The Santa Cruz Mountains Stewardship Network

A Regionwide, Cross-Sector Approach to Conservation—Executive Summary   March 2017

by Converge For Impact

Introduction

The Santa Cruz Mountains Stewardship Network (SCMSN) is a cross-sector collaboration of nineteen organizations that began in late 2014 with a focus on improving land stewardship in the Santa Cruz Mountains region south of San Francisco. Network members represent federal agencies, state and county parks departments, land trusts, nonprofit organizations, the region's largest timber company, research institutes, special districts, and a Native American tribal band.

When a group of individuals first convened in March 2015 to explore opportunities for collaboration, there was little consensus about what the network should accomplish, how members would work together, and how they would know if their efforts had succeeded. As of early 2017, however, the SCMSN has overcome historical tensions in the region, identified areas of shared interest, and members are collaborating to implement shared stewardship projects, producing outcomes that no one organization could accomplish alone. These successes suggest the Network's potential to improve stewardship throughout the region, provided members sustain their commitment to communicating and working together as the Network continues to evolve.

Although there is increasing recognition that conservation and natural resource management need to be addressed on a regional or "large-landscape" scale, defining a shared agenda for action with specific objectives to achieve that ambition can be challenging for collaborations like the SCMSN. Restoring habitats and stewarding lands are ongoing activities with outcomes that are difficult to measure, and for which an ideal end state is not always obvious. Yet, defining a common agenda and measurable objectives at the beginning of a collaboration is often advocated as an essential condition for success.

The case study of the SCMSN describes how one regionwide, cross-sector collaboration has succeeded without strictly fulfilling these preconditions. As an alternative, the SCMSN's formation has engaged partners by deliberately cultivating relationships between members, and allowing the practicalities of organizing the work to emerge on the basis of trust and members' commitment to the network's overall purpose. The formation of the Santa Cruz Mountains Stewardship Network is summarized below. A PDF version of the complete case study is available from Converge For Impact.

The Network's Origin

The idea of forming a collaboration of agencies, land trusts, nonprofits, and landowners responsible for large tracts of the Santa Cruz Mountains was developed by the executive director of one of the region's land trusts, who hoped that participants would find new ways to work together, coordinate activities, share resources and information, and eliminate duplication of efforts. Individuals from twenty-three organizations were invited to participate in the initial stages of the initiative's formation.

Setting the Stage

In interviews conducted before the Network's first convening, participants expressed a degree of agreement and difference that was to be expected from a loosely connected group of professionals. Every participant was interested in particular issues, but no single issue was of interest to everyone. In addition to positive reasons for participating in the initiative, some participants expressed concerns about hidden agendas and directions the network might take if they didn't participate. Although none of these differences dominated Network discussions, all of them added nuance and complexity throughout the Network's formation.

Forming the Network

The creation of the SCMSN unfolded in two phases during 2015 and 2016. The first seven months from February through September 2015 focused on connecting participants to one another, both personally and professionally, defining the Network's purpose, and organizing the Network to work toward shared objectives. The Network addressed historical tensions between environmentalists and the region's timber companies, which might otherwise have derailed the collaboration. A five-member Core Team was formed to make preliminary decisions and oversee Network operations between convenings. Members wrote Network bylaws that defined membership criteria and responsibilities, decision-making protocols, governance structures, funding and budgeting, and how Network names and logos can be used. The collaboration began to deliver tangible benefit to members at the Network's second convening in June 2015, when participants identified fourteen opportunities for collaboration between two or more organizations.

In September 2015, the nineteen organizations that had continued to participate in the collaboration since March signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). Although the MOU committed members to no specific actions or outcomes other than "practicing effective stewardship on their own lands and coordinating their efforts with other land stewards to enhance stewardship on a regional level," the MOU was a meaningful achievement. Given the diversity of members' involvement in land stewardship and their varied opinions about conservation in the region, it was as specific a statement of purpose as the Network could agree to at that time. The text of the MOU is available on the network's website.

Hiring a Network Manager

After the September 2015 convening, Network members shifted from a focus on reaching agreement about the Network's purpose to organizing themselves to act on it. By December, grant applications had secured just over $660,000 to fund the Network for another three years. In particular, the grants provided funding to hire a fulltime network manager.

