

Perspectives on Making Collaborations Work at Home and Abroad

Abstract

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In the karst mountains of western Guizhou and northeastern Yunnan Province, China, lie scattered, high plateau wetlands that are unique in Asia. These wetlands, dominated by slightly alkaline water, produce abundant submerged aquatic plants that in turn support a wide variety of wintering waterbirds, including the threatened Black-necked Crane. Crane conservationists have worked at the Cao Hai Nature Reserve, in western Guizhou Province, since the early 1980s and have focused primarily on protecting the cranes and their wetland home.

By 1994 it was clear that the initial approach was failing to address the conservation needs of this watershed and over 20,000 people living within it. The wetland was slowly being converted to agriculture. Though tangible links between conservation activities and the gripping poverty of the region were needed, conservationists working at Cao Hai were ill-prepared to address these larger social issues. In response, conservationists collaborated with organizations having extensive experience in poverty alleviation and developed a process to link poverty alleviation with wetland conservation at Cao Hai.

The goal was to provide the poorest local farmers with small grants to create small businesses compatible with nature reserve management. Though the goals of the program were clear on paper it took time for these goals to be understood among those involved—a reflection of the divergent views of what poverty alleviation and resource protection entailed. As one example, the first grants were given to relatively wealthy farmers because “people who are poor don’t know how to spend money.”

Eventually, poor farmers did receive grants, enabling them to reduce their demands upon local natural resources. Relations between local communities and the reserve staff, which had deteriorated to the point of physical conflict before the program began, improved dramatically. Agriculture encroachment upon the Cao Hai wetland ceased. As management within the reserve became more effective, numbers of Black-necked Cranes doubled. The success of the process developed at Cao Hai has led to its being adapted to other nature reserves in China and other parts of Asia.

On the opposite side of the world, conservationists, professors and farmers have collaborated since 1996 to improve adoption of pest, crop, and farm management practices to reduce the ecological footprint of potato production in Wisconsin. In short, the goal has been to reestablish a process where stewardship allows farms to be managed as a whole. Collaboration goals include: increased Integrated Pest Management (IPM), reduced use of high-risk pesticides, ecosystem restoration, and improved soil/water quality. With this system there is also potential to address other emerging issues like carbon sequestration. To date, our process has been grower-driven and is the foundation of the Collaboration’s success. So far the Wisconsin potato industry has greatly reduced high-risk pesticide use and an eco-potato standard has been developed to provide a marketplace incentive for ecologically grown potatoes.

In addition, natural community restoration standards now integrate ecological restoration with agricultural production in a landscape context. The ultimate goal of this effort is to create a system where our farms produce high quality commodities as well as many other resources that are important to society and growers alike. Through potato eco-label standards we link society and growers in the production of myriad resources from the same lands.

The basic lesson from Cao Hai and Wisconsin is independent of significant cultural differences and is broadly applicable. Most environmental problems are both caused and solved by people and arise from non-public lands. Effective action therefore requires collaboration among diverse groups that begin by people acting on a common interest, continue through building trust by gradually sharing visions on an iterative basis, and require us to leave outcomes open so that unexpected results may arise.