

# Characteristics of Successful Tourism Partnerships: A Multiple Case Study Design

by

**Steve Selin**  
and  
**Debbie Chavez**

RESEARCH PAPER 9420

**KEYWORDS:** partnerships; characteristics of success; leisure; recreation; tourism; qualitative research; case study research; natural resources; forestry.

**ABSTRACT:** In an era of fiscal constraint, leisure service providers are examining tourism as a revenue enhancement strategy. Anecdotal evidence has established that linkages between public leisure services and the tourism industry are underdeveloped and need strengthening. The purpose of this paper is to develop a contextual understanding of the dynamic nature of tourism partnerships. Characteristics of partnership success are gleaned from a qualitative research study examining three community partnerships involving the USDA Forest Service and other federal, state, and local organizations and individuals. Characteristics of partnership success are broken into four categories: personal factors, interpersonal factors, organizational factors, and operational factors. Results from the study suggest a number of managerial actions to enhance the value of partnerships: develop more flexible personnel and financial accounting systems, ensure staff continuity over life of partnership, and implement partnership incentive programs for agency staff and potential external partners. Suggestions for future research are offered.

Steve Selin is an Assistant Professor in the Division of Forestry at West Virginia University. Debbie Chavez is the Project Leader of the Wildland Recreation and Urban Culture research unit in the Pacific Southwest Experimental Station.

## **Introduction**

In the current political climate of fiscal constraint, leisure service providers are examining tourism as a revenue enhancement strategy. Considerable interest has been shown in academic and management circles in exploring the potential opportunities and related costs associated with tourism development (Crompton, 1990; Gunn, 1990; Hollinshead, 1990; Knopf, 1990; Zeigler & Caneday, 1991). Several conferences have expressly focused on the appropriate level of integration between public leisure services and the tourism industry (Langston, 1988; Selin & Lewis, 1994; Sheffer, 1991). Anecdotal evidence (Reid, 1988) has established that linkages between public leisure services and the tourism industry are underdeveloped and need strengthening. Empirical research is needed to guide managers in forging innovative partnerships which achieve sustainable tourism goals.

The purpose of this paper is to develop a contextual understanding of the dynamic nature of tourism partnerships. Characteristics of partnership success are gleaned from an exploratory study examining three community partnerships involving the USDA Forest Service and other federal, state, and local organizations and individuals. All three cases focus on developing natural resource-based tourism opportunities. Results from the study have important implications for park and recreation administrators interested in forging partnerships to boost tourism activity on public lands and recreation areas.

## **Characteristics of Successful Partnerships**

Partnerships, as a term popularized in the leisure service field, has been applied to activities ranging from volunteer assistance to contractual arrangements between a public agency and a concessionaire. A clear conceptual definition is needed to guide future empirical inquiry. Partnerships will be defined here as the voluntary pooling of

resources (labor, money, information, etc.) between two or more parties to accomplish collaborative goals (Gray, 1985). Partnerships range from situations where two agencies interact briefly around a common problem to those where multiple organizations are represented in an ongoing venture. Partnerships may be highly structured, characterized by legally binding agreements, or they may be quite unstructured verbal agreements between participating parties.

Close examination of recent tourism partnership case studies (Sheffer, 1991) and partnership-specific research (Selin & Beason, 1991; Selin & Chavez, 1993; Waddock, 1991) reveal a number of dimensions that are important to the success of tourism partnerships. Reid (1988) identified several factors thought to expedite the formation of tourism partnerships. These included more communication, developing institutionalized fora for cooperative planning, familiarization tours, and cooperative research. Reid also noted obstacles which tend to mitigate the effectiveness of tourism partnerships including turf protection (also discussed by Gunn, 1990), lack of awareness, bureaucratic procedures, and limitations of staff and funds.

