

PERSPECTIVES ON

Collaborative Conservation



*Evaluating Partnership Challenges, Successes, and
Opportunities in the West - November 2020*



Partnerscapes

Partners for Conservation recently transitioned to a new brand—Partnerscapes—but we will continue to be a landowner-led organization with the same focus of improving landscapes through communication. Every landscape has potential partners that are, or can, work together to sustain working lands for natural resources and people. Partnerscapes speaks to that potential, and the partnerships that can serve our landscapes now and going forward.

Partnerscapes would like to acknowledge the contributions of University of Montana graduate student **Travis Anklam**, who worked on this project with support from the Wyss Foundation. Travis was instrumental in administering and analyzing the survey, and then summarizing the findings. His leadership was critical to the completion of this effort.



Credit: Jeremy Roberts, Conservation Media



Credit: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Background

Partnerships and collaborations across the West are playing a significant role when it comes to conserving natural resources and supporting communities. According to the Western Collaborative Conservation Network, over 450 known collaborative groups are incorporating diverse perspectives across jurisdictions to build the bridges needed to overcome the natural resource challenges of the West. Whether through habitat restored or relationships built, the efforts of partnerships and collaborations alike are paying dividends.

But what is the valuation of these dividends? How do participants know if collaboration is worth their time and resources? What tools can help them evaluate the effectiveness of their partnerships? And how can answering these questions help collaboratives achieve their goals?

Partnerscapes (formerly Partners for Conservation) reached out to almost 270 partnerships and collaboratives across eight Western states in order to start addressing these questions. The goal was to determine what partnerships are doing, how they measure and share the story of their progress, and what lessons and insights they can offer other collaborative efforts to advance natural resource conservation in the West.

“What we are trying to get is collective action. A group of people to come to agreement on something and make a change on the ground. In order to make that happen you need to have human capital (individual knowledge, skills, and abilities), social capital (relationships, networks, trust), and you need to be able to leverage resources. Laying that simple formula out for people and then having evaluation frameworks and evidence that shows the importance of these foundational building blocks is very helpful.”

—Laura Van Riper, Bureau of Land Management

Those who responded represent diverse perspectives working at a range of scales across a variety of issues and challenges. This report summarizes their responses, highlighting common themes and distinct insights that emerged from their experiences. In the resources section at the end of this report you can find many of the tools that are being used to better understand, measure, and communicate the value of collaborative conservation efforts.

We hope that the resources found here help enhance partnership efforts in your landscape and community.

Executive Summary

Evaluating a collaborative's accomplishments can help them to share the value of their efforts with stakeholders, funders, and their community while identifying how to be even more effective moving forward. Understanding the accomplishments of multiple collaboratives can shed light on the broader successes—and common challenges—of collaborative conservation at a larger scale.

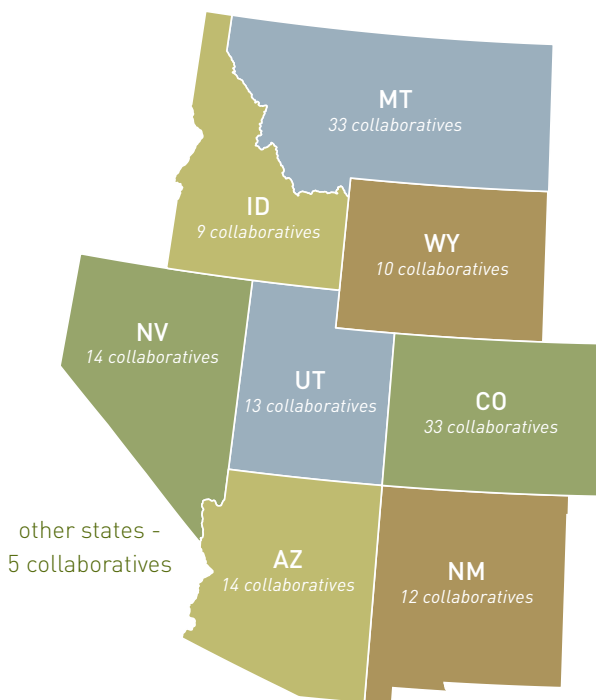
Partnerscapes reached out to active collaboratives to better understand their successes and challenges, and the evaluative approaches they are using to accomplish their goals.

