

RECREATION PARTNERSHIPS ON NATIONAL FORESTS: THE INFLUENCES OF INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT AND URBAN PROXIMITY ON AGENCY CAPACITY

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Abstract.—This paper presents data from the second phase of a multiphase study being conducted to explore the structure and function of U.S. Forest Service (FS) recreation partnerships. In Phase I, institutional commitment and urban proximity emerged as key indicators of agency capacity to effectively develop and maintain recreation partnerships. In Phase II, multiple case studies were selected to explore these indicators of partnership capacity. Interviews were conducted throughout six of the nine FS regions with personnel at each forest’s ranger districts and supervisor’s office. The narratives of our key informants and their representative themes help refine our emerging conceptual understanding of FS recreation partnerships. This paper describes the influence of institutional commitment and urban proximity on agency capacity to cooperate in recreation partnerships.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

U.S. Forest Service (FS) partnerships, worth an estimated one billion dollars per year, enhance the FS budget and capacity to manage public lands (Collins and Brown 2007). The FS Partnership Guide (National Forest Foundation and FS 2005) uses the term “partnership” to “describe relationships between the people, organizations, agencies, and communities that

work together and share interests” (p. 5). Numerous articles in professional journals and technical reports have described the benefits of working with partners (Darrow and Vaske 1995, Selin and Chavez 1994, Uhlik and Parr 2005). Previous research has explored characteristics of successful partnerships and implementation cycles but has not focused on the role of urban proximity and institutional commitment in building and maintaining successful partnerships. This study addresses this research gap through an in-depth case study of multiple partnership environments and commitment levels. Specifically, this paper has three objectives:

- Objective 1: Evaluate the role of urban proximity in national forest recreation partnerships.
- Objective 2: Evaluate the role of institutional commitment in national forest recreation partnerships.
- Objective 3: Explore the influence of urban proximity and institutional commitment on agency capacity to work in partnerships and use partnerships to enhance recreation services and opportunities.

In Phase I of this research, institutional commitment emerged as an important factor for both FS employees and their partners. Partnership coordinators at both the regional level and forest level organized partnerships by matching willing partners who contacted the forest with the appropriate FS personnel. However, not all national forests have a designated partnership coordinator. Phase I results revealed that just having a partnership coordinator demonstrated institutional commitment to building and managing partnerships and influenced the nature and extent of FS-partner relations.

Phase I also revealed that urban proximity was a crucial advantage in many successful partnerships.

An urban forest is defined as a forest adjacent to, or within one to two hours of a metropolitan area. Phase I interviews revealed that forests meeting this definition had access to a larger pool of potential partners and volunteers. In addition, urban forests are primarily recreation-focused. An amenity forest (Kruger 2006) is defined as a forest in an area that has a history of second homes, vacation homes, and built or natural features that attract people from urban to rural areas. Amenity forests are typically rural but recreation-focused. Amenity forests are unique in that they have access to partners from populations that may be transitory but deeply connected to the public lands that attract them to the area. A rural forest is defined as a forest that is more than two hours from a metropolitan area. Phase I informants working on rural forests typically had access to a smaller pool of potential partners. Rural forests were also more likely than other types of forests to focus on a mixture of commodity (e.g. timber harvest) and noncommodity functions.

2.0 METHODS

Using grounded theory, Phase I developed a conceptual framework of partnerships on National Forests through key informant interviews (n= 21) with both FS personnel and their partners. In open coding of the Phase I interview transcriptions, several themes emerged. External environment (i.e., urban, amenity or rural proximity) and institutional commitment (i.e., presence of a partnership coordinator) surfaced as key indicators of the agency's capacity to partner. Phase II more deeply investigated these findings through multiple case studies and interviews with FS personnel working closely with partners.

In April 2009, case studies were selected following phone discussions with regional partnership coordinators. Site visits were then coordinated with the partnership coordinator (where present) or the forest recreation manager at each forest. Cases were selected to represent a combination of rural, urban, and amenity forests with and without partnership coordinators, as well as differing forest locales (i.e., from different FS regions). One-on-one interviews were conducted in June-November 2009 during

site visits (n = 41) and via telephone (n = 4) when scheduling conflicts occurred. Interviews began with the key contact person; subsequently, a chain referral sampling technique was used to gather additional employees' perceptions of partnerships on each forest. All interviews were audio recorded, and audio files were transcribed verbatim following interview completion. Transcribed interviews were imported to NVivo7 to facilitate analysis. Open and axial coding (Charmaz 2006) was used to determine themes and central ideas about partnerships in these national forest cases. Triangulation (Seale 1999), reflexivity through peer debriefing, fair dealing in case selection, attention to negative cases, and a clear explanation of research methods enhanced the quality of this study (Mays and Pope 2000).

