

**Working with Communities:
U.S National Park Service Community Assistance in Corridor Planning**

Charles L. Tracy
National Park Service, U.S Department of the Interior

Shifting Leadership to the Local and Regional Level: Changes in federal land protection priorities and U.S. demographics have prompted a growing realization within the U.S. National Park Service (NPS) and other federal land managing agencies that they need to be more creative in partnering with local communities, including those with underserved populations, to engage them more fully in the protection and stewardship of cultural landscapes, river corridors, and recreational trails and greenways. This increased recognition of the need for partnership, especially in the protection of linear corridors, is underscored by the introduction of “Treasured Landscapes” (DOI, 2010) a new federal land conservation initiative by the U.S. Department of the Interior—which has as two of its major components “strengthening connectivity between protected lands” and “identifying where NPS can best play the role of partner, assisting and advancing local conservation goals.” The outlook is on greater emphasis and financial support for the federal partnership role in local and regional efforts to advance development of recreational greenways, cultural landscapes and ecological corridors.

Through a series of examples from the New England region, this paper will show how NPS has succeeded in reshaping the use of three different federal designations for linear resources (National Heritage Corridor, National Scenic Trail, and Wild and Scenic River) to achieve more effective conservation partnerships with states, communities and nongovernmental organizations. Each of these national designations—originally conceived with the federal agency playing a leadership role—has evolved to shift leadership to the local and regional level. The significant results of this change have been greater public engagement in the development, management and ownership of local and regional greenways, along with no increase in federal land ownership.

An Evolving Design for Conservation Partnership: The goals of “Treasured Landscapes,” the current federal land conservation initiative, reflect the fundamental challenge that has been faced by federal land agency planners since the late 1970s, namely: how to protect and manage nationally significant cultural landscapes, river corridors, and recreational trails and greenways without increasing federal land ownership or management responsibilities (Fosburgh, et al., 2008). While the concept of partnership, a cooperative working relationship with state, regional, local agencies and non-profit organizations, has always been the basic answer, the components of an effective conservation partnership have been evolving over the past two decades in response to this group of key questions: How are partnerships initiated? What are the roles of the partners, especially the federal role? How is volunteerism encouraged? Who provides funding? and Who is in charge?

One way to view the creation of an effective conservation partnership is through the lens of three overlapping phases, activation, planning and management. Each phase emphasizes a certain mode of public participation. Activation is engaging local citizens and organizations to bring public attention to the significant values of a specific resource and to stimulate recognition of the need for local and regional environmental stewardship. For national heritage corridors, wild and scenic rivers and national scenic trails, successful activation leads directly to a planning phase, during which the public is actively involved in identifying key resource issues and management solutions and in helping to shape them into a cooperative management plan. The management phase begins with federal designation and the establishment of a formal council, where volunteers, landowners and others can work together with government agencies to implement the management plan. These phases are more fully described in the case studies which follow.



Figure 1. Dam Warnings, Swanton, Vermont: Floating barrels with paddles that included lines from a poem that would change as the paddles rotated in the current.

Creative Civic Engagement: NPS planners in New England have been using a wide range of activation strategies to creatively engage communities in reconnecting with the environment and to encourage public awareness of special resource values and the need for stewardship. Two creative strategies, which are sometimes intertwined, are working with artists and organizing public events. On the Missisquoi River in northern Vermont, artists worked with NPS, a regional non-profit organization, and river communities to raise awareness about the Northern Forest Canoe Trail, a 740-mile water trail that traces Native American travel routes from Maine to New York. The artists undertook three projects—a community-based photography exhibit, a temporary kinetic river installation, and a marble canoe sculpture—all focused on “reaffirming a sense of connectivity, not only to the river, but between communities along the river” (Bianchi and Tracy, 2008). The projects advanced support for the establishment of the Northern Forest Canoe Trail, and also helped initiate a regional dialogue about the environmental issues facing the Missisquoi River, which eventually led to the planning phase in the form of a Wild and Scenic River Study (MRBA, 2010). In northeastern Connecticut, a folksinger was commissioned to compose a series of songs based on primary history sources related to the Quinebaug River Valley and then collaborated with local elementary schools to create more songs. The songs and local performances helped spread

awareness of the goals of the nascent Quinebaug-Shetucket Rivers Valley National Heritage Corridor. In New York City, “The Golden Ball” floated down the Bronx River as part of a multi-media art Earth Day event. The Golden Ball proved to be a potent catalyst in the formation of the Bronx River Alliance, and is now part of the Alliance’s annual celebration of the Bronx River’s environmental restoration effort (Bianchi and Tracy, 2008).



