WARNER COLLEGE OF NATURAL RESOURCES
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CENTER FOR COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

FOUNDATIONS FOR PRACTICING COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

A Theoretical Framework & The CC Fellows Learning Modules

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Wilkins et al (2021) defines collaborative conservation (CC) as “a process that unites diverse stakeholders to collectively manage natural resources with the goal of enabling people and places to thrive now and in the future." Even so, there are different ways that collaboration conservation efforts might manifest. CC might take place through the structured work of a coalition, network, or collaborative that is convened for the purpose of tackling an environmental issue. CC can also happen through a diverse group of stakeholders working together to do an on-the-ground conservation project, such as a restoration project. But stakeholders do not necessarily have to be convened as part of a single coalition to be involved with CC. For example, the CC effort can work with (or through) different stakeholders to build capacity, share or gather information that contributes to decision-making, or to create, test, or use tools, such as apps or maps.

Regardless of what the effort might look like, all CC projects feature the following characteristics (Margerum 2008): a (1) wide range of stakeholders (2) engaged in – or at least contributing to - participatory processes that lead to creative solutions. This diverse engagement means an increased likelihood of acceptance around (3) problems, goals, and proposed actions and (4) a sustained commitment to problem-solving (Figure 1).

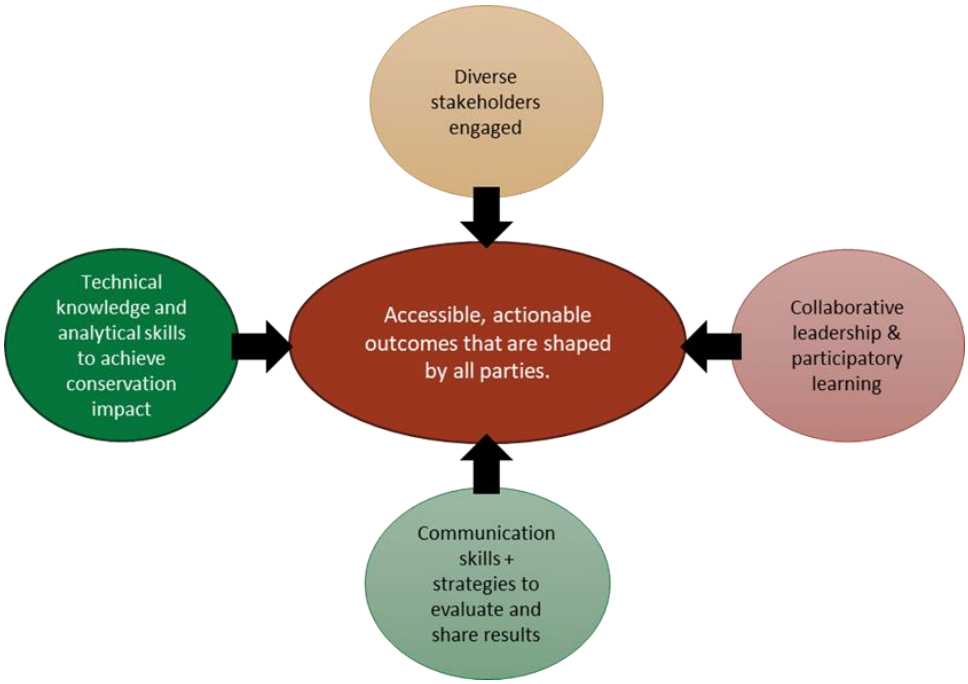

Figure 1. Characteristics of collaborative conservation

Below, each of these characteristics are explored in detail. This theoretical framework will be used to create a course of action for developing professional development learning modules for supporting the successful practice of collaborative conservation.

1. ENGAGE A WIDE RANGE OF STAKEHOLDERS

Collaborative conservation differs from other approaches in that it moves beyond defining conservation success in ecological terms. Rather, the dimensions of success include a holistic combination of biophysical, social, and economic attributes.

Because biophysical and socioeconomic problems are seated in complex systems, finding solutions to them is most successful when engaging a diverse array of stakeholders representing different sectors. Importantly, the knowledge, experience, perspectives, and priorities of a rancher, a land developer, an environmental advocate, a local business owner, and a government agency (for example) are each equally valid. "People across the landscape should be engaged in shaping the future of the places where they live, work, own land and recreate" (Future of Conservation Forum 2022). Each has something valuable to contribute toward a solution that everyone can live with. Together, they can synthesize new knowledge and arrive at creative solutions.

As with other forms of participatory research, collaborative conservation seeks knowledge for the purpose of taking action (in contrast with more conventional research approaches, which tend to seek knowledge for understanding). It is a collective action endeavor requiring "human capital (individual knowledge, skills, and abilities)" and "social capital (relationships, networks, trust)" (Partnerscapes 2020). Collaborative conservation takes a 'bottom-up' approach that accounts for locally defined priorities and local perspectives (Cornwall et al, 1995). When solutions consider local knowledge and priorities, they are more likely to be accepted by everyone involved.

Different types of collaborations operate differently, and this impacts the ways in which stakeholder engagement might manifest. This is especially true when we consider a continuum of possible partnerships, map out the different ways in which a collaborative engages stakeholders, or examine the focus of the collaborative's activity.

2. MANAGING THE PROCESS

Successful leaders in collaborative conservation aspire to center human well-being, promote equitable participation, and equalize power dynamics within the CC effort. This requires careful management of the associated processes.

Because collaborative conservation brings a diverse array of stakeholders together, collaborative leaders become adept at managing differences. Collaboration is not about resolving conflicts or ending self-interest, nor does it mean that individual stakeholders are expected to compromise. Rather, the idea is to create a successful process that advances a shared vision through joint agreements wherein multiple priorities and values are given equal or equitable weight (Gray 1989; Shackleton et al 2010).