Several empirical studies have investigated factors associated with partnership success in the recreation and tourism fields as well as in other social service disciplines. USDA Forest Service managers have suggested a number of agency actions needed to improve partnerships including better communication networks, streamline rules and regulations, better planning, and the need to provide incentives for potential partners (Selin & Chavez, 1993). And, in a study of employment training and development partnerships, Waddock (1991) identified the following correlates of effectiveness:

- (1) Partners need to trust other partners;
- (2) Partner representatives need to have adequate power to make

- decisions for their organization;
- (3) Partners need to sense there will be benefits to all partners from their efforts;
  - (4) Partners need to recognize they are interdependent for resolution of issues;
  - (5) Issues being dealt with need to be salient to partners;
  - (6) Partners need to feel they add value to the partnership;
  - (7) Power needs to be balanced among partners;
  - (8) Partnership objectives should be clear and well defined;
  - (9) Feedback to partners must be adequate;
  - (10) There must be strong leadership within the partnership;

Several of Waddock's dimensions have been corroborated in the recreation and tourism field by Selin & Beason (1991) who found that domain consensus, sense of interdependence, goal similarity, and goal knowledge were significant predictors of the level of cooperation observed between the USDA Forest Service and local tourism service providers.

While some progress has been made in identifying characteristics of partnership success, much of the work has been anecdotal in nature. Empirical research is needed to test the implicit assumptions of these descriptive sources. Results from an exploratory multiple case study research study examining three community partnerships are presented in the following sections.

### **Method**

This qualitative research study used a multiple case study design (Yin, 1989) to build theory related to characteristics of success associated with tourism partnerships.

Case study research has been used extensively in the management sciences field to

study the internal structure and processes of partnerships (Waddock, 1989). To construct a population of partnerships, a questionnaire was mailed to Recreation Staff Officers on all national forests requesting cost-share agreements and supporting documents describing two of their most successful partnerships. In addition, a copy of all USDA Forest Service regional reports on partnerships during the 1990-91 fiscal year was obtained. The final population included descriptions and supporting documentation for 280 partnerships representing 78 national forests.

A criteria-based procedure was used to select three partnerships for the case study phase of the project. The criteria included attributes such as degree of success in accomplishing ambitious goals, maturity, number of partners, voluntary association, and regional proximity. The three partnerships chosen included a community project in Eagle, Colorado to construct a regional visitor information center. Key partners in the effort included the Eagle District of the White River National Forest, the Colorado Division of Wildlife, Eagle County, the town of Eagle, the Bureau of Land Management, the Eagle Valley Chamber of Commerce, and the Eagle County Historical Society. The second partnership was a statewide effort in Utah to develop an integrated scenic byway system. Key partners included the USDA Forest Service, the Utah Travel Council, the Bureau of Land Management, the Utah Department of Transportation, the Federal Highway Administration, the National Park Service, and the Utah Travel Regions. The third partnership was another community effort in St. Maries, Idaho to interpret the logging history of the region. Project outcomes have included the construction of an interpretive center and several recreational trails. Key partners were the St. Maries District of the Idaho Panhandle National Forests, the St. Joe Valley Association, and the Marble Creek Historical Society. All three selected partnerships have received national exposure and awards for their significant

accomplishments.

During the summer of 1992, the author visited each partnership site. A triangulation method (Miles & Huberman, 1984) was employed to collect multiple sources of data to control for possible biases caused by the researcher being the sole observer of the partnership. Data sources included semi-structured interviews with all key partners, letters, agendas and minutes, administrative documents (reports, proposals, brochures), and newspaper clippings. Results of the study presented here reflect partner responses to three open-ended questions examining factors contributing to the overall success of their partnership. Respondents were asked to identify the necessary ingredients to forging a successful partnership and what individual partners contributed to the partnership that either contributed to the overall success of the partnership or might have hindered partnership development. A total of 23 interviews were conducted, each lasting an average of 45 minutes. In all cases, the most directly involved and knowledgeable individual within each agency was interviewed. All interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed word for word for subsequent analysis.

