



# COLLABORATION HANDBOOK

**INSTITUTE**  
AT THE GOLDEN GATE



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## A Commitment to Collaboration

Since the agency's beginning, collaboration has nourished, sustained, and enhanced the National Park Service (NPS). Collaboration is the cornerstone to many of the Park Service's successes. Through a shared vision and spirit of cooperation, partners have created dynamic programming, better stewardship, and new national park sites. As the NPS moves into its second century, it envisions collaboration as fundamental to its work. Our nation's communities, partners, and park-users are increasingly more connected, more diverse, and more urban, and the NPS is constantly adapting to better engage them. Collaboration, as a way of working, is vital to best serve the Park Service's mission and its communities.

The NPS's Urban Agenda started in 2015 and was a call to action for a more collaborative, interconnected, and relevant Park Service. During the initiative's two-year pilot, 10 Urban Fellows were rapidly building relationships, strengthening partnerships, and prototyping best practices for collaboration. The Urban Fellows have distilled their experiences into 10 lessons that support a culture of collaboration for the NPS. These lessons are ready to be shared and, most importantly, ready to be used — broadly, consistently, and courageously — across the agency.

# How to Use this Handbook

This handbook presents an overview of 10 core lessons for improved collaboration. These lessons encompass the lifespan of a collaborative effort, starting with internal capacity building practices, moving to forming new collaborations, and ending with sustaining collaborative initiatives. The lessons include stories, tools, and discussion points that can help park professionals incorporate the lessons into their work.

This handbook is not exhaustive and is best used when groups or individuals supplement the lessons with their own experiences and deep knowledge of their communities. Although written for groups, the handbook can also be used for individual on-boarding and training processes. The information in this handbook should empower park professionals with new ways of expanding their collaborative efforts.

## COLLABORATION AS A PRACTICE

Collaboration, at its best, is a practice—actions repeated over and over again that benefit relationships and a shared goal. The practices within this handbook should be seen as building blocks to collaboration. Any singular practice is not collaboration on its own; collaboration is a blend of practices over a sustained period of time.

Collaboration should look different for different parks or park departments. Parks and staff should utilize and modify the set of tools and lessons that best addresses their needs and goals.



## Getting Started

Before selecting and incorporating any new practice from the handbook, reflect on how your park currently collaborates. Take stock of what you and your park do well. Note your successes. Note your collaboration strengths. Now might be a good time to review a Park Service classic, Brian O’Neill’s **Partnership Success Factors**. How many of these practices are already integrated in your work?

The tools listed in the handbook address common obstacles the NPS frequently faces with deeper collaboration. Based off the needs of your park and your community, take a moment to reflect on the challenges you currently face and use the following table to identify what tools might best fit your park.

## THE RIGHT TOOL FOR THE RIGHT JOB

CHALLENGE	SOLUTION	HANDBOOK LESSON AND TOOL
Limited capacity	Low cost techniques for improving collaborative efforts	Growing a collaboration skill set Asset mapping Weaving in collaboration
Limited knowledge of community needs and partner priorities	Encourage opportunities where NPS can play a support role and have the community lead	Flexing the power of the parks Aligning park projects with identified city goals
Fear of over-committing	Empower staff to have authentic, transparent, relationships with collaborators	Building in reciprocity and mutual benefit Listening without an agenda
Complex rules and regulations for partnerships	Create simple, park-wide systems for exploring new partnerships  Repurpose and sustain existing relationships already benefiting from large initial investments	Supporting new partners  Building in sustainability Reviving and repurposing partnerships





## PREPARING FOR COLLABORATION

# Growing a Collaboration Skill Set

### *Source training on collaborative skills from experts within your park*

The NPS' next century requires a staff empowered to build a culture of collaboration. Although there are formal ways to build these skills, informal training opportunities are often more time- and cost-effective. Informational interviews, shadowing, and staff-led trainings are fast and quality ways to increase the Park Service's internal capacity for collaboration. Parks shouldn't wait for the perfect project to increase collaboration skills, cultivating these skills should be integrated into the everyday work of park staff.



Erika Gay, the Urban Fellow in Richmond, Virginia, identifies skill sharing as one of the most impactful legacies of her fellowship. While working on a Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance (RTCA) project that required a great deal of partnership, Erika created opportunities for current NPS staff to learn how to better collaborate with the community.

A substantial portion of Erika's fellowship involved convening a collaborative to enhance the connections among cultural, historic, and recreational resources flanking the James River. Connecting Tredegar Iron Works National Historic Site with Belle Isle (a City of Richmond public park) and the James River required a diverse and extensive set of collaboration skills. Erika recruited stakeholders from the NPS, the City of Richmond, the James River Park System, and other community partner organizations. Together they formed and supported subcommittees, set joint goals, and began to work on a variety of partnership initiatives.



