

Putting collaborative leadership into practice:

The role of peer learning



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Abstract

Learning and exchange among peers (“peer learning”) is an important process shaping and enabling landscape conservation and stewardship. As a practice that connects practitioners working at the landscape scale within and across regions—and that dedicates time and resources to supporting meaningful exchange—peer learning builds and strengthens the relationships at the core of the collaboration and partnership that are central to meeting shared goals and needs. This article explores peer learning and its role in learning, demonstrating, and building collaborative leadership. It offers two examples of peer learning initiatives and their on-the-ground outcomes: the Large Landscape Peer Learning Initiative, a program coordinated by the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy to bring together an international group of landscape conservation practitioners for shared problem-solving; and the Landscape Conservation Catalyst Fund Program, an initiative of the Network for Landscape Conservation to create a learning-exchange community among grantees to support the development of place-based partnerships.

Introduction

A major act of leadership right now, call it a radical act, is to create the places and processes so people can actually learn together, using our experiences.

— Margaret J. Wheatley

One of the most important tasks facing the landscape conservation and stewardship community of practice is sharing with one another what people are learning from their work. Engaging in this learning exchange is critical to helping these efforts evolve to meet the challenges and opportunities at hand, and

crucial to empowering and supporting conservation practitioners engaged in difficult work, upon whose web of relationships much of the success and durability of these efforts rest.

To address this need, purposeful learning and exchange between and among practitioners or “peers” is rapidly being recognized as an essential practice within landscape conservation and stewardship. By dedicating time and resources to meaningful

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exchange, peer learning builds and strengthens the relationships and behaviors that underlie and enable sustained collaboration at the landscape scale. Regional, national, and international networks and organizations' supporting landscape-scale conservation practice are facilitating peer learning processes that bring practitioners together within and across regions to share experiences and innovate solutions to the complex problems they face.

This article takes a closer look at the role of peer learning in demonstrating, teaching, and building collaborative leadership within the landscape-scale conservation community. It provides an overview of peer learning, expands upon its importance for collaboration and partnership, and explores examples of peer learning initiatives and their on-the-ground outcomes for landscape-scale conservation and stewardship.

What is peer learning and why is it worth spending time and resources on?

Peer learning is the process of people learning from each other and growing together. When undertaken intentionally by those in the same field, it describes bringing together peers, or teams of peers, on a voluntary basis to exchange experience and ideas based on mutual trust and respect in a safe and inclusive space (Andrews and Manning 2016; Johnson, Levitt, and Navalkha 2020). While different approaches can be taken as to who participates in a peer learning process or who “counts” as a peer, in general, “peers” are defined as individuals who bring to the group experiences, perspectives, or expertise relevant to the theme or objectives of the exchange.

Two features of the peer learning process are unique, and uniquely in tune with the demands and characteristics of landscape-scale conservation and stewardship. The first is a non-hierarchical approach to learning and exchange based on the principle that each person has something of value to contribute, and achieved through facilitation that centers listening, reflection, and inquiry. This absence of hierarchy reflects the governance structures of landscape-scale partnerships, where information and action are free-flowing and move through peer networks. The second is an emphasis on empowering participants to share their passion and engage effectively with each other by deepening one-on-one relationships that strengthen the larger web of connections (Brown

2017) that characterizes landscape-scale work. This involves facilitation that makes space for emergence, inviting participants to co-create and modify processes, agendas, and objectives, and creating opportunities for personal connection and sharing. Together, these elements create the conditions for the group to “gain a greater sense of energy, purpose, vision, and ultimately self-understanding” (Walsh, Bartunek, and Lacey 1998).

Bringing people together through peer learning awakens enormous potential for the emergence of ideas and collaborative problem-solving through conversation and sharing. As participants build trust, they assert views, exchange insights, offer proposals and alternatives, question and modify visions, adjust patterns of thinking, and engage in a back-and-forth to find ways to achieve mutual understanding. The meeting of different perspectives illuminates existing work, refreshes strategies, and transforms paths forward to create needed change. This is illustrated by the following reflection from one co-traveler in a peer learning exchange hosted by the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy:

I've never spent a week like that with such amazing people. My understanding of the world and my place in it has deepened and expanded. I have an enhanced appreciation of how our landscape conservation efforts are connected. It feels like I am now working on behalf of a much larger community, and I feel emboldened even though doubts remain about one step or another. I already knew that any misstep, mistake, or setback is just fodder for more learning, but now the learning could help others. Even today, as I begin to solve problems with one partnership, project, and network, I know that whatever follows—wins, losses, and lessons—may be helpful to my new friends in far off places.

