



The Trail Partnership Research Project Final Report

Photo Credit: Guy Bryant

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For:

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Executive Summary

Photo Credit: Christine Vigue/Tom Thomas; Back Country Horsemen

Executive Summary

The Trail Partnership Research Project was a two-year research project in partnership with the US Forest Service (USFS), National Park Service (NPS) and Virginia Tech (VT). This project applied a research-based approach to examine and assess existing trail stewardship partnerships and to provide on-the-ground managers with knowledge and practical strategies to increase capacity and improve their ability to engage in effective partnerships for trail work. Planning for this research began in June 2021 and execution of the study began in January of 2022. This report summarizes the full results and recommendations from the research project.

This study used a two-phase research methodology to evaluate the perceptions of both government and non-government participants in trail partnerships. In phase one, 83 USFS and NPS partnerships were recruited to participate in an online survey about their partnership. In phase two, those who had responded to the survey were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews to discuss select topics about their partnership in more depth.

We recruited 164 individuals from 83 USFS and NPS partnerships to complete the survey (x from agency side and x from non-agency). Of the 164 recruited, 107 provided complete or near complete online survey responses (65% response rate), representing 69 total partnerships. Of those 107, 89 were complete enough to use in our statistical analyses. Of the survey respondents, 80 individuals indicated they would be willing to participate in phase two and 43 individuals were interviewed about their partnerships.

A major research topic in this project was to identify the factors most important to the success of trail partnerships. Partnership literature identifies dozens of factors that may affect partnership success, but we wished to examine which factors are the most important in the context of **trail partnerships** so that agency staff and partners may make targeted improvements to these partnerships on in the areas that are the most impactful.

We conclude that eight factors that can be grouped into two tiers are most related to partnership success. These factors, in order of their relative impact on the rating of overall success of the partnership are:

Tier 1 – The Factors Most Important to Trail Partnerships:

1. Overall evaluation of trust or distrust,
2. If the parties in the partnership provide capacity (i.e., knowledge, skills, abilities, staff, funding), and
3. The level of interdependence between the government and partner (i.e., recognition that each partner brings diverse ideas to the partnership, the quality of work would suffer without the other party, and goal achievement may become difficult or impossible without the other party).



Tier 2 – Other Factors of Managerial Consideration:

1. If the partnership operates under a partnership model that places an emphasis on coordination and resource sharing or consensus building (i.e., Cross-sector collaboration or Collaborative Governance),
2. The level of disruption that has been caused by turnover,
3. Whether the respondent is a member of the government or the partner organization, and
4. The age of the partnership.

The report that follows highlights specifics about the research and the factors listed above, provides recommendations that were developed from field input that managers may choose to implement to help improve their partnership's outcomes, and addresses a suite of ancillary factors (those of less importance) that were examined in the study.



Photo Credit: Randy Rasmussen; Back Country Horsemen





Introduction

Photo Credit: Liz Chrisman; IMBA

Introduction

Problem Definition

The US Forest Service (USFS) manages 162,984 miles of formal trails and countless miles of visitor created, unofficial trails and routes across nine regions. These trails allow motorized use (40% or 64,548 miles) and non-motorized use (60% or 98,436 miles) while actively supporting resource extraction (e.g., forestry) and wilderness areas (20% or 32,153 miles of trail are in federally designated wilderness).

The FS employs a variety of methods to maintain and care for these trails. In FY22, just over one-third of these trails were maintained (57,412 miles). This work was primarily accomplished by volunteers and partners (50% or 28,551 miles) and force account work (46% or 26,141 miles).

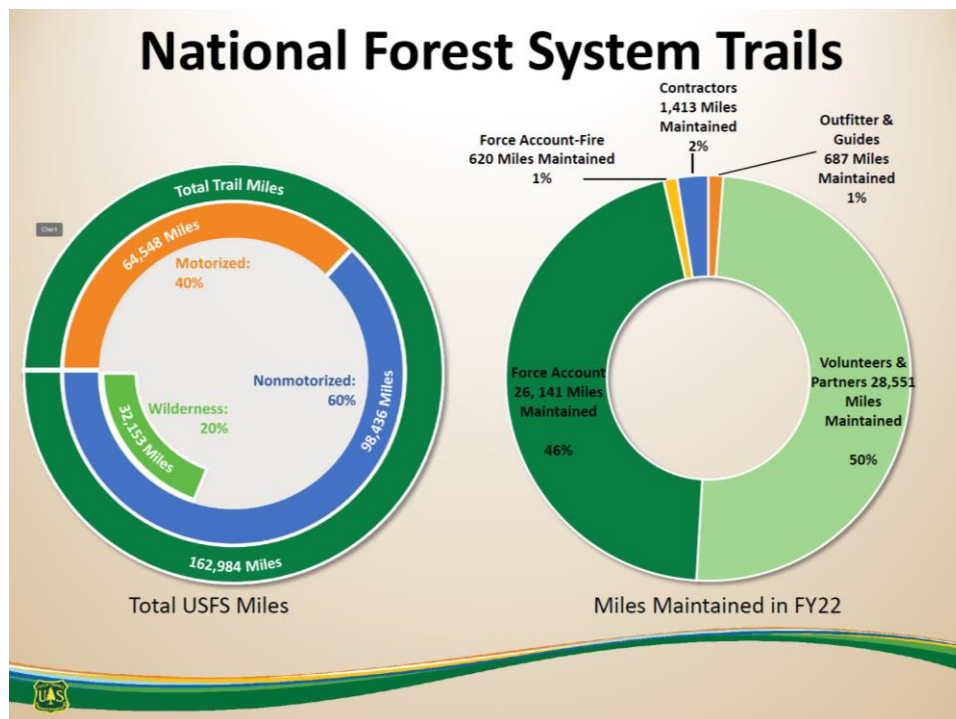


Figure 1 - Forest Service Trail Maintenance Breakdown 2022

For detailed breakdowns of trail mileage and maintenance by Forest Service Region, please see Appendix 1.

