cooperation.

As we approach the next millennium, however, the conservation community faces challenges more complex and vexatious than those past. Current "crises" in species protection and habitat conservation are too challenging to be solved by agencies, organizations, or individuals acting alone (Trauger and Hall 1992). Economic and political forces are frequently so powerful and the biological and social interests so divergent that resource managers and conservationists are overwhelmed and underfunded when development and environmental interests track a collision course. Human numbers and needs are rapidly increasing at the same time that individual aspirations and expectations are expanding. Diverse special interests clog political systems and compete for priority on the national agenda and in the budgets of governments, organizations, foundations, and corporations. Consequently, threats and conflicts affecting wildlife and wild places are rapidly accelerating at the same time capability and op-

portunity to protect and preserve them appear diminished.

While human endeavor will always be rooted in self-interest, partnerships involve enlightened self-interest. The key is to focus all points of view on what binds the mutual interests rather than what divides. Mutual interest is clearly the paramount principle in conservation partnerships (Metzger 1983). Successful partners share a common concern and seek a shared solution based on a shared vision of success. This common goal must be equally important to all partners. As such, they hinge not only on the 3 *T*'s named above, but equally on the 4 *C*'s—*challenge, commitment, communication, and cooperation*.

### **Before engaging**

Partnerships will not solve all problems or apply in every situation, but they can be effective in advancing programs and accomplishing projects. In seeking to name the necessary parts of a successful partnership, the prospective partner must first determine whether a partnership is the right tool. Much as the manufacturers of everything from computer software to lawn mowers extol users to "READ THIS FIRST", so too are there basic guidelines on whether to engage the partnership mode.

### **Warning label**

With tools, there is always a warning label. Partnerships are a tool, and like all tools, there are times when they are effective and times when other tools may be more useful. Partnerships are like a living organism in that they need constant nourishment and hard work for their maintenance and well being. Unlike so many advancements in our society, partnerships are low-tech by nature and there are few, if any, shortcuts. Egos and turf must be checked at the door or kept on a short leash as participants proceed to the partners table. According to Endicott (1993), turf consciousness and lack of a clear consensus were the greatest problems associated with partnerships. Avoid partnerships for partnership sake.

### **Worthy project**

A good partnership is founded on a solid conservation need. Some types of projects lend themselves more readily to partnerships than others. Certainly, the nature of the project dictates the make-up of its partners. Habitat acquisition and restoration projects, for example, may be more attractive to certain prospective partners, while long-term research appeals to entirely different partners.

This is not a judgment on the relative merits of habitat acquisition versus long-term research, but rather a comment on the needs and objectives of prospective partners. To be successful, partnerships must lead to effective action and tangible results. The benefits should be worth the costs.

### ***Communication***

Effective communication is the cornerstone of any successful partnership. Constant communication is necessary to share information and to ensure coordination. Partners must clearly express their needs, desires, and expectations from each other and for the project. Nonprofit organizations and government agencies both point to better communication and consensus building as the way to avoid problems (Endicott 1993). Goodwill and trust among partners is built through honest, clear communication on a frequent, sustained basis.

### ***Participation***

Partnerships require hard work and depend on mutual commitment and effort. All partners should be full and active participants, open to differing values, interests, and styles. Partners must listen openly to new ideas, different perspectives, and divergent viewpoints. Partners must consider innovative options, radical proposals, and unconventional solutions. Partners should be empowered to work together at the lowest possible or feasible level, that is, partnerships are local.

### ***Equity***

Like all relationships, partnerships depend on mutual effort, trust, and respect. Partners should share the responsibility as well as the credit. The fastest way for a partnership to go awry is for the sponsor to treat funding partners differently (for example, on the perceived value of their contribution) or to withhold information from them about the project. Before launching a project, partners must know each other's interests and why they are involved in the project. One partner should not be expected to do all of the work or all of the compromising. Partners should tread lightly on the other's egos and turf.

### ***Non-traditional partners***

Given the need for new sources of funding and broader constituencies, conservationists need to seek partnerships that embrace new, non-traditional players. The resources that these seldom-tapped partners can bring to the table are enormous. Conservationists, as a rule, spend too much time

speaking to each other and not enough time reaching out to new partners. Rather than being so quick to determine who our enemies are, we should work to win new converts to conservation of biological diversity. The best source of converts is the rank and file of those perceived to be against natural resources conservation. In addition, there is growing recognition that many social and environmental problems share common roots, providing more opportunities to broaden cooperative efforts. Strive to include all of the stakeholders at the outset.