With funding now guaranteed, a seven-member Selection team was tasked with finding a Network Manager to replace the team of five consultants who had been leading the Network. The transition was critical. With the right person, the Network could continue to grow and flourish; with the wrong leadership, the Network could dissipate. After a five-month search and selection process, the Selection team recommended that the Network hire a Network Manager with the skills to facilitate the Network's deliberations, anticipate its evolution, and manage Network logistics—tasks that members themselves could not manage in addition to their day-to-day responsibilities. The new Network Manager was hired in June 2016, in time to participate in the Network's second convening of the year.

Expanding the Network and Going Public

A potential liability of building collaborations on trust and relationships is that they may become insular, failing to engage with the communities of individuals and organizations around them. Therefore, a year after the Network was formed, members agreed to expand the Network by including more individuals from each organization and inviting senior organizational and community leaders to "meet the Network."

At the June 2016 convening, several members brought colleagues and introduced them to the

Network. Project teams were energized by the perspectives brought by new participants, two of whom volunteered for and were elected to a new Core Team. At a "Meet the Network" event after the convening, Network members answered questions and explained the collaboration's work to twenty attending board members and community leaders. Having frequently remarked during the previous year that they felt ill-equipped to describe what they were doing as a Network, members found their voices and championed their work together.

Organizing for Systems Impact

During 2015 and 2016, the Network also focused on identifying strategies to affect land stewardship on a larger scale than could be achieved by individual participants. By October 2016, after a year of exploring various options, Network members had formed six project teams to undertake activities with the potential to affect land stewardship on a regionwide scale. Five of the six teams are developing plans for improving conservation outcomes throughout the region by increasing public awareness of the importance of stewardship, influencing public policy, and advancing evidence-based decision-making and evaluation of stewardship outcomes. An Asset Mapping team has also been formed to inventory physical assets and expertise that organizations might share with the Network, as the basis for more systematically managing these resources.

Continuing to Evolve the Network

Since the October 2016 convening, progress continues, along with the emergence of new challenges. In general, members continue to express optimism about the Network's ongoing value. Collaborations between organizations continue to increase, and most of the project teams continue to advance their work. It is also hoped that a map of land use throughout the region that is being developed by one of the project teams will provide Network members with insights into regional patterns that will foster more region-wide approaches to conservation planning and implementation.

Members are having difficulty, however, making time to respond to emails, schedule meetings, and achieve progress on Network issues that are important to them. To address these challenges, the Network Manager is engaging members in reimagining their participation in the Network.

Conclusion

In terms of network building, it's safe to say that the SCMSN has successfully completed the formation phase. The Network has devoted significant time to addressing political issues among its members—concerns about disparities in resources and influence, and about whether the Network will become a mechanism for control, rather than a means to work together more openly. In these ways, the SCMSN has established prerequisites for more substantive collaboration over time.

The SCMSN is currently in a transition from network formation to network action, in which participants are asking how the Network can most effectively improve land stewardship on a regional scale. Members are exploring whether a more specific purpose is needed to focus their participation in the next phase of the Network's evolution. The Network is considering how to extend its influence in the region by engaging with more private landowners and representatives of the region's underserved communities. Members are asking what controversial topics need to be discussed to advance the Network's efforts to address relevant issues in the region.

Current developments suggest that it's time for the SCMSN to revisit its founding principles from the perspective of its present evolution. In practice, this includes continuing to review the core network activities outlined in the Five Cs Network Formation Framework, explained below, and remembering the lessons that members learned and observed throughout the Network's formation, summarized in the following eight practices:

1. Never stop cultivating trust. Make strong relationships a priority.
2. Be comfortable with ambiguity and the emergent nature of network results.

3. Stay fluid—let people, teams, and projects come and go—but keep the core strong.
4. Honor self-interest, individual initiative, and entrepreneurship.
5. Deepen organizations' engagement with the network.
6. Be skillful decision makers. Close every consideration with a decision.
7. Deliberately engage with the network's periphery and consciously evolve the network.
8. Keep having the next critical conversation.

These eight practices describe the Network's emergent process—the mindsets and behaviors that help to create and maintain an active culture of collaboration. In this respect, a network not only exhibits the characteristics of an organization, it is also like a community—a living system that maintains a cultural signature as it responds to the needs of its members and the challenges of the day.

Frameworks Used to Guide the SCMSN's Formation

In addition to reviewing the history of the SCMSN's formation, sideheadings throughout the case study summarize the principal frameworks that were used to guide the network formation process. The most important of these frameworks are presented in the following three sections on the "Five Cs Network Formation Framework," the role of foundations, and the importance of cultivating trust-based relationships between network members.

