


Reinventing Public Lands Partnerships

The Florida National Scenic Trail Case Study



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Introduction

The public lands system in the United States has a long history of using public-private partnerships to run visitor services such as youth programs, raise private funds, and engage citizens in land stewardship and environmental education. In many instances, the nonprofit organizations in public-private partnerships have also been instrumental in securing congressional designations for national trails, monuments, and parks as well as wild and scenic rivers and wilderness areas.

Many such partnerships are fifty (or more) years old! And while public-private partnerships have achieved numerous “win-win” results during that time, the intervening years have also brought significant shifts in the country’s demographics, political and cultural trends, and land use issues. As with any relationship, these partnerships must adapt to changing circumstances in order to remain relevant and meaningful. This case study outlines the systematic process used to analyze and ultimately reinvent the partnership between a federal agency – the United States Forest Service (USFS) – and its nonprofit partner, the Florida Trail Association (FTA).

The case study defines the situation and strategic issues arising from an analysis of the resource that is the focus of the partnership, the Florida National Scenic Trail (the Trail), and the partnership relationship. It also reviews the partnership reinvention process designed by Conservation Impact and used to develop an updated resource agreement, a set of shared strategic goals, and a new partnership model.

About the Authors

Founded in 1996, Conservation Impact is a consulting firm that works solely with conservation nonprofits and related public agencies. Authors Shelli, Leigh, and Karen, along with Kristen Grigsby comprise the Conservation Impact team. The team specializes in building stronger, more sustainable, and more impactful organizations, agencies, and partnerships. With advanced degrees in public administration and nonprofit management and undergraduate degrees in environmental conservation, sociology, and public affairs, the team specializes in strategic planning, marketing, organizational development, fundraising, and partnership reinvention. Having developed this partnership reinvention approach, they have used it successfully with federal agencies, local agencies, nonprofit organizations, and community coalitions. See www.conservationimpact.com.

Why Reinvent?

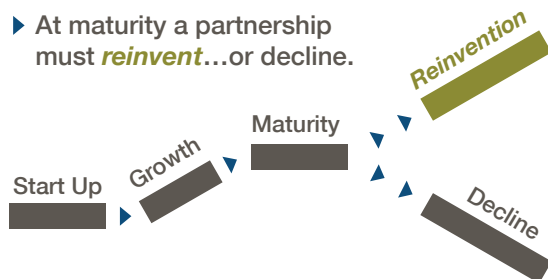
Wholesale reinvention of a partnership may seem extreme. However, public land agencies face truly unprecedented pressures. They are required to deliver ever-increasing results as federal and state budgets are being cut dramatically, visitor numbers and other compatible recreation uses continue to grow, and new natural resource challenges mount (such as climate change, longer fire seasons, and hydraulic fracturing).

As a result, public lands managers are becoming increasingly reliant upon their nonprofit partners to support public lands stewardship. Today's challenges require new levels of joint problem solving, innovation, and collaboration. The ability to reinvent public-private partnerships to meet these challenges will influence not only the health of our public lands, but also the health and well-being of individuals and communities.

Conservation Impact's Partnership Reinvention Process

Partnership reinvention is a systematic approach to analyzing, redesigning, and developing a partnership in order to achieve specific resource-defined goals and to ensure a productive, mutually beneficial relationship between strategic partners.¹

Deliberately reinventing a partnership is most relevant when the conditions under which the partnership operates have changed or when the partnership has matured and is no longer able to successfully steward the resource. In both situations, the partnership must reinvent in order to reach its "next level" or risk further decline, failure, or obsolescence.



¹ We define strategic partnerships as an interdependent and formalized relationship between two or more parties to achieve clearly articulated goals. Strategic partnerships typically imply that each entity brings its unique assets to the relationship. Strategic partnerships require active collaboration and structures, processes, and skills for ensuring a positive inter-organizational and interpersonal relationship.

