



Case Study

STRONG PROJECT LEADERSHIP AND STAFF ALLOW A MODEL PROJECT TO SUCCEED OVER TIME COSUMNES RIVER, CALIFORNIA, U.S.A.

As the decades pass, a key project must continually refine staff roles.

The Cosumnes River is the last free-flowing tributary of the Sacramento River still in existence. It survives in a gridded matrix of one of the most industrially farmed regions of the planet. An evolving public-private partnership between a dozen public and private entities at the local, state and federal level has protected and expanded this gem. In the process, it has enlarged the idea of protected habitat to encompass compatible agriculture such as rice growing, which supports thousands of migratory birds on the Pacific Flyway.

The partnership has benefited from the lengthy tenures of several key employees who brought strong interpersonal and communication skills to the table. The preserve and surrounding conservation lands protected through easement or conservation-friendly management is located in the heart of a rural population that often perceives “conservation” as a negative, the result of the whims of an urban population who does not understand the difficulty of making a living from the land. Over time, Conservancy and partner staff have been able to bridge the values and communication styles of the different stakeholders for the project, from duck hunters to bird watchers, from old-time residents to schoolchildren, into a workable, coherent vision.

Central to this effort has been the way that the partners have been able to update their changing roles and responsibilities over time. There are over a dozen partners in the effort, from private groups like Ducks Unlimited to neighboring farmers to county, state and federal agencies. Key to managing each partner’s evolving role is a documentation process called the “Cooperative Management Agreement” (CMA) and its recently developed Cosumnes River Management Plan.

Over the years the project has encompassed many skills and projects, including:

- educational programs in schools,;
- overseeing tree plantings for forest restoration;
- high level real estate negotiation;
- outreach to the farm community;
- high level water policy work; and
- migratory bird science.

As in any large, multi-decade undertaking, there have been peaks and valleys in the spirit of the partnership. Staff turnovers are difficult, as are transition moments when needs have changed but a clear articulation of the path forward has not yet been developed. But for the most part, the CMA has created a way for all partners to have a realistic understanding of the other's roles, and to reassess how staff positions need to change over time with the partners' changing roles. For example, as the project has evolved, some public agencies have wanted to own and manage more land, requiring more on-the-ground managers; Conservancy organizational priorities have shifted to owning less land, and sharpening focus towards restoration science, water, and land use policy.

A close working relationship among the partners allows for staff to be hired for each organization in ways that will strengthen the whole, and contribute to mutual appreciation and accountability.