— Bill Labich, Highstead Foundation

As the quote above captures, the peer learning process can build lasting relationships and friendships among participants. Those relationships then

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reverberate out to the larger community of practice when participants channel learning back to the organizations, initiatives, and networks in which they participate. In doing so, peer learning processes reinforce and fortify a connected and robust community of practice that recognizes collaboration and partnership as key factors in realizing collective aspirations.

How are peer learning and collaborative leadership related?

At its best, by making room for demonstrating, learning, and building collaborative leadership, peer learning addresses several challenges: preparing people to become collaborative leaders, shifting into a collaborative mindset, guiding participants through process, and embracing coactive power. Learning among peers from different sectors, backgrounds, organizations, and geographies reduces barriers to working with each other and drives home the idea that together, the community of practice is more powerful than any individual, organization, initiative, or network on its own—the ultimate goal of collaborative leadership.

Throughout a peer learning process, collaborative leadership is demonstrated by hosts, facilitators, and participants. While participants may take on the roles of stewards, mediators, and catalysts, at different moments hosts and facilitators embody all three of these roles and model collaborative behaviors—compassion, character, courage, and commitment (Mickel 2021)—from the beginning. In this way, they lay the groundwork for participants to enter into the process with authenticity (honesty about who they are and the experiences they bring personally and professionally) and vulnerability (honesty about what they need and willingness to share power and take risks) and prepare the group for reflective practice by demonstrating what may be for many participants a deeper and different way of interacting with others. By setting the stage for peers to, as management expert Amy Mickel says in *The Practice of Collaborative Leadership: The Four Cornerstones* (2021), bring their hearts and souls to the process, hosts and facilitators demonstrate what collaborative leadership looks like and invite participants to access these behaviors in

themselves. At the same time, participants who come into peer learning with collaborative leadership skills consciously and unconsciously demonstrate to their peers what it looks and feels like for these behaviors to be present in the room.

When participants undertake a peer learning process, a kind of “magic” happens, to paraphrase Greg Moore, president and chief executive officer emeritus of the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy. As people build trust, respect, and strengthen one-on-one relationships, the collaborative behaviors present within the group come to life and become prismatic, helping to shift the group into an ongoing collaborative mindset. As participants spend time together, get to know each other, share stories, and take on tangible and intangible issues, challenges, and opportunities as a group, they learn and develop the skills and abilities of collaborative leaders. Put differently, individuals, and teams of individuals, are changed by the relationship-building taking place. These transformative relationships have the power to change not only the people in the room, but their visions, strategies, priorities, and motivations. Skills, knowledge, and new perspectives may then be taken back to their organizations, networks, and initiatives, where it can similarly help to shift the work or inspire new efforts to foster collaborative approaches towards achieving change and implementing solutions.

Participants typically come into a peer learning process with networks forged through years of experience in the field; however, in some programs there may be a continuum of experience among participants, with some early in their careers. Being part of a peer learning exchange offers participants at any career stage the chance to build and grow their networks. More importantly, however, participants experience a collaborative leadership process within this new network. This space created by the peer learning process functions as a kind of “microworld” (Senge 1990) in which participants can build collaborative leadership skills in a comfortable, safe environment. The network acts as a flight simulator of sorts, allowing peers to exercise the traits and actions that comprise the cornerstones

of collaboration—compassion, character, courage, and commitment (Mickel 2021). Done repeatedly, peer learning provides ongoing opportunities for participants to continue to learn, practice, and hone collaborative leadership skills and abilities that benefit and strengthen their wider networks and increase the capacity of the community of practice as a whole.

How is peer learning being implemented within the landscape conservation and stewardship community of practice?

As awareness grows that the complexity of 21st-century conservation and stewardship demands collaboration to achieve impact, organizations large and small, place-based and content-focused networks, multi-stakeholder partnerships and initiatives, and other partners in the landscape conservation and stewardship community are increasingly engaging in peer learning processes. Here, two recent peer learning exchanges convened by practitioner-focused organizations at different scales are discussed:

- The **Large Landscape Peer Learning Initiative**, a program coordinated by the International Land Conservation Network within the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy to bring together an international group of landscape conservation practitioners for shared problem solving; and
- The **Landscape Conservation Catalyst Fund Program**, an initiative of the Network for Landscape Conservation to create a learning-exchange community among grantees to support the development of place-based partnerships.

The Lincoln Institute of Land Policy's Large Landscape Peer Learning Initiative

Background. The Lincoln Institute of Land Policy is a private operating foundation based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, that seeks to find land-based solutions to social and environmental problems. It does so through research, education, and training that

integrate theory and practice to inform public policy decisions around the world. Building from practitioner interest during the 2014 National Workshop on Large Landscape Conservation, in 2018 the Institute convened the first cohort in a pilot peer exchange program known as the Large Landscape Peer Learning Initiative (LLPLI).