Conservation Impact's partnership reinvention process has five distinct steps:²

- **Analysis:** analyzing both the public resource and the partner organizations
- **Resource Agreement:** establishing shared understanding and vision for the resource
- **Goals:** defining mutually agreed upon goals for the resource
- **Structure:** developing the partnership model required to achieve goals
- **Partner responsibilities and relationships:** creating a work plan to define how partners will work together towards shared goals



A successful reinvention process results in a partnership that is:

- **Resource-defined:** defined by the conditions and needs of the public land or water resource
- **Relevant:** appropriate for the current situation
- **Results-focused:** focused on achieving mutually agreed upon outcomes
- **Resilient:** possesses the strength and flexibility needed to adapt
- **Relationship-positive:** uses deliberate systems and structures to ensure productive inter-organizational and interpersonal relationships

² Note that this process is clearly distinct from partnership development processes that focus on interpersonal relationships and how people work together.

- The partnership between USFS and FTA for the Florida National Scenic Trail is an example of how each of these steps is applied to achieve a reinvented partnership.

Case Study

The Florida National Scenic Trail



The Florida National Scenic Trail was officially designated as one of eight national scenic trails by Congress in 1983 under the National Trails System Act. The Act designates the USFS as the administrative agency for the Trail and explicitly recognizes the importance of volunteers: “the head of any Federal agency administering Federal lands, are authorized to encourage volunteers and volunteer organizations to plan, develop, maintain, and manage, where appropriate, trails throughout the Nation.” Incorporated in 1964, FTA helped to get the Trail designated in the legislation and has been an important volunteer partner since.

The 1,300 mile Trail³ spans the entire length of Florida, traversing lands owned by federal agencies (44%), state agencies (21%), and water management districts (23%). It crosses a total of 58 land areas owned or managed by 28 different land managers across 37 counties.⁴ The USFS is the largest of these managers with 167 miles of the Trail crossing land it manages. As administrator, USFS’s responsibilities

³ There are approximately 300 miles remaining to complete the Trail.

⁴ The Florida National Scenic Trail is highly unique due to the complexity of land ownership. Most other national scenic trails traverse land owned by one or more of the federal agencies as opposed to a mosaic of municipalities, counties, state agencies, water management districts, and federal land managers.

include completing the Trail, keeping it open and safe for public use, and fulfilling these responsibilities through the engagement of partners and citizens.

The Primary Partner Model

For more than 20 years, stewardship of the Trail was accomplished through a public-private partnership between USFS and FTA. This partnership was structured as a primary partner model, with USFS providing funding, knowledge, and expertise to the relationship and FTA providing trail maintenance and local presence.

Funded by USFS, FTA manages volunteer labor, maintains and develops trail segments, and communicates with Trail-adjacent communities and Trail land managers. FTA maintains a small staff in northern Florida and has a highly-decentralized structure of 18 local volunteer chapters across the state.

The 27 non-USFS Trail land managers had very little direct communication with USFS. Representatives from their local FTA chapter served as their primary point of contact for the Trail. These land managers were largely absent from decision-making on issues such as desired recreational experience, project prioritization, resource allocation, and Trail maintenance and development.

Changing Circumstances

In 2006, the USFS committed to providing a regular amount of base funding each year for Trail-related expenses. This change in funding coincided with USFS’s desire to ensure fuller accountability of funds. USFS was increasingly seeking specific results and the sustained capacity to complete, manage, and promote the Trail.

At the time of this change, the maintenance needs of the Trail had begun to exceed FTA’s on-the-ground capacity.

Selection of trail projects was largely driven by the readiness of a given volunteer chapter to manage a project, rather than through an organized prioritization system. FTA was also having difficulty diversifying its funding and remained largely dependent upon its annual allocation from USFS.

On the other side of the partnership, USFS's lack of clear goals for the Trail muddled resource allocation decisions. In addition, it had fallen behind in the mapping and data management tasks that would help them make better decisions about completion and maintenance. The Trail itself lacked a clear, consistent brand, making any work to promote it premature at best.

The USFS felt that by delegating on-the-ground project decisions and land manager relations to FTA, it had abdicated some of its responsibilities as Trail administrator. The change in funding and increased attention to long-term sustainability represented USFS taking the first steps to more fully live up to those responsibilities.

However, increased USFS attention to the Trail strained the relationship with FTA. Confusion as to roles and responsibilities led to tension and disagreement. It became increasingly apparent that the partners held different, and at times conflicting, visions for the Trail as well as different ideas about resource priorities. Conservation Impact was brought in to facilitate a meeting between increasingly frustrated FTA and USFS leadership in early 2010.