The National Park Service (NPS) manages over 21,000 combined miles of trail across all 417 park units and manages approximately 24,600 miles of trail in the National Trails System on National Scenic Trails that may be co-managed with the Bureau of Land Management and/or US Forest Service and National Historic Trails that may also be co-located with transportation routes (e.g., highways) or state and local park systems.



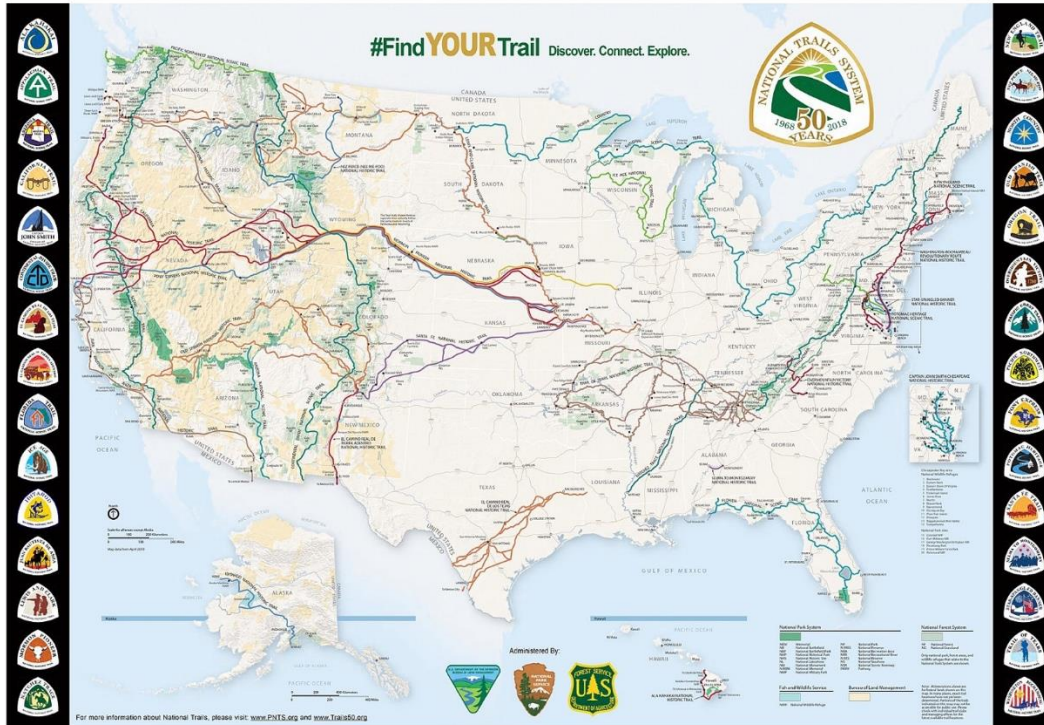


Figure 2 - Map of the National Trails System

Partnerships are an integral part of trail management for the US Forest Service and National Park Service. Partnerships can reduce costs to accomplish trail goals and can create opportunities to collaborate with outside parties and expand capacity. The US Forest Service and National Park Service both rely on trail partnerships to manage their trail systems and the importance of these partnerships are emphasized in strategy documents such as NPS’s 2016 Director’s Order #21, the USFS’ 2017 National Strategy for a Sustainable Trail System, and the USFS Ten Year Trail Challenge.

The purpose of this study is to support the US Forest Service and the National Park Service in their strategic objectives and identify mechanisms that may be used to help improve trail partnerships. To do this, researchers at Virginia Tech administered surveys and conducted interviews with the USFS and NPS government points of contact (hereafter referred to as the “government”) and non-USFS and non-NPS points of contact (hereafter referred to as the “partner) for 69 trail partnerships. This document details the research methods, findings, and provides recommendations that government managers can use to help improve trail partnerships in their units.

Methods

The study applied a two-phase, mixed-methods approach to evaluating factors identified in partnership literature as important to partnership success. In the first phase of the research an online survey was sent to the government and non-government points of contact for 83 partnerships used to support stewardship of USFS and NPS trails. In the second phase, 80 respondents to the online survey were recruited for one-hour interviews to discuss their partnerships in more detail. The following sections describe the research methods in more detail.



Online Survey

The online survey was developed collaboratively with input from leadership at the US Forest Service and National Park Service and from preliminary input from trail partnership managers at the two agencies and leaders at non-government groups who have partnerships with the USFS and NPS.

To select partnerships for inclusion in the study, a “key contact questionnaire” was sent through the national trail program leads at each agency to their networks of regional and local trail managers. This questionnaire asked each respondent to help identify up to six partnerships they work with, indicate whether or not they consider the partnership more or less successful, and provide operational information about the partnership (e.g., how long the partnership had been operating, agreements the partnership operates under). This key contact questionnaire identified 202 partnerships that could be included in the study. A sample of these partnerships was purposefully selected by the research team to ensure system wide representation across regions and agencies, diversity in partnership attributes, and to identify pairs of similar partnerships that had varying ratings of success. From the 202 partnership sample frame, the research team recruited 83 partnerships to participate in the online survey.

Semi Structured Interviews

Online survey respondents were asked if they would be willing to participate in follow-up interviews about their partnership. Of the survey respondents, 80 individuals indicated they would be willing to talk to the research team and 43 individuals were interviewed about their partnerships. Interviews covered some topics that were not included in the online survey and asked participants for additional information about some topics from the online survey.

