

# 3 WORKING WITH PARTNERS

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## 3.1 Identifying Potential Partners

Partnering with organizations working toward the same goals can be quite powerful. Each party brings their own area of expertise and resources, and often, you can build efficiencies by coordinating work or dividing work according to skills, resources, or location. The first step toward building a successful partnership is thinking carefully about whom to include.

A good starting point is to ask yourself: Who else is working on similar issues in your region? A watershed group? A state agency? Scouts? A hiking or mountain biking club? A land conservancy? A school or volunteer association? Think about all the people who live, work, or play in your project area and who might be invested in the health of its natural resources.

Also, think about who already has relationships with the landowners you seek to engage. Who has funding for this sort of work? Who has the ability to track efforts and progress? Are there regulatory agencies that may play a role (e.g., issuing permits, providing tax abatement or cost-share)? As you gather more potential partners, check in with them for suggestions of other folks who should also be engaged.

Let's say you're working to make sure that timber cuts on private lands are done in a sustainable manner. State natural resource agencies and University Extension are likely go-to partners because this work aligns with their organizational missions. Local birding or hunting groups may be interested because the project will help ensure healthy habitats for the birds and animals they love (to watch or hunt). Perhaps a watershed organization would get involved because unsustainable timber cuts often also result in more erosion issues. Industry may even be interested in investing in this work because they want to maintain their local supply chain.

In another example, perhaps you own a nature preserve but need help maintaining it. Would a nearby high school be interested in a service-learning opportunity? Does the local community's business association view the preserve as a town asset it would be willing to support? Does the historical society view

it as helping to preserve the historic character of the area? Think about how your goals might overlap with theirs.

Once you have identified all potential partners, start to narrow down the list. You don't have to (and usually shouldn't) partner with everyone who is able and willing to help you. If an organization's mission does not fit with the project goal, if they are overstretched with other activities, or if they want you to alter your project goals and parameters in ways that would dilute your impact, save that relationship for another day. Not everyone needs to be a partner on every project. Having too many partners, or the wrong partners, can lead to sluggish progress, mission creep, and spoiled relationships (that may have been fruitful in a different context). Remember, someone has to set up all of those conference calls and meetings. Don't give yourself a headache by inviting more partners than actually needed. There will be opportunities for more partnerships in the future.

Don't invite people into your partnership if you aren't prepared to listen to them and incorporate their perspectives and concerns. On the other hand, don't be afraid to invite people into your partnership because you think they have different views from you; they may be the most important link for ensuring your goals are achievable. If an organization is crucial to your effort but doesn't have the resources to participate, see if you can support or incentivize them by contributing toward their time and travel expenses.

Finally, if your project has (or even seems to have) a negative impact on an organization or group, it is important to engage with them early in the process. The group may or may not be a formal member of your coalition but should be invited into the process. In this way, their needs can be heard, and they can contribute early to solutions that will work for them.

For example, the Watershed Agricultural Council (WAC) works with loggers in the New York City watershed to encourage the use of water quality BMPs during logging operations. Rather than a

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regulatory approach, WAC uses a voluntary system in which loggers receive the financial incentives and technical support they need to use BMPs. Now WAC is seeing greater implementation rates, is regularly invited to plan harvests in advance with loggers, and inspects the sites when harvesting is complete. If WAC hadn't worked directly with the loggers, it would have been hard to know how to achieve these gains.

Keep in mind that you don't get to choose your partners; you only get to invite them to join you. Each participating organization will need to see the

value in spending time and effort working toward the partnership's goals and may not be willing or able to participate at the level or in the ways that you desire. Partner organizations may get different immediate benefits from participating in your project (e.g., more access to biking trails, new ideas for science fair projects, opportunity to voice concerns about proposed actions), but solid, long-lasting partnerships are usually built on a deeper commitment to the overall goals of the project and alignment with each other's missions.

**When identifying partners, a good rule of thumb is to include as many organizations as you need, but no more. Think broadly and creatively about who might be good to partner with, but think critically and strategically when actually setting up the partnership.**