The data analysis method used could be described as nesting the analytic inductive process within approaches to generate formal abstract theory (Burgess, 1984). The data were coded to reflect major themes and then recoded into subthemes to reflect specific content (Strauss, 1987). Theory building was achieved through an iterative process of alternating between phenomena and interpretation. As a result, the guiding questions changed as information received became more refined and themes began to emerge. The literature review occurred subsequently to the analysis to provide some conceptual confirmation to the emerging themes.

## Results

Participants in the three tourism partnerships identified a number of characteristics that contributed to the success of their partnership. Consistent with the study objective of building grounded theory, the following themes reflect the researcher's interpretation of the data rather than attempting to fit the data to an existing theoretical model.

Research findings will be integrated with previous research in the discussion section.

These characteristics are categorized in Figure 1 as personal characteristics, interpersonal characteristics, organizational characteristics, and operational characteristics.

### Personal Characteristics

Participants in the study frequently attributed the success of the partnership to the unique mix of personalities represented in the group. Several wondered whether the same success could have been achieved with other actors involved. There was a sense of "having the right people" involved in the project and that diversity in skills, philosophy, and resources was a strength. Participants in all three partnerships mentioned strong leadership as a key to success. Leadership qualities cited as being important included: motivation, commitment, enthusiasm, vision, patience, open mindedness, perseverance, and an ability to get other people excited. A Forest Service manager commented:

You need a person with energy and commitment that truly believes in the project. They don't take no for a definitive answer. Willing to take the time to really push. If you don't have that it probably won't go. It can't be the Forest Service. It has to come from outside. It has to be theirs. They must have ownership.

Several respondents also touched on risk-taking as an important personal

quality of partnership members. In other words, certain people were willing to, "go out on a limb" or "bend the rules" or "push the envelope" to ensure the success of the partnership. Most of these comments were made pertaining to rigid personnel and financial accounting systems employed by federal land management agencies.

Most respondents also exhibited a community spirit or a willingness to give of themselves for the good of the community or of the state. To one partner, "The realization that we are not doing this for ourselves, but for somebody else. It starts to get easier." Or to another, "I was trying to keep my ego out of it."

Finally, as an alternative hypothesis, perhaps luck had more to do with the success of the partnership than the mix of personalities. According to one participant, "We were lucky on this one. Everyone got along."

#### Interpersonal Characteristics

A number of interpersonal or group characteristics were cited as contributing to partnership success. Respondents were generally amazed by the high degree of cooperation exhibited between the various organizations involved in each partnership. Phrases like, "the group dynamics were just right" or "we complemented each other" or "there was just the right balance" were frequently offered explanations.

Communication and trust issues commonly arose during interviews. Active listening, honesty, and directness were cited as important success indicators. Other suggestions included "no hidden agendas" or "be up front" or "get everything on the table." One respondent noted that it is important to, "listen and share information and ideas."

The ability of the group to develop a "shared vision" of the partnership early in its development was often mentioned as a prerequisite of success. In the words of a Forest Service planner, "A mutual feeling of what they want it [the partnership] to be



when its completed."

Partnership success was also attributed to the group's ability to adjust to each other and reach consensus on difficult decisions. Phrases like "give and take" or "giving up turf" were frequently heard. As one partner put it, "Everyone has to give up turf. Get things on the table. There wasn't anyone who had to have power or more recognition than the next." Or, to another, "You have to be willing to give up and compromise where appropriate."

### Organizational Characteristics

A number of organization-specific factors were identified that contributed to partnership success. An often mentioned key to success was having support from upper-level management for the partnership. As a Forest Service District Ranger put it, "I had the support from my supervisor, the green light, and the full authority to proceed." Incentives provided by the agency, either financial such as cost-share grant programs or recognition efforts like awards, played an important role in motivating both agency personnel and other partners to participate in the partnership effort. As a private sector partner explained, "the Forest Services' upfront money made people sit up and take notice."

