

Managing Public Lands for Impact and Sustainability

THE TAMALPAIS LANDS COLLABORATIVE CASE STUDY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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California, like all states throughout the U.S., is grappling with issues of sustainability—not only of its significant natural resources, but also of the agencies responsible for managing its extensive public lands system. 2013 was an uncertain and humbling year for California's land managers, who endured sequestration, a 16-day federal government shutdown, and the repercussions of the mandate to close 70 state parks two years prior. On the heels of these setbacks, the conservation community is embracing new and creative approaches to land protection and stewardship—including innovative partnerships.

Public land agencies have collaborated for many decades—both informally and formally through inter-agency agreements—to share resources, equipment, staff, and information. Recently, we have seen an emergence of more deliberate partnerships with their own identities and priorities and a commitment to building durable relationships. The Tamalpais Lands Collaborative (TLC) in Marin County, California is one example of this.

The TLC Case Study tells the story of this newly formed partnership and its innovative approach to sustaining the health of Mount Tamalpais (Mount Tam). It examines the early stages of the partnership among four unique land management agencies—the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA), a unit managed by the National Park Service (NPS); California State Parks (State Parks); Marin County Parks;¹ and the Marin Municipal Water District (MMWD)—and one nonprofit organization, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy (Parks Conservancy). It also outlines the need for the partnership, the steps, and key issues involved in its formation, including purpose, mission, geographic focus, goals, funding, governance structure, resource allocation, and partner roles.

Land Management of Mount Tamalpais

Mount Tamalpais is an iconic natural landmark in the San Francisco Bay Area and the highest peak in the Marin Coast Range. Mount Tam provides its visitors and community with clean, ample water and fresh air as well as a stunning natural landscape for renewal, solitude, inspiration, and recreation.² The mountain and its watershed lands provide water resources to 186,000 Marin County residents.³ While Mount Tam is seen by the community as one mountain, the land is actually owned and managed by four adjacent but separate public agencies—GGNRA, Marin County Parks, MMWD, and State Parks.

¹ Marin County Parks and Open Space District recently rebranded and now call themselves Marin County Parks with two divisions—Marin County Parks and Landscape and Marin County Open Space District.

² Mount Tamalpais is also part of the California Central Coast Biosphere Reserve, one of 411 of the most globally important ecosystems designated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Man and the Biosphere Program.

³ Marin County residents are unique in that the majority of their water supply is sourced from their own backyard. Most other communities in California rely on water sources that are located hundreds of miles away and must be piped through mountainous landscapes. <http://www.marinwater.org/DocumentCenter/View/916>

The Six Steps of Partnership Formation

Research demonstrates that the most productive partnerships are intentionally and systematically constructed. While there is no one-size-fits-all partnership model, the TLC's development can be used to demonstrate the importance of a deliberate, step-by-step approach to partnership formation.

The TLC's partnership formation process had six distinct steps:⁴

- 1 Define the Need for the Partnership
- 2 Assess Partnership Readiness
- 3 Create a Common Vision
- 4 Engage Stakeholders
- 5 Agree to Goals
- 6 Formalize Relationship and Establish Systems

STEP 1 Define the Need for the Partnership

Within the past decade, Mount Tam's land management agencies have become increasingly aware that they share numerous complex and costly challenges as well as many untapped collaboration opportunities, including coordinating stewardship and education programs, managing biological resources across jurisdictional boundaries, and improving signage and trail corridors mountain-wide. As the partners assessed the need for partnership, it became evident that central to this need was improving and sustaining the health of the resource—the mountain.

STEP 2 Assess Partnership Readiness

Given the complexity of having five partners—four of which are government agencies with varying decision-making processes, capacity, budget cycles, and policies—the TLC was able to formalize its partnership relatively quickly. Five key factors made the situation ripe for the partnership to form:

- 1) Geographic connectivity and organizational mission overlap
- 2) The necessity of a collective approach to Mount Tam's health and sustainability
- 3) Past successful collaboration by the organizations
- 4) A common vision shared by the executive leadership of each organization
- 5) Public support by key stakeholders

⁴ These six steps are supported by organizational development literature as well as analyses of other conservation-based partnerships.