Erika used this opportunity to engage her colleagues and invited fellow park professionals to shadow and observe her collaborative process. Numerous staff members saw Erika facilitate a large group of community stakeholders towards impressive goals—such as a new public transportation bus stop near the riverfront and quarterly workshops for youth educators in the community. They also saw some of the smaller goals being completed, such as new wayfinding signs and enhanced trail maps showing the suite of resources along the James River. Seeing the progression of the coalition's work and witnessing Erika's collaborative skills in action

were valuable learning opportunities, as staff could learn nuanced techniques that they might not come across in formal learning opportunities. Shadowing also sets the stage for reflection and debrief afterwards, allowing for deeper learning and more tailored mentorship in the future.

After modeling a bevy of skills and tasks over the course of a year, Erika then had staff test them out on their own. She would create a safe container for staff to explore and strengthen their collaboration skills, while still nearby to support them if needed.

Now, as Erika plans to hand over leadership of this initiative, she is positive that her fellow co-workers are prepared to continue this collaborative initiative and the progress they've made in connecting with the community.



## TOOL

# *New Community Liaison Position Description*

In order to create a lasting legacy for the Urban Agenda program, the Urban Fellows and the Urban Support Team developed a community liaison position description (COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SPECIALIST) to aid national park sites ready to make a deeper commitment to community and collaborative work. Even if a community liaison is not viable for your park, take a look at the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) required for this position. The NPS' next century increasingly requires that its staff have skills mimicking those of an Urban Fellow and Community Liaison.

### Collaborative Skills

- Knowledge of community assistance and outreach
- Demonstrated strong project management, delegation, and team leadership
- Demonstrated ability to implement innovative, non-traditional projects and initiatives
- Understanding how to align NPS goals with community goals
- Organizing/facilitating large public workshops; strong ability in public speaking
- Demonstrated ability to leverage resources to further shared goals
- Demonstrated experience resolving conflicts between entities with diverse backgrounds and/or competing interests
- Strong cultural competence, knowledge of cross-cultural values
- Knowledge of variety of partnerships, cooperative agreements, and contracting processes and policies
- Skill in applying evaluative methods to determine the efficiency/efficacy of strategies

### NOTES FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Supervisors could use the position description to start a conversation with staff about collaborative skills that their park sites need strengthened. Supervisors and staff could brainstorm skill sharing and other informal learning opportunities where staff could gain experience with the skills above.



## PREPARING FOR COLLABORATION

# Asset Mapping

### *Research the community before seeking new collaborations*

The value of deep collaboration and partnership with local cities cannot be underestimated. Parks with strong ties with city government and municipal departments continuously reap benefits from these relationships. Parks that collaborate with cities develop strong connections with their local residents, are able to pursue novel and innovative opportunities, and are better positioned to weather obstacles.



David Goldstein, the Urban Fellow for Detroit, Michigan, had the challenge of cultivating relationships with a municipality with no nearby national park site. Although Detroit benefits from the technical and financial assistance of the Park Service, the NPS is not physically visible in the city. David knew that if he wanted to convince Detroit to deepen their relationship with the Park Service, he first needed to showcase the benefits of partnering with the NPS. David's first step was to create an asset map to support conversation and (eventual) collaboration with Detroit stakeholders.

David began researching and cataloguing all the ways that the Park Service had supported Detroit. Then, with strong support and staff expertise from the NPS, David mapped all of these assets against census, economic, and health data for the city. This allowed him to recognize some of the challenges to collaboration the NPS and Detroit face.

Despite the fact that 80% of the city's buildings qualify for National Register protection, David noticed that the majority of the National Register listed sites are located far from where people live. Ninety-percent of the Land Water Conservation Fund sites are in places where the neighborhood depopulation has been highest - indicating to David that city and state planners should have a greater focus on equity when creating recreation opportunities. He also noticed that most of Detroit's parklands active within the RTCA program needed more stakeholders from the African American community, Detroit's largest demographic group. David's asset mapping highlighted the need for support in more densely populated areas and more input from the African American community. Knowing Detroit's needs allowed for David to start seeking relevant solutions.

#### A DEEPER LOOK

Asset maps document the history, resources, and identities of a park's surrounding community. Parks and park professionals should know the full history of the NPS' relationship within a city/community and should be able to share this information with stakeholders. Find what projects are finished, ongoing, and proposed within the city; discover what stakeholders have been involved; and note successes and the lessons learned from struggles. Discover what issues and history reflect the community's identity or ideals.

#### A DEEPER LOOK

When tracking your assets, notice where there are obvious gaps. Note what stories are not being told and the stakeholders who are most interested in having their history represented. These stakeholders might be your most committed advocates.



David ultimately took this information to Detroit's mayor, who supported him in submitting a grant for more resources in populous areas that are relevant to Detroit's African American community.

Eventually, the data compiled by David made it to **Data Driven Detroit**, an online platform that supports community advocates, nonprofits, and local government to make informed, data-driven decisions. Now other partners and future collaborators can identify gaps and places where NPS programs would be most beneficial. Having access to this information will help the Park Service implement collaboration and future support in a strategic way.



## TOOL

### *Make Your Own Asset Map*

Before building or improving relationships with a community, take some time to get to know that community better. It will better prepare you to highlight resources that are important to local residents, pitch projects that are more likely to succeed, and address stumbling blocks that may be impeding partnerships.

