

# Going into PARTNERSHIP to Manage a Landscape

By Ellen M. Williams and Paul V. Ellefson

Forest ecosystems rarely are situated on land that belongs to a single owner. Instead, they are usually dominated by a patchwork of public and private landowners who have overlapping and often conflicting interests and responsibilities. The challenge to the forestry community is to foster cooperative approaches to manage and protect these ecosystems—approaches that will link owners and focus their actions on confirming the integrity of the larger ecosystem.

In a partnership, members voluntarily promote individual actions that when combined, will sustain larger ecosystems. It can include representatives from government (federal, state, county, and local), the private sector (industrial landowners, nonindustrial landowners, and interested citizens), and not-for-profit organizations (conservation and environmental organizations) (Baardsen and Gronhaug 1990; Endicott 1993). Although partnerships are often advocated as a solution to ecosystem problems that transcend boundaries, there is surprisingly little understanding of their fundamental organization, administration, and success (Cortner et al. 1996).

With the aid of state foresters, interest group leaders, industrial foresters, and federal land management administrators, we selected 40 partnerships for study in 1995 and obtained information from each partnership's chief spokesperson or lead facilitator. In some cases our contact person had promoted the partnership and was in-

fluent in its subsequent management. In other cases the contact was a facilitator or impartial manager.

The partnerships ranged in age from less than one year to more than 12 years; the majority (58 percent) had been formed since 1993. Membership in each ranged from six to 75, with an average of 19 members. The area of land for which a partnership was responsible was 40 acres to 44 million acres, with an average of 5.8 million acres. Federal, state, and private entities were the most common partners, each involved in more than three-quarters of the partnerships studied. Local, industrial, and Native American entities participated in one-third of the partnerships, environmental and conservation groups in slightly less than half. Most groups met monthly or every other month (59 percent); some met every two weeks or, at the other extreme, once per year.

## Formation of Partnerships

Some partnerships are the formal result of cooperation between people and organizations as they work toward shared values. Others come about because an impending resolution of conflict forces the expected losers to try to redirect the outcome: it's better to be at the table and exert some influence than remain outside and risk complete loss. Still other partnerships arise because an administrative or judicial ruling requires opposing groups to resolve their disagreements (Sample et al. 1995).

Spokespersons for the partnerships

studied here were asked to identify the resource issues that had led to the existence of their partnership. Nearly 28 percent indicated that issues involving water, watersheds, or wetlands were most instrumental; 22 percent reported concerns over the management of a threatened or endangered species. Urban encroachment and the differing administrative mandates of public agencies were also mentioned.

Why do individuals and organizations join partnerships? Some private landowners become involved in partnerships because they view cooperation with their neighbors as a responsible way to become better stewards of their own forest property (NWF 1994). Others are attracted by opportunity to work on large-scale issues involving many landowners. Still others hope to forestall regulation by cooperative efforts (Endicott 1993; Sample et al. 1995) or seek a more unified voice in regulatory rule making (Ellefson et al. 1995). Participation in a partnership may enable people to enjoy cost-sharing benefits, unique tax advantages, or specialized technical assistance (Jones 1994). Affiliation with power and leadership in a community has also motivated people to join partnerships (Mattessich and Monsey 1992).

Spokespersons for the partnerships we studied cited members' interest in improving stewardship of forest resources, sharing information with other members, and retaining control over land use decisions (*table 1, p. 30*). Although 60 percent of the partner-

ships offered no financial or technical assistance to their members, 67 percent of the spokespersons for those that did found this incentive an important or very important consideration leading to a member's decision to join; 33 percent suggested such assistance was neutral in effect. Help took the form of technical assistance (48 percent) and cost-share payment (45 percent), or a

combination of both, for implementing certain forest practices or for coordinating such practices with neighboring landowners.

