

Science for Environment Policy

Large-scale conservation partnerships: challenges and successes identified

Conservation partnerships that span geographic, biological and administrative boundaries are needed to deal with many global environmental problems. However, there are challenges to managing these complex, large-scale programmes that involve many partners and stakeholders. A new study examines the nature of these challenges and identifies the factors that lead to partnership success.

Large-scale conservation initiatives are needed to protect ecosystems and the services they provide from a variety of threats, including [climate change](#), desertification, [land use](#) change and invasive species. Many conservation groups are now forming 'broad-extent' partnerships to manage these problems collaboratively. For example, the Danube-Carpathian Programme promotes conservation, restoration and sustainable management for the entire Danube River Basin and the Carpathian Mountains. These types of programmes include organising bodies such as state agencies, universities or NGOs as partners, and stakeholders such as companies and landowners.

In this study, the researchers surveyed conservation practitioners from 11 different broad-extent partnerships. In all, the programmes were spread across three continents and covered 29 countries. Individual programmes ranged in coverage, from around 10 000 km² to an entire continent. All of the partnerships crossed authoritative, political and watershed boundaries, and eight had direct input into land management decisions.

The survey asked the practitioners about the challenges they faced in achieving goals and the actions they felt contributed to success. The results were grouped into three topics: launching and maintaining partnerships; specifying management objectives; and implementation and learning. Problems with launching and maintaining partnerships were mainly related to bringing partners together, communication between all partners and stakeholders, and sustaining partnerships in the face of difficulties such as mistrust or staff changes.

Obtaining sufficient funding was cited as a major issue affecting programmes' ability to set objectives and gather information. The traits that were shared by successful partnerships included: adequate funding, full engagement between partners and stakeholders, and trust and long-term relationships between the partners. Good levels of funding and communication were more likely when the different priorities of the various partners and stakeholders were recognised and integrated into the objectives of conservation plans.

Respondents reported a number of obstacles to setting management objectives. A major problem was that the various partners had their own, sometimes different, goals. This issue was further complicated by the fact that individual partners often fell under the responsibility of different authorities at national or local levels. As a result, conservation efforts were designed for different scales. Another difficulty was identifying and agreeing measurable indicators of objectives, as the different partner organisations often used different indicators. However, the process of developing partnership objectives helped set overall priorities and design common communication messages.

Partnerships often found it difficult to successfully implement conservation actions. For example, it was not always easy to translate policies into actions on the ground, owing to differences in management timetables or mistrust between partner organisations. Most of the partnerships adopted an adaptive management approach, which uses research to revise conservation objectives or select suitable management actions. Some programmes found it especially useful to link economic and ecological benefits; this helped ensure funding and fostered successful implementation of conservation actions. Overall, the researchers conclude that taking into account changing environmental, political and social conditions has been important to conservation successes.



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