No two asset maps should look the same, but below are some prompting questions to help park professionals gain a deeper understanding of their communities. Compile all the relevant information into a living document to be reviewed and updated regularly. This asset map should shape how parks approach and build relationships within their city.

#### *Questions to ask during your needs assessment*

##### **Current and Previous Support and Engagement**

- What groups or partners does the park communicate with regularly?
- What financial or technical assistance has the park provided to this community?
- What groups or demographics were most/least engaged?
- Where are the gaps or missed opportunities for NPS support?

##### **Community Strengths and History**

- What are the community's strengths, ideals, and values? How are they reflected in NPS work or programs?
- What historical events and cultural attributes are most salient to this community?

##### **Obstacles**

- What challenges have prevented collaboration in the past?
- What lessons learned or points of contention should park professionals be mindful of?

##### **Opportunities**

- What opportunities exist for new partnerships or programs?



## FORMING RELATIONSHIPS

# Building in Reciprocity and Mutual Benefit

*Build in goodwill and mutual benefit for new park visitors and potential partners*

Cultivating relationships with new and diverse park visitors takes time. Even small gestures can pave the path towards true partnership. Reciprocity builds trust and heightens the awareness for new communities to learn more about the NPS. It also is a helpful tool to reassure new communities that the NPS wants mutually beneficial relationships.

It's important to note that when talking about reciprocity, we're using it in the anthropological or sociological sense. It is a friendly gesture to initiate or maintain a relationship. It is bringing baked-goods to your new neighbor or helping a friend move. It is the NPS proactively offering a small kindness, so that when the Park Service reaches out again — perhaps seeking their community support or to access its networks — these communities are familiar with and fond of the NPS.



Saguaro National Park and Diana Rhoades, the Urban Fellow for Tucson, Arizona, continue to benefit from some of the goodwill cultivated over three years ago. In 2014, Arizona's César E. Chávez Holiday Coalition successfully advocated for the City of Tucson's César E. Chávez Day, a paid city holiday in remembrance of the civil rights activist. Esther Rivera Murdock, Saguaro National Park's Community Engagement Coordinator at the time, recognized this as an opportunity to show support for the City, the Coalition, and, by extension, the larger Latino community. Under her guidance, Saguaro National Park decided to waive its fees on Tucson's César E. Chávez Day. It was a small and affordable act of solidarity — the holiday falls on a weekday with low visitation — but it has had multiple layers of impact.

The small gesture has turned into a beloved tradition at Saguaro National Park. They continue to host fee-free days on César Chávez's birthday, expanding their programs and connection within the Latino community, while strengthening their partnerships with the César E. Chávez Holiday Coalition. In fact, Saguaro National Park has since hired Cam Juárez, the co-founder of the Coalition, as their new Latino Community Engagement Coordinator. Cam and Diana have partnered with the Coalition to create a new family camping tradition named after the rallying cry of César Chávez and Dolores Huerta (co-founder of the National Farmworkers Association). The 2nd annual Sí Se Puede ("Yes We Can") family campout was held in 2017 with the grandson of César Chávez, Alejandro Chávez. In May of 2017, Saguaro National Park's Next Generation Rangers and the Coalition partnered to visit and volunteer at California's César E. Chávez National Monument, sparking a new service-learning collaboration between the two parks. Saguaro National Park's small investment boosted the success of multiple programs and events. However, the most important and largest gain from that small act of reciprocity is the relationships built within the Latino community.

Arizona's César E. Chávez Holiday Coalition is a perfect partner to increase Latino visitorship at Saguaro National Park. They continue to be a trusted organization with strong ties to the Latino community and their partnership with the NPS continues to grow. The larger Latino community is beginning to see Saguaro National Park and the NPS as a place where Latinos are welcomed and employed.



## TOOL

# *Skillfully Use Reciprocity*

As with all good practices, context is important. Below is a suggested framework to deepen relationships within the community through reciprocity. Ideally, this framework will be fleshed out within your department and will be adapted to meet the needs of the desired program or community. Having transparent standards will empower staff to use reciprocity strategically.

### Identify park objectives for reciprocity

Clearly identify park goals for reciprocity. Is this for building new relationships? Is it to maintain long-standing and cherished relationships? Craft talking points to be shared with staff that reflect the park goals for reciprocity.

### Identify potential community members for reciprocity

Which communities would reciprocity be most useful for beginning, deepening, or repairing relationships? Why would reciprocity be impactful with these communities? What potential benefit might the Park Service gain from a better relationship with these communities? Make sure to include communities with little to no interaction or relationship with your site.

### Identify services/support/programs that would reflect the community's needs or desires

Brainstorm all the different ways that your site would feel comfortable "doing a solid" for the community. Consider community needs and desires that may be addressed with small acts of reciprocity. Asking the community about what NPS resources they find most useful will yield helpful information for this task.