Analysis Methods

Survey data were reviewed for completeness and 89 survey responses were used in the quantitative analysis. A variety of statistical approaches were employed to analyze the quantitative data including factor analysis, linear regression, relative importance analysis, importance-performance analysis and the comparison of a subset of government and partner responses for 28 partnerships where both parties responded to the survey. Semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed, then were qualitatively coded and organized.

Online Survey Topics

- Level of job formalization
- Partnership capacity
- The focus of the partnership (i.e., on the ground work, strategic planning, or a mix)
- Partnership goals
- Goal formality
- Complexity of the partnership
- The reasons for partnering
- Importance and performance of stated outcomes
- Leadership behaviors
- Leadership turnover
- The involvement of executive leadership
- Trust

Interview Topics

- Partnership management processes
- How goals are developed/reviewed
- Reasons for survey ratings of overall success
- Challenges encountered in the partnership and strategies used to overcome those challenges
- Leadership approaches used by the respondent
- Executive leader involvement
- Reasons for survey ratings of trust
- Suggestions to improve trail partnership management and outcomes





Results

Photo Credit: Abet

Results

Descriptive Statistics

We recruited 164 individuals from 83 USFS and NPS partnerships to complete the survey. Of the 164 recruited, 107 provided complete or near complete online survey responses (65% response rate), representing 69 total partnerships. Of those 107, 89 were complete enough to use in our statistical analyses.

A variety of contextual factors were captured about the partnerships in the survey. These factors include partnership administrative unit (Figure 3), the partnership's age (Figure 4), and the use/user type(s) of the trails that the partnership works on – OHV, Equestrian (i.e., “non-human”) and other uses versus only human powered use (i.e., only hiking, mountain bike, and non-motorized winter; Figure 5).

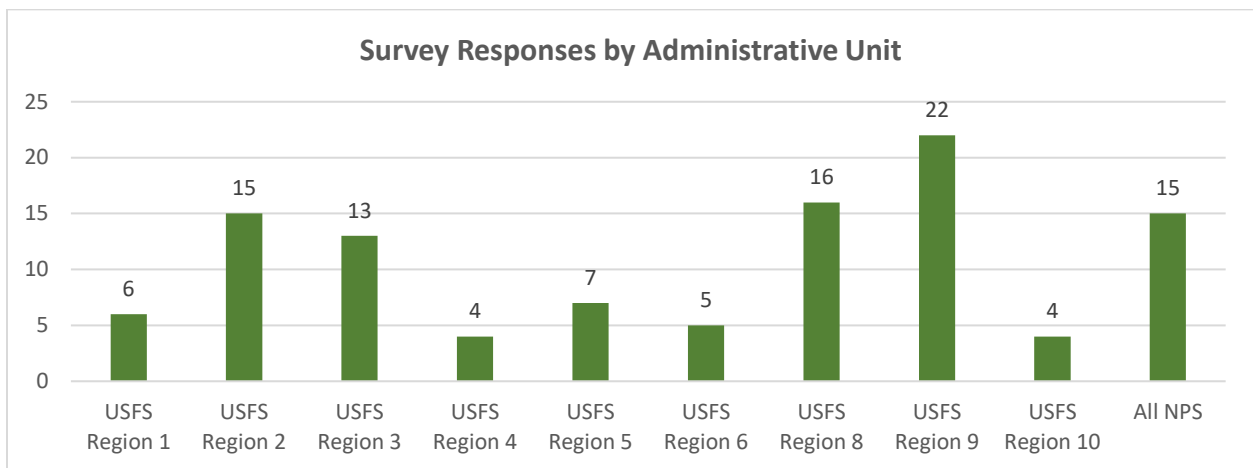


Figure 3 - Survey Responses by Administrative Unit

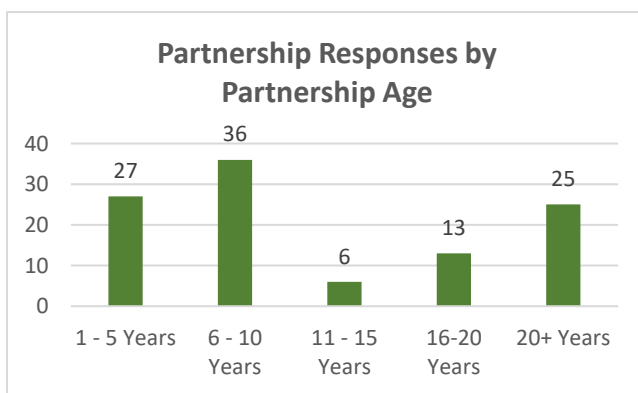


Figure 5 - Partnership Responses by Partnership Age

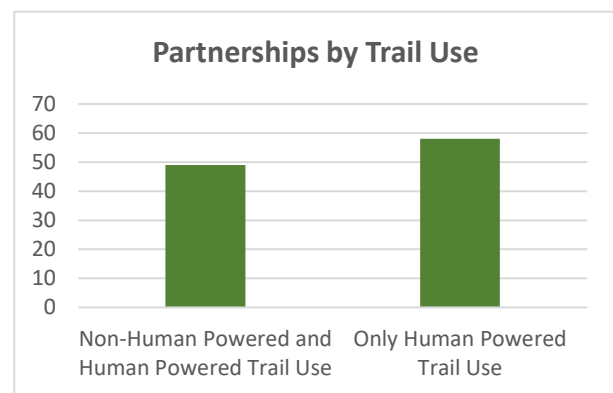


Figure 4 - Partnership Responses by Trail Use

Although all Regions and the NPS were not equally represented in our survey responses, our statistical analyses found no major differences in responses across Regions or between Forest Service and NPS respondents.