### Barriers to Participation

Certain conditions or attitudes can prevent participation in a partnership. Stakeholders may be reluctant to join partnerships because they fear losing

autonomy over the use and management of their land (Goldstein 1992; Ireland 1994). Others are deterred by lack of a power base: owners of small tracts may fear that they will have to manage by the agendas of the larger owners. New management practices involve risk and uncertainty, which potential participants may be unwilling to accept (Schoenwald-Cox et al. 1992).

Government participation in a partnership can be restricted by law. For example, the Federal Advisory Committee Act bars federal agencies from participating in committees, including partnerships, that influence management decisions. Conflict between an agency's legal directives and those of either the partnership or other participants can deter government participation (Cortner et al. 1996). For their part, private landowners' distrust of government may discourage participation if an agency is a member or even provides facilitating services (Cortner and Shannon 1993). Similarly, landowners may resist partnerships that seek to conduct resource assessments, fearing that their management options will be limited if an endangered species is found on their land. Private landowners may also be slow to commit to long-term memoranda of understanding with partnerships because inheritance taxes represent such a large uncertainty for their descendants. And federal antitrust laws may deter a company's involvement in any partnership that could affect free-market transactions (Sample et al. 1995).

Barriers to participation cited by spokespersons for the partnerships we studied included limited time for active participation, indifference to the issues, inadequate resources to support involvement, and misgivings about the intent of some participants (*table 2*). Of least concern were laws restricting participation, antagonism between some participants, and potential financial losses resulting from membership in a partnership.

### Organizational Structure

Once people agree to organize a partnership, its structure can range

**Table 1. Considerations motivating partnership membership, as identified by partnership spokespersons.**

Motivations for joining a partnership	Among two most important considerations	An important consideration
Improving stewardship of resources	40%	98%
Sharing or receiving information from other participants	18	75
Retaining control over land use decisions	12	45
Inhibiting the expansion of government activities	6	18
Influencing partnership actions in general	6	50
Improving relations with other participants or the community in general	5	60
Enhancing economic development opportunities	4	45
Obtaining assistance and incentives	3	30
Monitoring activities of participants or group in general	3	30
Preventing financial losses resulting from partnership actions	1	8
Interacting with important leaders in the community	0	27
Nonrespondents	2	0

**Table 2. Barriers inhibiting membership in partnerships, as identified by partnership spokespersons.**

Barriers to joining a partnership	Among two most important barriers	An important barrier
Limited amount of time to actively participate	18%	60%
Indifference to the issues	15	58
Inadequate resources (personal and organizational) to support involvement	14	35
Apprehension and misgivings from previous dealings with some participants	14	42
Fear of losing control over land use and management decisions	11	45
General antigovernment sentiments	9	35
Laws or rules limiting participation	3	10
General dislike or antagonism toward some participants	3	28
Potential financial losses resulting from participation	3	45
Nonrespondents	10	8

## The Voices of Experience

**I**n interviews, the spokespersons of 40 partnerships engaged in landscape-level activities were eager to share their expertise. Here are some of the 104 comments culled from our study:

*Establish open and constant communication.* "Use common terminology and reach out to participants by talking to them and listening to their concerns...no hidden agendas—keep everything in the open." Lively discussions and active listening establish the mutual understanding that is necessary for a successful partnership. For nurturing understanding and support in a broader sense, communication with outside audiences is also important.

*Identify common interests.* Seeking out common goals and interests in the use, management, and protection of the forest is critical. Once partnership members realize that they have common interests, progress can be made toward defining goals and objectives and the means for attaining them.

*Set clear goals.* "Define mutual goals clearly, ensure commitment of participants...assist the group in defining clear, tangible, common, and attainable goals."

*Acknowledge time and resource commitments.* "It takes a lot of energy, time, and long-term commitment...be willing to spend years to see results." Use people's time efficiently by timing meetings carefully, following clear agendas, and cautiously nurturing progress toward agreement.

*Involve all stakeholders.* "Be inclusive, ensure involvement by key decisionmakers...invite all people with an interest in the topic, especially critics...stakeholders should be present at all key decision points...need senior-level support from agencies and support from local communities." Partnerships that involved all stakeholders rated their effectiveness higher than those that did not, and they experienced less outside resistance.

