

Investing in Collaborative Conservation & Stewardship

About This Resource

This open-source, living document is designed to help practitioners, funders, policymakers, and others communicate the value of collaborative approaches, as well as the critical investments needed to advance large-landscape-scale conservation, stewardship, and community resilience efforts. It draws on research, practitioner experience, and field-based examples to make the case for the sustained collaborative capacity and infrastructure funding that enables durable, cross-boundary outcomes. Developed by a group of practitioners and supporting organizations working to address systemic barriers to collaborative conservation and stewardship, this resource will evolve over time as new knowledge emerges.

Today's Challenges Outpace Traditional Way of Working

Across the United States and around the world, communities are facing the increasingly complex, interconnected challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss, economic development, water security, wildfire, environmental injustice, and more.

These challenges do not respect jurisdictional, organizational, ownership, or sector boundaries. Yet the institutions, governance systems, and management approaches used to address them are often constrained by sector mandates, fragmented authority, and limited capacity to work across scales and boundaries. As a result, a growing gap exists between the complexity of these problems and the ability of existing systems to respond effectively.

Transboundary challenges demand solutions that integrate diverse actors, knowledge systems, and resources. Land- and seascape collaboratives¹ have emerged as one of the most promising ways to link local action to landscape-scale impact and enable more adaptive, coordinated responses to complex issues.

Landscape-Scale Collaboratives Offer a Different Way of Organizing for Impact

Many conservation and stewardship goals can be advanced by individual organizations. But the most complex environmental and social challenges typically require coordinated action.

¹ Conservation and stewardship approaches that bring together public agencies, Tribes, communities, nonprofits, private landowners, funders, and others to address cross-boundary social, economic, and ecological challenges.

Land- and seascape collaboratives operate where individual organizations and traditional governance systems are often ill-equipped to act alone. They enable partners to align efforts, build trust, mobilize resources, fill governance gaps, and achieve outcomes no single organization could accomplish. They also create space for diverse partners to co-create strategies that align conservation, economic, and community priorities.

Because these collaboratives² are adaptable by design, they can be tailored to local conditions while maintaining the cross-boundary coordination needed to achieve integrated and lasting outcomes.

Collaborative Approaches Are Foundational, but Under-Supported

While collaboration is widely recognized as essential for advancing solutions to complex, cross-boundary challenges, the infrastructure to effectively work that way has not received the same attention or investment.

In many regions, collaborative approaches have become a primary way of working, and the expectations placed on them continue to grow. Yet durable, landscape-scale outcomes require intentional investment in the people, processes, and support systems that make effective collaboration possible.

This is the central funding challenge: collaboratives are increasingly expected to deliver large-scale, cross-boundary outcomes, but the capacity required to sustain that work is too often treated as secondary, temporary, or optional.

Collaborative Capacity³ Is the Critical Missing Ingredient

Despite their promise, many collaboratives struggle not because of a lack of vision, but because the capacity to sustain their work is missing. Building and maintaining collaboration requires dedicated staffing, skilled facilitation, shared governance systems, community engagement, communications, data coordination, and the time to build trust and align action.

These collaborative capacity investments are not administrative overhead. They are enabling infrastructure. They allow partners to move from isolated projects to coordinated action capable of shifting the trajectory of complex, cross-boundary challenges.

As public and private investment in conservation, stewardship, climate resilience, and community development grows, there is a real risk that these investments will fall short of their potential without the collaborative capacity needed to sustain them. Most funding is focused on discrete projects and outcomes, and the critical work required to align partners,

² An “umbrella” term for a group engaged in collective action to achieve shared goals, including partnerships, coalitions, alliances, networks, etc.

³ A collaborative’s ability to meet its collective purpose and achieve desired outcomes (Mickel & Farrell, 2025).

build trust, coordinate action across jurisdictions and sectors, engage communities, and maintain shared strategies over time is often not properly resourced.

This gap is increasingly consequential as environmental and community challenges prove to be interconnected and therefore require coordinated cross-sector responses. Investing in collaborative capacity helps bridge this gap. It ensures that funding supports not only projects, but also the fundamental collaborative infrastructure⁴ needed to deliver and maintain lasting outcomes.

Strategic Capacity Investments Produce Compounding Returns

Recent research and programmatic assessments⁵ demonstrate that strategic investments in collaborative capacity produce outsized returns.

Investing in Collaborative Capacity:

- **Accelerates pace** through coordinated action and more efficient project delivery.
- **Expands scale** by aligning partners across regions, ownerships, sectors, and communities.
- **Improves quality** by integrating diverse expertise, local knowledge, and community priorities.
- **Increases durability** by building trust, shared governance, accountability, and long-term systems.

Nearly 90% of collaboratives studied reported strengthening collaborative capacity increased the pace, scale, and impact of their project delivery. Strategic investments also enabled partnerships to achieve outcomes no single organization could accomplish alone, including regional restoration, wildfire mitigation, shared data systems, accountability systems, and more durable implementation.

These benefits compound over time, collaboratives build trust, better systems, and additional capacity they become better able to respond to new issues, attract investment, sustain partner commitment, and deliver impact.

A Strategic Opportunity to Maximize Public, Private, and Philanthropic Investment

For funders and policymakers who value conservation, stewardship, climate resilience, and

⁴ The systems, processes, tools, and other organizational supports that enable a collaborative to function effectively. This includes governance structures, decision-making processes, communication systems, data-sharing platforms, backbone staffing, funding mechanisms, and shared protocols (DeSilva et al., 2022).

⁵ [Investing in Collaborative Models and Their Capacities: An Evaluation of the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation's Innovative Nutrient and Sediment Reduction Grant Program](#) & [Positioning Collaboratives to Generate Impact: An Evaluation of the Catalyst Fund and Collaborative Capacity Investments](#)

community well-being, there is no better time for strategic, sustained investment in collaborative capacity. It is one of the most effective ways to increase their return on investment.

Collaborative capacity funding fills a systemic gap. It provides the activating force needed to turn individual investments into connected outcomes: resilient ecosystems, stronger communities, more inclusive stewardship systems, and durable impact across whole landscapes.

Now is the moment to invest not only in projects, but in the collaborative systems that connect projects into durable, cross-boundary outcomes with real impact.