Overall Evaluation of Partnership Success

One of the major evaluations of each partnership was the respondent's rating of "overall success." The prompt given to the respondents about success was: "On a scale from 1 to 9 where 1 is 'Not at All Successful' and 9 is 'Extremely Successful,' please indicate your opinion on the overall success of the partnership with [the other party] to date." We chose an evaluation of overall success (as opposed to evaluation of individual partnership outcomes) to provide a measure where the respondent could roll all factors, they felt were important to success up into one measure and provide a basis for comparison across partnerships. Respondent ratings of success skewed toward the more successful end of the scale (where 9 = Extremely Successful; Figure 6). Approximately two thirds of the partnerships were rated seven, eight, or nine and the other third were rated six or below. While the evaluations of overall success are skewed, there is enough variance in these responses to make statistical inferences of which factors are most important to overall success.

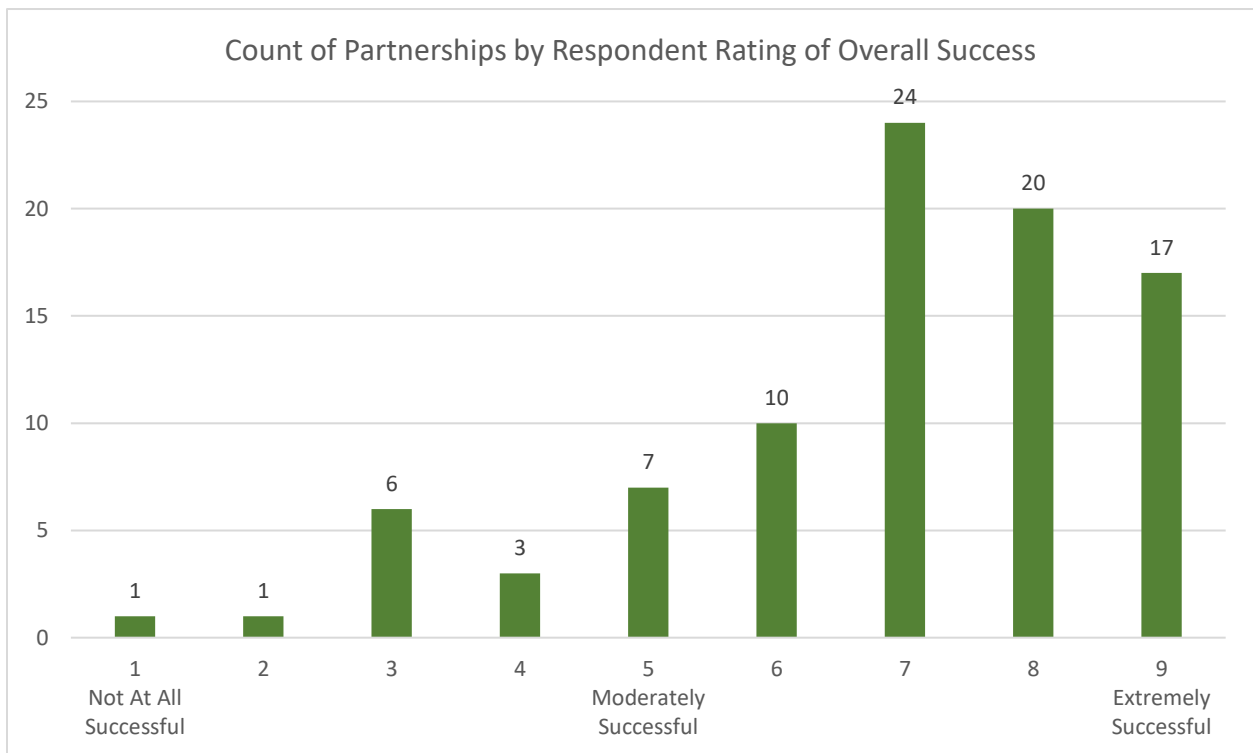


Figure 6 - Survey Responses by Rating of Overall Partnership Success



Factors Most Important to Trail Partnerships

A major research question in this project was to identify the factors most important to the success of trail partnerships. Partnership literature identifies dozens of factors that may affect partnership success, but we wished to examine which factors are the most important in the context of trail partnerships so that partnership managers and participants may make targeted improvements to their partnerships on in the areas that are the most impactful. Full lists of all factors evaluated and the scales by which they are evaluated are included in Appendix 2 – Survey Instrument.

We conclude that eight factors that can be grouped into two tiers are most related to partnership success. These factors, in order of their relative impact on the rating of overall success of the partnership are:

Tier 1:

1. Overall evaluation of trust or distrust,
2. If the parties in the partnership provide capacity (i.e., knowledge, skills, abilities, staff, funding), and
3. The level of interdependence between the government and partner (i.e., recognition that each partner brings diverse ideas to the partnership, the quality of work would suffer without the other party, and goal achievement may become difficult or impossible without the other party).

Tier 2:

1. If the partnership operates under a partnership model that places an emphasis on coordination and resource sharing or consensus building (i.e., Cross-sector collaboration or Collaborative Governance),
2. The level of disruption that has been caused by turnover,
3. Whether the respondent is a member of the government or the partner organization, and
4. The age of the partnership.

The first three items are the most impactful, accounting for over 75% of the variance in the rating of overall success, meaning, as these three things increase – evaluation of overall success increases with them. Tier Two items also relate to the evaluation of overall variance, but to a lesser extent (approximately 17% of the variance in the rating of success). These tier two items should be of serious managerial consideration when working with partners and selecting strategies to improve partnerships. The next three sections describe the Tier One factors and recommendations for how partnerships may try to improve those areas. After this, we discuss the Tier Two factors and conclude by discussing other factors that were examined but are not considered important to partnership success.

Three factors are the most impactful on the rating of partnership success:

Whether or not the parties trust each other;

The overall evaluation of partnership capacity; and

The level of interdependence between partners.



Trust is the most important factor to the rating of partnership success.