*Create an environment of trust and respect.* "Engage private landowners early, listen to them, use their words, honor their fears...once the barriers are broken down, the cultures become one through trust and credibility, and success will follow in terms of both social change and resource improvements." A nonthreatening atmosphere is essential for open and less-defensive discussion of issues. Individuals must believe they can trust one another and feel that their views will be listened to and respected.

*Encourage voluntary participation.* People feel greater satisfaction with their group's progress if they come willingly to the table than if their participation is compulsory.

Volunteers are more open and feel less threatened, and knowing they can freely leave helps diffuse their fear of losing control to a larger public or private organization.

*Focus on resource stewardship.* Wise stewardship of forest and related resources is a strong and common bond among participants in successful partnerships.

Such a theme evokes fervent emotions that can motivate landowners and other interested parties to join and actively take part in a partnership. *Thwart notions of loss of control.* Fearing a loss of control over their decisions regarding the use, management, and protection of land and programs can hinder a person or organization's involvement in a partnership. Antigovernment sentiment, fear of hidden agendas, and differential power bases contribute to such concerns. Creating

trust among participating groups may diminish notions of loss of control.

*Engage a neutral facilitator.* A champion can instill positive perceptions of effectiveness and progress, but a good champion is not necessarily a good facilitator. Most partnerships need a neutral facilitator who can maintain an atmosphere of respect and keep the group moving in a positive direction.

*Consider incentives.* Whether the lure of technical or financial help motivates people to join a partnership is unclear. Most partnerships we studied did not offer these incentives; however, groups that did so considered them very important for attracting and keeping participants.

*Share information and resources.* Sharing information and resources can solidify bonds among members of a partnership. Government agencies in particular find partnerships a good way to pool limited resources, thus enabling them to address larger issues and management challenges.

*Secure adequate funds.* Partnerships need financial resources for their operations as well as for implementing the policies and programs their members want. Inadequate funding is a leading cause of disappointment. Ironically, lack of funding can also be an incentive for some members to join a partnership, if they want to share staff or resources.

*Obtain support of management.* Staff of public and private organizations that are participating in a partnership need commitment from their supervisors for the necessary time and resources if their participation is to be effective. Since a partnership's progress can be slow, supervisors must also be willing to support long-term participation.

### How can resource managers improve the effectiveness of an existing partnership or enhance the prospects for success of new partnerships?

from an informal, loose alliance to a formalized arrangement involving a facilitator, manager, constitution, by-laws, and meeting protocols. Some researchers have said that a highly formalized structure adversely affects the working relationships between participants and over time undermines the success of a partnership (NWF 1994). Others suggest that some degree of or-

ganizational structure is necessary (Endicott 1993). According to their spokespersons, the 40 partnerships we studied had the following organizational characteristics:

- 93 percent had clearly defined goals and objectives;
- 88 percent used a facilitator or neutral manager;
- 83 percent had a champion or

leader who had urged formation of the partnership;

- 78 percent had formed voluntarily;
- 65 percent included all stakeholders in their membership;
- 46 percent bound participants to the partnership by a formal agreement; and
- 46 percent had formal bylaws governing partnership operations.

Spokespersons were asked what threatened the continuance of their partnership. The most common response was lack of financial and related resources (*table 3*): inadequate funds to implement the partnership's plans and programs, and individual members' inability to secure enough support for their continued involvement. Important, but of much lesser concern, were conflicting goals of members, lack of foreseeable agreement on issues, and antagonisms between members.

**Table 3. Conditions threatening the continuation of partnerships, as identified by partnership spokespersons.**

Threats to continuation of partnership	
Lack of financial and related resources needed to implement agreed-to plans and programs	68%
Lack of resources to support continuing involvement of individual members	48
Interests and goals of partnership and individual members in conflict	28
Lack of funds to organize and carry out meetings	25
Difficulty coordinating the resource management activities of participating organizations	18
Lack of member agreement on mission, plans, and implementation schedules	18
Lack of benefits clearly attributable to partnership	10
Personal antagonism between members and organizations	8
Lack of authority to implement agreed-to plans and programs	5
No threats identified	8

NOTE: Respondents could select more than one condition.

