Partnerships in Natural Resource Agencies: A Conceptual Framework [1]

Catherine V. Darrow **Jerry J. Vaske**[2]

Abstract: To meet financial constraints while maintaining or improving programs, natural resource managers have increasingly turned to partnerships with other public agencies or private businesses. The process of developing a successful partnership, however, is rarely chronicled, much less empirically studied. By using the available natural resource and business management literature, a set of criteria have been suggested as necessary components of successful partnerships. The resulting conceptual model provides a framework for guiding future empirical verification.

Partnerships between natural resource agencies and other organizations have emerged as an innovative management strategy to meet agency goals while responding to financial constraints. The National Park Service, for example, has over 400 such arrangements. Similarly, the USDI Fish and Wildlife Service, the USDA Forest Service, and the USDI Bureau of Land Management have been active in creating partnerships.

Although the need to develop partnerships is well established, most public-private partnerships have not been systematically evaluated. The few existing studies have examined the characteristics (LaPage 1994) or process components (Selin and Chavez 1992, 1993; Darrow and others [In press]) of partnerships, and are typically based on comparisons of a limited number of case studies. Without empirical and theoretical scrutiny, the criteria needed to create and maintain a successful alliance are difficult to identify. Moreover, because unsuccessful partnerships are rarely discussed, much less chronicled, it is difficult to identify techniques and strategies to be avoided.

The limited natural resource literature as well as the business management literature suggests three distinct phases associated with successful partnerships: (1) initiation, (2) planning, and (3) implementation/evaluation. Each phase is characterized by different processes that influence the direction of the partnership.

This paper offers a conceptual framework for systematically evaluating natural resource partnerships, and provides a foundation for future empirical exploration.

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[2]Research Assistant and Associate Professor, respectively. Department of Natural Resource Recreation and Tourism, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523.

Initiation Phase

The need for initiating a partnership may originate from economic issues, an administrative mandate, or other sources. During this phase, the process elements include an evaluation of the agency's internal and external environment relative to its orientation to other agencies / organizations (Lewis 1990). The ability to identify key resources, forecast potential problems, and evaluate "principles of fair exchange" are key indicators of success (Lane and Beamish 1990). Principles of fair exchange involve an evaluation of the perceived equal reciprocity of human and non-human resources.

Although prospective partners may have been considered, more intensive partner selection occurs during this initiation phase. Natural resource agencies appear to be more sensitive to the role of careful partner selection (Maxwell 1994, personal communication). After the field of potential partners has been narrowed, initial non-binding agreements may be made. Forming these initial agreements serves as a testing ground for how well partners actually work together.

Planning Phase

Once the core group of partners has been selected, more formal partnership meetings begin. During the initial meetings, the lead partner is either selected or emerges, and the roles of other partners are clarified (Collins 1991, Kent 1991, Killing 1983, Lewis 1990). A review of case studies from the National Park Service indicates that there may be different leaders for different parts of the partnership project (Darrow and others [In press]). Clarification of the roles each partner will play is an indicator of the ultimate success of a partnership.

A second indicator during the planning phase is the development of a strategic plan which includes mutually agreed upon vision statements and goals (Collins 1991, Stodder 1991). The vision and goals statements provide a foundation for formulating a written plan, essentially a "map" for the direction of the partnership. The written plan should include clear financial plans (Dent 1990, Lynch 1989, Selin and Chavez 1993), address legal, regulatory, and tax issues (Carter and others 1988), and consider the role of incentives, recognition, and rewards for all partners (Merrifield 1992, Selin and Chavez 1993). These issues are particularly important for partnerships with volunteer organizations that are not tangibly compensated. For the natural resource agencies, this step can be particularly complex because of the array of business structures in partnership with the agency. For example, partners may include volunteer organizations, for profit businesses, or non-government organizations, each having different legal/regulatory, and tax structures.

Third, partnerships may alter the responsibilities of the existing staff or involve the hiring of new personnel. Therefore personnel needs should be determined during the planning process (Ganitsky and Watzke 1990, Killing 1983). As the strategic plan develops, an indicator of successful partnerships is staff and public involvement. Without internal and external support even the best planned partnerships may fail (Darrow and others [In press]). The business management literature presents a strong case for involving all levels of staff in an ongoing manner during partnership development (Lewis 1991 1992, Zeira and Shenkar 1990). The process of including the public or staff in partnerships entails a determination of who should be involved and a plan for how to involve them.

Equally important is the design of a marketing strategy, a practice not nearly as common with natural resource agencies as with private businesses. Marketing strategy is essential to the success of the partnership (Kitchell and Kraayenbrink 1992, Selin and Chavez 1993). For natural resource agencies, a marketing plan tends to take the form of providing public education and planned communication about the partnership project. Media and messages should be targeted to specific audiences.

Finally, the planning process should include the construction of information systems. This involves the development of data organization, data storage, and a determination of how information systems will be operated.

Implementation/Evaluation Phase

During the implementation/evaluation phase, priority should focus on creating criteria for measuring project progress (Killing 1983). The selected criteria should remain flexible so changes can be made as needed. A key indicator of success is ongoing evaluation and monitoring (Selin and Chavez 1993). Successful partnerships merge evaluation and resulting changes with information systems and marketing plans.

This phase should include exit or termination strategies for the partnership (Killing 1983, Merrifield 1992, Slowinski 1992). As the project nears conclusion, partners can consider one of three options: (1) continuation of the partnership via extension of the current project or creation of a new project with the same partners, (2) the inclusion of new partners to work on additional aspects of a current project, or (3) terminate the partnership.

Conclusion

By documenting process elements associated with each phase of an existing partnership, managers and researchers will be better positioned to evaluate the potential success of new partnerships.

The three phases outlined here raise a number of questions for future research. During the initiation phase, for example, can evaluation criteria be identified to assist in the screening of potential partners? What components should be included in an analysis of the agency's internal and external environment? During the planning phase, which specific issues must be included in the vision and goals statements? What are the most effective ways of involving the staff and relevant publics in the development of a partnership? For the implementation/evaluation phase, what are appropriate indicators of a project's success? Can effective and efficient strategies be identified to assist in conflict resolution between partners?

Overall, this paper raises more questions than it answers. Our goal is to encourage the adoption of more formal procedures for evaluating existing partnerships. Conceptualizing a partnership as a series of distinct phases, provides a framework for examining specific components.

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