Flexibility in personnel and financial accounting procedures was a frequently cited success indicator, particularly by private sector partners. One Forest Service manager recognized this factor, "You can't get too bound up in our regulations. That's one way to turn off the private sector fast. [Our regulations] irritated them." Also, hiring staff with specific responsibilities for developing community and state-level partnerships contributed to partnership success. In the Utah case, the forethought by the USDA Forest Service to hire state-level recreation initiative coordinators was instrumental in forging state-wide coalitions. One constraint mentioned by several

private sector partners, was the "revolving door" hiring policies of the USDA Forest Service. These comments emphasize the importance of having staff continuity throughout the lifecycle of the partnership.

Finally, USDA Forest Service managers played a number of unique roles in the development of these partnerships. In addition to contributing technical and financial resources to the partnership, these managers also played important roles as a catalysts and mediators. Several examples illustrate this role. One recreation technician was described by her private sector partners as the "rudder" and "the thread of continuity" throughout the lifecycle of the partnership. And, according to one Forest Service District Ranger, "We were the catalyst. The link between the Forest Service and the community became the hub, the energy."

Several quotes bear out the mediator role Forest Service managers often occupied. As a private sector partner described a Forest Service planner, "[ ] was the thread of continuity. Without that we would not have felt comfortable with our roles. I would not feel comfortable letting [ ] do her thing. She wouldn't feel comfortable with what I do." And, in the Idaho case, a representative of the St. Joe Valley Association (which represents wood product interests) comments, "The Forest Service is the neutral entity. No way would the St. Joe Valley Association [normally] work with the Sierra Club [to build an interpretive trail]. Never the twain shall meet." Strange bedfellows, maybe, but these examples illustrate the power of partnerships to find common ground between interest groups with otherwise divergent values.

#### Operational Characteristics

A number of operational or planning factors were mentioned as contributing to partnership success. Many respondents mentioned the importance of having a detailed, written plan of action to stimulate interest in the partnership. Having

architectural drawings completed or specific resource needs itemized were cited.

"People volunteer best when you can specifically tell them, I need 15 two-by-fours rather than, can you help with this project?" A tangible goal is needed to capture the imagination of the community. Two other quotes support this idea. In the Colorado case, a participant related, "Once we saw the drawings, that did it. Let's do this." Or in Idaho, "We put together a brochure to hand to people. Somehow that made the project more of a reality rather than just an idea."

Meeting environments were also thought to correlate with partnership success. Here, though, differences were found in suggested formats. In the Colorado and Idaho cases, informal protocols were observed. The Colorado group met once a week over lunch. In Idaho, donuts were served at all steering committee meetings.

It was the attitude of [ ]. He's a team player. We respect him.

Personal and professional respect. He brings over fresh donuts. The powerful bureaucrat has created a homey atmosphere. We have some fun. If it wasn't for some key things like that I don't think we could have done it.

By contrast, the Utah steering committee conducted more formal working sessions. In all cases, scheduling regular meetings was highly recommended. And, in each case, imposed deadlines were the rule. According to one participant, "When there's a deadline, people really hump."

Another key to success mentioned by several partners was having a formal, cooperative agreement in place early in the development of the partnership. In both the Colorado and Idaho cases, a Memorandum of Understanding was drawn up to formalize partnership goals and agency responsibilities. This was not the case in Utah, however several Utah respondents expressed some regret that a cooperative

agreement had not been formalized earlier. According to one Idaho partner, it helped to, "Define the role of the committees at an early stage. What boundaries, authority, and decision-making powers." The need for formal cooperative agreements was more strongly expressed by representatives of public agencies than by private sector individuals, reflecting a perceived need to develop legal relationships with external partners as well as a desire to document the value of the partnership to the agency.