Figure 2. Bronx River, New York: Golden Ball Celebration

A less colorful, but no less useful strategy for engendering greater public awareness of resource significance are studies which document the often unknown natural and cultural resource values of a particular resource or assess their economic benefits for the region. For example, a series of preliminary studies focusing on the archaeology, history, and ecology of the Taunton River in Massachusetts contributed significantly to public and state agency support for seeking Wild and Scenic River status (Reid et al., 1998). Similarly in Connecticut, studies documenting the economic impacts and recreation use of the Lower Farmington River and Salmon Brook are part of an ongoing study for Wild and Scenic River designation (Tyson et al., 2009).

Planning the New England National Scenic Trail: For federally-designated heritage corridors, wild and scenic rivers and national scenic trails, successful activation leads to a more formal planning phase. Prior to the mid-1980s, the primary focus of the planning phase was to determine whether a particular region, river or trail met the standards of eligibility, feasibility and significance for federal designation. Following designation, a management plan was then developed. In 1986, a critical advance in the partnership model was made during completion of the Upper Delaware National Scenic and Recreational River management plan. It was recognized that public discussion of resource management issues and alternatives, along with public participation in the development of a cooperative management plan *prior to designation* resulted in greater support and acceptance (NPS, 1986).

The New England NST stretches approximately 220 miles through 39 communities from Connecticut’s Long Island Sound to the Massachusetts-New Hampshire border and has been in existence for over half a century. Managed jointly by the Connecticut Forest and Park Association and the Appalachian Mountain Club, the

trail is maintained entirely by volunteers from the two organizations. Although much of the trail is on state and municipal lands, more than half is currently routed through private lands and on roads around private parcels. Volunteers work tirelessly to re-route sections of trail off-road and onto adjacent lands held by conservation-minded private landowners. The New England NST offers hikers a close-to-home opportunity to experience and enjoy the natural world along uniquely wooded traprock ridges. However, the proximity of this green corridor to areas of growing population is a major challenge. Spreading urban development means that the trail is almost constantly and increasingly threatened by subdivision development.



Figure 3. Volunteer Trail Steward, Guilford, Connecticut: NPS assisted a regional trail organization, a local land trust and local government to plan and develop a 25-kilometer extension of the New England National Scenic Trail.

With no national scenic trail designations in more than twenty years—due in large part to inadequate public participation and the lack of a partnership approach, the planning for the proposed New England NST drew its lessons from the Upper Delaware and other initiatives which demonstrated the partnership approach. Community engagement, now fully integrated with the planning phase, was essential to the building public support for designation of the New England NST.

The process was led by regional planning agencies and the two trail managing organizations and assisted by NPS planners. NPS also provided funding for assessing the trail’s natural and cultural resources and for a survey of landowners and trail use. The planning team coordinated several working groups with broad participation from all the trail communities, landowners, state agencies, land trusts and trail user groups. The goals were first to identify what was needed to ensure the trail’s long-term sustainability and then to craft consensus-based management solutions. Landowner concerns about trail use and liability, along with the need for dedicated staff to coordinate volunteers and better community outreach, were among the chief issues identified during the planning process.

As evidence of the dynamism of this process, urgent trail management issues identified during the planning were addressed immediately, such as landowner concerns about signage and specific trail routing. The management solutions, developed by the working groups, were then incorporated in the “Blueprint for Trail Management” (NPS, 2006) which was endorsed by both states and all 39

communities. The Blueprint served as the basis for creation of the national scenic trail (designated in 2009) and is now being implemented by a trail advisory council.