Trust
Importance Score

10/10

"I think all the relationships are so solid that I just know we can have honest and trustful feedback with each other. That's so important; kind of irreplaceable." – Trail Coalition Executive Director

Trust

Generally, **trust** is defined as "a willingness to accept vulnerability and risk based on the expected future behaviors of the other party" and **distrust** is defined as "a belief that the expected behaviors of the other party in the future may cause an undesirable outcome." The partnership literature often cites trust between partnership participants as one of the most important factors to achieve partnership outcomes¹.

For trail partnerships, to what extent does the level of trust between parties affect the rating of overall partnership success?

We found that trust is the most influential factor in trail partnerships, accounting for 31% of the rating of overall success. In our survey we found that for every one-level increase in trust, one would expect a .81-point increase in the evaluation of overall success.

Components of Trust Evaluated in the Survey

Overall trust in a relationship is based on four components:

- **Dispositional Trust:** Individual propensity to trust based on their personal experience.
- **Rational Trust:** Trust based on an assessment of the other party's past performance and expected future performance.
- **Affinitive Trust:** Based on perceptions of shared values, shared experiences, or demonstrations of caring and respect toward the other party.
- **Systems Trust:** Based on the perception that the procedures of the relationship are fair and transparent.



Incorporating Trust into Your Partnership

★ Recommendation

Build Relationships.

- Dedicate time to working with each other.
- Treat each other with mutual respect and professionalism. Discuss what respect and professionalism means to your partnership. Review anti-harassment policies that all parties are expected to adhere to (i.e., FSM 8100 and NPS Reference Manual 16E).
- Follow-through on partnership commitments
 - Attend government or partner meetings related to the partnership as frequently as possible.
 - Commit to partnership communications; set and meet expectations (e.g., We will typically respond to emails within three business days; we will have periodic check-in meetings every two weeks).
 - Ensure that partner requests of the government are feasible before committing.
- Hold annual roundtables where government and partners can get together to discuss annual accomplishments and out year planning. It is useful to have both one-on-one meetings with individual organizations and larger meetings where all partner organizations can meet jointly.

“When you bring partners together and you share the successes of one partner, then another partner can be like ‘Hey! I want to be a part of your efforts. I think we do a good job of telling our story and wanting our partners to all engage and work with each other.’”

– USFS Recreation Program Manager

“I’ve only been cussed out by a partner one time, and it’s because [we] made a promise that we could not keep ... the partners suffered, lost financially because of it. This was 15 years ago, but that was devastating to us, all of a sudden, you have to go into overdrive because you have to rebuild those relationships. I call it the ‘Bank of Goodwill.’ We took a huge withdrawal from the Bank of Goodwill and I still have to deal with the person who cussed me out. But now we’re buddies because he understands that it was one out of line person, not the whole Forest Service ... Trust is essential when working with partners. You can’t just make a mistake when you work with a partner and, if you do, you have to own up to it immediately.”

– USFS Interpretive Specialist



★ Recommendation

Build Confidence in Each Other's Abilities and Work

- Conduct joint government-partner trainings (e.g., trail skills training, construction standards, leadership, facilitation, local needs and challenges)
- Debrief project work, identify challenges, develop strategies to address challenges, and document accomplishments in a timely manner

★ Recommendation

Build Systems to Define Your Partnerships and Ensure Longevity.

- Develop and document goals and expectations for how the partnership will be managed (e.g., what are the on-the-ground and organizational goals for the partnership; how will work planning be done, who is responsible for accomplishment tracking and reporting); review each periodically.
- Develop succession plans and documentation to retain institutional knowledge and facilitate staff and partner transitions to reduce the effects of turnover.
- Create an understanding of partner and government processes, needs and expectations (e.g., recognize limitations of law and regulations, understand the potential impacts of advocacy work on the partnership, understand the difference between transactional partnerships (i.e., where partner work is directed mostly by the government) and transformative partnerships (e.g., where government and partner work together closely to develop work plans, share resources, and achieve consensus).

“Combined training would be good. Training opportunities where the Forest Service, Park Service, or BLM can work with the [organization] to really talk to them about what our needs are for certain things, because needs may vary geographically or may not align with what’s in the instruction manual, so we want you to do this instead. It’s the communication, coordination, and collaboration ... that I think are helpful.”

– Conservation Corps Partner

“The Cooperative Agreement structure is fundamentally transactional; it’s a method of procurement and financial assistance ... I think you’re limiting your partnership potential ... the most successful partnerships I see around the system have, in addition, partner and philanthropy driven contributions to the trail outside of that agreement. ... It’s important to make partners feel like valued contributors.”

– NPS Trail Administrator



Capacity is the second most influential factor to the rating of partnership success. Compared to Trust, it has about two thirds of the impact on success.

Capacity
Importance Score

7/10

“What’s going on is there’s not enough staffing in partnership coordinator or trails coordinator type-people to be able to come up with enough projects for these different volunteers. As an example, [organization] would reach out to me when I was district program manager in [office] and say ‘Hey, we want to do projects on your forest, send us a list and we can coordinate.’ And due to the lack of capacity I had to say ‘Hey, we can’t do anything with you guys this year because we don’t have the capacity to identify and plan projects.’” – USFS Recreation Staff Officer

Capacity

Partnership **capacity** is seen as foundational for the overall success of a partnership and is characterized as the availability of resources (time, people, knowledge, skills, abilities, and funding) to address the taskⁱⁱ and reflects the **knowledge, human, and social capital each partner brings to the group**. Capacity is considered a major driver of partnership success or failureⁱⁱⁱ

For trail partnerships, to what extent does the level of capacity that a partnership has affect the rating of overall partnership success?

We found that capacity is the second most influential factor in the success of trail partnerships, accounting for 22% of the rating of overall success. In our survey we found that for every one-point increase in the evaluation of a partnership’s capacity (i.e., if the partnership has the necessary people, KSAs and funding), one expects a .70-point increase in the evaluation of overall success.

