

# A collaborative future for conservation: lessons from connectivity conservation

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While past conservation efforts focused on conserving sites and species, we have seen an increasing emphasis placed on managing landscapes and processes. Ecological processes do not respect our socially constructed boundaries of tenure and jurisdiction, so adequate management of the landscape as a whole requires a collaborative approach. Collaboration is central to the future of conservation and has in fact been part of much mainstream conservation practice for the last 30 years. The Australian Landcare program demonstrated that, by working together, collectives of people can be inspired to achieve more than they could individually. However, despite a long history of collaborative land management, groups still face significant challenges in aligning efforts to meet a common goal.

This chapter discusses findings from interdisciplinary social research on two case studies of connectivity conservation, Habitat 141° in Australia and the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y) in North America. The quotes below were taken from qualitative interviews with staff members, partners and affiliates of the two initiatives between 2010-2012. The interviews focused on the governance and science of connectivity conservation and frameworks to support collaborative conservation across large spatial scales.

Originating from an alliance between scientists and activists, Y2Y is an advocacy-based environmental non-government organization (ENGO) focused on habitat connectivity for Grizzly Bears (*Ursus arctos horribilis*) that began in the early 1990s. Y2Y covers five US states, two Canadian provinces, two Canadian territories, and the traditional territories of 31 First Nations groups. Recognised as an international leader in large landscape conservation, Y2Y provides inspiration to connectivity efforts around the world. Habitat 141° is an emerging effort in south-eastern Australia focused on fostering collaboration between various government agencies, ENGOs and community stewardship groups working in the region. The area includes three states and five natural resource management bodies.



Glacier National Park, a core protected area in the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative. ©Photo: Jason Irving

Connectivity conservation aspires to enable local groups and communities to make decisions in their region while working towards a landscape-scale vision. Connectivity conservation is a conservation philosophy distinct from, but related to, the concept of ecological connectivity. Two key factors distinguish connectivity conservation from previous conservation efforts. First, the spatial scale of their vision – these initiatives often cover hundreds to thousands of kilometres – and second, the explicit commitment to social values, aspirations and collaborative land management (Worboys et al. 2010; Wyborn 2011). To achieve the overarching goal of improving landscape-scale ecological connectivity, connectivity conservation requires different actors across a vast landscape to align and coordinate their programs. This presents a significant challenge for collaboration as the organisations or actors are often guided by diverse aspirations, values and mandates.

### From collaborative vision to collaborative practice?

Having a guiding, long-term vision is a central pillar of connectivity conservation. The vision of connectivity focuses on people connecting and restoring landscapes and serves to captivate audiences and rally support from the community, landholders and funding agencies. The role of the vision is to both inspire and align: the articulation of a vision for the future landscape is intended to motivate different actors to coordinate towards a particular goal. In the case of Y2Y, the vision plays on the magnificent scenery and wildlife of Yellowstone National Park and the Yukon Territories while incorporating the scientific principles of the initiative (Chester 2006). In contrast, Habitat 141° draws heavily on the idealisation of collaboration among local communities. Both Y2Y and Habitat 141° strongly emphasise the central role the vision plays in the initiative. As the Y2Y executive director states:

*“I think the vision itself, it’s so compelling, that’s what’s allowed us to be successful because it resonates with lots of folks and they want to get engaged in...organic initiatives as a result of the power of the vision. All kinds of folks in organisations have become engaged and done various pieces of the work that needs to be done because the vision’s so exciting.” (Y2Y Executive Director)*

The vision is critical to collaboration, as it serves as the direction, inspiration and touchstone in the difficult process of negotiation among diverse actors. However, collaborative conservation requires action beyond the inspiration: turning a big vision into action can be very challenging. A shared vision is one thing; learning to work together is completely different:

*“In hindsight why wouldn’t you subscribe to that vision?...It’s a bit like saying I’m going to form a football team and then win the grand final...it’s easy to have the vision...it’s actually winning the premiership that is the hard bit...” (Participant Habitat 141° Governance Working Group<sup>1</sup>)*

A vision cannot substitute for open communication about both the goals of a collaboration and how the collective will work together. Miscommunication over simple language is common in the early days of a collaboration – words like ‘partnership’, ‘leadership’ or ‘ownership’ can embody a range of meanings for different people. This is particularly prevalent in collaborations of diverse actors who tend not to share terminology or modes of operation (Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000; Huxham 2003). Overcoming differences in language or ways of working together have to be built over time.

In collaborative conservation it can be useful to separate the ‘task list’ from the collaborative process. The ‘task list’ comprises the projects or programs delivered by a group, while the process is the dialogue that produces the task list and sustains the collaboration (G. Burnett pers. comm. 2012). Projects and programs will be initiated and completed but the dialogue is ongoing. Open and unstructured gatherings at the outset of a collaboration can allow participants to get to know one another, building trust and shared understanding of the different perspectives in the group (Imperial 2002). From this platform, projects and ideas often organically emerge. Trust is a vital ingredient in successful collaborations; we know that without it collaborative endeavours are likely to fail, yet there is no magic recipe for building trust (Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000). Trust is shaped by previous expectations and perceptions of the behaviour of the different actors and these perceptions can be difficult to overcome (Huxham 2003):

<sup>1</sup> Quotes referenced to ‘Habitat 141°’ are taken from members of a working group formed to develop governance arrangements for Habitat 141°. Cited quotes come from a range of participants, however personal particulars are removed for sake of anonymity.