3.0 RESULTS

The six case studies investigated in Phase II suggested that institutional commitment is highly variable among forest units. Geographic location strongly influenced how much pressure each forest was under from the public to have partnerships and what primary type(s) of partnerships the forest developed. Both institutional commitment and geographical location were instrumental in understanding the current capacity of FS personnel to engage effectively in partnerships. Future partnership efforts may benefit from the insights presented here.

3.1 Case A: Urban Forest with Partnership Coordinator

Case A informants described their forest as having extremely well-structured institutional support with a designated partnership coordinator on the forest level, "zoned" partnership coordinators assigned to the forest's districts, and volunteer partnership coordinators who assisted FS personnel with partnership events.

I would say in the region, we've just been acknowledged, probably nationally, we're probably one of the most developed partnership organizations in the NFS. Part of it is [the zoned partnership coordinators], they've been

around for a long time and have a lot of great relationships. (Forest Partnership Coordinator)

However, even with an overwhelming amount of institutional support, many Case A informants also felt that they lacked the capacity to fully manage the public demand to partner.

Even with [partnership coordinators], there is no way we can meet the number of volunteers and partners out there who are interested in working with us. Part of this is that [urban area] is a very outdoorsy community. We are an urban forest, we are the backyard. (Forest Partnership Coordinator)

Because of the extensive public interest, Case A personnel discussed the need to “funnel” individual volunteers into larger partner groups. They suggested that it is more effective to interact with one club president than to coordinate project tasks with several individual volunteers. Case A personnel referred to “umbrella” organizations, external entities that help organize individuals and groups of volunteers and plan projects with the insight and assistance of FS personnel.

3.2 Case B: Urban Forest, No Partnership Coordinator

Case B informants reported very little institutional support for creating and maintaining partnerships. Many reported feeling that leadership recognized the potential value of partnerships but had not committed resources or formalized a support structure to enable personnel to form and maintain partnerships.

The forest lacks organization. As far as our volunteer program. We just aren't organized real well to take advantage of the metropolitan area... I don't think it's a desire. It's just a lack of funds to even hire a volunteer coordinator. And you can say, well, you can take funds from everybody and then make a volunteer coordinator, that would give it a forest emphasis. Well, top level management hasn't chosen to do that, hasn't made that kind of dedication to it. (Group Leader for Public Service)

Case B personnel reported receiving more support for partnerships from external partners than from internal leadership. Partners were often providing the basic resources (i.e., funding) and relational support (i.e., dedication to project tasks and collaborative management) necessary for building and sustaining partnerships.

Because of its urban proximity, Case B informants did report an overwhelming public demand to partner. Partners of this forest were primarily local: Boy Scouts, local governments, and individuals. Case B informants reported that the use of partnerships was inconsistent throughout the unit. Often, individual employees were dedicated to and innately skilled in collaborating and did the bulk of the agency's work with partners. Case B personnel reported a desire for more structured support for building and maintaining partnerships in order to alleviate their own workloads and to help better meet the demands of the public. When asked what they would do with additional support, one person replied, “We'd work with more volunteers and more partners. And we'd work with them longer. We'd have more projects going and do more with it” (Recreation, Lands, and Minerals Officer).

3.3 Case C: Amenity Forest with a Partnership Coordinator

Case C informants reported a lack of institutional support for partnerships. While the forest unit had a designated partnership coordinator, this employee was assigned to other duties and did not take an active role in assisting forest personnel with recreation partnership tasks. District personnel reported that their motivation to partner stemmed from necessity (e.g., lack of in-house resources to accomplish job duties) and political popularity.