Components of Capacity Evaluated in the Survey

- There are enough people (collectively between the partner and government) to meet partnership goals.
- The people involved in the partnership have the needed knowledge, skills, and abilities.
- There is adequate funding (even if there not a monetary component to the partnership).



Expanding the Capacity of Your Partnership

★ Recommendation

Expanding the Workforce

- Make development of long-term, stable relationships a goal of the partnership
- When possible, partner organizations should strive to have dedicated, long-term leadership (either through paid staff or long-term volunteers)
- Shift grants and agreements tasks away from partnership managers to more administrative staff so partnership managers (both government and external) can focus on relationship building and on-the-ground work.
- Increase applicant pool by diversifying hiring pipelines (e.g., universities, partner groups) and writing job descriptions broadly, while still addressing mission-related needs.

★ Recommendation

Expanding Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

- Train trail employees early in careers on partnership-relevant topics such as: communications, leadership, conflict management, task prioritization, collaboration, and diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Empower those involved in partnerships. Allow partnership participants to set priorities for the management of their partnership and make decisions on goals and methods to achieve those goals without excessive oversight.

“A lot of these smaller organizations don’t have the funding to have a paid person to run [trail projects]. So that ends up being an issue, because everyone’s trying to do it on volunteer time, so everyone’s capacity is limited.”

– USFS Recreation Staff Officer

“We would love to have full time paid staff. We could get so much more done if we had a Director of Operations or an Operations Manager to manage projects and grants. It comes down to funding. If the Forest Service can’t have the staff needed to maintain the trails, it would be great to have money set aside for [our organization] to do work for them on the trails.”

– Trails Coalition President

“I’m 15 years into my career right now with the Forest Service and ... I was able to attend the Middle Leader Service Training course. We talked with people from other program areas about leadership and challenges and how to work with partners ... in my head I was thinking ‘Man. I wish I had taken this when I started my career’ because, from day one as a recreation employee we’re already engaging with the public, working with volunteers. Those soft skills are just as important as chainsaw certifications.”

– USFS Recreation Staff Officer



★ Recommendation

Expanding Funding Levels and Flexibility

- Reduce funding uncertainty in ways such as: dedicating funding to partnerships more frequently (e.g., annually), supporting partner applications for multi-year grants, or setting funding levels based on long-term use trends (as opposed to previous year use).
- Demonstrate commitment to partners by providing (even small amounts) of funding to partners to support shared goals.
- Consider writing agreement scopes of work specific to the task at hand but allow for some flexibility in scope to adapt if conditions change on the ground.
- Be timely in providing letters of support for partner grant applications.
- Engage Planning and NEPA staff to add trails projects to the scope of other, higher priority projects when feasible (e.g., if a trail needs re-routing and the re-route goes through the project area for a planned timber harvest, add the re-route to the scope harvest project).

“We had one problem. When I worked with [district office], I asked them to give me a letter of recommendation so I could get a grant RFP done. They took weeks; made my life miserable. I typically don’t get that letter until like three days before the grant’s due and I prefer to have my proposals in about a week early at least. So, a better response would be nice. It’s just really communication. [I am okay] as long as I know what’s going on. I understand that my goals are different than theirs. The reason we do [local trail work] is that we feel like that helps improve the local economy.”

– Partner Executive Director

“When there’s uncertainty in the amount of funding from year to year, it can create challenges for us. We plan our staff capacity based on trends. Huge pendulum swings in funding based on trends or, from one priority to the next, do really impact us.

– Partner Executive Director



Interdependence is the third most influential factor to rating of partnership success. Compared to trust, it has approximately two thirds the impact on success.

Interdependence
Importance Score

7/10

“In Forest Service culture ... raise awareness of the value of volunteers and having dedicated staff. I know they do that in [other geographic areas] – allowing for professional volunteers. If you get professionals in that position, include them in your planning, and, from the Forest Service perspective, make them more ‘extended staff’ ... That would go a long way to solving, I think, a lot of these problems.” – Volunteer Group Founder

Partner Interdependence

Partner **interdependence** is recognition that each partner brings diverse ideas to the partnership, the quality of work would suffer without the other party, and goal achievement may become difficult or impossible without the other party. Partnerships with **high levels of interdependence generally achieve better outcomes**^{iv}.

For trail partnerships, to what extent does the level of partner interdependence affect the rating of overall partnership success?

We found that partner interdependence is the third most influential factor in the success of trail partnerships, accounting for 21% of the overall rating of overall success. In our survey we found that for every one-point increase in the evaluation of a partnership’s interdependence, one would expect a .71-point increase in the evaluation of overall success.

Components of Interdependence Evaluated in the Survey

A level of mutual agreement and reliance upon each other (agency and partner) in a partnership characterized by recognition and appreciation of:

- The ideas and skills the other party
- The contributions of each party to the quality of work
- How partners and collaborate to achieve goals



Embrace the Needs and Skills of All Parties to Create Interdependence in Your Partnership

★ Recommendation

Create Opportunities to Leverage the Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities of Partner Organizations Beyond On-the-Ground Trail Work

- Leverage partner's knowledge by involving partners in project scoping, prioritization of projects, NEPA analyses, collection of trail condition data, and monitoring whenever feasible.
- Discuss out-year planning efforts with partners to help them align their work planning with expected agency needs.
- If a partner is also the proponent of a trail project and the project fits within the unit's priorities, but completion of the environmental analysis is constrained by funding, be open to the partner assisting in the funding of an environmental analysis.

"We are having planning conversations in August the previous year ... it's not just about funding. It's about 'what do you want to have on the forest next year in terms of [our organization]'s presence'? ... That has made a huge difference. ... If we can start having that conversation the year before, then the ducks are going to be way more in line when it comes to actually implementing a project."

