

Collaborative community conservation

Collaborative community conservation is an approach that emphasizes the role of citizens and organized stakeholders in developing consensus-based, holistic responses to the complex ecological problems that cross regulatory and jurisdictional boundaries and seeks to engage partners in sustained deliberation, trust-building, and shared work so that ecological, economic, and community goals can be addressed in integrative ways.

Collaborative conservation takes many forms, some voluntary and advisory, others embedded in formal governance processes and agency authority. It has spread across many parts of the U.S., especially from the 1990s onward, and goes by a variety of terms, such as grassroots ecosystem management, place-based natural resources management, collaborative planning, collaborative watershed management, and integrated environmental management.

The core premises of collaborative community conservation are that complex ecosystems cannot be managed simply by command-and-control regulatory tools, but require multiple sources of local and cross-disciplinary professional knowledge, integrative thinking, adaptive planning and implementation, deliberation among stakeholder perspectives, and building trust through shared knowledge and collaborative work extending long beyond initial policy decisions.

By the year 2000, estimates of such ecosystem partnerships ranged between 400 and 600, with perhaps 40,000 core participants and volunteers. Most typically they emerged in the western regions of the country, often in response to policy stalemate and fierce polarization. Federal land and environmental agencies have often collaborated with ecosystem partnerships, as have many state agencies.

Support for collaborative community conservation has ebbed and flowed due to changing political administrations, uneven buy-in from environmental and other groups, as well as difficulties in sustaining leadership capacities. There exist significant tensions between the procedural dynamics of community deliberation and collaboration, on one end, and substantive or ecological results, on the other.

The Clinton administration generated considerable cross-agency support for collaborative community conservation, while the Bush administration narrowed it and the Obama administration was favorable, but failed to lend vigorous support. The Trump administration gutted support for public participation in collaborative ecosystem work.

With ever greater complexity and uncertainty due to climate change, however, building the capacity and legitimacy for collaborative community conservation will become ever more important, as will investing in more robust forms of public participation to further democratize the models available. Federal agencies need to develop far greater capacity to support democratic participation and collaboration, as well as community resilience and just transitions, while aligning with various other regulatory tools that can yield ecosystem protection, restoration and resilience.

Brief history

The conservation movement has a long and complex history in the U.S., with important national groups such as the Sierra Club, National Audubon Society, National Wildlife Federation, and the Wilderness Society, among others. It has achieved many important gains, such as the Wilderness Act of 1964, which set aside nine million acres of Forest Service land and established a public process for designating tens of millions more acres from other federal land agencies – for a total of 250 million acres in some form of protected status.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA, 1970) contains provisions for environmental impact statements (EIS), including interdisciplinary ecological analysis, as well as public participation.

The Endangered Species Act (ESA, 1973) has far stronger substantive requirements for protecting wildlife habitats and species, and it covers all public and private lands. The ESA passed with overwhelming bipartisan support, largely because many did not anticipate the power and scope of its key sections 4, 7, and 9 on public and private land use. Court appeals, modifications, and attempted repeal have followed. Some agencies, such as the Fish and Wildlife Service, have come to support collaborative approaches partly because their resources and staff have been overwhelmed by ESA listing obligations.

Collaborative community conservation arose in response to a range of factors:

Watershed ecology

By the 1980s, it was becoming clearer that command-and-control regulatory tools for point source pollution, privileged in the Clean Water Act (CWA) of 1972, was limited as a response to nonpoint sources, such as runoff from farms, roads, and development projects. The Chesapeake Bay Agreement (1983) among several mid-Atlantic states and the District of Columbia, with support from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), enabled collaborative approaches, as did the 1987 revisions to CWA, notably its National Estuary Program.

During the 1990s, a “watershed approach” spread among hundreds of newly formed watershed associations and watershed councils, and received support from a new office at EPA, the Office of Wetlands, Oceans, and Watersheds (OWOW). The Kendall Foundation funded significant learning through the Four Corners Watershed Initiative in four states in different parts of the country, with collaboration of the River Network, which then helped to diffuse the approach. Some states also developed funding and other supports for watershed associations and councils. Research in ecology and conservation biology yielded similar emphases.

See **CivicGreen Glossary:** [watershed association](#).

Land management

The protection and management of public lands has been central to conservation from the early days of the conservation movement. Yet effective land management with conservation goals has become increasingly complex with the need to incorporate private lands into ecological strategies and to accommodate multiple users, such as ranchers, farmers, foresters, irrigators, recreationists, environmentalists, and Indigenous peoples.