*“Trust is a fundamental issue...can we trust government? They haven’t worked with us before, they told us what to do before, we don’t agree with them.” (Habitat 141°)*

Again, this issue is more challenging among collaborations of diverse groups working in complex partnership arrangements. This can be overcome by starting with small wins – the low hanging fruit – to build and strengthen trust and gradually increase willingness to take risks (Huxham 2003). Collaborative capacity will not happen instantly:

*“I think collaboration has to be practiced, and it has to be learnt and practiced to be demonstrated.” (Habitat 141°)*

Collaboration is a skill that can be improved over time through practice. In the early days, working on tangible projects can be more productive than focusing too much on discussing governance structures:

*“I think one of the things we forgot early in the piece is that collaboration actually involves people...we were trying to get structures in place when really what we wanted was people...engaging with each other...once they get to know each other, they are going to start developing projects together anyway.” (Habitat 141°)*

Discussing governance is an important element of establishing collaboration but it is important to recognise that building successful collaborations requires more than simply outlining the structural principles of governance. The success of a collaboration also depends on the more intangible and informal norms and values guiding and shaping the culture of practice.

### Principles for practice

What then are some principles to foster an effective culture of collaborative practice? The foundations of good governance and collaboration are well established: trust, integrity, inclusivity, transparency, accountability, reciprocity and communication (see, for example, Folke et al. 2005; de Loe et al. 2006; Lebel et al. 2006; Lemos and Agrawal 2006; Lockwood et al. 2009). These basic principles should not be lost in the excitement about innovation and new models conservation. Beyond those general principles, the following principles for collaborative practice have been observed from the experiences of Y2Y and Habitat 141°.

### Compromise

*“They are afraid that when you...collectively work through solutions, that everything gets compromised...but it’s not about everybody losing, it’s about trying to find a solution that addresses a mix of things, in a way so you don’t necessarily get everything you want but the trade-offs are such that you can see it all working.” (Y2Y Partner)*

Compromise does not have to be about watering down a deal to satisfy the lowest common denominator. It is also about coming to the negotiation table with a willingness to listen to others and to shift your position to work towards common ground. This has been coined the ‘80/20 rule’ by the Blackfoot Challenge, a collaborative conservation initiative in Montana. The 80/20 rule is about working towards solutions all agree to rather than clashing on hotly contested issues that divide the group. Building trust through working on the ‘80%’ enables the group to address more contentious issues through a platform of trust (G. Burnett, pers. comm. 2012).

### Humility

*“Giving up control, and somehow being less concerned about who gets credit for what...[you] do have to give up certain aspects of control to be successful in the long term.” (Y2Y Partner)*

This capacity to compromise comes with fostering a culture of humility: having the willingness to accept the position of another group or individual or to enable somebody else to take the credit for work that is done. Collaborative practice should support and enable people to carry out conservation actions at all scales. Enabling groups or individuals to take ownership over the work they have completed is important. In a collaborative context it is important to negotiate fair allocation of credit where credit is due, and ensure that more powerful actors do not receive the accolades for work conducted by smaller groups less able to capture the spotlight.



## Learning

*“If you are trying to build on what is happening... whether it is putting stuff on the ground or the way you run it...you need to be...evaluating yourselves to keep learning from experience.” (Habitat 141°)*

Humility also extends to the ability to reflect on and learn from past practices. It means conceptualising collaborative practice as an ongoing process of learning from both success and failure across many levels: from adaptive management in project implementation, social learning between participants, through to formal evaluation mechanisms and processes within governance.

## Patience

*“Hasten slowly! There needs to be...progress but we need to pull back and make sure that everyone is on board, use the touchy-feely stuff, there is no doubt about it that it’s about relationships...to hasten is about communicating the message that there is progress, slowly...[is about] making sure that everyone is keeping up with the process.” (Habitat 141°)*

Building trust and collaborative capacity takes time, resources and energy. The early days of collaboration are often plagued by ‘collaborative inertia’, whereby the initial outputs take longer than expected as the group learns to work together (Huxham 2003). Even successful collaborations later reflect on the mismatch between initial expectations of progress and the time it takes to demonstrate progress. This takes time, and patience...lots of patience.

## Flexibility

The culmination of these principles suggests a need for flexibility across many elements of collaborative practice. Flexible decision-making structures enable a program to adapt to changed social, ecological or political context: allowing groups or individuals to opt in or out of specific projects or elements of a project due to changed circumstances or desires, or conversely, respecting the desire of an actor to pursue an agenda that may only tangentially be related to the overall vision. Flexibility is essentially about embodying the principles of adaptive management in collaborative practice through a willingness to experiment with different approaches and learn from experience over time.

## Conclusion

Around the world we are seeing an increased emphasis on partnerships and collaboration as central to supporting healthy communities and landscapes. As one manifestation of this approach, connectivity conservation faces both challenges and opportunities for collaborative practice. Building and nourishing collaborative capacity is not an easy task, particularly when bringing together diverse groups of people. It requires effort beyond simply outlining the formal structural relationships of governance to include building relationships and fostering trust in an initiative. The principles outlined in this chapter – compromise, humility, learning, patience and flexibility – provide a framework of values to consider when working in or establishing collaboration. It is hoped that these principles can contribute to creating a culture of collaborative practice to sustain healthy, vibrant communities and landscapes into the future.

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## Biography

Carina Wyborn is a PhD student from the Australian National University in Canberra. She is an interdisciplinary social scientist with a research focus on the social dimensions of environmental change and collaborative approaches to connecting science with policy and practice. Carina's doctoral research examines the implications of up-scaling collaborative conservation in landscape-scale connectivity conservation in Australia and North America. She teaches in the Human Ecology program at the Fenner School of Environment and Society and holds a scholarship from Land and Water Australia and the CSIRO Climate Adaptation Flagship.