### Identify appropriate channels for decision-making on reciprocity

Who needs to be involved? What agency do direct service staff members have? Note that there may be some forms of support/reciprocity that your park site is always willing to offer if there's capacity — like presenting summer programming at a neighborhood association meeting.

Some small, easy examples of reciprocity may be: co-hosting an event for up to 25 participants, honoring one of their community members or local youth, or a letter of support for an organization's health programming. Get creative; the more robust the list, the more communities you'll be able to serve.

## A DEEPER LOOK

Reciprocity often sets the stage for more authentic partnerships and hedges against transactional relationships with the community. Transactional relationships — such as reaching out to partners only to attend, benefit, or support your own programs — can potentially strain and hamper partnerships.



## FORMING RELATIONSHIPS

# Supporting New Partners

### *Build a pathway and support structure for new partners*

Navigating the NPS' protocols and systems is complicated, even for our most experienced partners. Good collaborators create practices that support and guide partners as their relationship deepens with the Park Service. Supporting partners in this way prevents existing collaborations from fizzling out and increases the likelihood of exploring larger goals or more formalized partnerships.



Before becoming the Urban Fellow for New York City, Floyd Myers was the Chief of Business Development and Partnerships for the National Parks of New York Harbor. Floyd often sought out organizations to collaborate with, like Groundwork Hudson Valley, whose youth supported recent renovation work at Jacob Riis Park. Floyd wanted to develop a relationship with Groundwork Hudson Valley because of how aligned their work and mission was with the NPS. They were a quality partner, and National Parks of New York Harbor could easily support this relationship once it started. Reaching out to Groundwork Hudson Valley was a no-brainer: this partner was highly compatible with the NPS support systems available.

Floyd also had a consistent stream of potential partners that reached out to him. One such group was Mission Continues, a local veteran's non-profit group that now regularly volunteers with the NPS.

In 2015, Mission Continues cold-called the National Parks of New York Harbor looking for volunteer opportunities for their members. They were immediately connected into the park's

partner support systems, which helped the park turn a one-time volunteer gig into a lasting partnership. Over the past two years Mission Continues has volunteered for the NPS over a dozen times and now the NPS calls on them when they have a project best suited for dependable and committed volunteers. All volunteers are cherished at the NPS, but the safety-oriented and skilled veterans that volunteer with Floyd's team are especially valued. This was a partnership opportunity too good to pass up and Floyd's team had the infrastructure and practices to hold on to such a valuable partnership.



Review the “Partnership Pathway” tool to learn about the process Floyd created to ensure that his partners have a positive experience working with the NPS. This process provides an important framework for partners that stays with them from their very first conversation through their diverse stages of partnership.



## TOOL

# Partnership Pathway

### Provide partners with an access point.

There can be numerous access points, but the initial contact person should have the capacity to match potential partners with relevant park programs or park staff. All park staff should be knowledgeable on where to direct potential partners.

### Select partners who will be a good fit for park needs.

Choose quality over quantity. Ideally, park partners could support both park and community goals. Addressing park goals would mean that there is a NPS program or need that a potential partner is well prepared to support. Community goals serve and benefit the larger community, not just the park. Collaborations that serve both park and community goals tend to provide more opportunity for growth and/or sustainability.

## A DEEPER LOOK

Collaborations that benefit community goals ensure community buy-in and often benefit parks in the long-term. Community buy-in sets the stage for recruiting additional partners or tapping into diverse funding streams. It is also an indicator of the potential longevity of any given collaboration. Projects/programs that are beloved by the community tend to have long shelf lives.

### Connect partner staff with boots on the ground.

Partners that are a good fit should be matched up with the most relevant park staff. Staff working as access points should ensure that the boots on the ground have the capacity to support the new partners. It is also important for these first-contact staff to support their colleagues by writing an introductory email, passing on contact information, and relaying any expectations.

### Create feedback loops.

Established partners should have the opportunity to provide feedback on how any collaborative effort is going. This can be done informally, through a conversation, or formally in year-end reviews/reports. This is a good opportunity to see if partners need to be better supported, if they would like more leadership, or if there are other collaborative opportunities they'd like to explore.



## FORMING RELATIONSHIPS

# Flexing the Power of the Parks

### *Utilize relevant park resources to incentivize collaboration*

Many communities are unaware of the variety of resources used to meet the NPS' complex mission. City and state governments might not be familiar with the many programs and opportunities for collaboration with the federal government. In a society in which everyone is busy, employees in all levels of government are hesitant to enter into new collaborative efforts because they do not always know how their communities may benefit. Nathan Souder, Urban Fellow for Jacksonville, Florida, developed a unique solution for forming relationships with partners unfamiliar with or unaware of Park Service resources.



Flexing the power of the park is incentivizing collaboration by raising awareness of NPS resources to potential partners. It is most successful when the resources highlighted are relevant and appealing to the intended partner. Finding the most relevant resource to share with partners requires a shift in perspective. In order to best flex the power of the park, parks should view themselves and their resources through the eyes of their potential partners.