### ***Leverage***

To understand the strength of a partnership, examine its appeal from the funder's viewpoint. Funders, from Congress to a local family trust, are continually bombarded by requests to serve their constituents. Each year, for example, the House and Senate Appropriations Committees receive thousands of requests for add-ons above and beyond the budget submitted by the President. In each case, the appellants claim that their project is vital and dependent on Congressional attention. Multiply such claims 1,000 and even the most conscientious members of Congress grow numb.

Consider the alternative. The funder is approached to share in the cost of a project rather than foot the entire bill. Already the appellant has left the pack of favor-seekers behind by requesting part, rather than all, of the required funding. A cost-sharing project comes with an endorsement that other interests view the project of sufficient value that they are also willing to invest in it. Cost-sharing tests the hypothesis that if a project is viable, more than a single donor should be willing to fund it. Cost sharing has 1 other important element, especially for corporations and Congress—constituency. The building of funding partnerships is akin to the building of constituencies.

### ***Flexibility***

Partnerships must be flexible. There is no single recipe or cookbook. Like a good camp cook, partners must be adaptive and ready to improvise. Regulations, such as those encumbering state and federal agencies, can stifle a partnership if rigidly applied. Partners should not get bogged down in paperwork and bureaucracy, rather, they should employ the KISS principle (Keep It Simple, Stupid).

### ***Funding***

Partners should share expertise, equipment, information, technology, and funds. Each partner must understand the nature and extent of their

commitments and responsibilities. Since any transfer of funds from 1 partner to another may affect the quality of the relationship, care must be taken to ensure that partners remain equal and that money does not subordinate any partner. In some partnerships, the contribution of 1 or more of the partners may be primarily money. As wildlife biologists and managers, we greatly appreciate those who can contribute money to match with our expertise and technical capability. In such cases, however, care must be taken to ensure that partners providing most of the necessary funding do not receive preferential treatment relative to other partners. In addition, 1 partner accepting funds from another also assumes the responsibility of accounting for where and how these funds are expended. To prevent misunderstandings, it is vital that the expected standards of accountability be fully outlined by the funder and understood by the recipient.

Much is often made in the conservation community over the issue of "tainted" money. As a noted conservationist crassly stated, "there ain't no such thing as tainted money 'cept there tain't enough." Money brought to the table willingly and without restrictions by a partner is welcome. It is amusing to

watch efforts by some environmental groups to pass judgment on donations by certain corporations as tainted, yet gleefully accept donations from individuals who may have made their fortune on stocks from those very same corporate entities. If there is any doubt, however, as to the source or expectations of the donor in return for the contribution, the funding should not be applied until the concerns are addressed. Such situations are rare, however, where the other characteristics outlined herein are in force.

## Building partnerships

Having determined that partnerships appear to be the proper tool, the task is now to build the partnership itself. Whether the initiating partner is in the public or private sector is largely irrelevant (Metzger 1983) so long as that partner is realistic about its capabilities and those of its proposed partners. Endicott (1993) provides a "carpenter's manual" of the many tools for building and maintaining public-private partnerships. Like any successful human endeavor, partnerships should focus on a specific project to be accomplished within a specified time. Specific partnerships must fit the organizational, political, so-

*Conservation partnerships: a field guide to public-private partnering for natural resources conservation* by the Management Institute for Environment and Business, 1993, provides a preliminary checklist of partnership do's and don'ts.

### **don't:**

- Limit the ways you use partnerships to further agency objectives.
- Endorse an external product that will be for sale.
- Wait until the last minute to bring in supervisors, public affairs, or agreement specialists to review the contemplated partnership.
- Exceed your authority to solicit partnership funding from private sources.
- Get into turf battles.
- Get frustrated if there are delays. Time periods are estimates only.

### **do:**

- Take the initiative. Talk to people. Think creatively about ways to work with others to achieve common goals.
- Put ideas in writing for people who may be interested. Make sure to represent these as ideas rather than an agreement.
- Define clearly the objectives of a potential partnership, the resources that each participant would bring to the activity, and benefits that each stand to gain.
- Be inclusive. Early on, involve people whose approval or participation will ultimately be required.
- Learn about prospective partners; be comfortable with their reputations and capabilities before joining the partnership.
- Be realistic in estimating the often lengthy periods required to initiate and implement a partnership.
- Investigate alternate strategies for achieving the objective. Are other avenues or other partners better suited to accomplish the objectives?

cial, economic, regulatory, and policy setting that they are intended to address (Metzger 1983).