Applying the Five Steps

Analysis

As the first step in the process, Conservation Impact conducted an objective partnership analysis. The goals of the analysis were to assess the conditions and needs of both the Trail and of the partner organizations. By focusing first on the resource, the analysis could transcend the personalities involved, identify strategic issues, and provide context for the conversation.

The analysis highlighted how dramatically circumstances had changed from when the partnership was initially designed:

- Recreational use patterns had shifted over time from hiking only to the inclusion of other compatible non-motorized uses.
- Trail maintenance needs had expanded beyond just trail building and maintenance.
- FTA had insufficient capacity to meet needs along the entire length of the Trail.
 - Public awareness of the Trail as a whole (i.e., a 1,300 mile national scenic trail offering diverse recreation experiences) was very low; a sense of the Trail as a whole was also lacking among Trail land managers and local FTA chapters!
- Land managers were disengaged and their resources and expertise largely untapped.
- USFS and FTA held dramatically different views of what the Trail was (and should be in the future).
- Interpersonal and inter-organizational relationships and conflicts had become the partnership's primary focus (rather than the Trail).

Resource Agreement

The next step in the partnership reinvention process is the development of a resource agreement – a high-level direction-setting document that defines the desired future state of the resource.

Given that the analysis highlighted the partners' differing visions for the Trail, the first step in creating a resource agreement was to develop a common definition of the Trail (e.g., inclusion of other compatible non-motorized uses or hiking only) and to define the optimum recreation experience. Working together to answer questions like: "What are we trying to achieve for the Trail today and for the next five years?" and "What is a safe and quality recreation experience for the Trail user?" served to take the partners' discussion out of the realm of personalities, power, and politics and keep the Trail center stage.

These issues were discussed and decisions were made at an April 2010 meeting of USFS and FTA facilitated by Conservation Impact. The resulting resource agreement became the basis for a more detailed strategic plan,

subsequent work plans, and the reinvented partnership model. The resource agreement, referred to as the strategic framework, defined vision, description, user experience, imperatives, and preliminary goals for the Trail.

Structure

The resource agreement developed in the April meeting led USFS and FTA leadership to conclude that the current partnership model (the primary partner model) no longer met the needs of the Trail. The resource agreement required a partnership that included:

- Sufficient on-the-ground capacity to meet increased maintenance and development needs along the entire length of the Trail.
- A widely-shared understanding of the Trail as a whole.
- Adequate financial and managerial strength to take the Trail from its establishment/ development phase to completion.

The analysis highlighted two important opportunities:

- The opportunity to more fully engage and maximize the spectrum of expertise, relationships, and resources of all 28 land managers.
- The opportunity to more fully brand the Trail as a unique state and national treasure.

FTA and USFS agreed in concept to move from a primary partner model to a land manager coalition model.

Conservation Impact wrote the business plan to guide the implementation of the new model and guide reinvention of the partnership. The plan explicitly defined the new partnership model and the structure needed to meet the needs of the Trail and achieve strategic goals.

The business plan defined the land manager coalition model as a 14-member committee of senior level decision makers representing the 28 land management agencies. The coalition serves to deeply engage land managers in planning and decision making while also honoring FTA's historic role as the primary nonprofit partner. The new structure brought a diversity of experiences, expertise, and resources together to ensure that the Trail reaches its full potential as a unique and valuable public asset enjoyed by diverse constituents.

Goals

The resource agreement developed by USFS and FTA included a list of six imperatives:

- Complete the Trail.
- Update the management plan.
- Bring the Trail to consistent standards and ensure maintenance to those standards.
- Promote the entire Trail as a whole and start building the Trail's brand.
- Ensure fully functioning, productive partnerships.
- Ensure a more diverse funding base from a broad spectrum of engaged partners.

During one of its first meetings, the new Florida National Scenic Trail Coalition (the Coalition) was tasked with creating the first-ever Trail strategic plan. Engaging the Coalition members in setting specific, measurable goals derived from the six imperatives ensured that all participants had the opportunity to discuss issues prior to any decisions being made by the lead agency. The process also helped the members understand how the trail segment on their land was part of a nationally significant 1,300 mile treasure.