**Table 4. Conditions contributing to successful partnerships, as identified by partnership spokespersons.**

Conditions contributing to successful partnerships	Among two most important conditions	An important condition
Recognition of common goals and interests	26%	88%
Mutual respect for interests and goals of other partners	16	78
Willingness to openly share information	12	85
Informal and open structure for partnership operation	11	82
Partnership viewed as a leader in the field or community	6	52
Participants' willingness to negotiate and compromise	5	32
Ability of partnership to adapt to new challenges	5	32
Facilitation by outside neutral party	4	15
Decisions based on a partnership consensus	4	58
Nature of participants' personalities	1	35
Personal friendships of participants outside a partnership	1	25
Nonrespondents	9	0

### Factors Leading to Success

We defined a successful partnership as a group able to attract and keep individuals and organizations engaged in partnership activities. Here are two previously identified keys to success: partnerships need to include—or at least invite—representation by all stakeholders from the very beginning, and partners need to have common interests (Mattessich and Monsey 1992; Swanson 1994).

Success also requires a certain amount of understanding and flexibility. Acknowledging the interests and goals pursued by other partners is a good start, as is recognition that organizational mandates and strongly held personal ideologies may limit members' ability to negotiate and compromise.

Open communication of values, differences, concerns, ideas, and solutions within a partnership can lead to trust among participants. Communication outside the partnership—that is, reporting progress to supervisors, grantors, and the general public—has also been suggested as critical to partnership success (Cortner et al. 1996), especially for government agencies that seek to accommodate citizens' and landowners' interests. Publicizing the

work and progress of a partnership also builds a foundation of community support and reduces the likelihood that there will be resistance to implementing the agreements reached by members of a partnership (Mattessich and Monsey 1992; Schoenwald-Cox et al. 1992; MIEB 1993).

Adequate financial resources can be an especially important contributor to success. Though government agencies and not-for-profit organizations may contribute professional facilitators and business managers, partnerships invariably must seek additional and more focused funding if they hope to implement their plans and programs. Lack of funding can compromise success over the long haul (MIEB 1993).

Asked to identify what they considered "important to keeping individuals and organizations together as a partnership," spokespersons for the 40 partnerships we surveyed named recognition of common interests and goals, mutual respect for the interests of other partners, willingness to share information, and an informal and open structure for operations (table 4). Considered far less important to a partnership's success were personalities (whether compatible or conflicting) and the development of personal relationships outside partnership meetings. Of the 10 conditions identified as important to partnership success, six involved the conduct of individual members, four concerned the operation of the partnership, and one involved perceptions of the partnership by external audiences.

Further insight into what makes for successful partnerships was obtained by relating more specific measures of success (effectiveness of partnership operations) to various managerial and organizational conditions of the studied partnerships (Williams and Ellefson 1996). From the spokespersons' perspective, partnerships that formed voluntarily were not necessarily more effective but were perceived as making more satisfactory progress: 94 percent of the voluntarily formed partnerships were judged to be mak-

ing satisfactory or very satisfactory progress, compared with only 44 percent of those whose formation was mandatory.

Partnerships that included all stakeholders were viewed as more effective but not necessarily more satisfied with their progress. Partnerships with champions—leaders who had spurred their formation and continued operation—were more effective and making more progress, in the eyes of their spokespersons. Relationships between success (effectiveness and satisfaction) and the presence of a facilitator or clearly stated objectives were not so obvious.

Given the need for foresters today to manage at the landscape level and, as a consequence, work with all the landowners in that landscape, it makes sense to focus our efforts in productive ways. Learning what makes partnerships work will help us become better resource managers. □

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