Finally, for the momentum of a partnership to be sustained, it is important for the group to set new goals periodically. In all three cases, there was a tendency for the planning group to rest on their laurels once a facility or scenic byway system was dedicated. As one transportation official put it, "When the next child comes along, its easy to forget the one that's already there." Partnerships are fragile and need the infusion of new goals if they are to thrive. In a real sense, partnerships either grow or die. According to a Chamber of Commerce partner, "You have to keep a goal in front of you. Now we have some new goals." For example, the Utah steering committee started meeting again after a lengthy hiatus when the group decided to solicit federal highway bill funds to implement an interpretive plan for one of the designated byways.

### **Discussion**

Results from this qualitative study should be interpreted cautiously for several reasons. The small and non-representative sample limits the generalizability of the results to other agencies and geographic regions. And, a halo effect, where respondents attempt to present their partnership in the most positive light may have introduced some bias in the raw data. The researcher noticed, for example, that respondents were hesitant, at times, to criticize other partners or agencies even with assurances of anonymity. Despite these potential limitations, the qualitative data and interpretation is useful for the primary study objective of building theory related to characteristics of

partnership success. Results from the study served to confirm previous literature on partnership success and to suggest new correlates of partnership success.

That strong leadership emerged as important to partnership success confirms several previous studies (Gray, 1985; Waddock, 1991). Gray (1985) hypothesized that successful collaboration between organizations will only occur when leaders have legitimate authority and appreciative skills. Respondent comments regarding having the "right people" involved in the partnership corroborates work by Waddock (1989) who concluded that partnerships must include the "right" organizations whose interests overlap and the "right representatives" who have the commitment and ability to act "on the spot" (p. 87).

Interpersonal factors attributed to partnership success in the study such as trust, shared vision, and mutual adjustment support findings from a number of previous studies (Gray, 1985; Waddock, 1989; Bonnicksen, 1991). Describing a biosocial model of natural resource policy formation, Bonnicksen (1991) hypothesized that social adjustment processes occur when, "agents, stakeholders, and representatives of the larger society work together to formulate cooperative management strategies" (p. 13). Gray (1985) described a similar process where stakeholders adjust to each other through a "coincidence of values" (p. 925). This same adjustment process emerged as a central theme in all three partnerships.

Both organizational and operational factors contributing to partnership success in the study confirm previous partnership literature (Waddock, 1989, 1991; Bonnicksen, 1991; Selin & Chavez, 1993). One interesting finding from the study was the assertion that it was important for the continued life of the partnership to set new goals periodically. This finding supports work by Waddock (1989) who studied five community and economic development partnerships. She described a maturity phase

of partnership development where mission and purpose are reevaluated. "This reevaluation engenders a broadening of focus if the partnership is to stay in business (p. 87)."

Results from the study suggest a number of management strategies for nurturing and sustaining tourism partnerships including more flexible personnel and financial accounting procedures, staff continuity across the life of partnership, staff training workshops oriented around a planning for partnership theme, and partnership incentive programs. It is not enough for administrators to give lip service to the value of partnerships. Verbal support must translate into specific policies and resource allocations designed to maximize the potential benefits from community partnerships.

Partnerships form a complex, dynamic system of interrelationships between agencies and interests that is constantly changing. As such, they must be managed thoughtfully at each stage of their developmental lifecycle. Resource managers in each of the reported cases acted in an empowering role, nurturing private sector involvement in a host of national forest management activities. Managers content with the hierarchical decision-making structure of many public park and recreation agencies must learn to manage lateral decisions across organizations to be successful in sustaining effective partnerships.

Future research is needed to test the implicit hypotheses developed in this study. A larger, more representative sample of partnerships should be used to test these hypotheses quantitatively. While this study examined partnership success, future work should also examine reasons for the failure of partnerships. And, baseline research is needed to develop a taxonomy of partnership types as well as developing managerial systems for evaluating the relative success or failure of partnerships.

Partnerships will undoubtedly increase in their importance to leisure service

agencies. A Bureau of Land Management official from the study said it best:

Partnerships have become more important because people expect it. That government, citizens, and industry work together to solve common problems. Problems are too complicated and too expensive to handle on your own. So partnerships have simply become a way of life. You simply don't have any choice if you want to get things done.