And I mean the line officers push partnership development. Primarily for political reasons, they're very sexy...But there's really no internal incentive mechanism that drives us to promote these partnerships. We do it because it's politically popular to do it and we do it because we can get some work done. (Recreation Staff Officer)

One Case C informant described access to partners at “in-between” forests located in neither urban or rural areas:

Yes I think there’s a good volunteer base. We’re better than some forests and not as good as others. Often if you’re adjacent to larger communities you have more opportunities. If you’re out in the hinterlands it’s hard. We’re kind of in between. (Public Service Staff Officer)

Many Case C partnerships are local entities: outfitters, guides, hiking or biking clubs, and concessionaires. Case C personnel also reported partnerships with groups from outside the adjacent communities. These groups often traveled to the forest to provide recreation opportunities or services that relied on the forest’s specialized resource (e.g., contiguous wilderness or a wild and scenic river).

3.4 Case D: Amenity Forest, No Partnership Coordinator

While Case D had no designated partnership coordinator, personnel on this forest reported a high level of internal commitment to, and support for, partnerships. Leadership would interact directly with partners, facilitate employees’ partnership skill development, and provide access to necessary resources for partnerships (e.g., ability to match funds). Case D informants also reported the use of umbrella organizations to help organize partnership efforts:

...[This umbrella organization’s] primary mission is facilitating volunteer work. So they coordinate, supervise, facilitate volunteer groups...And during the off-season, they are kind of lining up volunteers and individuals and groups, individuals to come in as groups, and work on projects. And during the off season they also work with us to prioritize those projects and identify them and work on the logistical support for those. And it is just, for me, an unbelievably positive relationship where they help us so much. (Wilderness Ranger)

These umbrella organizations established by Case D personnel are also instrumental in providing the forest with access to partners. Like with Case C, most partners are either local or travel to the forest because of a deep connection with and reliance on the forest’s amenity resources.

So I think people here are more involved with the forest. They’re here because of the forest, a lot of them...So I think the caring level is higher. So that maybe answering your access question, in that if people care more about their forest maybe they’re more accessible. (Forest Supervisor)

3.5 Case E: Rural Forest with Partnership Coordinator

Case E informants reported that leaders are supportive of partnerships. A newly hired partnership coordinator signified a shift in the forest’s emphasis towards working on partnerships. However, long-term personnel (i.e., informants who had been with this forest for ten or more years) discussed heavy turnover within leadership positions and felt that the current support of partnerships might be temporary. Informants also described time and workforce constraints; to them, partnerships were “extra work” that they were not able or willing to take on. Few district-level informants reported using the partnership coordinator to assist them.

What [the partnership coordinator’s] job is, is to solicit these grants, write the grants, apply for the grants, get the money in, and then we get all the work dumped on us. We got all we need to do already...we don’t have the people to actually go do the work that we bring all this grant money in [to do]. (Forester, Recreation)

Case E partnerships were primarily based upon individual employees’ professional or personal networks. These networks consisted of state agencies or local residents with a common interest.

I do a lot of phone calls. I know a lot of different disciplines; folks in fisheries, folks in wildlife, folks in birds. That kind of stuff... Oil and gas

people, biofuels folks, I've been working with them too. You just start putting your fillers out, you're aggressive, you're not afraid to approach somebody and beg for something. (Partnership Coordinator)

Nearly all of Case E's partners were local. Many informants spoke about the importance of local retired people in assisting the forest with visitor services. Youth corps-types of partnerships were also an important source of volunteer workforce. The only partners from outside the adjacent communities were campground hosts who traveled to the forest from neighboring states.

3.6 Case F: Rural Forest, No Partnership Coordinator

While Case F did not have a designated partnership coordinator, forest personnel here also reported a recent increase in support for partnerships. This was demonstrated through the forest's newer hires who were brought on because of their experience in working with partners. While some Case F informants desired a designated coordinator, others reported that existing personnel with the appropriate skills were a suitable or preferred alternative to a designated coordinator.

... you have to be careful about that [designating a partnership coordinator] because when you add positions you don't necessarily add capacity. It's really important to have the right skills. They don't need to be in a position per se, you just need to have them on your staff. They may have other responsibilities but they also have the energy and desire to do this. (District Ranger)

The majority of Case F partnerships were with local entities concerned with a specific resource or use. Because of limited resources to complete the work, partnerships had become an important element in delivering recreation services.