Goals and structure. The two-year effort brought together four teams of peers involved in large landscape conservation initiatives of similar scope and scale from two countries, the United States and Chile, to learn about each other's landscapes, engage in collective problem solving and strategic thinking, carve paths forward for addressing critical challenges and seizing opportunities, and strengthen a global network for landscape-scale conservation practice (Johnson, Levitt, and Navalkha 2020).

Individual team members brought broad experience and deep expertise to the practice of landscape-scale conservation from across the public, private, and non-profit sectors, and had backgrounds that spanned a range of disciplines. While team composition shifted during the course of the exchange, each team had a core group of key practitioners who remained engaged throughout.

The initiative consisted of four key elements: extended field visits, case statement preparation, a workshop with thematic experts, and ongoing support for strategy implementation. Together with the Lincoln Institute team facilitating the larger process, each landscape team hosted participants during in-person field visits or study tours through which the hosting team and peers spent structured and unstructured time together learning about the landscapes *in situ*.

Over the course of the four field visits, each team worked together, with the input of facilitators and peers, to prepare case statements articulating their

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Figure 1. Participants gather in Parque Pumalín, Chile, during the 2018–2019 Large Landscape Peer Learning Exchange.

strategic visions. The final field visit ended with the expert workshop, during which the teams were joined by external experts from the landscape stewardship and conservation community who provided feedback and constructive input into strategies for achieving the teams' visions. After the conclusion of the field visits, the Lincoln Institute team provided support for continued advice and implementation of key strategic actions that would advance landscape conservation outcomes identified by the teams.

Key insights from the LLPLI

Intention-setting. Providing clarity around the objectives and expectations for the peer learning exchange when inviting people to participate allowed members of the landscape team to take part in the exchange with shared intention and commitment to the process. The standing of the host organization and staff provided a sense of legitimacy and added value to the exchange, and provided the foundation from which deeper relationships could be encouraged

and facilitated through connecting with people and place inside and outside of meeting rooms.

Making time for interpersonal connection. During the field visits, which ranged from three to fourteen days, time spent out on the landscape, meeting with landowners, organizations, and other stakeholders with deep connection to place, and in group discussions in meeting rooms, at group dinners, and on walks and bus rides, allowed for emergent human connection. Away from their usual contexts and schedules, and with shared commitment to the value of learning from each other, participants in the peer learning exchange had the time and space to deepen one-on-one relationships and bond as a group by sharing stories, experiences, and insights. As one participant beautifully put it, “I am very thankful for the opportunity to spend so much bus time, mealtime, walking and hiking time, etc., in slowly getting to know everyone. Some I’d not spoken to before other than to utter something on a phone call.

And now, I feel such affinity, it's hard to know what to do with all that feeling and awareness and concern other than to appreciate it and let all that light impact my landscape conservation work even more.”

This is the “heart and soul” aspect that undergirds collaborative leadership. By the conclusion of the exchange, core group members had developed lasting trust, respect, and friendship, laying the groundwork for constructive learning and problem-solving. As another participant stated, “growing trust breeds meaningful sharing of visions, resources, tools, and vocabularies and fosters a tangible sense of mutual support needed to meet big challenges.” This sense of mutual support fostered a greater sense of interdependence between participants, well after the exchange itself.

Recognizing interdependence by thinking together.

Centering the exchange around the co-creation of shared deliverables by each landscape team built trust and sharpened collaborative thinking. The teams were asked to prepare case statements for their landscape, exploring the history, current situation, and strategic actions relevant to achieving enduring conservation and stewardship outcomes. As each team hosted participants in their landscape, received input during the field visit and beyond, worked together to articulate their work and context, and contributed to refining other teams' case statements, the group as a whole learned the value and unique potential of collaborative ideation.

As one participant remarked, “the visit to Chile, and the exchanges that occurred during the visit, were inspirational, motivational, challenging, instructive, and rewarding. Most of all, it offered me an opportunity to continue to learn—and also to contribute. It required me to think, work, and converse with professionals and conservationists with exceptional life experiences, track records, and creativity.” Moreover, participants from different sectors and organizations within each team developed a stronger understanding of how their individual and organizational efforts were connected or needed to be more connected, strengthening the web of connections in the landscape and beyond.

