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Above: Working Lands Conservation's summer field crew monitoring ecosystem services in Utah rangelands.

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## Collaborative Approaches for Landscape-scale Restoration

by Kris Hulvey<sup>1</sup> Photos courtesy the author

The successful restoration of healthy, vibrant landscapes in California and across the Western US requires projects that engage communities, scientists, policymakers, and land managers. This idea that stakeholder engagement is key to restoration success is highlighted in the recently revised *International Principles and Standards for the Practice of Ecological Restoration*, where it is listed as the first of eight key principles underpinning ecological restoration (Gann et al. 2019). The value of partnerships is also increasingly recognized by academics (e.g., Bestelmeyer et al., 2019; Aoyama and Huntsinger, 2019), State and Federal Agencies (e.g., NRCs Working Lands for Wildlife program), foundations (e.g., The Hewlett Foundation), and non-profits (e.g., Network for Landscape Conservation, Partners for Conservation, Working Lands Conservation). Such expanding interest in partnerships perhaps stems from our improved understanding of the complex drivers of ecosystem change (like climate change), together with a growing focus on landscape-level restoration goals such as managing ecosystem services. Successful outcomes under these parameters require restoration actions that span property lines, jurisdictions, and spatial scales. Having buy-in from many partners is critical for success.

As a PhD student, I studied yellow starthistle invasion in California grasslands and worked to develop methods that would make these ecosystems more resistant to invaders (Hulvey and Aigner 2014). In grad school I learned experimental design, statistics, and ecological theory. I bet many restoration professionals have a similar background, notably missing a grounding in skills aimed at engaging the diversity of stakeholders needed to complete

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Image 1: Microcosms and small plots — the scale commonly used in restoration studies. Image 2: Sage-scrub landscapes in Northern Utah — the scale at which restoration projects actually occur.

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restoration across real landscapes. My work took place in pots or 1 m x 1 m plots. Now, I work across one million acres of sage-scrub rangeland in northern Utah. The ecological skills in my toolbox are strong, but restoration work at this scale won't happen without the participation of the ranchers, federal and state policy makers, and other managers who steward this public-private landscape mosaic. Collaboration has been essential for successful outcomes.

### What does the partnership universe look like?

A recent review of collaborative partnerships estimates there are currently over 500 multi-stakeholder working groups across the US (Leigh Goldberg Consulting, 2018). The structure of these groups varies widely, ranging from networks of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) focused on improving coordination and collaboration in a watershed or region (e.g., [California Landscape Stewardship Network](#)), to associations of governmental organizations formed to navigate differences in agency policy (e.g., the [One Tam](#) initiative in California), to multi-party networks composed of diverse stakeholders<sup>1</sup>—including NGOs, government

<sup>1</sup>Examples include the [High Divide Collaborative](#) in Montana & Idaho and the [ROGER](#) (Results Oriented Grazing for Ecological Resilience) group in Nevada. For a longer list of collaborative groups, see the [California Landscape Stewardship](#) website, or this [article](#) in the *Landscape Conservation Bulletin*.

agency representatives, landowners, and academics. While these groups don't always have a stated 'restoration' goal guiding their work, their environmental, social, and sustainable economic goals often have significant overlap with those of restoration ecologists and professionals. The partnership lessons learned by these groups' work can be informative to SERCAL members looking to build multi-stakeholder collaborations to further their own restoration activities.

### What are the building blocks of partnerships?

Even when stakeholders value the same landscape and are interested in working collaboratively, building partnerships can be challenging. For example, tension may exist from past management activities that compromised livelihoods or ecosystem health. In my current work in Utah rangelands, a group of 38 permittees, four government agencies, plus non-profit and university scientists, are working together to alter grazing on public lands in order to improve water quality, sage-grouse habitat, and the rangeland vegetation that supports rancher livelihoods (Payne 2018). Several factors were critical for forming this partnership. These factors are also considered vital partnership building blocks by a variety of other multi-stakeholder groups (Partners for Conservation 2018, Boies 2017, Christiansen and Belton 2017).

**A shared problem or goal:** The initial catalyst for many partnerships is avoidance of an unwanted outcome that spurs to action stakeholders from many backgrounds. An example of such an event

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in the Intermountain West was the potential ESA listing of the Greater-sage grouse (Wollstein and Davis 2017), which could have affected rancher activities on public rangelands and required policy changes by the agency partners in charge of managing much of this landscape (Stoellinger & Taylor 2016). Non-action had potential economic repercussions that enticed parties to the table. However, because the Greater-sage grouse use over 173 million acres of public and private lands across the Great Basin and surrounding areas (US Fish & Wildlife Service, 2019), the scale of management needed to address sage-grouse declines and avoid listing was too big for any single group to undertake alone. Partnerships were vital.

**Trust:** Building trust is repeatedly noted as ‘the bedrock’ of successful multi-stakeholder partnerships (Partners For Conservation, 2018, Network for Landscape Conservation, 2018a & 2018b). When groups come together who do not have a history of collaboration, or might have a history of conflict, building trust and a common language in which to express shared objectives is crucial. Divisions among groups can stem from differences in organizational culture, occupational jargon, management goals, and the unique constraints faced by stakeholders as varied as landowners, agency managers, and

research scientists. Participants in successful partnerships note that there are no shortcuts when building trust. The process requires time, dedication, showing up repeatedly with an open mind, and

actively listening to others. Elements recognized as particularly helpful for facilitating the process include:

- ❖ *Local champions:* Individuals who belong to key stakeholder groups and who strongly advocate for the collaborative process (Payne 2018)
- ❖ *The inclusion of facilitators:* Individuals familiar with the issues being addressed and who are practiced in bridging communication and understanding gaps among diverse groups (Boies 2017); and,

- ❖ *The participation of cross-cutting stakeholders:* Those who belong to more than one stakeholder group, and thus have the skill to identify and bridge gaps in norms, translate jargon, and demonstrate cross-group trust.

**Backbone logistical support:** Participating in a multi-stakeholder collaboration often requires new types of logistical support because partners may work outside their primary organization’s normal channels of communication and programmatic funding. Communication within the collaborative might include quarterly

Collaboration is not about  
gluing together existing egos.  
It’s about the ideas that never  
existed until everyone entered  
the room. — *Unknown*

*(Borrowed from the High Divide  
Collaborative website)*

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From left: Construction of one BDA (Beaver Dam Analogue) during a restoration project in Northern Utah rangelands... and another BDA one year after construction.

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meetings, workshops, field days, and group calls. These activities need to be planned, funded, followed-up on, and synthesized. As the partnership continues to develop and begins to put projects on the ground, hiring a dedicated part- or full-time staff position will ensure communication channels stay open.

**Transparent and trusted science as sideboards for action:** Clear, agreed-upon science can facilitate the development of project goals and activities.

SERCAL members excel at bringing good science to the table. When shared in the interactive format of multi-stakeholder meetings, partners can digest this knowledge via unguarded discussions. Such open communication can eliminate barriers that exist due to organizational jargon, and allow individuals to process shared information according to their own experiences on the landscape. Gaps in current available science could also lead to opportunities for co-production of knowledge

through joint studies. For example, the ROGER collaborative in Nevada developed a research project with some of its active members focused on improving remote sensing-based habitat assessment tools (Nikonow 2019). This research addresses key limitations the group faces when trying to manage the spread of cheatgrass across millions of acres of rangeland. Research undertaken by the collaborative can have particularly strong buy-in by members, with jointly produced results serving as a foundation for future management and restoration decisions.

## What barriers need to be overcome?

Perhaps the most obvious challenge to successful restoration partnerships is the lack of experience stakeholders may have in working collaboratively. As more groups test the collaboration waters, there are a growing number of resources for those interested in gaining collaboration skills, including companies offering partnership training (e.g., [The Partnership and Communication Collaboration Academy](#)) and short-courses on collaboration and conflict resolution (e.g., [University of Utah's Short Course on Effective Natural Resources Collaboration](#), [UC Davis' Conflict](#)



Field tour in Northern Utah by multi-stakeholder groups interested in using BDAs to restore stream functioning in rangelands.

In the face of landscape-scale challenges such as climate change, partnerships can facilitate high-impact local projects that synergize across a region, to ultimately move toward a shared restoration objective.

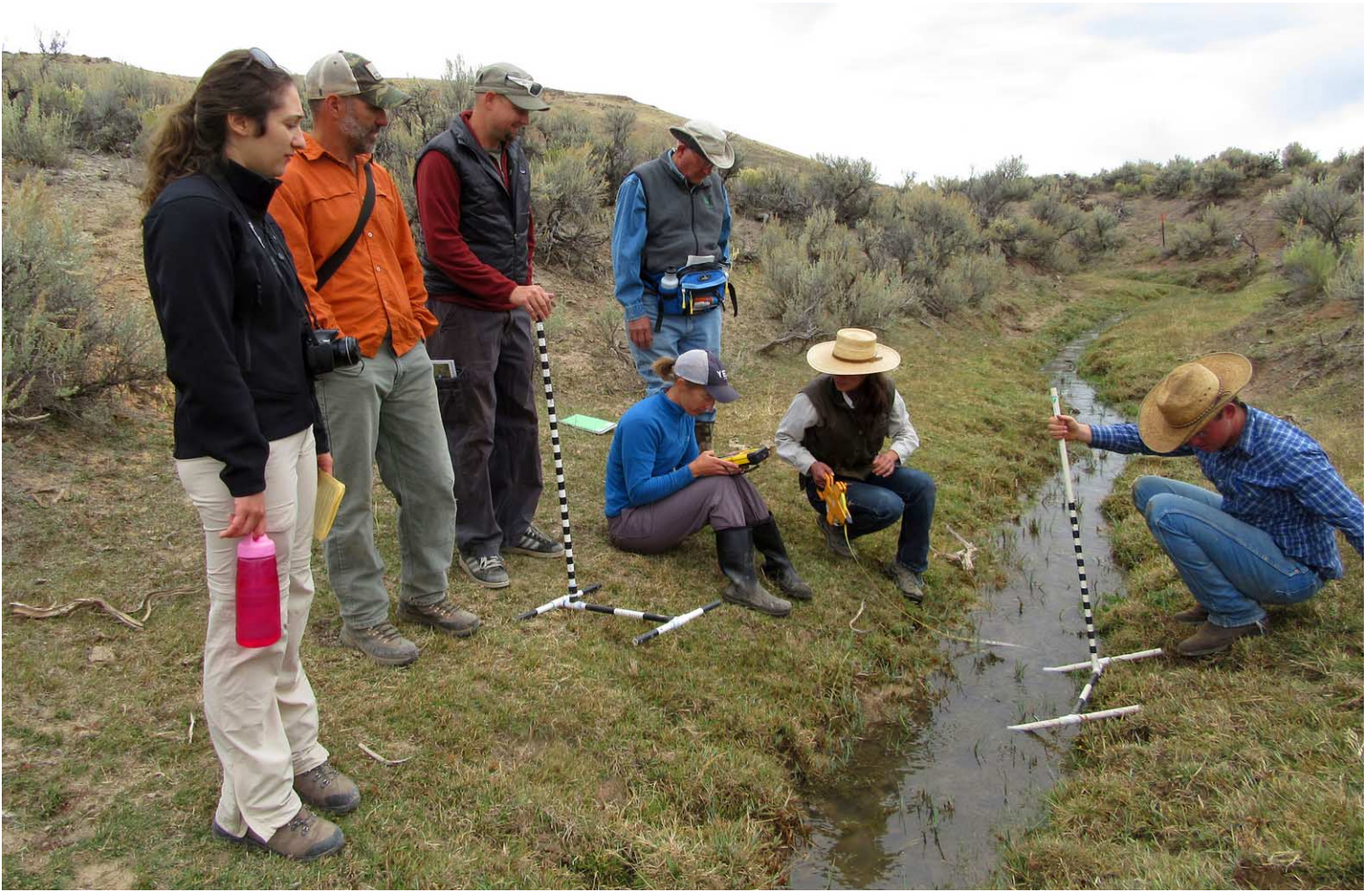
[Resolution Professional Concentration Certificate](#)). The number of facilitators is also growing, but there is still a need for more people trained in this role. Groups engaged in collaborative work highlighted several other challenges, including:

**Funding gaps:** An increasing number of non-profits, foundation funders, and agency partners are dedicating resources to collaborative work. Despite this progress, a recent needs-review by the California Landscape Stewardship Network indicated that 'backbone' support is still sparse compared to funding for other management and restoration actions (Leigh Goldberg Consulting, 2018; [see review summary here](#)).

**Meeting fatigue:** To develop trust and communication, partnerships require facetime. When the collaboration is young, this process can be challenging as partners develop relationships and work through communication barriers. On a practical level, the time dedicated to this process can be in addition to normal organizational roles, requiring the balancing of work obligations.

**Continuity of partnership members:** The extensive trust and communication developed when building a partnership means that individual relationships are often the foundation of success. When key members of the partnership leave — such as when an agency partner is re-assigned to a different position, this can disrupt the work of the group. Partnerships in later stages of development can

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Agency personnel, students, and non-profit scientists monitoring a stream in Northern Utah rangelands.

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overcome this problem by developing a strong culture, which both values educating new members quickly, and demonstrates behavior norms for new members entering the group.

**Difficulty measuring success:** Measuring the extra value partnerships bring to restoration work is important when approaching funders and securing buy-in from individuals already juggling tight schedules. In the last year, a framework for assessing partnership impact — the [Partnership Impact Model](#) — was developed to quantify the impacts of partnerships (Mickel and Goldberg, 2018 & 2019). This model is being adopted by partnerships wanting to discuss the benefits flowing from their work.

### **Final thoughts: The power of collaboration**

Restoration through multi-stakeholder collaborative partnerships has the potential to address management issues at scales required for landscape-level changes. When done well, these partnerships break down informational silos common across agencies and academia, leading to innovative management solutions. In the face of landscape-scale challenges such as climate change, partnerships can

facilitate high-impact local projects that synergize across a region, to ultimately move toward a shared restoration objective. Ultimately, one of the most important outcomes of building partnerships among people with different experiences and values may be the capacity this process creates to address new, and perhaps unforeseen, restoration issues in the future.



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