



Case Study

ENDING GRACEFULLY: LESSONS FROM “PARKS IN PERIL” (PiP) LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

A seventeen-year, mainly USAID-funded effort yields unprecedented gains to conservation and also a trove of lessons learned on how to end large projects and renegotiate partnerships.

In 1990, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) launched an ambitious program called “Parks in Peril” (PiP), which was designed to create local capacity for conservation in threatened, high-biodiversity landscapes throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. These sites were known as “paper parks” because they were decreed on paper, but were not adequately managed “on the ground,” where they were exposed to threats like expansion of agriculture, illegal logging, and hunting. Without a conservation vision, funding, capacity and community involvement, their biological value and potential to create larger-scale efforts would be lost.

To build this capacity, the TNC partnered with a colossal spectrum of players and partners, from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), to national governments, to small, site-based NGO’s, indigenous communities and municipal governments. PiP worked with all of these organizations to improve financing, support conservation policies, and manage both sites and entire systems of protected areas, including private, indigenous, and municipal reserves, as well as national parks.

Seventeen years later (2007), the result was hailed as an extraordinary success: improved conservation in over 18.2 million hectares of endangered habitats in 45 protected areas in 18 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. \$105 million had been channeled to critical conservation projects, and protection of natural areas had been elevated to national and regional importance by the local conservation institutions responsible for them.

Embedded within the successes of PiP are “lessons learned” about how to renegotiate, wind down, and end partnerships. At any point, fifty simultaneous sub-projects, as many as 30 USAID staff, 50 TNC staff, more than 50 partner organizations, many different languages (including local indigenous ones), and, of course, the personal hopes and expectations of every individual were involved with this complex project. Managing these relationships was a continual learning process.

The scheduled end of the project in 2007 and the resulting termination of what had become a revenue stream of about \$7 million per year introduced a new complexity to these relationships. Partners often viewed TNC as both a collaborator and a “donor,” providing the single largest source of funding for many NGO partners. Most had not thoroughly examined the implications of the “end of PiP”. It was difficult for some partners to understand that their relationship with TNC would be changing because TNC’s funding source would be ending.

A further complication was the rapidly approaching “last day for expenditures,” which introduced a tumult of pressure for unmet implementation. Many partners rushed to spend a backlog of funding and complete activities to which they had committed – and they also had to comply with unfamiliar, complex reporting requirements established by the U.S. Government for project closure. In some cases, USAID approval of annual work plans and last-minute modifications introduced additional delays in implementation.

On the whole, TNC and its partners rose to the occasion and managed a challenging process, and learned many lessons along the way:

Winding Down Shared Projects or Partnerships: Top “Lessons Learned” from PiP

1. One to two years before ending a long-term project, **discuss frankly what the future looks like**. Begin to conduct “Close-Out Agreement” meetings on a specific timetable. Make it as clear as possible what the closeout procedures will look like. Discuss with the partner whether the missions of the two institutions will continue to be compatible.
2. Check to **make sure that due diligence occurs at the beginning** of the project and that the partners have thought about how much they can really implement per year, and how much reporting they can really undertake on a quarterly basis. Impeccable financial reporting for public grants is important, and is much harder than it seems.
3. **Be clear about future funding and where it will come from**, and TNC’s role (or lack thereof) in procuring that funding after the project ends. It is critical to have an explicit strategy so the partner and TNC staff understand how much funding they will have after the “big grant” ends. Think “Gracious Closure”.
4. Make sure to **align expectations and create a realistic timetable for deliverables** that accounts for delays in implementation that may be introduced by a donor, especially if public funding (and a high-level of donor scrutiny) is involved. As your partner moves forward, they may prefer to pursue the “smaller, easier” funding that private sources provide over the complications of continued support from public donors.
5. The beginning of highly capitalized projects creates dreams and big expectations. In the wind-down phase of major projects, **identify new beginnings on the horizon**, even if they will be capitalized on smaller scales, or help transition a partner to a non-partner role as gracefully as possible if high-level priorities change. Agree on how you will work together in the future, and under what situations.
6. If the partnership is renegotiated, **make “Annual Check-in” meetings a set part of the communications plan**.
7. **Celebrate the achievements**. Our esteem for each other is wasted if we do not give it voice.

Winding down PiP was a tremendous effort, and one that engaged TNC in a massive learning experience across many geographies and institutional scales. The achievements of PiP continue to provide conservation dividends long after the victory celebrations in Washington, D.C. and several Latin American countries came to an end.

As part of the process of closing “PiP 2000 – A Partnership for the Americas,” USAID, TNC, and partner staff documented the program’s key successes in several formats – a web site, DVD, and a published report in the Innovations in Conservation Series entitled *Partners*

Section 6: B When To Renegotiate?

for Protected Areas Conservation: Experiences from the Parks in Peril Program in Latin America and the Caribbean. Added to the capacity for science-based conservation and participatory management that PiP fostered in the region, this information constitutes an indelible legacy – a foundation for future conservation and development in Latin America and the Caribbean.

For more information about the Parks in Peril project, visit
www.parksinperil.org and www.parksinperil.org/files/partnerships.pdf.