For collaboratives and coalitions, Gray (1989) argues that collaborative processes should allow stakeholders to "assume decision-making responsibility for their collective future." To be successful at this, collaborative leaders should allow for innovation, adaptation,

and creativity. They use facilitation strategies that enable effective dialogue, information-gathering, debate, and/or deliberation. In many cases, the role of the facilitator is to "expand the solution space, nudging the parties beyond the status quo, and redraw the map of the problem domain" (Gray 1989). These same underlying principles apply to CC in the context of civic engagement.

Above all, CC processes cannot succeed unless there is a foundation of trust. Collaborative leaders adopt intentional strategies for communication, building and nurturing relationships, and sharing knowledge and information. They use participatory methods, understand group dynamics, promote a culture of decision-making, ensure there is a shared vision, manage conflict, and more. Throughout, the dynamics and dimensions of equity and inclusion are managed through different forms of leadership and engagement, such as co-productive agility (e.g., Chambers et al 2022, Abebe et al 2022).

There are at least three phases in any collaborative process, and the dynamics of collaboration might shift depending on each phase. However, regardless of phase, power sharing is "central to most conceptualizations of collaboration" (Dandy et al 2014). Thus, practicing collaboration requires understanding dimensions of power, how it flows and is distributed in context-specific ways, as well as strategies to minimize power differentials, reduce hierarchies, increase participation, and achieve action.

3. ACHIEVING CONSERVATION IMPACT

Strategic planning and action-planning frameworks are helpful in setting agendas, creating goals, analyzing the systems at play, and moving a project forward. As well, there are a variety of participatory tools to help leaders and collaboratives assess their situation, understand the issues, gather information and data, and apply the resultant learnings.

By its very nature, collaborative conservation is set within complex systems. As with all complex systems, it involves a large number of elements that interact in nonlinear ways, and "solutions can't be imposed; rather, they arise from the circumstances" and context (Snowden et al 2007). There are a number of decision-making frameworks that can be applied in the types of complex systems one might see in collaborative conservation efforts.

It is also helpful to explore the explicit and implicit assumptions about how actions and outcomes are interconnected. Many collaborative processes will benefit from developing the theory of change for their project, a conceptual model that explains a logical chain of results connecting the strategy with the desired impact, as well as informing the evaluation plan.

Collaborative conservation goes beyond what stakeholders should learn and do (the realm of sustainability education). And it differs from other conservation practices in the nature of the agenda-setting and the process of participatory, applied learning to

generate effective solutions. This is most successful when there is a planned, sustained commitment to the effort.

The use of standardized project management tools is helpful for ensuring transparent, effective communication as well as creating a choreographed sequence of events that will keep stakeholders engaged and motivated. These tools are used to not only shepherd the project from inception to implementation, but also to help leaders avoid issues and pitfalls that might lead the CC effort to fail.

There are established tools for planning and implementing conservation projects (e.g., The Nature Conservancy's Conservation by Design approach). As well, a number of collaboratives have noted that GIS other types of technical tools are resources that can be extraordinarily helpful for data collection, analysis, planning, and communication (such as creating story maps) – yet these resources can be difficult for organizations to access outside of the collaborative.

A sustained commitment requires financial stability. Conservation finance includes a set of tools and approaches that collaboratives can use to access capital in creative, innovative ways.

4. TELLING THE STORY

It is important to share the results and story of the collaborative conservation effort, both during and after the project is complete. This goes beyond the skills used to encourage and maintain constructive dialogue among participants. Successful communication engages the audience and effectively achieves your communication goals (S. Ham, 2013). Engagement strategies should be informed by the AAAS Communication Triangle, while learning theorists and cognitive research reveal the importance of participatory learning that is relevant, engaging, and audience-appropriate.

Measuring the outcomes of the CC effort can be achieved using a variety of participatory methods. These methods can be used to study various aspects of the CC effort, providing practical approaches for gathering knowledge and data while putting researchers in the role of facilitators and learners while authentically capturing the knowledge and experience of stakeholders and local people. These methods might be used to evaluate how well the collaborative processes worked; whether or not the collaboration had an impact; or document the results of the conservation project.

How these results and other aspects of the story are shared depends in many ways on the context. Care should be taken to include the many nuances, players, and community-driven outcomes of the project. Effective communication strategies, outreach events, videos, workshops, websites, story maps, open houses, and more can be used to good effect.

FELLOWS LEARNING MODULES

This theoretical framework reveals the suite of knowledge, skills, and dispositions required to successfully practice collaborative conservation. We recognize that the practice of collaborative conservation is situationally responsive, and there is no one way to do it. Rather, these Modules are meant to help each individual develop their philosophy and approach based on key sets of principles, processes, and techniques, which are presented here. We seek to embed research in practice and equip CC Fellows with the knowledge and skills to successfully practice collaborative conservation.

THE PRACTICE OF COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION LEARNING MODULES

Module	Strands
1. Introduction to Collaborative Conservation	- Characteristics - Foundational conditions - Typologies - Levels of engagement
2. Engaging Stakeholders	- Stakeholder analysis - Situation assessment - Trust-building and engagement strategies - Engaging across cultures
3. Managing the Process	- Collaborative leadership - Facilitation considerations, models, and strategies - Participatory learning and different knowledge systems - Managing differences - Decision-making frameworks
4. Achieving Conservation Impact	- Conservation Planning - Technical knowledge and analytical skills - Theory of Change and other project management tools - Finance and Fundraising
5. Telling the Story	- Communication strategies - Evaluation planning for activities and processes - Participatory methods

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