Partnerships provide distinct advantages to all agencies involved. To private sector interests, government sponsorship brings stability, credibility, and funding. Private sector involvement stretches public dollars and provides operational flexibility to park and recreation agencies. However, park and recreation agencies must implement an enlightened set of policies to ensure that these benefits are realized.

## References

- Bonnicksen, T. M. (1991). Managing biosocial systems. Journal of Forestry, 89 (10), 10-15.
- Burgess, R. G. (1984). In the field: An introduction to field research. London, Eng: George Allen & Unwin.
- Crompton, J. L. (1990, March). Claiming our share of the tourism dollar. Parks and Recreation, pp. 42-47.
- Gray, B. (1985). Conditions facilitating interorganizational collaboration. Human Relations, 38 (10), 911-936.
- Gunn, C. A. (1990). The new recreation-tourism alliance. Journal of Park and Recreation Administration, 8 (1), 1-8.
- Hollinshead, K. (1990). The powers behind play: The political environments for recreation and tourism in Australia. Journal of Park and Recreation Administration, 8 (1), 35-50.
- Knopf, R. C. (1990, March). Marketing public lands: Is it the right thing to do? Parks and Recreation, pp. 57-61.
- Langston, D. (1988). Tourism and recreation: Perspective of another federal agency. Proceedings of the 1987 Symposium on Tourism and Recreation: A Growing Partnership (pp. 14-17). Champaign, IL: Sagamore Publishing.
- Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A. M. (1984). Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Reid, L. (1988). Recreation and tourism workshop summary. Proceedings of the 1987 Symposium on Tourism and Recreation: A Growing Partnership (pp. 41-57). Champaign, IL: Sagamore Publishing.



- Selin, S. W. & Beason, K. (1991). Interorganizational relations in tourism. Annals of Tourism Research, 18, 639-652.
- Selin, S. W. & Chavez, D. (1993). Recreation partnerships and the USDA Forest Service: Managers' perceptions of the impact of the National Recreation Strategy. Journal of Park and Recreation Administration, 11 (1), 1-8.
- Selin, S. W. & Lewis, F. (1994). The USDA Forest Service and rural tourism development: An expanding role. Trends. 31 (1), In press.
- Sheffer, J. B. (1991). The New York State canal system: Creating a coalition from diversity. Partnerships in Parks and Preservation (pp. 57-60). Washington, DC: National Park Service.
- Strauss, A. (1987). Qualitative analysis for social scientists. Cambridge, Eng: Cambridge University Press.
- Waddock, S. A. (1989). Understanding social partnerships: An evolutionary model of of partnership organizations. Administration and Society, 21 1, 78-100.
- Waddock, S. A. (1991). Correlates of effectiveness and partner satisfaction in social partnerships. Journal of Oganizational Change Management, 4 (2), 74-89.
- Yin, R. K. (1989). Case study research: Methods and design. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Zeigler, J. B. & Caneday, L. M. (Eds.). 1991. Tourism and leisure: Dynamics and diversity. Alexandria, VA: National Recreation and Park Association.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p><u>Personal Characteristics</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* right mix of people</li> <li>* strong leadership</li> <li>* propensity for risk-taking</li> <li>* community spirit</li> </ul> | <p><u>Interpersonal Characteristics</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* communication</li> <li>* trust</li> <li>* shared vision</li> <li>* mutual adjustment</li> </ul>                |
| <p><u>Organizational Characteristics</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* administrative support</li> <li>* flexible protocols</li> <li>* staff continuity</li> <li>* mediator role</li> </ul>    | <p><u>Operational Characteristics</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* written plan</li> <li>* meeting environment</li> <li>* cooperative agreement</li> <li>* set new goals</li> </ul> |

**Figure 1.** Common characteristics of successful partnerships.