Nathan incentivized a new collaboration with over 20 state, city, and community organizations by working with the partners to identify a successful NPS resource or program they could adopt and tweak to make it relevant to new audiences and new partners. The partners included the City of Jacksonville, Florida State Parks, Groundwork Jacksonville, the YMCA of Florida's First Coast (the Y), and the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens.

The partners chose to develop their own version of the BioBlitz program. BioBlitz is an event where the community and scientists do an extensive inventory of all living creatures in a designated area over the course of 24 hours. Nathan's partners decided to host the event at a downtown city park in order to make the event accessible to families and the African American community. Each partner brought a hands-on educational opportunity and, to make the event more relevant, the event was renamed Biodiversity Festival. People associate festivals with family and fun and Nathan's partners did not disappoint with the fun factor. The United States Forest Service brought Smokey the Bear and Hoot the Owl for photo opportunities. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission brought targets and taught archery. The event also had a bounce house, food trucks, and yoga classes provided by the Y. A section of the park was set aside for groups to do a mini version of a BioBlitz and, upon completion of the BioBlitz and other festival activities, youth were sworn in as Junior Rangers.



This event was an obvious win for all parties involved. Not only was the attendance high, but many of the organizations had never partnered with each other and the NPS had the honor of being the convener. In total, the Biodiversity Festival involved over 24 partners, which provided a variety of programming. Nathan was able to successfully choose and refine relevant NPS resources to encourage collaboration and he also was able to set aside resources that were not a good fit for his partners.

Flexing the power of parks is less about the resources themselves and more about perspective — if the NPS approaches collaborations from the perspective of the partner or program participant, everyone wins.

#### A DEEPER LOOK

One of the NPS' more popular resources, access to a park site, was less valuable to Nathan's partners. They felt a city park was more ideal for their event. Nathan's partners were more interested in increasing their networks through NPS's relationships and tapping into the cachet of the NPS. When engaging new partners, park professionals should be prepared to view their resources in a new light.



#### TOOL

### Shifting Perspective

Incentivizing collaboration first requires that potential partners be aware of the benefits. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, incentivizing collaboration requires parks to view themselves through the eyes of their potential partners. *How does the NPS make their partners look good? How do our partners value and view NPS programs and resources? What most excites potential partners about collaborating with us?*

With your team, identify resources that could incentivize collaborations with potential partners. Note if any resources may need to be tweaked or refined to make them more relevant to your partners. Clearly articulate what your partners might value about these resources. This will help you most effectively showcase your resources to your partners.

#### EXAMPLE:

Relevant Resource or Asset	<i>Ability to attract diverse partners</i>
Potential Partner	<i>Mayor's office</i>
Incentive/Value for Partner	<i>Broker new and valuable relationships for our partners</i>
Any modifications needed?	<i>Highlight ability to play convening role, not just a host-site</i>

#### NOTES FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Really challenge your group to determine the value of park resources from your partner's perspective. For some resources, you may have to speculate or guess what the incentive or value would be for your partners. Prioritize the resources that have values you can verify or feel confident about. If you have to guess at the value of certain resources, that might be an indication that more conversation with your partners is needed.



## FORMING RELATIONSHIPS

# Aligning Park Projects with Identified City Goals

*Encourage collaboration with cities by aligning park goals with city goals*



Before engaging any new partners, parks should identify the benefit these new partners would gain from a collaborative effort. This is especially true for collaborating with cities and city government. Fortunately, identifying how a city might benefit from a proposed collaborative effort is relatively easy. Cities usually have formal and transparent processes for identifying their goals. Parks should increase the probability of partnership with local government by aligning park projects with identified city goals.



Kieron Slaughter, the Urban Fellow for Richmond, California, began his collaboration with the city by first familiarizing himself with Richmond's goals. He reviewed Richmond's long-range planning documents (all available on the city's website) and then interviewed stakeholder groups, neighborhood councils, and city-convened community panels and commissions. Kieron also took special care to review the city's Health in All Policies, Health & Wellness Element, Bicycle Master Plan, and Pedestrian Plan as well as other related health/recreation goals the city had documented.

### A DEEPER LOOK

Review what city initiatives or strategic goals may be bolstered by NPS projects and/or resources. Groups can prepare a small presentation on stated goals from your local health department, planning commission, department of transportation, and/or passion projects coming out of the mayor's office.

Even a quick web search of city or county government departments can lead to plenty of information to make park projects more relevant. For a deeper understanding of city goals, park professionals can join city commissions usually convened by the city council.

Kieron then shaped his major project as an Urban Fellow to directly reflect the goals of the city of Richmond and its residents. Richmond, like many cities, had goals oriented around creating healthier and more active communities. These goals also included increasing opportunities and access to physical activity and recreation. Kieron quickly saw that these goals closely aligned with a number of existing NPS goals and programs, such as the Healthy Parks Healthy People program and the NPS Urban Agenda.



For Richmond residents without access to a vehicle, getting to Rosie the Riveter/ World War II Home Front National Historical Park is challenging. Most residents have to use high traffic streets, traverse a freeway, and walk through two miles of an industrial area before reaching the park, located on Richmond's beautiful shoreline. Rosie the Riveter, like many other NPS sites, had to figure out creative ways to encourage the community to cross a freeway to get to the park.