Who We Surveyed

We wanted to get the perspective of a variety of collaboratives, while having enough commonalities between those surveyed to identify transferable lessons. Consequently, we limited our survey to eight states in the Intermountain West—a region with a large number of collaborative efforts representing a wealth

of experience. Our survey focused on collaboratives that included more than two perspectives from a community that were using a collaborative decision-making process to address two or more issues on at least two types of land ownership. These criteria left us with a list of almost 270 collaboratives that we invited to take our survey of which 87 responded, a response rate of 32 percent.

Responses came from a wide array of perspectives, including landowners, agency staff, local officials, non-profit and business leaders, scientists, facilitators, and members of the public. Their perspectives also represent many different types of collaborative efforts, from watershed groups and forest collaboratives to land trusts and agency led efforts. Although we would have liked to survey multiple participants from each collaborative, we were only able to survey one person per collaborative due to time and resource constraints. We recognize this as a limitation when compared to many other evaluations of individual collaborative efforts.



Where They Are Working - This map depicts where responding efforts are working, with multiple collaboratives working across two or more states.

Examples of Collaboratives Surveyed

Community-Based Collaboratives - Locally based stakeholder groups working together to address natural resource challenges in a particular place.

Watershed Groups - Stakeholders, often locally based, working together to address water-related issues, typically at a watershed scale.

Land Trusts - Stakeholders working together to create conservation and/or stewardship easements.

Forest Collaboratives - Stakeholders working together to address restoration, conservation, and natural resource use on public and private owned forests.

Wildlife-Based Collaboratives & Working Groups - Stakeholders working together to address wildlife-related challenges.

Landscape-Scale Collaboratives - Stakeholders working together to address natural resource challenges at the landscape-scale.



Credit: Angela Dwyer/Bird Conservancy of the Rockies

What We Asked

The web-based survey started with demographic questions to get a sense of the who, what, where, and why for each collaborative. By asking about the organizational aspects of the partnership, we were able to get a sense of each collaborative's structure, purpose, and goals as well as the process they use to pursue their goals.

About a third of the survey focused on the outcomes and impacts of each collaborative in order to better understand what collaboratives are accomplishing. We asked if the collaborative's efforts had resulted in on-the-ground impacts (like stream miles restored), and if efforts had resulted in important relationship impacts (such as trust building or improved communication between participants). We also asked how collaboratives are measuring their impacts, and if efforts to evaluate progress have helped them to accomplish their goals.

Our last set of questions was designed to assess the challenges collaboratives are facing and what support networks and resources they utilize. At the end of the survey, respondents were asked if they would be willing to do a more detailed follow up phone conversation. For those that agreed, we followed up with an informal call to better understand their responses and to identify the resources and evaluative tools they are using.

We recognize that there are nuances in the definition of both concepts, but for ease of communication the concepts of "partnerships" and "collaboratives" are used interchangeably throughout this report.

Overarching Themes

Although the collaboratives that responded to our survey varied in geography, scale, focus, and the perspectives represented, several common themes emerged. We identified these overarching themes in regard to what collaboratives are accomplishing, how they are evaluating progress, and the challenges and opportunities they are facing. The collaborative efforts that responded are:

- **Working to tackle issues across jurisdictions with multiple perspectives—many for five years or longer.**
- **Pooling resources to build relationships and make progress on the ground.**
- **Evaluating progress by tracking the relationship and natural resource impacts of their efforts.**
- **Using a variety of evaluative tools that are helping them to better accomplish their goals.**
- **Challenged by limited funding, the impacts of COVID-19, and difficulties building capacity and sustaining engagement.**
- **Pursuing opportunities to engage with other collaboratives and local, state, and regional support networks to share lessons and resources.**
- **Striving to better evaluate progress and tell their story to engage participants, build capacity, and secure the funding needed to accomplish their goals.**

Perspectives on Success

What successes are being achieved using the collaborative approach, and how widely is this success being seen?