– Conservation Corps Director

"They give the same excuse every time – 'we're shorthanded, we don't have enough people to put into this as far as the NEPA study goes.' Well, tell me that. Because I could pay for a NEPA study if it helps you and increases bandwidth on your part. That is part of our agreement, and we can do that. ... I want to say it's because the people who work at the district, they've never [outsourced NEPA]."

– Partner Executive Director



Other Factors for Managerial Consideration

There are other less dominant factors that influence partnership success (i.e., tier two factors) should also be of serious consideration when thinking about how to operate successful trail partnerships. In the following sections we provide a brief overview of each factor and how managers may try to address them in their partnership.

Cross Sector Collaboration and Collaborative Governance Partnership Models

Models of partnership work are differentiated on four major attributes: the high-level goal of the partnership, the partnership’s focus, the rationale for partnering versus acting alone, and the work arrangements used to support the partnership.

Partnerships that are more aligned to the Cross Sector Collaboration and Collaborative Governance models of partnership (which focus more on resource sharing, interdependence and collaboration) have higher levels of success than those aligned with a Public Private Partnership model, which is characterized as more task-oriented and directive.

Partnership Attribute	Public Private Partnerships	Cross-Sector Collaboration	Collaborative Governance
Goal	Infrastructure or service delivery	Sharing of information, resources and activities	Consensus-based decision making
Project-based vs. strategic	More project-based	Both	More strategic
Why partner vs. acting alone?	Budgetary efficiency, take advantage of free market innovation, improve capacity	Partnerships are sometimes "failed into" - i.e., previous attempts to act alone have failed. Partners bring skills, knowledge, and abilities to create a “sum greater to the parts” and cannot get what they want without collaborating	To create a space for innovative problem solving and increase the legitimacy of decisions
Typical type of work arrangement	Formalized, top-down coordination; contracting	Formal, coordinated resource pooling	Group-based collaboration throughout

*This finding suggests that partnership management approaches that focus more **on resource sharing, interdependence, and collaboration** may lead to better outcomes.*

Additionally, we believe it is important that all parties be explicit about the partnership approaches that their partnership should take so that the operation of the partnership aligns with partners’ expectations.



Disruption Caused by Turnover

Staff turnover is a part of all organizations. In fact, it may be said that turnover at the US Forest Service and National Park Service is even a part of the organizational culture as staff frequently move units for different positions or promotions or may do temporary details to learn new skills in other parts of the organization.

That turnover affects outcomes is not a surprise. Long-term relationships between partners can help build interdependence, signal commitment to the partnership, and allow for the building of trust. Excessive turnover may hinder the partnership, but there are strategies that partners can use to address expected turnover.

Strategies to address turnover may include:



Involve groups of people in the management your partnership



Ensure partnership goals, processes and achievements are well documented



Develop online knowledge repositories and shared workspaces for your partnership

The Age of the Partnership

The age of the partnership in our model is related to perceptions of partnership success. While younger partnerships may struggle with trust building and other aspects that take time, we find that older partnerships tend to be considered slightly less successful in our model.

The reasons for this relationship are unclear, but our discussions with partnership participants do allow us to create some hypotheses for why this may be such as:

- 1) Participants in older partnerships may have higher standards or expectations for success.
- 2) Younger partnerships may garner more attention than older partnerships.
- 3) Older partnerships may have higher levels of trust, but sometimes higher levels of trust may lead the government to be more hands-off with these partners, which can lead to less interactions which could diminish outcomes and success.
- 4) Younger partnerships may take advantage of sources of funding such as grants, state funds, or new federal funding more actively than older partnerships





Photo Credit: Liz Chrisman; IMBA

“When my mind goes to partnerships, it goes to cost share agreements. That’s where the money is and, for better or worse, I would say ‘worse.’ In the case of [our forest] they’re using [GAOA funds] to develop recreation more so than they are using it to catch up on their backlog of needed maintenance. ... [Recreation development groups] were pretty disorganized even five years ago, but especially ten years ago. Now they have gotten into trail maintenance and trail building big time with the USFS because of the money that flows. Politically, to the public, it looks like it’s all volunteer work ... that’s where part of our mistrust comes from.”

– Chair of a volunteer organization that has partnered with the USFS for over 20 years



Government Respondents vs. Partner Respondents

Congruence of response or “agreement” is important to partnerships as agreement between partners on the processes used to manage a partnership and the goals of a partnership is related to partnership success. Our goal was to explore where the level of agreement relates to perceptions of partnership success. This analysis helps us identify the key areas in which agreement is critical for trail partnership.

Our analysis uses 28 partnerships where both the government and partner points of contact returned a complete survey to examine the level of congruence of responses between the government and the partner respondents. This analysis examined the degree to which a partnership is being managed successfully (procedural success) and the achievement of the partnership’s stated goals (outcome success). In this evaluation we asked respondents to rate the 1) importance of the indicator to their partnership and 2) how well their partnership is achieving each indicator.

For each of these 28 partnerships we evaluated to what extent the government and partner respondents agreed for each of these indicators. This provides us with a measure of agreement between the parties, we then analyzed these agreement levels versus the respondents’ rating of overall partnership success.

Our analysis uncovered two key findings:

- 1) Agreement on all measures of success is not necessary for a partnership to be considered successful **but**
- 2) There are three key areas where the level of agreement between the government and partner is directly related to the overall success of trail partnerships:
 - a. Perceptions of **partnership management** (i.e., how well the partnership is being managed)
 - b. Perceptions **performance outcomes** (i.e., meeting the expectations or goals of the partnership; in our case, trail-related work)
 - c. Perceptions **relationship outcomes** (i.e., partner perceptions that there is value added by the partnership to the relationships between parties; Dowling et al. 2004).