Our motorized rec program, ATV, off-highway motorcycles, snowmobiles... Back around '96, '97 we started amping up the program, getting more partners involved, getting more money

involved for the upkeep and maintenance of trails. And then it just seemed to blossom.
(Natural Resources Specialist)

Other forest informants discussed the effectiveness of using self-sufficient groups that came to the forest with their own leadership and oversight. These were often partnerships with youth-oriented volunteer programs (e.g., Student Conservation Association with crew leaders). These type of partnerships were also effective because they consumed very little of the forest's limited time and labor resources.

4.0 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The six cases explored in this study reveal the interesting dynamics of FS partnerships. The role of urban proximity and access to partners is more clearly explained through the experiences and narratives of our informants. In addition, institutional commitment to partnerships is shown to be highly variable among the six FS case studies. Exploring the role of designated coordinators and other supportive personnel furthers our understanding of agency commitment to the partnership process.

4.1 Access and Capacity

There seems to be an inverse relationship between public demand to partner and the agency's need to partner. Public demand to partner was highest on urban forests, where personnel reported a more moderate need to use partners. In contrast, rural forests have a more moderate demand from their public to partner, but report a higher need to partner to accomplish essential work. At amenity forests, both the public demand and agency need to partner is high (Table 1). Because of heavy visitation to the national forests, amenity forests (cases C and D) reported higher volumes of partnership access and a greater need to provide recreation opportunities than did rural forests (cases E and F). Although urban proximity explained a forest's demand from partners and common types of partners (i.e., umbrella organizations on urban forests, self-sufficient groups on rural forests), institutional commitment was vital to agency capacity on all forests.

Table 1.—Access and capacity

Indicators of Collaborative Capacity	Geographic Location		
	Urban Forest (Case A and B)	Amenity Forest (Case C and D)	Rural Forest (Case E and F)
Agency Need	Moderate	High	High
Public Demand	High	Moderate/High	Moderate
Common Partnership Type	Individuals, Diverse	Local, Specialized Users	Local, formalized
Partnering Focus	Umbrella	Multi-focus	User groups

4.2 Commitment and Capacity: Units with a Partnership Coordinator

FS capacity to form and maintain partnerships hinges on the presence of personnel with appropriate skills (i.e., negotiation and network building). Partnership coordinators have these skills but, in some cases, partnership coordinators are constrained by other job duties (i.e., Case D). In Case E, the partnership coordinator primarily acquired grants to fund partnerships (Table 2). To act strategically towards partnerships, districts must also be enabled to manage partnerships. Because partnership coordinators cannot account for all pieces of the partnership puzzle, efforts should be made to provide all agency personnel with skills and resources necessary to build and maintain partnerships.

4.3 Commitment and Capacity: Units without a Partnership Coordinator

The same is true for FS units without a partnership coordinator; increased capacity and a comprehensive approach to partnerships requires that multiple personnel are fluent in the partnership process. Forests without a partnership coordinator demonstrated a lack of organized support for partnerships. In these cases, leadership emphasis becomes necessary to increase agency capacity to partner (Table 2). Because there is not a designated coordinator, it is essential that forest and district personnel develop partnership skills on their own.

Table 2.—Commitment and capacity

	Forests with partnership coordinator			Forests without partnership coordinator		
	Case A	Case C	Case E	Case B	Case D	Case F
Current Institutional Commitment:	Forest partnership coordinator, zoned/district coordinators, AmeriCorps volunteer coordinators	Forest partnership coordinator, constrained by other duties	Newly hired forest partnership coordinator, primarily acquires grants	Leadership recognizes the value but no committed structure is given to support partnerships	Leadership support allows forest and district personnel to work effectively in partnerships	Hiring incoming personnel with partnership skills
Future Commitment Needs:	Further development of partnership structure at the district level to address the public demand to partner	Personnel committed to working actively with partners, especially at the district level where most partnerships occur	Increased time and resources for district personnel to work with grant- funded partnerships	More consistent support for partnerships at the forest and district level, partnering with an umbrella group to assist internal efforts	Further work with umbrella organizations and continued institutional support for partnerships	Increased time and resources to personnel who work with partners, or assistance of a formalized coordinator

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

Through increased awareness of forest conditions (i.e., external environment and level of institutional commitment), FS leaders may become more sensitive to the capacity of their personnel to partner and may be in a better position to provide appropriate resources to enhance or expand existing partnership-building capacity. Future studies may further evaluate the influence of external environment and institutional commitment on building and maintaining successful partnerships in other cases.

6.0 LITERATURE CITED

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