Raising a collaborative consciousness. Explicitly asking participants to assess their and others' work by offering perspective on the past, present, and

futures of their landscape created a much-needed space for reflection. One participant described it this way: “Individuals' creativity and motivation are refreshed by the reminders of the importance of our work, fresh intellectual inputs, and recognition of the value of personal learned insights to others.” For the participants and many other landscape-scale conservation practitioners, moments to pause, take stock, and evaluate strategies and priorities can be few and far between. Dedicating the time to do so during the exchange helped participants to think about their work in the context of other efforts being undertaken by a global community of practice.

This recognition of how every place-based landscape conservation effort is part of a global movement, and the inspiration created by shared reflection, enhanced participants' capacity to undertake cross-boundary, partnership-based work and to spur stronger, more durable conservation and stewardship outcomes.

On-the-ground outcomes from the LLPLI

The outcomes achieved by LLPLI teams demonstrate the role and value of the exchange for practicing collaborative leadership in landscape-scale conservation.² Initiatives undertaken by the four participating teams in the time since the exchange illustrate how it advanced collaborative approaches to achieving changes that matter for the landscape and its human and natural communities.

In California, representatives from the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, working in partnership with the California Landscape Stewardship Network, are partnering with decisionmakers in the state government to improve the effectiveness and efficiencies of regulatory processes, interagency coordination, and collaborative frameworks advancing and accelerating conservation and stewardship throughout the state. *Cutting Green Tape*, as this effort is known, is now a signature initiative of the California Natural Resources Agency (CLSN 2020; CNRA 2020).

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In the northeastern US, partners within the Northern Appalachian Trail Landscape Partnership (NATLP) are prioritizing the development of a more participatory, collaboratively governed landscape conservation initiative. With support from the Lincoln Institute, the NATLP collaborated with the University of Massachusetts at Amherst to design and carry out a stakeholder planning process to gain a variety of perspectives on the Appalachian Trail and to enable more effective communication and coordination between stakeholders and between scales of collaborative initiatives for the Appalachian Trail Landscape Partnership at large (NATLP 2021).

In Chile's Mediterranean corridor, stretching from El Boldo on the Pacific coast to Altos de Cantillana, located just outside the capital city of Santiago, Fundación Tierra Austral (FTA) is transforming conservation in Chile by implementing the first conservation easements on private lands, enabled by legislation passed in 2016. Together with other BHP Foundation grantees, FTA is participating in a knowledge network to share learning and is collaborating with organizations and networks throughout Chile to build public trust in private land conservation.

In Chilean Patagonia, with the support of the Lincoln Institute, the Friends of the Parks of Patagonia (Amigos de los Parques) is engaged in an exchange between its executive director, Eugenio Rengifo, and Greg Moore of the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy. Their connection, sparked through the LLPLI exchange, has enabled Rengifo to connect with best practices throughout the United States and with learning from its well-developed system of friends groups for national parks and public lands. The relationship is supporting one of Chile's first friends groups to ensure sustained financial and public support for large protected landscapes in southern Chile.

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The Network for Landscape Conservation's Catalyst Fund Peer Exchange Program

Background. The Network for Landscape Conservation (NLC) is the US's national umbrella group and a leading voice for advancing collaborative conservation at the landscape scale and connecting people to ideas and innovations—and to each other—in order to accelerate the pace and practice of landscape conservation.

In 2019, NLC launched the Landscape Conservation Catalyst Fund Peer Exchange Program. This national program couples grant-making investments in the collaborative process of place-based, community-grounded landscape conservation partnerships with capacity investments through the creation of a learning and exchange community among funded partnerships. Together, these investments are intended to accelerate efforts to build enduring collaboration and conservation progress that protects the ecological, cultural, and community health of landscapes across the nation. A portion of the fund is reserved to support Indigenous-led partnerships working to advance Indigenous landscape conservation priorities.

Goals and structure. The peer learning component of the two-year program is intended to accelerate each landscape conservation partnership's growth and development, better positioning the partnerships to achieve their landscape visions over the long term. In crafting the program, the NLC seeks to achieve the following goals:

- Help build a community of practice across grantee partnerships;
- Help partnerships achieve their grant objectives;
- Build individual competencies and skills among key leaders and staff of partnerships; and
- Strengthen the competencies of key leaders and staff to work across cultures.

A NLC peer learning working group coordinates this program through content development and facilitation support. A foundational principle is that the cohort of NLC Catalyst Fund grantees envisions, shapes, and implements a program that is relevant to all. The focus on co-creation is ongoing and iterative, and adjustments and adaptations are made based upon participants' feedback and regular assessment by the working group.³

Each peer learning cohort comprises approximately 12–16 grantees and 3–5 NLC working group members. Grantees are typically key leaders and staff members of the landscape conservation partnership that is being funded and who have sufficient familiarity with their partnership to be able to effectively talk about its experiences, successes, and challenges. NLC members often have several decades of experience working in collaboration to support stewardship and conservation goals. These NLC members volunteer their support as a part of the working group and join the cohort of grantees in a monthly virtual meeting to facilitate and participate in shared learning and exchange. Working group members participate to help shape the program and facilitate dialogue. As experienced practitioners, they are well positioned to provide expertise and insight, but are also learning alongside the cohort participants through the practice of collaborative leadership and exchange.