While public lands are critically important and vulnerable to political and policy threats, private landowners are essential to ecological sustainability, habitat connectivity, and resilience in the face of climate change. It has become increasingly clear, as Robert Keiter argues, that national parks cannot be treated as special islands, but must be managed as the critical cores of larger ecosystems. Only when the National Park Service works with surrounding areas can the parks meet critical habitat, large-scale connectivity, clean air and water needs, and provide sanctuaries where people can experience nature. Furthermore, “the parks serve as both the wild heart of complex ecosystems and an anchor tenant for local economies.”

The six-year review by the Public Land Law Review Commission, established by Congress, recommended in 1970 that public participation in land use planning should be participatory, with “all points of view, including protests.” Although publics were defined as plural in composition – local and regional as well as national – it was left to be determined what mix might produce the most optimal public good.

Federal land agencies began to take up this challenge in the 1970s. The Forest Service began energetically in many places, and its participation staff became part of an interagency council on citizen participation. The National Forest Management Act of 1976 strengthened mandates for participation, but results were disappointing because participation operated within a largely adversarial paradigm of each group making its own claims. As one participant at the time put it, the Forest Service “got the interests all fired up and then ran us head-on into each other.”

Only with the increasing use of dispute resolution methods, as well as greater appreciation for ecological complexity, did the agency begin to make more progress. The Forest Service was, for the first time, headed by a biologist (Jack Ward Thomas) in 1993, who was succeeded by another biologist (Michael Dombeck) later in the decade, both of whom supported collaborative ecosystem approaches.

All four of the main federal land management agencies have developed collaborative community conservation and ecosystem management projects, sometimes backed by expansive mission statements. These include the U.S. Forest Service (USFS, founded 1905), the National Park Service (NPS, 1916), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS, 1940), and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM, 1946). The latter three are within the Department of Interior, and the Forest Service is within the Department of Agriculture.

To be sure, none of the agencies were initially organized by presidents or authorized by Congress to pursue ecological goals, which emerged in tandem with increased rights and rising expectations for public participation. Ecological science and conservation biology came to place increasing stress on adaptive management capable of learning amidst complexity and uncertainty. Land trusts and conservation easements, as well as active stewardship, have become important to the overall toolkit of conservation.

Some units of federal land agencies have been especially innovative in how they have engaged publics in governance and stewardship. One notable model is the Golden Gate National Recreation Area of the National Park Service. Some Native American tribes and Indigenous peoples have also developed collaborative governance approaches, both within sovereign tribal territory and as part of broader landscapes and partnerships.

Conflict and stalemate

Many communities, especially in rural areas, experienced intense conflict over environmental regulations and federal land management practices in the 1980s and 1990s, to the point where neighbors polarized and everyday community life deteriorated into physical threats and worse. What was economic lifeblood to some –farmers, ranchers, foresters – was a threat to sacred landscapes and ecological integrity to others.

During the administration of Ronald Reagan (1981-1989), and initially with its direct support at the Department of Interior under James Watt, the Sagebrush Rebellion mobilized public anger around demands to grant the states the right to manage public lands. The Wise Use and related movements further challenged the legitimacy of federal land use controls, and received support in county-based efforts and state ballot initiatives. Such demands had wide appeal, since federal land in the western states and Alaska constitutes around 47% of all land, and in some states much more (85% in Nevada, more than 50% in Utah, Oregon, and Idaho, more than 40% in four other western states). Rapid economic and population growth has added to interest- and value-based conflicts over land use and water rights, among many other issues.

The dilemma faced by environmentalists is that they might win a battle in court, but nonetheless lose the war as ecological deterioration progressed and landholders sold to developers to build trophy vacation and retirement homes. Farmers and ranchers, on the other hand, might face a more heavy-handed use of the Endangered Species Act unless they help to develop more effective land use and wildlife protection practices. In addition, the various preexisting forms of community involvement – grazing advisory boards, state water district boards, state game and fish wildlife commissions – proved far too narrow as interest group representation.

“Just saying no” no longer seemed like a viable option for the environment or for the economic future and community vitality of places cherished by many different groups. Seeking win-win-win solutions across ecology, economy, and community grew in appeal, as did devolving some initiative and authority to place-based forums. The Western Governors

Association developed a set of principles – called Enlibra – that endorsed local collaborative problem solving and ecosystem perspectives.