Respondents across the Intermountain West shared that they are finding success through the collaborative approach despite differences in the type of organizations, range of geographies, and state(s) in which they are working. In fact, the wide range of contexts in which collaboratives are achieving success makes clear that collaboration is helping to address natural resource challenges.

Working Across Diverse Jurisdictions. More than 75 percent of respondents shared that they are working across four or more jurisdictions, including private, state, federal, and local government owned land. Transboundary work can help partners to manage resources at a greater scale.

What do we mean by “the collaborative approach”?

While many organizations might tackle natural resource issues on their own or with coalitions that include like-minded perspectives, the collaborative approach engages a broader range of perspectives to overcome challenges. By working with different—and sometimes conflicting—perspectives, many participants find that the collaborative approach can bridge divides in resources and relationships to better tackle natural resource issues in a defined place. Some issues are so complex or far reaching that they may require collaboration across perspectives and jurisdictions to generate effective solutions on the landscape. Collaboration is not a silver bullet, but it often hits the mark by helping participants find success in new and broader terms.



Credit: Bird Conservancy of the Rockies

Addressing Multiple Issues and Challenges. All of the collaboratives surveyed responded that they are, or have, addressed multiple issues and challenges. More than 75 percent of those surveyed are addressing issues related to wildlife conservation, fish conservation, water quality, and invasive species/weeds. Tackling multiple issues can help generate the integrated solutions needed to address complex challenges.

Including Diverse Perspectives. At least five distinct perspectives are included as participants in 95 percent of the surveyed collaboratives. Examples included private landowners, federal and state agencies, local and tribal governments, and non-profit conservation organizations. Including diverse perspectives can help better address challenges by closing gaps in resources and knowledge.

Creating Shared Goals. Almost all participants reported that they had clearly stated shared goals. Finding agreement around shared goals can itself be a milestone, depending on the collaborative and the history of conflict between stakeholders.

Pooling Resources and Capacity. Over 80 percent of respondents reported that they share resources and capacity in their planning efforts and as they work together to implement these plans. Collaboratives are not only getting together to talk—they are also getting work done together too.

What beneficial relationship and on-the-ground results are collaboratives having? In other words, what value are their efforts adding?

Successes that are largely operational or organizational are signs of a successful process. However, the effects that a collaborative is having on both relationships and landscapes are equally as important. Both the outputs (such as agreements and restoration plans) and outcomes (such as trust built and stream miles restored) are often at the heart of what participants hope to achieve through collaboration.

We identified several positive results that collaboratives are having, including:

Foundational Relationships Built. More than 80 percent of collaboratives surveyed said that their efforts have improved communication, built trust and understanding, increased data sharing, and otherwise

improved relationships between participants. More than half said that their efforts had helped to build empathy between participants and allowed them to be more creative and innovative. These improved relationships contribute to a healthy partnership and can help to address conflict that might get in the way of resolving shared challenges.

On-The-Ground Results. More than 80 percent of respondents reported that their efforts have resulted in on-the-ground improvements such as stream miles restored, acres treated, infrastructure improved, and habitat conserved. Many of those respondents also shared the data to back up their responses. These on-the-ground results are often at the core of what participants and collaboratives hope to achieve.

Unexpected Impacts. Nearly all respondents reported that they generated positive outputs and outcomes beyond their original focus and/or geography. These additional impacts indicate that collaboration—especially sustained over several years—can continue to make a difference over time in dynamic ways.

“Collaborative conservation is a powerful tool to address issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. Conservation needs to be more inclusive and collaboratives can be built to include a diverse array of stakeholders in an equitable way.”

—Eytan Krasilovsky, Zuni Mountains Collaborative, Greater Santa Fe Fireshed Coalition



Forest Stewards Guild youth crew in the Zuni Mountains Collaborative landscape collecting forest data that was used as part of an 80,000 acre NEPA analysis to enable forest restoration. Credit: The Forest Stewards Guild.

Common Challenges

What challenges are collaboratives encountering? What are their most pressing needs in order to accomplish their goals?

Partnerships and collaboratives identified several common challenges that they are facing in pursuit of their goals. A lack of funding—and the resulting limitation on capacity—was seen as a chief concern for most respondents. Many respondents reported a need for more resources specifically to hire staff and facilitators, as well as to support projects that are shovel-ready but don't have the money needed to get them going.