Managing the Lamprey Wild and Scenic River: The Lamprey River flows 60 miles through 6 communities in southeastern New Hampshire and into the coastal estuary known as Great Bay. A large percentage of the land in the river's corridor is undeveloped, creating extensive wildlife habitat and offering picturesque scenery. Due to the Lamprey River's valued resources and importance as a tributary to the Great Bay National Estuarine Reserve, the lower portion was designated in 1996 as a Wild and Scenic River, only the second river in the State of New Hampshire to receive such designation. At every stage of its development, the Lamprey Wild and Scenic River integrates the participation of the public and river communities.

The Lamprey River Advisory Committee (LRAC) receives annual NPS staff assistance and annual federal funding, which is matched by state and local funds, to support its ongoing management activities. The current LRAC initiatives—increasing public access to the river, removing invasive plants, monitoring the visual impacts of bridge reconstruction, and protecting riparian corridor lands with conservation easements—were all identified as goals by the public through an extensive series of local meetings during the planning phase, and subsequently integrated in the river management plan which formed the basis for the federal designation. The results speak for themselves: pilot projects for the eradication of invasives are being conducted by volunteers with state agency support; public access has been enhanced by new recreation maps and information kiosks along the river; and, nearly 2000 acres and 12 miles of riparian corridor have been conserved over the past 12 years.



Figure 3. Farmington Wild and Scenic River, Connecticut: Fishing at Church Pool

The “Statement of Management Philosophy” which introduces the Lamprey River’s 2007 Management Plan update clearly articulates the partnership ideal: “We believe that the Lamprey can be simultaneously protected and utilized if landowners, town boards, recreationists, and the state and federal governments are well informed about its unique attributes and work to safeguard them. Notwithstanding the protection afforded by the NH Rivers Program, local, state and federal regulatory programs,

and the federal Wild and Scenic Rivers program, the Lamprey's future as a community asset rests most squarely on the willingness of individuals and the towns along the river to be careful stewards of it" (LRAC, 2007).

Managing the Quinebaug-Shetucket Rivers Valley National Heritage Corridor: Set within the sprawling metropolitan corridor along the East Coast in northeastern Connecticut and south-central Massachusetts is a special area of river valleys, agricultural lands, and forests that forms a distinctive, if difficult to define, region. In fact, a large part of the original impetus for federal designation of the 1000-square mile region now encompassed by the Quinebaug and Shetucket Rivers Valley National Heritage Corridor (designated in 1994) was the desire of residents and local activists to both define and protect the area's shared landscape characteristics. The region's distinctiveness, deeply embedded in its landscape and history, includes a rugged terrain, a decentralized pattern of hill towns and small mill villages, and a collection of resilient small farms (Lowenthal, 2008).



Figure 4. Charlton, Massachusetts: Farmlands in The Last Green Valley

As the national heritage corridor evolved, its lead organization, The Last Green Valley, maintained a strong focus on protecting the region's unique natural and cultural landscape features and on providing local communities and residents with the knowledge and tools to achieve this goal. In 2005, their creative efforts resulted in establishment of the Green Valley Institute (GVI), a formal partnership of the national heritage corridor with the University of Connecticut, the University of Massachusetts and The Nature Conservancy. GVI provides workshops and training to three target audiences: "private landowners, municipal leaders and land use commissioners, and contractors, realtors and others who convert open space to other uses." In 2009, GVI developed a "how-to" workbook designed to assist municipalities, land trusts and recreational organizations in planning for greenways and green infrastructure, which will be distributed throughout the heritage corridor. The workbook includes information on greenways, green infrastructure, important natural and cultural resources and protected lands maps, as well as visioning tools for planning. Similar in spirit to the Lamprey River's management philosophy, GVI, in partnership with the heritage corridor, sees its mission as building "local capacity to protect and manage natural resources as our region grows" (GVI, 2009).

Outlook—New Corridors of Conservation and Stewardship: Conservation partnerships have evolved into an innovative and cost-effective alternative to large-scale federal land acquisition and management that will continue to grow in relevance and importance as federal land managing agencies seek to protect natural and cultural resources on a landscape scale. In order to be effective, however, these partnerships need to fully engage broad public participation and volunteerism at every phase of development, from identifying significant resources and developing management solutions, to maintaining ongoing stewardship activities. The leadership role should be broadly shared by local residents, including landowners, and local and regional organizations. The federal agency role begins with helping communities to reconnect with their environment and inspiring a sense of environmental stewardship. It continues through providing a framework for participatory planning, then responding to local interests and sharing the costs and responsibilities for ongoing management.