Federal sovereignty over public lands in the west has been contested for generations, with a brief hiatus from 1950 to 1975. As Daniel Kemmis has argued in *This Sovereign Land*, collaborative approaches can help reground democratic self-governance in ways that are not vulnerable to privatization, dominance of commodity interests, or turning the land over to the states.

Shifts among conservation organizations

Many of the leading conservation organizations began to explore new forms of conservation and collaboration. The Nature Conservancy has been especially engaged from early on and the Wilderness Society sponsored the first extensive inventory, conducted by University of Michigan researchers under the direction of Steven Yaffee in 1996. In some cases, where the national office has been skeptical, a local or state chapter might participate, as in some Sierra Club chapters. Local and regional environmental organizations have been regular partners in many cases.

For some national organizations, the shift was relatively smooth, for others it went against the grain of organizational cultures and advocacy strategies. Motives were mixed, as some recognized the core principles as valid, yet also perceived limited political and policy alternatives. Where conservation and environmental organizations, however, perceived significant threats to the legal and regulatory regime, such as the Endangered Species Act, opposition has been vigorous. Local environmental organizations sometimes diverged from national ones on these issues.

Political opportunities and constraints

While collaborative approaches responded to ecosystem challenges, they also emerged where further land set asides and regulations had limited political support in Congress and state legislatures, and shifting support across Democratic and Republican administrations in Washington. The administration of William J. Clinton (1993-2001) was generally supportive of collaborative ecosystem conservation, without backing away from core regulatory tools.

However, the Republican (Gingrich) Congress elected in 1994 and the George W. Bush administration (2001-2009) were not amenable to new land set asides or stricter regulation. The main priorities of the Bush administration were energy development and other resource outputs on public lands. It did accommodate a form of “cooperative conservation,” with emphases on collaboration, participation, and adaptive management, but with much less emphasis on substantive ecosystem science and goals.

In line with the president’s open and collaborative governance memorandum on his first full day in office, the Obama administration (2009-2017) was favorable (e.g. the 2012 Forest Service planning rule and the 2016 BLM 2.0 planning rule).

The Trump administration (2017-2021), however, attempted to gut many aspects of federal land management, including participatory and collaborative models.

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Types of collaboratives

Models for collaborative community conservation vary considerably. Richard Margerum's overview of the field accounts for some of the variation according to three main archetypes, although these vary on a continuum, with hybrid and nested forms and changes from one phase to another.

Margerum's three general types are:

- *action collaboratives*: focus on direct, on-the-ground action, such as monitoring ecological conditions, restoring watersheds, enhancing habitat, reintroducing and managing fire, improving land management, and educating stakeholders and the public. They are primarily generated by independent civic and nonprofit groups.
- *organizational collaboratives*: engage formal government agencies and nongovernmental organizations, with the goal of changing their roles or improving their programs. This might include better communication across various offices and agencies, shared research activities, and aligning policies and practices. They typically include some formal sanction by one or more public agencies, which send mid-level and sometimes senior staff to regular meetings.
- *policy collaboratives*: these focus on policy deliberations, higher-level administrative roles, and legislative changes. They might develop new water quality standards or a broad strategy to address sea level rise.

The further one moves from action collaboratives to organizational and policy ones, the greater the importance of mobilizing inter-organizational networks. Nonetheless, it remains important to continue to mobilize social networks and trust at the action level. As McKinney and Harmon also argue, "While natural resource disputes in the West share many common characteristics, they are too complex and variable for any one model or strategy to be appropriate in all circumstances."

Some of the more robust ones, such as the Puget Sound Partnership of Washington State (part of the National Estuary Program), engage partners at multiple levels, from federal, state and local government and university scientists, to businesses and tribes, to environmental and environmental education organizations, to local implementing organizations. Over the course of its lifespan of some 30-plus years, the Puget Sound Partnership has gone through three organizational iterations and is now well integrated into state government.

The Crown of the Continent is an 18-million acre transboundary ecosystem at the headwaters of North America that includes Montana, two Canadian provinces (Alberta and British Columbia), seven tribes and First Nations, more than 20 government agencies, and at least 20 community-based partnerships.

California's network of marine protected areas, based in a landmark law of 1999, has all the marks of extraordinary organizational and policy collaboration after a multi-year lag, yet also has

developed community-based collaboratives and citizen science and environmental education projects that have mobilized many hundreds of volunteers.

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Core design features

Collaborative community conservation shares some core design features, although these can vary in how much they are formalized and enculturated. Among the main features are some combination of the following:

Nonhierarchical deliberation

Participants are equals in the deliberative process, not ranked by agency authority, organizational prestige, or size of membership. Participation is open to those who agree with the core norms of the process.