The Five Cs Network Formation Framework

Engaging network members throughout the SCMSN's formation process required a deliberate approach to designing and facilitating Network convenings, as well as Network activities between convenings. A framework referred to as the "Five Cs" was used to design each convening and guide the Network's evolution. The Five Cs framework focuses on the following five activities as essential to a collaboration's success:

- *Clarify Purpose*—An initial statement of a collaboration's purpose is generally required to persuade people to consider working together. Circumstances usually determine how specific the purpose needs to be. The problem to be addressed and participants' understanding of it tend to evolve over time.
- *Convene the Right People*—Convening the right people means bringing together a broad cross-section of individuals and organizations who have the capability to affect the larger system of which they are a part.
- *Cultivate Trust*—Deliberately building trust among participants is the cornerstone of the Five Cs approach to network formation. Enduring, trust-based relationships are viewed as the most important ingredient for successful collaboration.
- *Coordinate Existing Actions*—A fundamental principle of network success is that members' personal and organizational objectives must be served by the work of collaboration, or they will not be able to justify the time commitments required for network activities. Coordinating existing actions includes sharing best practices, pooling resources, and eliminating duplication of efforts, thereby achieving quick wins that demonstrate the immediate value of the collaboration.
- *Collaborate for Systems Impact*—Beyond a network's ability to serve participants' immediate needs, a network must also enable members to affect the larger system in ways no organization could do alone. To collaborate for systems impact, network members begin by identifying "leverage points"—places in a system where, as systems theorist Donella Meadows has said, "a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything." Once members have identified leverage points, they form self-selecting teams to develop and implement plans for effecting change.

The Five Cs framework defines the deliberate aspect of network formation. The aspect of network formation that the Five Cs doesn't explicitly describe is the sensemaking that is necessary to accomplish each of the five activities.

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Sensemaking is the ongoing process of developing a deep and meaningful understanding of the complexity of the problem to be addressed. Although the five activities appear to be simple, the sensemaking required to effectively complete them is sufficient to guide even the most complex collaboration.

The Role of Foundations

The SCMSN has been fortunate in obtaining funding for its work from two San Francisco Bay Area-based foundations that understand the role that foundations can play in enabling networks to achieve their full potential.

In addition to their financial support, both foundations have been valuable partners because of their commitment to supporting networks by:

- Giving networks space, flexibility, and time to develop at their own pace.
- Viewing the development of trust as a valid network outcome.
- Supporting specific network functions, such as convenings, facilitation, and network coordination.

The Importance of Trust

The SCMSN's commitment to the challenge of working together is enduring because of the trust-based relationships and mutual understanding that members have developed. Trust is the glue that has held Network members together through the SCMSN's two-year formation process and beyond. In the absence of an explicitly defined strategy as the Network took shape, trust is the element that has made possible all the Network's other virtues and accomplishments. Trust contributes factors to the success of a network's formation that are provided by no other activity. Specifically:

1. Trust creates a virtual organization while a collaboration's more formal structures and processes are being formed.
2. Trust enables the participants of a collaboration to explore options without having to commit to any of them.
3. Trust ensures that a group exercises its capability for collective intelligence, and avoids the pitfalls of conformism and groupthink.

In summary, trust initiates and sustains collaborative initiatives, creates space for the dialogue and shared sensemaking that is critical to complex problem solving, and ensures that groups function with the intelligence that is the potential of effective human systems.

The Santa Cruz Mountains Stewardship Network

The following organizations participated in the formation of the Santa Cruz Mountains Stewardship Network during 2015 and 2016.

Amah Mutsun Tribal Band of Ohlone/Costanoan Indians

Big Creek Lumber

CAL FIRE San Mateo – Santa Cruz Unit

California Department of Parks and Recreation

Girl Scouts of Northern California

Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve, Stanford University

Land Trust of Santa Cruz County

Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District

Peninsula Open Space Trust

San Lorenzo Valley Water District

San Mateo County Parks Department

San Mateo County Resource Conservation District

Santa Cruz County Parks Department

Santa Cruz County Resource Conservation District

Save the Redwoods League

Sempervirens Fund

Swanton Pacific Ranch, Cal Poly

UC Berkeley Department of Anthropology

UC Santa Cruz Natural Reserves

US Bureau of Land Management