



Case Study

OVERCOMING DISTRUST AND CLARIFYING EXPECTATIONS IN THE SERVICE OF A WORLD-RENOWNED NATURAL TREASURE SIERRA NEVADA, U.S.A.

A creative, thoughtful and evolving “Partnership Charter” maximizes long-term flexibility and conservation impact.

The Northern Sierra Nevada, home of Lake Tahoe, is a world-renowned resort and wilderness area of beautiful alpine mountains, lakes, forests, meadows and fast-running rivers and streams. One of the board members of The Nature Conservancy of California loved the area. The board member and his wife lived in the area and were deeply involved with the conservation community. They mused that it would make so much more sense if all the key organizations in the area worked together, instead of separately. Five local non-profit groups – the Feather River Land Trust, Sierra Business Council, The Nature Conservancy, Truckee Donner Land Trust, and the Trust for Public Land – decided to explore the idea together as the Northern Sierra Partnership (NSP).

The NSP team met regularly over the course of a year to create a formal “Partnership Charter” and focused their goals on broadening expertise, networks, donor bases, and conservation on the ground. The charter delineates the partnership’s conservation goals, organization and staff, and roles and responsibilities of all partners, and clearly states how internal communication was to work.

A donor provided start-up funding for staffing to coordinate the launch. The partners signed the charter document, but relegated specific actions to constantly updated appendices to ensure that the document could evolve and stay fresh. They chose to make decisions by consensus and used a sliding voting scale (A-F ‘grades’) to avoid gridlock. Financial management is handled by an independent outside party.

Building trust around donor issues was of critical importance – including determining how donated funds would be allocated. At the outset, the partners conducted a “mock allocation” exercise that built confidence in the process. By sticking to the agreed-upon principles, they discovered that the funding amounts sought and allocated were agreeable to all partners. This imaginary trial run went a long way towards allaying fears. They also had one staff person who they jokingly proclaimed would act as “Switzerland,” (the small European country known for its neutrality) to coordinate actions between entities until a coordinator was hired. In this way they created a structure and process for effective decision-making and also addressed the issue of *who* should make key decisions.

By setting common ground rules and clarifying expectations, the NSP has created a trajectory where the majority of their challenges arise from the conservation work itself, and not the operations of the partnership.