Diversity and inclusion are valued, but strong ideological positions or uncompromising interest representation are not. Thus, a business representative who refused to think beyond the narrow interests of his or her industry would not be welcome, nor would an environmental group that had an uncompromising view of what deep green ecological thinking required. Nor would a property rights group that opposed all government land use regulation. Those excluded, of course, retain their rights of criticism, advocacy, and voting in the full range of other democratic venues, and may negotiate participation in the collaborative at a future date. They also have access to the courts.

A guiding question to ensure robust deliberation and effective implementation, however, is: “who else needs to be at the table?”

However, some informal collaboratives or conservation alliances are limited in membership to landowners and rural producers and others are much closer in form to stakeholder-based dispute resolution.

Consensus-based

Decision making aims for consensus rather than majority votes and hence aims to broaden the legitimacy of decisions and protects minority rights. Full agreement is rare, of course, and most collaborative processes establish rules for a supermajority to get as much of a practical consensus as possible. Community visioning processes may ground decision making on specific issues.

Enculturate civic virtue

Norms and procedures are established to nurture civil respect, careful listening, honest rather than strategic speech, trustworthy motives and trusted follow-up behavior in implementation. Appeals to a common or public good, rooted in a shared and beloved place, guide deliberation, while also recognizing distinct economic and institutional interests and “enlightened self-interest.”

Storytelling may help frame how participants understand themselves as civic actors with commitments to a larger public good. Some meetings begin and end with community-building exercises. Repeated interaction enhances opportunities to enculturate virtue, elicit respect, and engage in co-production.

“Getting on one’s soapbox,” however, does not accord with such norms.

Enlist social networks

Participants generate information sharing, emulation of new norms and practices, and further collaboration through existing social networks, such as friends, family, neighbors, religious congregations, social clubs, farmer groups, and other forms of social capital. Such networks can build upon already existing trust and help generate further trust for more complex relationships and projects.

See **CivicGreen Glossary:** [social capital](#).

Ennoble productive work on landscapes

While the work practices of ranchers, farmers, and foresters can be ecologically destructive, collaborative solutions can build upon local knowledge and generate practices that are protective and regenerative for long-term land stewardship, product diversification, and multigenerational commitment to working lands in communities that are sustainable, resilient, and just. By collaborating with agency staff, as well as university ecologists and biologists, all these occupations can reinforce each other’s distinct democratic professional ethos and practice.

See **CivicGreen Glossary:** [democratic professionalism](#).

Place-based, holistic, and integrated approach

Collaborative community conservation is based upon shared knowledge and research that reduces information asymmetries, with lay and professional sources, and aims to achieve holistic ecological, economic, and social goals in an integrative fashion. Geographic information systems (GIS) are key tools. Public agencies are encouraged to manage across fragmented bureaucratic silos and checkerboard land ownership, with a focus on measurable performance and results rather bureaucratic rules, while also remaining faithful to laws and regulations.

Adaptive management and problem solving

Collaborative conservation stresses “learning by doing,” with continuous and open monitoring and through multiple iterations and revisions in the face of uncertain tools, imperfect data, and unanticipated outcomes. Indicators include measures of economic, ecological, and community thriving, as well as shortfalls.

Simultaneous, broad-based, reciprocal accountability

Being democratically accountable is not primarily about following rules, but achieving agreed upon goals among a range of actors who can hold each other to account in multiple ways. This is designed to enhance legitimacy, encourage self-enforcement, and lower resistance to implementation.

Accountability through collaborative community conservation is designed to enrich and supplement other forms of democratic accountability – electoral, administrative, legal, public sphere and free press – not to replace them.

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Limits and drawbacks

Collaborative community conservation has been controversial. For some, it represents an enrichment of democracy that repositions competitive interests and values within a practical and collaborative search for common good in shared and sustainable landscapes and communities. For others, it poses a threat to democracy by devolving too much authority over public lands that are fundamentally national in ownership, accountability, and use, and it opens the door further to powerful commodity interests to determine local and regional development strategies.

With climate change, managing complex ecological systems will become ever more difficult and will require further civic innovation and democratic legitimation. Collaborative community conservation in various forms will undoubtedly remain essential, although building capacities will require addressing various challenges and criticisms. Among these are:

Building capacities for robust, ongoing work

Collaborative community conservation is difficult, complex work that invites a long-term perspective. As one watershed coordinator in Oregon noted, “It took us a hundred years to screw up this watershed; we’re not going to fix it in five.”