Difficulties engaging participants, funders, and the local community also emerged as an obstacle for many collaboratives. Respondents suggested that training to increase staff capacity, along with tools to better engage partners and community members, could help if funding is unavailable.

Outside of these larger themes, collaboratives identified several other common challenges including:

- Limited knowledge of effective communication tools to engage participants and community members.
- A lack of time, resources, and tools to evaluate accomplishments and share progress with others.
- Difficulties maintaining participant and partner energy and commitment over time, especially if funding is unstable or limited.
- Turnover with agency or partner organization staff can make it difficult to sustain relationships and maintain trust.

Collaborating During COVID

Perhaps not surprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic is posing major and novel challenges for collaborative efforts. Several respondents shared concerns for the sustainability of their collaboratives in a hurting economy and are already seeing diminished fundraising ability and decreased overall funding. Many collaboratives have not been able to meet or hold events in person and are finding it difficult to maintain engagement, organize fieldwork, and build relationships remotely. COVID-19 has directly affected 87 percent of respondents, with most of those reporting increased challenges due to the pandemic.



Credit: Bureau of Land Management



“It pauses our efforts for a bit, but also allowed some partners a little space to refocus.”
–Kara Dohrenwend, Southeast Utah Riparian Partnership



Credit: USDA-Agricultural Research Service

Evaluating Progress

Are collaboratives evaluating their progress, and what tools are they using to understand, measure, and communicate their accomplishments?

The majority of respondents surveyed have made an effort to evaluate their progress, with nearly two-thirds reporting that they have worked to track or quantify the on-the-ground results of their collaborative. Monitoring, data collection, and summary reports have been common approaches for collaboratives to measure and share the results they have seen.

Nearly half of respondents have also tracked or quantified the relationship impacts of their collaborative—such as the amount of trust and capacity built between participants—that are often foundational

Communicating Results

Over 75 percent of respondents shared that they report progress to their collaborative's participants, funders, the public, and/or to other collaboratives. For many respondents, their efforts to communicate their accomplishments informally and formally—through data, metrics, stories, and conversations—have helped them to forward their collaborative's goals.

to getting work done. Many of these relationship impacts are also critical to building capacity and sustaining efforts over time. Although results such as “increased trust” might seem more difficult to track, many respondents reported that surveys, informal conversations, and the level of continued participation have helped them better understand their collaborative's progress and accomplishments when it comes to relationships.

Why Evaluate?

In the face of so many challenges, why should collaboratives spend precious time, resources, and capacity on evaluating progress? Many researchers and facilitators argue that measuring progress is

critical for collaboratives to understand and optimize their efforts. Tracking progress can also help collaboratives demonstrate their value to funders, as well as participants in the partnership and outside partners. But what have efforts to evaluate progress done for collaboratives in the Intermountain West?

The majority of respondents who track and quantify their progress report that efforts to evaluate their collaborative have helped them to accomplish their goals. In addition, evaluating progress allows them to address many of the challenges that are common in collaborative conservation. We found that evaluating progress has and can help collaboratives by:

- **Securing Funding** - Of the respondents who have evaluated progress, over half (52 percent) reported that efforts to evaluate had helped them to increase capacity and/or funding for their collaborative. Evaluating both on-the-ground and relationship impacts can help collaboratives demonstrate their value to funders, donors, and contributing partners. Although some evaluative approaches require time and resources up front, many evaluative tools—such as short surveys regarding participant satisfaction—don't require much investment of resources.
- **Sustaining and Increasing Engagement** - Of the respondents who have evaluated progress, over half (57 percent) reported that efforts to evaluate had encouraged more participation among original partners or grown the number of participants involved with the collaborative. Evaluating progress can help collaboratives demonstrate the value of their efforts to participants and partners, while also identifying why certain participants may be more or less engaged.
- **Building Credibility and Community Support** - Of the respondents who have evaluated progress, over half (56 percent) report that efforts to evaluate had increased their collaborative's support and/or credibility within their local community. Communicating impacts through annual reports, at meetings, and regular newsletters can go a long way in helping partners and community members see the value of participating in a collaborative.

