

Why Does Collaborative Conservation Work?

Gary Severson 2021

Forest and rangeland conservation is comprised of numerous facets and moving parts that delve into the intricacies of how humans interact with natural resources in “*productive harmony*”. The concept of “*productive harmony*” is taken directly from Section 101 of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 which states:“... *it is the continuing policy of the Federal Government, in cooperation with State and local governments, and other concerned public and private organizations, to use all practicable means and measures,... to create and maintain conditions under which man and nature can exist in productive harmony, and fulfill the social, economic, and other requirements of present and future generations of Americans.*”

The collaborative conservation landscape is a complicated and intricate mosaic of ecosystem dynamics, governmental jurisdictions, land ownership, legal precedent, regulatory authority, administrative policy interpretation, technological constraints, competing public interests, economic fluctuations, and social and cultural values. When viewed by concerned citizens, it seems a labyrinth that is at best daunting, and at worst impossible. How do stakeholders begin to make a difference?



When asked by a Colorado legislative committee why he and the City of Leadville participate in a forest collaborative known as the Colorado Bark Beetle Cooperative, Mayor Chet Gaede responded, “*Because it makes us all bigger.*” As a retired Marine Corps fighter pilot and the mayor of a small Colorado mountain town encircled by federal lands, Mayor Gaede had learned firsthand the power and value of people working together to productively address

complicated issues and concerns greater than any single entity.

The power of working together.

When people come together to collaboratively address commonly shared issues and concerns by developing implementable actions, it is important to remember that all people are unique in their values, background, knowledge, skills, and experience. Not everyone sees things through the same lenses. In the world of antiques, what some people see as junk, others see as treasure. In the world of problem solving, some people see obstacles, while others see pathways.

Forest and rangeland collaborative conservation groups are no different. Unlike single issue special interest groups, collaborative conservation groups are able to view the big picture through their shared diversity. The strength of collaborative conservation groups lies in the people, groups, and agencies who have come together for a specific purpose.

The people are the ones who breathe life into the purpose of the group as individual views through unique lenses bring into focus the larger picture.

There is power in the organic, grassroots nature of neighbors helping neighbors for the common good. Our pioneer ancestors joined together to help one another raise their barns, harvest their crops, educate their

children, and build their communities, accomplishing something greater than any one person could achieve. So too, collaborative conservation groups do the same, working together to accomplish something far greater than any one individual or entity could.



Effective collaborative conservation groups operate on the principle of “synergy”. Synergy is defined as, *“The interaction of two or more agents or forces so that their combined effect is greater than the sum of their individual effects.”* In other words, effective collaborative conservation groups have learned that they can accomplish much more by working together than they can by working individually.

Taking an inventory of your group’s skills and experiences.

Let’s look at a college football team. A football team is made up of many different individuals, many more than the eleven players on the field. The National Collegiate Athletic Association



(NCAA) allows college teams to carry up to 125 active players on their roster. In addition, top college teams tend to have one specialty coach for every 4 or 5 players. Then, college teams have a staff of recruiters, scouts, trainers, nutritional experts, medical personnel, physical therapists, equipment managers, and logistics coordinators. Each individual person involved in college football has a unique set of skills and experiences. They apply their individual skills to the common purpose and synergistically

coordinate with the unique skills and experiences of others to accomplish their shared goals. It

takes a lot of people working together for the common purpose of winning a college football game!

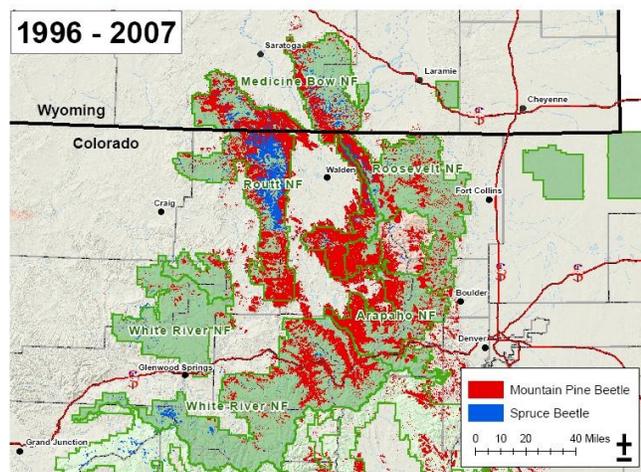
When people come together to pursue a common purpose, the purpose is greater than the individuals and organizations who make up the group. Some collaborative conservation groups conduct an inventory of the skills and experiences of the people and organizations who have committed to working with the group. Some of the inventoried skills and experiences from collaborative conservation groups with whom I have worked include unique skills such as:

- resource expertise
- leadership
- communications
- grant writing
- administration
- organization
- legal processes
- networking
- fund raising
- negotiation
- dispute resolution
- data collection and research
- legislative process
- group facilitation
- technical expertise
- electronic information technology
- community & economic development
- transportation
- marketing
- GIS mapping
- local government
- resource related industry

Once the collaborative conservation group understands the skills and expertise available to them to apply to the purpose of the group, a work plan can begin to take shape utilizing a division of labor. Knowing who can best do what, and who can't, and who has the needed skills and experience and who doesn't, facilitates efficiency and effectiveness for getting things implemented and accomplished.