Management Institute for Environment and Business (1993) is a handbook that was designed to help agency employees and partners alike increase the successful field-level use of conservation partnerships. The publication itself is a partnership of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Phillips Petroleum Company, and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation in cooperation with the Management Institute for Environment and Business.

### Documenting agreements

The need for documentation of a partnership runs the gamut from none at all to extensive and detailed, mirroring the diverse spectrum of working relationships that have been called partnerships. Often it will be essential to formalize partnership agreements in writing. However, in the spirit of keeping paperwork to a minimum, we recommend that such agreements be succinct statements not exceeding 2 pages. These documents should describe the program or project and specify who will be doing what and how by when. Perhaps most important is the vision statement: a clear, concise expression of the desired product or outcome of the partnership.

Some partnerships will involve the sharing or transfer of funds from 1 partner to another. When funds are transferred from 1 party to another, a contract, grant, or some other fiscal agreement is usually involved. In these cases, partnership agreements should specify how the funds are to be used in sup-

port of the project while keeping in mind our "tain't enough" axiom above.

Partnerships may span a variable amount of time from a few months to several years. Some partnerships may result in long-term relationships, while most partnerships should be completed within a few years. Partnership agreements should establish definite beginning and ending dates to avoid indefinite commitments.

Partnership agreements must be signed by all partners. While responsibility for implementing and accomplishing partnerships should be delegated to the lowest practical level, partnership agreements should be signed at the highest levels in the respective organizations. Signing by high level officials ensures sustained organizational commitment to the partnership. In general, partnership agreements should be specific, legal, binding, and enforceable.

### Final thoughts

Challenges confronting wildlife professionals in the conservation of biological diversity are greater than all of our collective capabilities (Trauger and Hall 1992). Partnerships have emerged as a potent tool in the management of natural resources. In the 1990's, partnerships will frequently offer the only politically and fiscally practical way to both resolve conflicts and still progress in an increasingly competitive and complex world. For many public agencies, such as the National Biological Service, partnerships are key to "the way we do business" (Natl. Research Council. 1993).

Throughout the conservation community, there is general recognition that much is to be gained by the public and private sectors working together to

#### Summary drawn from Management Institute for Environment and Business (1993):

- Partnerships are formed among organizations, but succeed because of individuals.
- A successful partnership usually has a strong leader who champions the partnership projects and goals with vision, energy, and enthusiasm.
- The people directly affected by a partnership goal are usually the ones most willing and able to work for it.
- Shared agendas, joint decision-making, and mutual benefit constitute a partnership; money facilitates the projects.
- Senior level support lets a partnership operate easily within the rest of the organization and displays the organization's commitment to other partners and to the general public.
- Organizations must be willing to share responsibility and should enter partnerships with the intention of being an active part of the process.
- A partnership presents an opportunity for organizations to work together beyond business-as-usual, day-to-day activities.
- Most partnerships are proactive and involve action beyond what is required by regulation or policy.

achieve common goals. Public and private sectors agree that there is great strength in the diversity that partners bring to projects (Endicott 1993). What 1 partner lacks in resources, authority, expertise, or information, the other can usually contribute to the partnership (Miller et al. 1986, Sheppard and Hekkers 1989, Soper 1990). Although some conservation partnerships may make strange bedfellows, the most unusual alliances often result in the most effective efforts. Partnerships provide vehicles for divergent interests to achieve solutions to seemingly intractable problems and to accomplish projects for significantly broader benefits. The key is to focus all points of view among the partners to facilitate a fuller understanding of individual and mutual interests and to create synergy in the search for innovative solutions to complex and difficult problems. Partnerships offer excellent opportunities for organizations to share personnel and equipment and to exchange information and technology. Successful partnerships establish a framework for future communication and cooperation.

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*Editor's note:* Our colleagues have provided a substantial springboard for future perspective on conservation partnerships. This is intended to be a routine department for profiling successes, experiences, and recommendations in applying partnerships to conservation challenges. Brief, informative manuscripts about your insights are invited and encouraged. Contact the Editor with ideas and questions.

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