



Case Study

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN COMMUNICATION DOESN'T HAPPEN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, U.S.A.

Lack of communication during an important transition creates confusion and conflict as a successful conservation project renegotiates its future.

The Santa Rosa Plateau is a treasured place in Southern California, a large expanse of grasslands and oak woodlands, vernal pools and migratory waterfowl. In all, over fifty imperiled species of plants and animals thrive here. It is a habitat centerpiece that provides corridors supporting animal movement, from mountain lion to deer herds to songbirds. It is also one of the primary recreational open spaces in one of California's fastest growing regions.

The Nature Conservancy began acquiring land in the area in 1984, and by the 1990's, a thriving coalition had blossomed, comprising the Riverside County Regional Park and Open Space District, the Southern California Metropolitan Water District (MWD), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG). The coalition eventually became responsible for protecting the 8,300 acre Santa Rosa Plateau Ecological Reserve in the heart of prime southern California real estate.

The coalition had created a management agreement, and in it The Nature Conservancy held the role of primary land manager, with on-site staff, due to its early acquisitions. In 2000, the Conservancy began a strategic review process of its role with the reserve. The Conservancy determined that it should change its role in the project and decrease its land management obligations. In this way, capital and resources would be freed to support other projects that had more urgent conservation needs.

The coalition undertook a comprehensive renegotiation of the project. First, the Conservancy sold the majority of its holding to the CDFG at a discount, transferring the sale profits into a land management endowment managed by the Conservancy. Second, CDFG took over day-to-day operations, including staffing. And last, Riverside County Parks agreed to operate all recreation programs.

The five-partner group had been working as a coordinated management team, sharing decision-making. In the next chapter of the partnership, the management agreement was revised to give more decision-making power to the most invested partners.

During the time of the renegotiation and hand-off to CDFG, a resource management plan had been started, but unfortunately it was never finished. This unfinished transaction meant that TNC and CDFG had a clear understanding of future roles and funding, but the other partners in the coalition did not. For example, partners concerned with recreation learned afterwards that there was no designated future funding for their priorities.

The partnership is now back on track, due to increased communication and a newly revised management agreement that has engaged all the partners. The Conservancy's new role is to lead the development of a resource plan for the Reserve and to continue to manage the endowment. In addition, the Conservancy and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will serve as scientific and technical advisors to the other partners.

Renegotiating a Partnership -- Lessons Learned by the Conservancy in Santa Rosa:

1. Create a detailed transition plan (including a comprehensive, long-term resource management plan) approved by all partners.
2. Recognize that some partners may have non-biodiversity goals, such as recreation, and that these goals need to be addressed.
3. When a major change is occurring, mark it with some kind of small or large ritual celebration with partners and others if appropriate. This provides a way to kick off a new chapter with good feelings and fresh information about the changes that local interested parties need to know.
4. The Conservancy needs to be as proactive in its partner relationships as it is in determining conservation priorities, fundraising and acquisition. The situation at the Santa Rosa Plateau Reserve illuminates the importance of tending to partnerships at every stage of their life cycle, and not just focusing on the beginnings.