



Case Study

“UNDER-PROMISE, OVER-DELIVER” NORTH COAST CALIFORNIA, U.S.A.

Back-to-back leadership turnovers and different organizational scales underscore the importance of setting a realistic pace and approach for conservation action.

The Northern Coast of California is known for its massive forests, the southernmost extension of the great boreal forests of North America. The region encompasses coastal dunes, old growth forests, and thousands of high-functioning watersheds that receive between 60 and 80 inches of rain a year. So lush is the forest at every level, including the 350-foot treetops of ancient redwoods, that mats of high tree vegetation host salamanders and other forms of life that rarely, if ever touch the ground.

The Nature Conservancy of California and many other local entities and individuals have long been interested in maintaining the conservation values of this region. The Conservancy wanted to help develop a conservation infrastructure in the area, but could not do so if it meant incurring the expenses of establishing an office.

Conservancy staff had been working with the Northcoast Regional Land Trust, as well as other non-profits, on a nine-month planning exercise using the Conservancy’s methodologies. This exercise had not yielded an action plan as it was still too difficult to cross-link systems and agree on actual sites. However, there had been good dialogue and relationship building, which had not been the primary goal of the effort.

Conservancy staff believed that the Trust had been a terrific partner in the process, and decided to explore the idea of a deeper, ongoing partnership with the group.

The Trust had strong scientific talent combined with deep regional roots, and a creative approach to the region’s conservation challenges. They also had an engaged Board of Directors representing a diverse coalition of working landowners, civic and community interests.

It became clear to the Conservancy that lack of funding was a major roadblock to conservation efforts. The Conservancy offered to help, calling on foundation and agency officials and assisting with political lobbying efforts in Washington, D.C.

The Conservancy and the Trust also discussed having a Conservancy representative join their board for one year. However, the Trust was in a transitional phase and was preparing to hire a new Executive Director. The Trust’s board felt that the Conservancy was too much of an unknown, and searched for a new Executive Director on their own. In this early stage of the partnership, the Trust saw the Conservancy as a “500 lb. Gorilla” whose sheer size could inadvertently compromise their mission.

A new Executive Director was hired. The Conservancy joined the Board shortly thereafter and made a one-time donation to fund the Trust’s operating expenses. Unfortunately, the new Executive Director resigned within a year due to personal circumstances.

4.B.1. Senior Management

By this time, Conservancy staff had spent enough time with the Board to actively assist in the interviewing and hiring of the next Executive Director. Shortly thereafter, the Trust and the Conservancy mutually agreed to continue the Conservancy's role on the Board.

The new Executive Director has been a good fit, working well with the Board and being a powerful force for conservation in the region. Having an Executive Director and a Board committed to the relationship stabilized the partnership, and the Conservancy has been a positive influence in helping the Trust with board and staff development, Land Trust accreditation, financial stability and fiscal responsibility.

The Conservancy has been asked to stay on the board, and has been an advisor in several new land transactions.

Lessons learned:

- Focus on “softer” benchmarks at the beginning of the partnership rather than wholesale implementation on a fast-tracked timeline.
- The implementation of a mission for smaller partners often depends on one or two key people. Helping influence the composition of the organization's staff and Board can have lasting impact.
- Creating formal agreement documents outlining a working relationship and responsibilities can shield projects from the vicissitudes of changing organizational priorities.
- It is important that partners translate their “culture” and organizational processes for each other. Over time partners can learn to work together to anticipate and respond to change.

Despite a slow start, over a few years' time the rewards for this partnership have begun to mount. There has been a huge jump in capacity at the Trust, scientific methodologies are in place, land acquisitions are underway, and ideas about long-term public funding vehicles are under discussion. The deep roots and passion of the Northcoast Regional Land Trust is taking conservation in this landscape to a new level.