STEP 3 Create a Common Vision

A key part of the TLC's purpose was an intentional shift from transaction-based collaboration to a model of long-term, aspiration-based collaboration and collective impact.⁵ Having concluded that the current land management challenges required new ways of doing business, the partners committed to deeper levels of involvement and developed a joint vision for the mountain, shared goals and strategies, and shared implementation and monitoring of projects and programs. By coming together to form the TLC, the five partners positioned themselves to inspire a community vision for the mountain, tell a bigger collective story, and share in the role of messaging for Mount Tam.

STEP 4 Engage Stakeholders

The five organizations recognized that in order to restore Mount Tam to a thriving, sustainable landscape, they needed full community support. In order to be more relevant to the community, the group agreed to embrace an inclusive, constituent-centered approach. They also decided to engage key stakeholders and interested members of the public early in the process—well before officially agreeing to partnership terms—to ensure that those constituents were in support of the partnership's overarching purpose and vision.

Staff from several of the agencies conducted proactive outreach efforts, meeting stakeholders in common spaces—public gatherings, group hikes, and a movie theater—and attending the meetings of other nonprofit organizations. It was not just about hosting their own meetings but intentionally seeking out and joining others' meetings. This required an ongoing investment over many months and remains a priority for the TLC as the partners embark upon developing a five-year strategy.

STEP 5 Agree to Goals

The five partners spent the time necessary to clearly define the overarching goals they planned to accomplish together. They developed three primary themes for their work. Based upon the interviews conducted with TLC partner staff, the author paraphrases these three themes as follows:

- ▶ To protect and restore Mount Tam and make it resilient for the future by supporting priority projects for conservation and restoration
- ▶ To improve education and interpretation opportunities for the visiting public and nearby communities in order to increase appreciation of Mount Tam and develop the next generation of stewards

5 Stanford Social Innovation Review defines collective impact as the commitment of a group of entities "from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem. Unlike most collaborations, collective impact initiatives involve a centralized infrastructure, a dedicated staff, and a structured process that leads to a common agenda, shared measurement, continuous communication, and mutually reinforcing activities among all participants." http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/collective_impact

- ▶ To increase volunteer capacity for stewarding Mount Tam and create a new vehicle for philanthropic support⁶

Agreeing to these goals was also an important opportunity for the group to clarify what they were not going to do. They wanted to stay focused on high impact, proactive, priority projects and programs that would have the greatest support from the community and would be beneficial to the mountain's ecosystem. The process also helped reinforce what the group would hold itself accountable for in its work together.

STEP 6 Formalize Relationship and Establish Systems

In March 2014, the five organizations formalized the terms of their relationship in a memorandum of understanding (MOU).⁷ The MOU lays the groundwork for the partnership's capacity⁸ and sets forth the agreed upon overarching goals and vision for the TLC, its partnership structure and governance, and high level roles and responsibilities.

Given the intent to implement joint goals and on-the-ground projects and programs with the Parks Conservancy as the fundraising arm, the partners knew that it was important to establish a deliberate structure with a leadership level (Executive Team) distinct from an operations level (Working Group).⁹ In addition, given the complexity of having five diverse partners, they also agreed to have the Parks Conservancy act as the centralized backbone organization for the operations team.¹⁰ The Parks Conservancy had staff, experience, and the necessary competencies to take on this role. The TLC also added other layers to its governance structure, including a volunteer steering committee to vet fundraising feasibility of projects and specialized subgroups for making recommendations to the Working Group.

6 From these three themes, the partners agreed to nine overarching goals, which are identified in the memorandum of understanding. To read the TLC's nine goals, visit <http://www.parksconservancy.org/assets/park-improvements/pdfs/tlc-mou.pdf>.

7 The GGNRA, State Parks, MMWD, Marin County Parks, and the Parks Conservancy became official partners and codified their formation as the TLC on March 21, 2014. It took the five partners approximately six months to develop and finalize a memorandum of understanding, which required agreement to a common vision, governance structure, and roles and responsibilities as well as several rounds of legal review and board approval by MMWD and Marin County Parks.

8 A partnership's capacity encompasses much more than funding; it includes its systems, structures, staffing, competencies, practices, and culture.

9 It is important to note that the staff assignments to the Working Group were deliberate. The Working Group consists of staff with the experience, leadership skills, authority, and clout to make many of the day-to-day decisions necessary for progress. Most of the Working Group members also have "collaboration with external partners" included in their job descriptions, and many have worked together on prior collaborative projects.