Key insights from the Catalyst Fund

Raising a collaborative consciousness. Similar to the LLPLI, the NLC Catalyst Fund Peer Exchange Program seeks to raise collaborative consciousness through creating the optimal environment for building relationships and developing comfort and familiarity among the peer learning cohort. Only in its second year, the program is focused on establishing the space to explore issues and challenges, ask questions, and learn alongside one another.

Building justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI), and cross-cultural competency. A portion of the Catalyst Fund Program is reserved to support Indigenous-led partnerships working to advance Indigenous landscape conservation priorities. As such, the program has embraced an emphasis on cross-cultural competencies and skills building. In particular, the program aims to remain critically aware of the historical legacy of conservation in North America, and collectively explore the need for practicing collaborative leadership with JEDI values.

Through facilitated sessions and intentional prompts, participants are engaged in conversations that bring knowledge, understanding, and awareness of systemic racism, conservation history, biases, and power and privilege structures. Participants also learn to apply JEDI principles to stewardship and conservation efforts, and funding and policy decisions. A facilitated session on cross-cultural collaboration utilizes storytelling to demonstrate how dimensions of inclusivity and exclusivity operate within the conservation sector. Sessions highlight inclusive practices such as the use of community agreements to build environments conducive to honest exchange, the use of land acknowledgements to aid in self-reflection and awareness of positionality, and the necessity of inviting guest speakers from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

While the need for this work has gained attention during COVID-19 and the continued nationwide racial, social and environmental justice movements, communities of color continue to struggle at all levels of access. The Catalyst Fund hopes to offer and create safe spaces for engaging in JEDI conversations through workshops and guided discussions and providing a foundation of knowledge and skills to assist grantees in developing inclusive partnerships and programs.

Strengthening connectivity and building common language among landscape collaboratives. Much like the LLPLI, the NLC Catalyst Fund Peer Exchange Program is fundamentally centered around the power of relationships and connectivity. As a measure of trust building that engenders deeper and more meaningful exchange over the two-year peer learning experience, the emphasis on relationships serves a core purpose. It also strengthens the connective tissue among landscape-scale practitioners, offering the potential for long-term collaboration and collective impact. Building common language among cohort members not only allows for a

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> By effectively communicating and demonstrating evidence of benefits, the value of the partnership or network will become clearer.

shared understanding of the substance and actions of collaborative leadership, it also enables these place-based collaboratives to tell the story of their partnerships in a way that resonates with public and private audiences, including funders.

Where do we go from here?

For landscape conservation and stewardship to be effective, members of this community of practice need to collaborate inclusively and equitably to maximize resources, whether financial, human, temporal, or otherwise. Explicitly centering the role of peer learning helps illuminate the path forward in breaking down the barriers to working at the landscape scale.

Continuing to create forums for peer learning is a powerful way to understand, develop, and foster what it takes to be collaborative among the landscape conservation and stewardship community. These skills then foster other learning by diffusing the practices of collaborative leadership more broadly, creating real possibilities for a coordinated and enduring response to the urgent land and water conservation and stewardship challenges of this century.

Endnotes

1. These include, but are not limited to: the [California Landscape Stewardship Network](#); the [Network for Landscape Conservation](#); the [International Land Conservation Network](#) at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy; the [Landscape Conservation Cooperative Network](#); the [Scaling Up Initiative](#); [Landscapes for People, Food, and Nature](#); the [BHP Foundation Knowledge Network](#); the [Indigenous Leadership Initiative Guardians program](#); and [Eurosites—the European Land Conservation Network](#), among others.
2. In their *Guide to Peer Learning*, Matt Andrews and Nick Manning note that “the value of peer learning can be evaluated based on whether peer engagement and sustained individual contacts produced the right learning outcomes for the right individuals to achieve changes which matter” (Andrews and Manning 2016).
3. During COVID-19 the program has been shaped around monthly sessions via virtual platforms. After the pandemic, it will reintroduce its original

design of inviting grantees to convene in person as part of NLC’s annual retreat.

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On the cover of this issue

A montage of images from [One Tam](#), a collaborative partnership to manage the landscape of Mount Tamalpais in California, along with one from Alcatraz Island in Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

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