#### A DEEPER LOOK

Is a freeway getting in between you and your community? Collaborating with city government is crucial to overcome an obstacle of this size. But first, deepen relationships with bike/walk advocacy groups to help you brainstorm viable solutions for your community. Also explore cheaper options like wayfinding signs and streetscape beautification to encourage new park-goers to cross freeway overpasses.

This particular challenge was the initial motivation for the Richmond Wellness Trail. When completed, the trail will be a safe and enjoyable greenway connecting the city's best parks, trails, and historical sites. This trail will link public transportation, downtown Richmond, Kaiser Hospital, schools, assisted-living facilities, and churches to a network of local parks (including the Rosie the Riveter World War II Home Front National Historical Park), bicycles routes, and natural beauty. The Richmond Wellness Trail will bring nature to the community and create the connective tissue needed to encourage a healthy and active lifestyle.

In April 2017, the Richmond City Council unanimously adopted the Richmond Wellness Trail Vision Plan as an addendum to the Richmond Pedestrian Plan. Aligning park needs with identified city goals assures that the Richmond Wellness Trail has local support and buy-in. This support made it an easier process to formalize this vision within city policy and set the groundwork for the Richmond Wellness Trail to be built. Aligning the park project with an identified city goal made every step of this process easier.



## SUSTAINING COLLABORATION

# Weaving in Collaboration

*Create prompts and practices to encourage collaboration in everyday work*

Undoubtedly, there are times when money and available staff hours all happen to match a park's collaboration needs. Although this is an excellent position to be in, it's frequently not the way collaboration happens. Collaboration in the NPS often looks more like stone soup. This stone soup is simmered by various departments and numerous park partners making small contributions that turn into a large offering for the community.



Ruth Raphael, the Urban Fellow for Boston, Massachusetts, frequently pooled together various park departments to create collaborative initiatives. Ruth applied her collaboration skills to tasks that were a part of the everyday, ongoing work at the National Parks of Boston—Boston National Historical Park, Boston African American National Historic Site and Boston Harbor Islands. Ruth identified tasks and work inside of the NPS that, through a little extra coordination, could advance additional park and community goals.

During her fellowship, Ruth was tasked with rehabilitating the gardens surrounding the Commandant's House in the Charlestown Navy Yard. Before beginning, Ruth brainstormed how she might better collaborate on this project. She realized that she had a perfect opportunity to collaborate with the Olmstead Center for Landscape Preservation. A little extra conversation and a little extra coordination allowed Ruth to tap into two of the Olmstead Center's youth development programs, Designing the Parks and Branching Out.



This partnership ultimately led to the involvement of other NPS partners as well: the Student Conservation Association, AmeriCorps, and the Massachusetts Department of Conservation & Recreation. These partners were looking for a landscape project for their young adults and this project was a perfect fit. By reaching out to this network of community organizations, Ruth provided a job-training opportunity to local youth with a task that normally would have been handled internally.

Once the garden is refreshed, there will have been a total of 23 youth participants involved with this project. There was no additional funds needed, it was simply reorganizing and coordinating work that was already happening across invested NPS departments and partners. The success of this project has modeled the benefits of seeking new ways of collaborating at various levels of park operations.



## TOOL

# Collaboration Debrief

Rethinking how we work should be a proactive process. The National Parks of Boston frequently challenge themselves by using the simple prompt “how might we...” *How might we engage the community with this project? How might we build relationships with this task?* Using this prompt allows for the National Parks of Boston to incorporate collaboration in creative and new ways.

Managers and supervisors should give their staff explicit permission to seek out collaborative opportunities. Supervisors should see collaboration as a skill to be developed and take time to reflect on how collaboration could not only improve work quality, but make work more enjoyable. Often, it is after a project is completed when the missed opportunities for collaboration become really obvious. Take advantage of this hindsight and consider collaboration as an important element to bring up in debrief sessions.



### NOTES FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

How does your team challenge themselves to better utilize collaboration? What reminders or prompts could your park use to incorporate collaboration more effectively or more frequently?

After debriefing or reflecting on an event or program, brainstorm how it could have been improved through collaboration. Below is a simple modification to a plus/delta chart that supervisors could use to continue the conversation on collaboration.

## EVERY KID IN A PARK EVENT

### How might we improve this through collaboration?

#### POSITIVES

So many kids!

*Seek more help with photography and document our community having fun*

Self-directed activities were very popular

*Seek out more partners to host additional self-directed activities (like coloring or craft stations)*

#### DRAWBACKS

Bottleneck in the parking lot

*Ask Special Park Use Group and park police for input and support*

Limited activities for children with special needs

*Seek advice or support from relevant nonprofits serving this community*



## SUSTAINING COLLABORATION

# Listening without an Agenda

### *Listen to stakeholders on their own terms*

All communities should feel like their voices are important to the NPS. Missy Morrison, the Urban Fellow for Washington D.C., established and maintained relationships during her fellowship by building in opportunities to listen. Missy strengthened her deep listening skills and re-learned the importance of listening to the community on their own terms. In other words: listening to the community without an agenda.



