Summary Report of the Model Ecosystem Restoration and Conservation Collaboratives Project

Sponsored by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF)
Prepared by the Institute for Engagement & Negotiation (IEN), University of Virginia

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This document presents a high-level overview of key recommendations, findings, and methods of a qualitative research study conducted by a team from the University of Virginia between December 2018 and June 2019. The study was commissioned by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Chesapeake Bay Program with the goal of better understanding *why* and *how* ecosystem collaboratives" may have the potential to accelerate on-the-ground activities and outcomes for watershed conservation and restoration.

Through the research process, IEN worked closely with the NFWF team to clarify the scope of research and the best definition of the term "ecosystem collaborative," recognizing its potential limitations. For the purposes of this study an "ecosystem collaborative" can be defined as "a partnership of two or more organizations that have agreed to work together in order to accomplish shared landscape-scale ecological conservation or restoration objectives."

The qualitative study involved four stages of research, each of which generated a more refined understanding of the factors that may underscore the success of ecosystem collaboratives. These stages of research are briefly described in this report, which is outlined as follows:

I.   Overview of the Research Team
II.   Synthesis of Key Recommendations: Metrics and Promising Funder Strategies
III. Overview of the Research Methodology
  1. Secondary Literature Review
  2. Interviews with Subject Matter Experts
  3. Workshop with Chesapeake Bay Conservation and Restoration Funders and Practitioners
  4. