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## COLLABORATING WELL FOR LARGE LANDSCAPE STEWARDSHIP

MICHELLE O'HERRON, GUEST EDITOR

# Together, we'll go further:

## *The opportunity of collaborative leadership*

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### Abstract

Tending to long-term landscape health and resilience is a highly complex enterprise. To address this complexity, we must imagine and facilitate a community-based response that is just as complex, inclusive, interdependent, informed, deliberative, and adaptive as the challenges we face. Conservation and stewardship partnerships are a now-familiar way to try to tackle this monumental task. However, *successful* conservation partnerships are not possible without leadership that can explore shared values amidst dissenting views, navigate complex and technical information to bring all parties to a shared understanding of the issues, manage conflict and facilitate difficult conversations, and approach these multi-faceted challenges with humility and empathy. This is both the challenge and the opportunity of collaborative leadership. The series of papers in this issue of *Parks Stewardship Forum* on “Collaborating Well” explores what makes collaborative leadership work. This introductory piece illustrates *why* collaborative leadership is so critical to meet our landscape stewardship needs. The article on the Partnership Impact Model goes beyond describing this work and delves into how to measure its impact. Moreover, the article on peer learning provides

examples of how to advance collaborative leadership successes by sharing critical knowledge, experience, and skills with others. Within all of these facets of collaborative leadership are social and cross-cultural competencies that further enable this work.

### A vision of conservation success

At the end of a long, distinguished career in conservation capped by serving as the head of the multi-state land trust Heart of the Rockies Conservation Initiative, Michael Whitfield noted, “We as conservation practitioners must very intentionally develop the skills needed to engage all sectors of local communities if we are to achieve big picture conservation results.” Importantly, Whitfield was not talking about better skills to understand conservation science. Instead, he saw a need to focus on what is often lacking: strong social and cultural skills. Why these skills? Whitfield’s experience had taught him that success “arises when community members from many backgrounds come together from day

ABOVE The Collaborating Well™ logo represents how we advance the partnership practices that help all parties achieve more together than any one could achieve on its own.

> Seen with clear eyes and hindsight, many historical practices lack trust and transparency, are overly technocratic, and do not address systemic inequities.

one to shape a common sense of place and develop a future vision grounded in respect for diversity of perspective” (Whitfield 2018). However, we cannot hope to succeed in this way without understanding one another, working through differences, finding common ground, and advancing common causes.

Whitfield is not alone in suggesting that big picture results stem from healthy relationships shaped by diverse, inclusive voices and nurtured through an effective process. Joanne Marchetta, executive director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, notes that durable, adaptable, and resilient landscape-scale outcomes can be achieved through culture change—specifically, a shift from regulatory, top-down, “us versus them” approaches to collaborative, partnership-based approaches (NLC 2018: 9).

What Whitfield, Marchetta, and others have realized is that taking care of long-term landscape health and resilience is a highly complex enterprise. It cannot be separated from issues of social health and justice,

economic well-being, cultural heritage, or ecological condition and change. To address this complexity, we must imagine and facilitate a community-based response that is just as complex, inclusive, interdependent, informed, deliberative, and adaptive as the challenges we face.

#### The reality of conservation today

As these opening observations suggest, we have not yet achieved the “big picture conservation results” that Whitfield envisioned. We do not currently employ the full suite of practices, principles, policies, and institutional frameworks necessary for the holistic and complex response these leaders envision. Indeed, the kind of conservation success that they point to requires a change from the structures and practices we’ve inherited and continue to rely upon.

Seen with clear eyes and hindsight, many historical practices lack trust and transparency, are overly technocratic, and do not address systemic inequities. This is not to say that past practices are no longer useful.

Innovative stakeholder engagement can help find common purpose and shared values for a clearer path forward, together.

| PAUL MYERS / GOLDEN GATE NATIONAL PARKS CONSERVANCY



It's more that they are not enough. What's needed is a set of complementary and supplemental approaches that connect the best pieces of our past to new, promising collaborative practices, and that are stitched together in a way that addresses deficiencies while pointing us to a better future.

During the past year, the events surrounding Black Lives Matter and the challenges brought by COVID-19 have further highlighted the deep societal issues we face. Addressing these social and public health challenges likewise points to more inclusive, effective, and authentic collaboration. Without the connections collaboration provides, important components of our social systems are left unattended, often with dire consequences.

#### A call for collaboration

These recent events point out the urgency of designing and adopting approaches that are more collaborative. A focus on collaboration and collaborative approaches is, of course, not new. There has been a growing call for collaboration and a growing number of collaborative enterprises in the conservation community and in other sectors.

Stanford Social Innovation Review's collection of work on Collective Impact captures the broad contours of this conversation (SSIR 2011). Reports such as the Network for Landscape Conservation's 2018 survey, *Assessing the State of Landscape Conservation Initiatives in North America*, also illustrate the growing prevalence of place-based efforts. Moreover, individual landscape conservation and stewardship initiatives are finding one another and sharing lessons and best practices through a number of statewide, regional, national, and international networks, including, among others, the [California Landscape Stewardship Network](#), [The Stewardship Network](#), [Western Collaborative Conservation Network](#), [Regional Conservation Partnership Network](#), [Network for Landscape Conservation](#), and [International Land Conservation Network](#).

Within each of these networks are place-based stories that highlight how collaboration can engender meaningful relationships while generating tangible outcomes. In the Santa Cruz Mountains along California's Central Coast, a partnership between California State Parks, land trusts, resource conservation districts, and the Amah Mutsun Tribe



The key elements of collaborative leadership described here provide a pathway to help us achieve our shared visions. | RYAN CURRAN WHITE/GOLDEN GATE NATIONAL PARKS CONSERVANCY

re-introduced Indigenous ceremonies and on-the-ground stewardship practices that had been absent for generations. The work of the partnership resulted in a range of activities across the Quiroste Valley that reflected traditional practices and promoted shared interests, including revegetation of important plants like tarweed, prescribed burns, and facilitating a return to a more historically representative mix of vegetative cover by removing native coyote brush and cutting down Douglas-firs. Through these partnership discussions and resulting work, meaningful connections between tribal leaders, agency staff, and conservationists were fostered and continued to grow (Pandell 2020).

Trust is also the key factor attributed to the success of the Blackfoot Challenge, a community-based conservation collaborative in western Montana's Blackfoot River valley. Faced with the pressures of a river degraded by upstream mining, and a growing international interest in river recreation in Montana, the group formed three decades ago to see how ranchers, state and federal agencies, and other community interests could come together and collectively steward the watershed. By homing in on



a collaborative process that emphasized trust in each other, transparency with the greater community, and a sense that parties can “disagree without being disagreeable,” the Challenge has found common purpose and shared values across a number of often contentious conservation issues (for a review of accomplishments on a wide range of issues—from water quality and watershed health to predator conflict, weed management, and land conservation—see Burnett 2012).

In New England, we see the full suite of complex multi-stakeholder collaboration dynamics in play as population growth and land planning butts up against the need for retaining forests and farmland for ecological, economic, cultural, and recreational benefits. A partnership known as Wildlands and Woodlands formed in 2005 to navigate this complexity by creating a conservation-focused vision for the region and inviting stakeholders to come together in innovative ways to make strides toward that vision. The [Wildlands and Woodlands vision](#) “seeks to protect at least 70 percent of New England as forests” that will “coincide with an expanding amount of acreage devoted to local, sustainable agriculture, thoughtfully planned compact development, and robust local communities with sustainable transportation, energy, and land-use policies.” To date, a number of new partnerships and initiatives have been catalyzed or expanded to help achieve this vision, many of which are being coordinated by the [Regional Conservation Partnership Network](#). This approach of envisioning the future, and then equipping and empowering citizens with the knowledge and resources to take action, both re-invigorates ongoing conservation efforts and inspires new collaborative initiatives.

> Collaboration and from-the-bottom-up processes are essential in today’s world, but it takes a lot of time and energy to do collaboration right.

— Bob Bendick,  
Gulf of Mexico Program,  
The Nature Conservancy

From these efforts, we have learned much. Among other things, we have a growing list of resources, case studies, handbooks, measurement tools, and templates that has been born of them. Many groups are also leveraging technology to provide new visualizations and other technology-driven tools to better understand and communicate landscape stewardship issues. Others are advancing policy solutions, exploring funding and finance opportunities, improving communications, experimenting with novel governance arrangements, and better integrating ecological and social science into landscape conservation efforts. It is important that we continue to advance and expand all of these critical activities.

#### The opportunity of a collaborative leadership program

We must also do more. One important avenue that has not been adequately addressed is improving our individual and collective ability to collaborate. Working collaboratively—to equip and empower rather than to control and direct—is a different way of both innovating and problem solving that requires that we also create different ways of working together. This largely takes the form of working to create networks of existing people and organizations rather than developing new institutions. In this context, conservation success relies on leadership that is able to explore shared values across an assortment of people and organizations—rife with dissenting views; complex, technical information; and difficult conversations. In addition, collaborative leaders do best when they approach these multifaceted challenges with humility and empathy. This is both the challenge and the opportunity of collaborative leadership.

To achieve the necessary social and cultural change we need to increase knowledge, understanding, and adoption of the skills, abilities, behaviors, and attributes that foster successful collaboration. Importantly, we also need the delivery mechanisms—trainings, workshops, conferences, webinars, peer exchanges, handbooks, mentoring, and coaching, among others—that provide the connection points to effectively transfer, expand, and adapt the core competencies of collaboration and collaborative leadership.

As practitioners, researchers, educators, scientists, and citizens, we the authors of this special collection



The Collaborating Well leadership program offers the tools to improve both our individual and our collective approaches to this challenging work. | LEE JESTER

of essays see this need to nurture collaboration every day. We are convinced we can do better and that we can be part of the solution to the complex and myriad challenges we face. But to do so we need to create tangible tools for stewardship and for conservation practitioners, agencies, scientists, landowners, community organizations and others to incorporate principles of collaborative leadership into shared work. For us, that has taken the form of developing a collaborative leadership program that can both meet the needs of our time and begin to build a bridge to a healthier, more resilient, more inclusive, and more equitable future for people and nature. We are calling our initiative Collaborating Well.

We acknowledge that the task of creating such a program must be an evolving conversation, built with intention and with the support, guidance, and input of the broader stewardship community. We see our role as bringing our own expertise, experience, enthusiasm, creativity, and capacity forward in

service to a broader goal: helping equip, empower, and inspire people to be effective partners and leaders in collaborative approaches to landscape conservation and stewardship.

#### The dimensions of collaboration

Moving forward, we see the need to foster learning around four overlapping dimensions of collaboration: (1) systems thinking; (2) interpersonal skills; (3) process design; and (4) social and cross-cultural competency. As described in the article “Putting collaborative leadership into practice: The role of peer learning” (Navalkha et al. 2021), included in this series, peer learning is a critical method through which these dimensions are explored, and knowledge and skills built and shared.

**Systems thinking.** Although we often engage in conversations as individuals or organizations, we function within larger systems that influence and affect us. These include ecosystems, sociopolitical

> We need to create tools for stewardship and for conservation practitioners, agencies, scientists, landowners, community organizations and others to incorporate principles of collaborative leadership into shared work.





The challenge and the opportunity of collaborative leadership lies in our ability to create healthy relationships shaped by diverse, inclusive voices and nurtured through an effective process. | RAY LEE PHOTOGRAPHY

systems, financial systems, governance systems, and more. A systems-thinking approach helps people see and better understand all the relevant pieces as well as the system of systems. In so doing, systems thinking builds understanding of the relationships, interdependence, and system dynamics that shape our interactions. These include important insights such as complex purpose<sup>1</sup> and complex reciprocity.<sup>2</sup>

**Interpersonal skills.** As noted by researcher Amy Mickel in *Collaborating Consciously: The Four Cornerstones* (GLSN 2021), interpersonal behaviors are among the most influential factors for either fostering or discouraging collaboration. Mickel’s groundbreaking analysis suggests that four cornerstones are key to building and strengthening collaborative connections and fostering successful collaboration: compassion, character, courage, and commitment. Advancing knowledge and building skills that lead to these behaviors supports collaborative leadership at all levels and is critical to conservation success.

**Process design.** Successful collaboration helps us solve problems when it includes the “right”

information, “right” group of people, and “right” process. Paying attention to all three dimensions, and advancing a skill set around them, is especially critical for those who play a role organizing, convening, and facilitating collaborative efforts. This includes developing and advancing a skill set in facilitation, mediation, mutual gains negotiation,<sup>3</sup> conflict resolution/conflict wisdom,<sup>4</sup> evaluation, and problem-solving. Measuring impact—another key piece of process design—is explored in more detail in the article “Practicing collaborative leadership: Demonstrating value through evidence of partnership impact” in this issue (Mickel and Farrell 2021). While reliant on these critical skills, effective process design is also often a creative enterprise, where the focus is on designing the series of “experiences” that can bring people together in new, productive, and meaningful ways.

**Social and cross-cultural competency.** As we move from paradigms defined by individuals, sectors, and silos to a collaborative approach defined by connections and relationships, we need to better understand and engage the diverse human communities with whom we share the Earth. More to the point, we need to better understand the diverse perspectives that define how we all relate to and interact with the land in order to discover more inclusive and representative solutions to our shared challenges. In the context of the United States, this involves raising our awareness and understanding of our social and cultural biases; digging into the history, origins, and current challenges related to diversity, equity, justice, and inclusion; and exploring ways to address the deep political cleavages that divide us. This will require attention not only to our relationships, but also our ways of learning, the language we use, and our ability to engage in open and authentic conversation with one another.

Taken together, these four dimensions—and the underlying principles, practices, and skills they represent—begin to provide a pathway that can help us realize the promise of collaborative conservation and stewardship. We believe they advance an important and undernourished part of our work and can help us achieve the community and conservation success we envision. As we continue to develop and refine these through the work of Collaborating Well, we invite you to be part of the journey.

## Endnotes

1. “Complex purpose” is an idea advanced by Dylan Skybrook with the Santa Cruz Mountains Stewardship Network to reflect the idea that diverse interests coming together to work toward a shared vision for a landscape do not need to have a unitary or common purpose in how they achieve that vision. Instead, they can have multiple ways to do so, based on diverse interests and capabilities. See [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/navigating\\_purpose\\_and\\_collaboration\\_in\\_social\\_impact\\_networks](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/navigating_purpose_and_collaboration_in_social_impact_networks).
2. In this context, “complex reciprocity” is best described by people such as June Holley, notable contributor to thinking and acting through networked structures, who see it as making a decision in a way where “you do not expect direct return from the individual you give to, but expect them to give to others in the network.” See, for example, <https://juneholley.medium.com/in-networks-i-like-to-think-people-operate-best-by-adopting-complex-reciprocity-you-do-not-23423d6e9a4>.
3. According to the Consensus Building Institute, “The Mutual Gains Approach to negotiation (MGA) is a process model, based on hundreds of real-world cases and experimental findings, that lays out four steps for negotiating better outcomes while protecting relationships and reputation. A central tenet of the model, and the robust theory that underlies it, is that a vast majority of negotiations in the real world involve parties who have more than one goal or concern in mind and more than one issue that can be addressed in the agreement they reach. The model allows parties to improve their chances of creating an agreement superior to existing alternatives.” <https://www.cbi.org/article/mutual-gains-approach/>.
4. “Conflict wisdom” is a phrase coined by Lisa Brush, chief executive officer of the Stewardship Network, as an alternative way to look at conflict resolution or conflict management, which often have a negative connotation. As the name suggests, a person with “conflict wisdom” is able to see multiple dimensions of conflict and use the wisdom of those insights to guide future decisionmaking.

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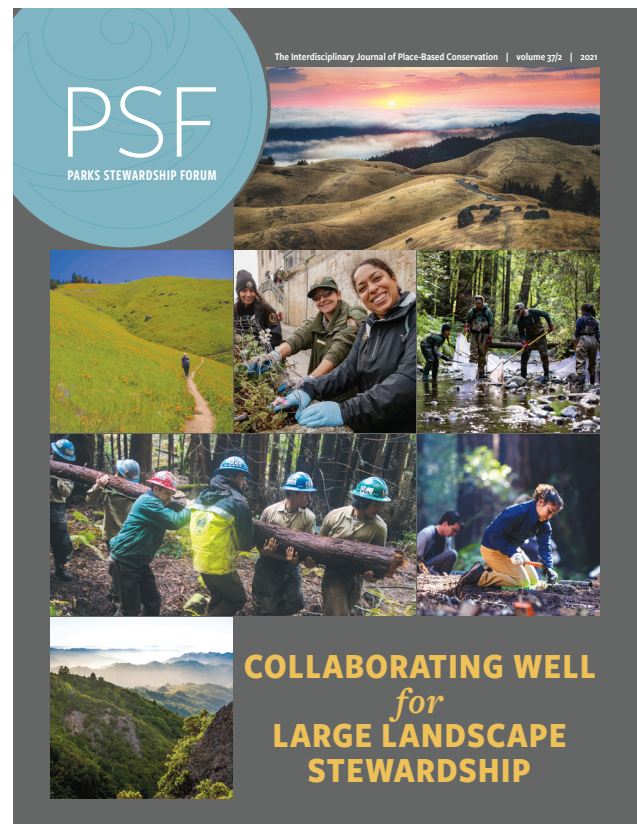
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### On the cover of this issue

A montage of images from [One Tam](#), a collaborative partnership to manage the landscape of Mount Tamalpais in California, along with one from Alcatraz Island in Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

TOP RAY LEE / RAY LEE PHOTOGRAPHY

SECOND ROW LEE JESTER; VIVIEN KIM THORP / PARKS CONSERVANCY; PAUL MYERS / PARKS CONSERVANCY

THIRD ROW PAUL MYERS / PARKS CONSERVANCY (BOTH PHOTOS)

BOTTOM RYAN CURRAN WHITE / PARKS CONSERVANCY

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