Unlike some of the highly trafficked D.C. park sites (such as the National Mall), National Capitol Parks - East has smaller, neighborhood parks and perhaps a less obvious staff presence. To foster relationships with residents in these neighborhoods, the NPS needs to make a concerted effort to be visible and accessible to the communities surrounding these small parks. Missy knew she needed to go beyond park boundaries and meet with the community on their turf and at their events.

She dove into this task head-on: meeting with community leaders, volunteer-led groups, and other valued partners. She let them shape the flow of the conversation and learned about their needs and concerns, and not just as it related to the Park Service's typical line of questioning. The conversations were richer, she got a fuller understanding of the community, and was able to offer more relevant resources and support. For example, safety is a well-known concern with some of D.C.'s national parks, and Missy (through deep listening) learned of the neighborhood desire to use community pride to cultivate a safe environment. Installing new interpretation and wayfinding signs that tap into local history and pride was a resource that National Capital Parks-East could provide in a timely manner. Having this highly visible symbol of responsiveness can support future courageous, and sometimes contentious, conversations.

Frustration can brew when communities feel like they are not being heard. Listening without an agenda is crucial under these circumstances. A pivotal moment for Missy was attending a NPS community round-table hosted by Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton. In the past, the Congresswoman's constituents struggled to find contact information for relevant NPS staff or to identify the park superintendent for their neighborhood park. In an effort to increase dialogue, Congresswoman Norton hosted a roundtable with the NPS Regional Director to discuss how parks can better serve D.C. residents. While the NPS leadership could not provide quick fixes to all issues raised



at the meeting, what had been a strained community relationship shifted as NPS leadership demonstrated their willingness to listen and residents saw the NPS's continued efforts seeking their advice. A more conversation-based engagement strategy was crucial for continued collaboration.

Listening without an agenda is a gateway to learning from the community. It is a skill that enables park professionals to improve relationships, to better understand the perspectives of their park-goers, and to foster more solutions and ideas sourced from park communities.

### A DEEPER LOOK

There are a number of ways to listen without an agenda. Explore using an ethnographic study to discover your community's values, issues, and world-view. Ethnographic studies can create a lens that will help your park make relevant engagement and management decisions, no matter the project.

**NPS cultural anthropologists** can support designing the study and can brainstorm potential partnerships for research and implementation with local universities.



## TOOL

### Deep Listening

Listening without an agenda is best paired with deep listening skills. Deep listening may feel new to park professionals, because much of the Park Service's community engagement requires that the NPS be the speaker or facilitator. Fortunately, deep listening can be practiced almost anywhere and staff can become more practiced before utilizing this skill in a community setting. Once practiced, staff will be better able to recognize when deep listening is happening. The table below helps differentiate between deep listening and defensive listening.

#### What this might look like:

#### DEEP LISTENING

Listening to understand.

*Verifying and checking to see if other perspectives are understood.*

Listening to learn.

*Acknowledging emotions and impact.*

Listening to acknowledge.

*Parroting back root causes, concerns, or the complexity of an issue.*

*Openness to the possibility of there being a number of coexisting truths.*

#### DEFENSIVE LISTENING

Listening to validate your own world view or perception.

*Avoidance, fleeing, or resistance to hearing conflicting dialogue.*

*Perceiving others who present conflicting perceptions as "rude" or "inappropriate".*

Listening to disprove the opinion or perceptions of others.

*Interrupting others before they finish their thoughts or sentence.*

*Responding by cataloguing "flaws" or inaccuracies in others' perceptions.*



## SUSTAINING COLLABORATION

# Building in Sustainability

### *Create collaboration with staying power*

Change and transition is inevitable within any collaborative effort. Leadership change, funding drying up, or even the completion of a project can cause powerful partnerships to stumble. Collaborative initiatives should strategically build in practices and partners that will increase the sustainability.



Tara Rath, the Urban Fellow for St. Louis, Missouri, is knee-deep in a 10 year project. The NPS is a crucial partner in the City Arch River Alliance (the Alliance), which is a partnership between the city, non-profit organizations, and the NPS. The Alliance is striving to connect the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial with downtown St. Louis — a massive undertaking requiring a \$380 million capital campaign and a park/land bridge across a freeway. The park committed to this vision in their 2009 General Management Plan and was formally supported by Janet Wilding, Tara's predecessor.

Currently, the Alliance is in its last year of construction. Partners are approaching a transition that will require them to shift from building the dream to maintaining the dream. The Alliance is well prepared for this shift, because they're a collaborative built for sustainability. They've made sure to craft a partnership that can weather change and even disruption.

One way that the Alliance is built to handle change is through their use of functional areas. These functional areas work similar to sub-committees and build in flexibility by allowing partners to choose how they collaborate with the larger group - such as choosing the tasks they want to support and their level of participation. Building in flexibility was key for the Alliance's sustainability.