An Example – Colorado Bark Beetle Cooperative (CBBC)

Beginning in the late 1990s, Colorado's high elevation lodgepole pine forests were experiencing the worst outbreak of mountain pine beetle in recorded history. Eventually, nearly two million acres of forest land of numerous jurisdictions and ownerships were impacted, with 90% tree mortality on many of those acres. In 2005, the US Forest Service, knowing that the impacts of the outbreak were larger than what they alone could address, sought to form a collaborative effort.



People agreed with the Forest Service and rose to the challenge, and the Colorado Bark Beetle Cooperative was formed. The CBBC eventually was comprised of over forty governmental,

private, and non-governmental organizations, and involved over one hundred individuals. The purpose of the Colorado Bark Beetle Cooperative was to *address the environmental, social, and economic impacts of bark beetles on high elevation forests and adjacent communities across all land ownerships and jurisdictions*

In 2005 the US Forest Service and the CBBC collaboratively identified the primary barriers to effectively addressing the impacts of the mountain pine beetle outbreak devastating high altitude lodgepole pine forests in Colorado. Those barriers were:

1. Constraining and conflicting statutes, regulations, and administrative policies.
2. Inadequate budgeting and staffing needed to accomplish on the ground work.
3. Lack of public awareness, understanding, and acceptance.
4. Lack of incentives for private sector involvement.
5. Inadequate wildfire pre-disaster and emergency preparedness planning.

Once the barriers were identified that severely constrained efforts to positively address the impacts of the bark beetle outbreak, an inventory of skills, experiences, authorities, and resources was taken among those that were participating. When the CBBC knew the tools that were available from the skills and experience inventory, priorities were identified for a collaborative approach. The identified priorities were:

1. Protect human life and property
2. Protect essential public and private infrastructure
3. Protect critical sources of water supply
4. Develop resilient communities adjacent to disturbance driven ecosystems

Then the identified primary barriers were overlain on top of the action priorities to determine who best to lead individual actions, accept responsibility, establish time frames for completion, and develop and monitor metrics to measure progress. The following examples illustrate individual tasks and the distribution of responsibilities and labor among participants:

- **Continuing identification and clarification of regulatory and administrative policy barriers to the implementation of effective and efficient actions** – US Forest Service, Colorado State Forest Service, Boards of County Commissioners.
- **Federal budget development and redistribution of available funding to priority areas** – US Forest Service, Boards of County Commissioners.
- **Initiate an “incident command” type organizational approach for insect and disease events rather than using a typical resource management approach** – US Forest Service.
- **Interface with the Colorado Congressional Delegation, Colorado State Legislature, and the Colorado Governor’s Office** – Northwest Colorado Council of Governments.
- **Search for sources of additional funding** – Colorado Congressional Delegation, Colorado State Forest Service, Northwest Colorado Council of Governments.

- **Development of wildfire pre-disaster planning and implementation** – Boards of County Commissioners, Town Councils, County Sheriffs, County Emergency Managers.
- **Development of incentives to involve the private sector** – Colorado State Forest Service, Resource industries, Boards of County Commissioners.
- **GIS Mapping and Interface with other mapping systems** – Bureau of Land Management.
- **Public Information and Outreach** – US Forest Service, Colorado State Forest Service, Colorado Governor’s Office.
- **Research regarding mountain pine beetles in lodgepole pine forests** – Colorado State University, Rocky Mountain Research Station (USDA FS)
- **Overall management and coordination of the Colorado Bark Beetle Cooperative** – Northwest Colorado Council of Governments, US Forest Service, Colorado State Forest Service.

For brevity, only a few of the identified tasks were listed and only the names of the responsible organizations. There were many more tasks identified and scores of individuals were involved. The Colorado Bark Beetle Cooperative operated from 2005 to 2011, and then it transitioned into the High Country Forest Collaborative as the mountain pine beetle outbreak subsided, and the circumstances and priorities shifted. For a more complete story of the Colorado Bark Beetle Cooperative, go to the Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy National Goals; Collective Solutions <https://www.nwccog.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/WRSC-CBBC-Success.pdf>

Conclusion

The word *collaboration* is defined simply as “to work together”. Here’s another way to look at it: **Co | labor** ation. Effective collaborative conservation groups have learned and practice the concept of synergy. They have learned how to make the available skills, experiences, and resources of those involved work together to achieve something larger than the sum of the individual parts. As Mayor Chet Gaede said, collaboration “...makes us all bigger”. Collaboration enables collaborative conservation groups to go beyond convening and partner dialog to producing tangible results that make a difference.

What do you bring to the table? What perspectives, skills, and experience do you uniquely possess that can add to the value of the group?



Gary Severson is an original member of the USDA Forest Service National Collaboration Cadre. He has worked with more than forty national forests and their community collaborative partners and served on the USDA Secretary's National Advisory Committee for Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration. He is a co-founder and former chair of the Colorado Bark Beetle Cooperative and is the retired Executive Director of Northwest Colorado Council of Governments. He makes his home in Evergreen, Colorado.