Conservation partnerships are here to stay and the outlook is bright, but not without challenges. An often-raised issue is whether federal involvement should be as catalyst or permanent partner. A related issue is the perception of the relative status of these federal “partnership” designations compared to the more traditional designations with the federal lands system. As these partnerships proliferate, both issues have important implications for the allocation of federal funding and staff assistance. In addition to the growing number of newly-designated heritage areas, rivers and trails, there is also growing interest in extending the partnership approach to new national park units in urban areas, such as in New Bedford Whaling Maritime National Historic Site and the Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Areas, where the NPS responsibility excludes or minimizes federal land ownership.

The *National Parks Second Century Report* strongly supports conservation partnerships and advocates that NPS and others work “to strengthen stewardship of our nation’s resources, and to broaden civic engagement with a citizen service to this mission.” The report fully embraces the role of conservation partnerships with specific recommendations for: a broad public-private initiative to create corridors of conservation and stewardship throughout the U.S.; cooperative stewardship of significant natural and cultural resources; and simplifying federal designations to promote public awareness that all units are part of the same system (National Parks Second Century Commission, 2009).

As they mature, conservation partnerships need to keep listening to the public in order to be relevant and responsive to local and regional environmental concerns. They also need to keep reaching out to inspire new audiences to find their own connection with the nature and a sense of personal stewardship. A wonderful example of reaching new audiences was a recent partnership between the Concord-Sudbury-Assabet Wild and Scenic River in Massachusetts and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, which featured a multi-media composition of music and winter images of the Sudbury River during its Boston Pops winter performances (BSO, 2010).

References:

- Bianchi, V.; Tracy, C., 2008; Art and Community Landscapes. http://www.nps.gov/ncrc/programs/rtca/news&events/ACL_Final_small.pdf
- BSO, 2010; Boston Symphony Orchestra, Gifts of Great Meadows. Podcast: http://www.bso.org/bso/global/movie.jsp?movie=http://podcasts.bso.org/images/mp3/podcast/GIFTS_PODCAST_121709_640x480.flv
- Fosburgh, J.; DiBello, J.; Akers, F., 2008; Partnership Wild and Scenic Rivers, George Wright Forum. <http://www.georgewright.org/252fosburgh.pdf>
- DOI, 2010; Treasured Landscapes, U.S. Department of the Interior. <http://www.doi.gov/budget/2011/11Hilites/DH035.pdf>
- Green Valley Institute, 2009; Annual Report. <http://www.tlcv.org/uploads/Publications/Reports/StatementofDistinction.doc>
- Lamprey River Advisory Committee, 2007. Lamprey River Management Plan. http://www.lampreyriver.org/Plan/LRMP_11.07_FINAL.pdf
- Lowenthal, L. 2008. Statement of Distinction: Why is it Green? <http://www.tlcv.org/uploads/Publications/Reports/StatementofDistinction.doc>
- MRBA, 2010; Missisquoi Wild and Scenic Rivers Study. <http://www.troutrivernetwork.org/mrba/wild+scenic.html>
- National Park Service, 1986; Upper Delaware Scenic and Recreational River Final River Management Plan. <http://www.nps.gov/upde/parkmgmt/planning.htm>
- National Park Service, 2006; Metacomet Monadnock Mattabesett Trail System National Scenic Trail Feasibility Study and Environmental Assessment <http://www.newenglandnst.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=d4Q7stukFRI%3d&tabid=57>
- National Parks Second Century Commission, 2009; Advancing the National Park Idea. National Parks and Conservation Association. <http://www.npca.org/commission>
- Reid, B.; Anderson-Hill, M.; J. Schultz, 1998; Taunton River Corridor Natural Resource Inventory and Conservation Plan. Unpublished report, excerpted: <http://www.tauntonriver.org/ecology.htm>
- Tyson, B; Thorson, J.; Maliar, D., 2009; Use and Economic Importance of the Lower Farmington River and Salmon Brook. <http://www.lowerfarmingtonriver.org/wp-content/uploads/frwa-final-revised-report.doc>