“Measuring success in conservation is so difficult, but so important.”

—Kate Wilson, Flathead Basin Commission



Members of the Idaho Rangeland Conservation Partnership steering committee worked with ranchers and the Idaho Department of Fish and Game to build beaver dam analogs that will help with stream restoration on the Josephine Ranch.

Credit: Idaho Rangeland Conservation Partnership



Credit: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Moving Forward with Collaborative Conservation

Working together across perspectives to make a difference in our landscapes and our communities is not easy. Limited funding and capacity along with difficulties in maintaining engagement make conservation partnerships challenging. Despite this, the input received from our respondents demonstrates that they are doing a lot to forward collaborative conservation in the West. By taking a step back to evaluate their work, many collaboratives have been able to better identify the challenges they face and develop ways to overcome them.

Understanding and telling the story of what collaborative conservation has done and can do moving forward is even more critical when faced with the challenges posed by COVID-19. Many collaboratives have experienced financial concerns and flagging engagement, making it necessary to demonstrate their value to funders, participants, and their communities. As most respondents shared, evaluating progress and communicating it to others can help in overcoming challenges while highlighting the important role their collaboratives play.



“Collaboration is a fantastic process and necessary for conservation in the West. Funders don’t often pay for the process, but funding process is happening more frequently.” –Angela Dwyer, Collaborative Adaptive Rangeland Management

Exchanging information between collaboratives can also build knowledge and capacity when resources are limited. Many respondents noted that opportunities to exchange stories, lessons learned, and useful tools with other collaboratives have helped them to troubleshoot issues and foster the skills needed to enhance their efforts. Most respondents already participate in such exchanges with other collaboratives, agencies, and local or regional support networks—leaning into these opportunities for peer learning can help.

As partnerships and collaboratives continue to pursue their goals, our results underscore the important role that evaluating and communicating progress can play in realizing success and overcoming challenges. By simply telling their stories to one another, funders, and their communities, collaborative efforts are making strides to forward natural resource conservation across the West.



Credit: Jeremy Roberts, Conservation Media

Resources

Respondents named a wide array of resources and evaluative tools that they are using to track or quantify their progress and share their accomplishments with others. There was not a one-size-fits-all approach, but rather a suite of approaches for measuring and communicating a collaborative's accomplishments depending on the context. We've included several examples of these resources, all of which have helped collaboratives better accomplish their goals.

Tools for Evaluating Relationship Impacts

- [Partnership Impact Model](#) - a guide to understanding, measuring, and communicating the partnership impacts a collaborative is having and can have.
- [Participant Satisfaction Scorecard](#) - a quick survey to understand participants' satisfaction with a collaborative process.
- [National Collaboration Cadre](#) - a community of practitioners that can provide support and evaluative tools to collaborative efforts on or adjacent to national forests.

Tools for Evaluating On-the-Ground Impacts

- [Eco Health Report Card](#) - a framework for measuring and communicating the health of a landscape and identifying where your collaborative can have an impact.
- [CFLRP Monitoring](#) - a suite of tools to help monitor and measure the ecological and collaboration impacts of Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program efforts. Many of these tools can be adapted to other collaborative situations.

Peer Learning Opportunities

- [Partnerscapes Webinars](#) - we offer periodic webinars to foster peer learning for community-based collaboratives. Sign up on our [email list](#) for more information!
- [National Forest Foundation Collaboration Toolbox](#) - A searchable database of collaborative tools and webinars on various topics in collaborative conservation, especially pertaining to work with or on national forests and grasslands.
- [Western Collaborative Conservation Network CRAFT](#) - the Western Collaborative Conservation Network (WCCN) has a searchable database with hundreds of learning resources, collaborative training programs, and event listings.
- [Local and Regional Collaborative Support Networks](#) - a list compiled by the WCCN with contact information for dozens of local and regional collaborative support networks.

“We would like to track the metrics about the collaboration itself but lack the knowledge and resources to do so.”

–Amy Verbeten, Friends of the Teton River



Credit: Angela Dwyer/Bird Conservancy of the Rockies



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