10 Stanford Social Innovation Review (SSIR) is credited with first presenting the concept of collective versus isolated impact. Many strategic partnerships are basing their structure, including the backbone organization, on the five conditions of collective success identified in the SSIR article published in 2011. http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/collective_impact

Culture was recognized as an important aspect of the partnership's capacity. From its nascent stage, the TLC partners were deliberate about fostering a culture of collaboration. The five partners developed and agreed to a set of partnership principles and success factors,¹¹ setting clear intentions from the beginning not just for what they planned to accomplish together (goals) but also how they planned to work together (values).

Conclusion

The TLC's formation provides eight key lessons for agencies and organizations that are contemplating a new partnership:

1. Mount Tamalpais exemplifies how today's public agencies face unprecedented resource management challenges—most of which cannot be solved in isolation. With shrinking budgets, increased pressures on public lands, and the public's demand for greater government accountability, traditional approaches to public lands management are not always sufficient. More complex challenges require more capacity, innovation, and new ways of doing business.
2. When organizations are contemplating a new partnership, it is important to evaluate readiness, both in terms of how ripe the situation is (external) and how ready the partners are (internal).
3. Large, complex problems require a greater vision. Partners must agree upon the uniting purpose of the partnership and reach a common understanding and language for their collaboration. Sometimes, engaging an outside facilitator is beneficial to this process. It is only when the parties have a mutually agreed upon vision that they can begin to effectively engage and seek input from stakeholders.
4. In order to reach broader constituencies, public agencies are paying closer attention to how they deliberately create relationships. Agencies are benefitting from creative and community-driven engagement strategies that go far beyond the more traditional public processes required by the National Environmental Policy Act and California Environmental Quality Act. Agencies are also learning the importance of engaging the public early on in the partnership formation process to ensure that the overarching vision is relevant to the needs and hopes of the community.

¹¹ The TLC's partnership principles and success factors are based upon the partnership legacy of Brian O'Neill. O'Neill was the former Superintendent of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area and led the park to earn a national reputation as being a model partnership park with a strong value on community partnerships. Today, GGNRA has 300 federal employees and another 1,500 individuals who work in the park and are employed by park partners. Over 80% of GGNRA's services are delivered by partner organizations, illustrating the value the park places on partnering to achieve its mission. <http://www.nps.gov/partnerships/oneill.htm>

5. Planning is critical to strategic partnerships. Agreeing upon goals defines the work to be accomplished by the partnership.
6. Resist the temptation to collaborate on specific projects before formalizing the nuts and bolts of the relationship. All partnerships must determine the best structure to achieve their goals given the assets of each partner. It is critical that this structural foundation is: 1) deliberately established and agreed to up front, and 2) based upon the goals of the partnership.
7. Also essential is the need for both strategic leadership and tactical operations staffing. The TLC's operations backbone organization model might not be necessary or relevant for other partnerships of this scope and scale; however, many partnerships have failed because they have not had ample staffing to fulfill the roles of project management, data management, and facilitation.¹²
8. An agreed-upon partnership culture is another important capacity consideration. The earlier in a relationship that collaboration values are discussed and agreed to, the more effective and positive the relationship will be.

While partnership models and scales will vary, the six steps implemented by the TLC can be universally applied to any start-up strategic partnership. Taking the time to undertake a deliberate process up front will save partners considerable time and energy down the road and better position the partnership for success and sustainability.

Methodology

An independent consultant conducted 27 individual interviews with the staff, executive leadership, and boards of the partner organizations as well as with community leaders and other stakeholders who are invested in the future of the TLC. Secondary research included the review of internal planning documents and external reports such as the April 2014 report by the Parks Forward Commission that outlines recommendations to address the long-term financial, operational, cultural, and demographic challenges facing California State Parks.¹³ This case study is also informed by literature and recognized best practices on strategic partnerships and organizational development as well as the consultant's direct experience with other natural resource-based partnerships around the country.

¹² http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/collective_impact

¹³ In 2012, the California Legislature passed a bill to form an independent, multi-disciplinary panel of experts, citizens, and thought leaders charged with making recommendations for the wholesale reinvention of California State Parks. To read the latest version of the Parks Forward Commission's report, visit <http://parksforward.com/research-reports>.