Tara and her partners have identified a number of characteristics that make large-scale collaborations with the NPS more sustainable - these characteristics are captured in the following Sustainability Checklist.



## TOOL

# Sustainability Checklist

✔ **Commitment to work and work methods that are mission-aligned with all the stakeholders.**

Take the time to ensure that partners are honoring their mission with any collaborative effort. This plan should be re-visited regularly with partners as projects progress. Also, there may be times when you need to reach outside of your group to tap into a unique skill-set or network. If these unique partners aren't mission-aligned (for the long-term) have an honest conversation about what their engagement with the group should look like. *What support do they need to participate? How long would they like to support this work?*



✔ **Backbone Support.**

The work and time needed to facilitate or convene collaborative efforts are often underestimated. Explicitly name which stakeholder will be holding this role. This can be a shared responsibility, with partners passing on these tasks after owning them for a set amount of time. Use habits/rituals to make this job easier such as creating a meeting agenda template or setting up meetings at the same time each month.

✔ **Strategic redundancy.**

Multi-year projects and other large scale projects should have multiple staff from each organization. Having a deep bench allows for quicker and more consistent dissemination of information to impacted communities and co-workers. It also allows for individuals to step down or step back without derailing a project.

✔ **Planning for longevity with funding streams and leadership.**

Collaborations with a long shelf-life should plan for change. They plan for when a funding stream runs out, when leaders need to change, and when the collaboration will be community-run. Collaborations should be generous with themselves and plan transitions before groups feel any stress from financial or capacity changes.



## SUSTAINING COLLABORATION

# Reviving and Repurposing Collaborations

*Create shared visions for collaborations that are in transition*

Starting new partnerships and collaborations can be quite an investment. Seeking out partners — and building trust and new relationships — can take months and sometimes years. Repurposing existing relationships for new collaborative efforts is a cost- and time-effective way to fast-track collaboration.



Helen Mahan, the Urban Fellow for Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, realized that tapping into existing partners would be key to accelerating her collaborative projects. Independence National Historical Park needed partners to ensure dynamic and relevant programming for their Every Kid in a Park initiative. The park also had a relatively short turnaround time to convene the needed partnerships. Every Kid in a Park is an opportunity that is ripe for collaboration and is a great playground for using old partnerships in new ways.

Helen first reached out to two strong partnership groups already rallied around the Canoemobile program and the Let's Move Outside campaign. These two networks of partners were invested in nature education and healthy youth in the community and she knew that their mission and programs aligned well with the Every Kid in a Park initiative. She also knew that these networks were in a time of transition, as the staff responsible for convening these networks had recently relocated. Reaching out to these partners made sense because of their proven success in similar collaborative efforts and because Helen could offer additional support during a time of transition.



### A DEEPER LOOK

When partnerships are sunsetting or dealing with leadership change and other transitions, consider how repurposing might strengthen or sustain these networks. Have regular, honest conversations about what current or future collaboration will look like for your partners given their circumstances. Make time to clarify and modify roles and responsibilities accordingly.

Helen then used these existing relationships as leverage for new partnerships. Independence National Historical Park had always wanted to include more science, technology, engineering, and math focused programming. Helen reached out to the Philadelphia Science Festival, organized by over 50 local and national organizations, which had limited interaction or relationships with the NPS. Helen offered the potential partner a prestigious venue, Independence National Historical Park, and access to her extensive network of youth development, nature, and health oriented community organizations. This blending of partners created an offering, Science in the National Park, which likely would not have happened had Helen not repurposed and reimagined the park's existing partnerships.



## Creating a New Culture

### *Turn a practice of collaboration into a culture of collaboration*

The Urban Agenda's Fellows tested the readiness and ability to integrate collaboration throughout the NPS. After two years of rapid prototyping, they have cultivated a series of practices for strengthening collaboration within the Park Service. These practices can be combined to form a strategy that can serve parks no matter their size or proximity to a city. It is a strategy that parks can start today and that could be modified to meet the unique circumstances of any given park.

The hope is that parks will adapt a number of these practices in this handbook and make them their own, that these practices will be refined and repeated until they become the norm, and that a set of collaborative practices would turn into a culture of collaboration.



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*All photos are courtesy of the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy except on page 9, photo courtesy of Detroit Public Schools Community District.*

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[instituteatgoldengate.org](http://instituteatgoldengate.org)

A program of the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, the Institute at the Golden Gate reimagines parks as catalysts for social change, making them more vibrant, relevant, and valuable for everyone. We explore and incubate knowledge and innovation in parks—locally, regionally, and nationally. Embedded in one of the country’s most visited and influential national parks, we forge unconventional partnerships to reach beyond traditional park boundaries.

## **GOLDEN GATE NATIONAL PARKS CONSERVANCY**

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The Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy is the nonprofit membership organization created to preserve the Golden Gate National Parks, enhance the experiences of park visitors, and build a community dedicated to conserving the parks for the future. The Conservancy is an authorized “cooperating association” of the National Park Service and is one of more than 70 such nonprofit organizations working with national parks around the country.

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