The goals of the strategic plan are shared priorities among all Coalition members. The goals not only define the work to be done by the partnership, but also become the basis upon which each partner's role and responsibilities are defined.

Partner Responsibilities and Relationships

Using the strategic plan as the foundation, partner roles and relationships could be developed objectively (i.e., relative to accomplishment of goals and needs of the Trail rather than based upon the personalities or agendas of any particular partner).

As the congressionally-designated administrator, USFS is ultimately responsible for strategic plan implementation, success of the Trail, and a safe and quality recreation experience for all users. The agency also continues to provide base funding. These factors define USFS's role as leader and coordinator of the Coalition.

The Trail requires ongoing maintenance, and FTA's volunteer pool, while smaller than needed, is still a significant resource. This means that FTA's primary responsibility remains mobilizing the volunteer work force. It also requires FTA to make a commitment to the Coalition that it will focus on expanding and strengthening its capacity to meet the need.

Coalition members serve to prioritize and secure resources for Trail projects that will bring all segments up to the standards defined in the strategic plan and create annual work plans. They also work in smaller groups as needed to complete specific objectives and deliverables related to strategic plan implementation.

In addition to taking on a portion of the work of the Trail strategic plan, Coalition members use the plan to set priorities and inform their individual land management plans.

Partnership Reinvention Outcomes

Over the past two and half years, outcomes stemming from the partnership reinvention include:

- Prior to reinvention, two partners worked to steward and develop the Trail. Now, 28 partners are actively engaged in the development, maintenance, and promotion of the Trail on their property and as a whole.
- The vision for the Trail and desired recreation experience for users is agreed to by all partners.
- Trail standards have been strengthened and the trail classification system is clear and universally understood, contributing to a much improved user experience.
- Trail operations are now governed by the shared goals of the strategic plan and annual work plans, increasing progress towards important outcomes.
- Multiple land managers are allocating resources (in-kind and financial) to Trail projects, allowing USFS to leverage its annual allocation for greater impact.
- Increased communication among Coalition members has contributed to more efficient use of volunteers

and improved safety protocols for both volunteers and users.

- Roles and responsibilities of all partners are clear and aligned with the needs of the Trail. As a result, conflict and disagreement have decreased significantly.
- Partners share a common understanding of the Trail as a whole as well as a common, consistent message they can share to promote the Trail and increase brand awareness and public support.

In summary, with all 28 land managers involved through the Coalition and working collectively to achieve goals, the Trail's public-private partnership is now commensurate with the needs of the Trail.

Conclusion

The case study shows that a partnership model must align with the needs of the resource, the goals to be accomplished, and the environment in which the partnership operates. Indeed, form (the partnership model) follows function (needs and goals). Thus, a partnership reinvention process will result in a customized model that best fits that situation.

While the partnership model will vary, the five steps of the partnership reinvention process can be universally applied: analysis, resource agreement, goals, structure, partner responsibilities, and relationships.

With public lands facing unprecedented pressures and challenges, public-private partnerships that steward those lands must strive to be relevant, resilient, results-focused, relationship-positive, and most importantly, defined by the needs of the resource. The partnership reinvention process offers a way to create such partnerships.



About Conservation Impact

Conservation Impact provides comprehensive organizational development consulting to nonprofits and related public agencies dedicated to environmental quality and natural resource protection. Founded in 1996, Conservation Impact has worked on more than 900 projects with nearly 600 organizations nationwide and internationally.

The company specializes in strategic planning and positioning, marketing, and organization analysis and development. We use an Integrated Strategy approach that looks at organizational identity, capacity, and constituents. We help our clients go to their next level of development.

The Conservation Impact staff bring significant expertise in nonprofit management, marketing, and conservation planning with degrees in biology, ecology, environmental conservation, nonprofit management, and public administration.

Conservation Impact's sister company, Nonprofit Impact, provides consultation and training to organizations and agencies dedicated to community and public health, education, and human services.

For more information about the companies, our team, or our work, please call us at 303.223.4886 or visit us online at www.conservationimpact.com.