In each of the following sections we discuss the indicators that have direct relationships to success *and* where agreement is a “necessary condition” for high levels of success. By focusing on these indicators where agreement is necessary for partnership success, managers can focus on improvements in these key areas rather than all areas of a partnership.

Direct Relationship:

As agreement goes down, so does the rating of overall success.

Necessary Condition:

A high rating of success (seven or higher) is not likely to be achieved.



Partnership Management

We asked respondents to provide input on the importance and performance of 13 indicators of procedural success – i.e., if the partnership is being managed well. We examined how agreement between parties relates to ratings of success. All indicators evaluated are included in Appendix 4.

In no case was agreement on the importance of any aspect of partnership management related to partnership success. In contrast, agreement on the performance of 10 of 13 partnership management indicators relate to success and four items are necessary conditions for success.

There are four management indicators where agreement performance is a necessary condition for partnership success. High levels of success cannot be achieved without agreement on these indicators:

- Planning and execution of near-term work to achieve partnership goals.
- Enthusiasm about participating in the partnership.
- Participation in the creation of partnership goals.
- Trust in the other party.

Key Point 1

There can be disagreement on what is most important to the management of a partnership but if government and partner participants do not agree on how well the partnership is being managed success may suffer.

Key Point 2

If the government and partner do not agree on how well the group is performing in...

- Planning and execution of **near-term work**,
- The level of **enthusiasm**,
- **Participation in goal creation**, and
- **Trust** in the other party

“We know each other and because of that I feel comfortable calling them up and asking questions, even hard questions that might be a little inconvenient ... we can talk it through. I just know that there is that trust because we’ve built those relationships ... everything is going to boil down to those relationships ... and you’re not going to have any trust unless you have spent the time to invest in the person in the relationship. That’s absolutely key.” – USFS Interpretive Specialist



Partnership Goals

We asked respondents to provide input on the importance and performance of 20 items that could be goals of a trail partnership. We examined how agreement between parties on the importance of these goals to their partnership and the performance of their partnership in achieving these goals. All goals evaluated are included in Appendix 5.

Performance Outcomes

The following indicators related to on-the-ground goals of a partnership or the “performance outcomes.” There are five performance outcomes where agreement on either importance or performance correlates with the perceptions of overall success:

- Completing "countable" trail work (e.g., miles constructed, structures built),
- Completing volunteer hours,
- Creating new trail or trail structures,
- Maintenance or replacement of trail or trail structures, and
- Improving trail conditions.

For two of these performance-based goals, agreement on the *importance of the goal* is a necessary condition for success. These two goals are:

- Completing "countable" trail work (e.g., miles constructed, structures built) and
- Completing volunteer hours

Relationship Outcomes

These goals are not related to on-the-ground work as much as they are the participation of people involved in the partnership. There four relationship outcomes where agreement on either importance or performance correlates with the perceptions of overall success:

- Developing long-term relationships that support this partnership and other work,
- Increasing the feelings of attachment and personal meaning about Federal lands among partnership participants or volunteers (i.e., increasing “sense of place”),
- Developing the leadership skills of partnership participants, and
- Supporting the delivery of the [partner’s] mission.

For three of these relationship-based goals, agreement on the *importance of the goal* is a necessary condition for success. These three goals are:

- Developing long-term relationships that support this partnership and other work,
- Developing the leadership skills of partnership participants, and
- Supporting the delivery of the [partner’s] mission.

Key Point

A lack of agreement about the **importance** of certain performance-based and relationship-based goals will make it unlikely for a partnership to achieve a high level of success.



Management Recommendations for Agreement Findings

In summary, the agreement between the government and partner on the importance and performance of these indicators is, in many cases, not necessary to partnership success. These items may be a bellwether that partnership managers can use to understand the health of their partnership and make changes to help improve partnership outcomes. We have three recommendations for partnership participants based on the analysis of partnership agreement.

Recommendation 1

Conduct regular check-ins on how well the partnership is being managed and, if the government and the partner have disagreement, adjust management strategies accordingly.

Recommendation 2

Recognize that partnership goals are not just about addressing on-the-ground objectives. Goals are often focused on partnership participants and relationships as well.

Recommendation 3

Understand that all goals of a partnership are important to one party or the other.

Partnership participants should seek to understand which goals are of most importance to which party and, where possible, seek agreement on the level of importance of the goals to the partnership.





Factors of Lesser importance To Trail Partnerships

Photo Credit: Pelo Blanco Photography



Photo Credit: Sean Xu

Factors of Lesser Importance to Trail Partnerships

Several factors that are typically considered important to partnership success did not emerge as related to partnership success in these trail partnerships. If a factor is in this list, it does not mean that it is not important to your specific partnership. Rather, it was not considered as a driver of success across trail partnerships on average.

List of factors of lesser overall importance to trail partnerships:

- Trail type/usage:
 - Single use trails vs. Multiple use trails
 - Whether the trail activities are primarily human powered or non-human powered
- The total number of activities a partner does in support of the partnership (i.e., the partnership's complexity)
- If trail maintenance and/or construction is an activity in the partnership
- If the partnership's operation follows a Public Private Partnership-type model
- The level of involvement of executive leaders (i.e., Forest Service Line Officers, Park Service Superintendents, or partner organization presidents/executive directors)
- If the partnership is situated in an urban, rural, or amenity setting
- Whether or not the partnership has agreements that it operates under or type of agreement
- Whether or not the work of the partnership is a formal part of the respondent's job responsibilities



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Endnotes

ⁱ See Fowler (2013), Kiljn and Teisman (2000)

ⁱⁱ See McCreary et al. (2012)

ⁱⁱⁱ See Ansell and Gash (2008)

^{iv} See Hülsheger (2009), Prashant and Harbir (2009)