Capacity building challenges include a variety of factors:

- *funding and staff*: whereas command-and-control regulations typically have a budget attached to them, collaborative conservation efforts must raise money for their projects. Funding can come from foundations and government grants, as well as volunteer time and labor.

Legislatures, however, tend to favor funds for projects, not salaries for people. This is true even where there are formal supports, such as the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board. When general budgets are under stress, collaborative projects are often the first to be cut back. In other words, funders tend to underinvest in staff capacities, including coordinators, which exacerbates turnover and can delay projects and disrupt relational work.

Underinvestment also limits staff’s ability to cultivate social networks in the community and to convene public forums that might further recruit volunteers, elicit constructive feedback, and legitimate collaborative efforts.

A parallel challenge is ensuring that federal agency staff can remain committed to place long enough to build trust, rather than being regularly rotated out to new assignments as the main pathway to promotion.

- *erosion of stakeholder commitment*: over time, stakeholders may drift away due to other commitments, frustration with the slow rate of progress, or because they perceive the problem as having been solved by initial agreements. In sparsely settled

areas, the pool of others to assume regular leadership in collaboratives may be quite limited.

Comparative results

Some critics, such as Judith Layzer in her comparative study of seven cases in the U.S., argue that while collaborative approaches to ecosystem management have tended to develop more holistic and comprehensive plans than piecemeal regulatory approaches, and have enhanced social capital and stakeholder agreement, they are less likely to conserve and restore ecological health than when goals are set through conventional politics.

In this view, pursuing economic and ecological goals simultaneously tends to lead stakeholders to avoid controversial issues and manage to the lowest common denominator. The landscape scale also tends to favor development interests and short-term economic considerations, since the economic vitality of the community is tied to jobs and taxes generated by commodity interests. Changes in the political context prompts defections, especially at implementation stages.

“In contrast, the initiatives in which goals emerged out of conventional politics have yielded greater-than-expected environmental benefits because political officials – judges, administrators, or elected officials – employ political capital and regulatory authority to promote an overarching, environmentally protective goal.” Where there are clear regulatory boundaries within which stakeholders can negotiate, landscape-scale ecological conservation and restoration initiatives tend to work better and keep powerful development interests from coopting the process. Strong advocacy and social movements are often necessary ingredients, and collaboration can distract attention from these at important junctures of strategic choice.

Collaborative problem solving and ecosystem stewardship, in Layzer’s view, could thus better deliver on its promises if there were stronger regulatory frameworks (Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act), a shift from commodity production to stewardship in the Farm Bill, and similar legal and regulatory changes.

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Conclusions, future directions

Collaborative community conservation remains an important approach to land and watershed management and will assume increasing importance in the face of further disruptions due to climate change. These include drought and competition for water, wildfires across many parts of the West, threats to ecological integrity, and population shifts. Coastal ecosystems and communities will be seriously impacted by sea level rise.

Securing democratic legitimacy for choices that may bring multiple benefits, but will also entail distributed costs, will remain a major challenge, even if we can stop some of the more destructive pipeline projects through protest and politics, and even if we can set in motion processes to radically reduce greenhouse gases.

Diverse models for collaborative community conservation will undoubtedly persist, as will a contested politics of its proper alignment with regulatory tools. Much learning can be catalyzed by public agencies in the coming years, especially if federal agencies help to align these within effective parameters of regulatory oversight and Congress and the president provide critical support.

Essential to fruitful experimentation and learning will be robust support for enriching the participatory components of collaborative community conservation. This would entail funding for capacity building, including core staff to facilitate deliberation and shared implementation, broad outreach and environmental education in communities, partnerships with universities and Extension services, and stewardship and co-production among broader publics.

Conservation and climate corps models of national service could also enhance capacities for civic engagement in collaborative community conservation. (On the latter, see [CivicGreen Glossary: national service](#).)

A robust strategy to refine and strengthen collaborative community conservation would generously fund a range of models within each federal land management agency as part of a coherent framework committed to broadening and deepening democratic engagement, linking local work with engagement by national organizations, diffusing best practices and participatory mapping tools, learning from broader networks, developing pathways to institutionalize some set

of action collaboratives while encouraging the formation of new ones, and effectively aligning with regulatory and other tools.

As Matthew McKinney argues, we need “to foster a diverse portfolio of experiences on public land governance.”

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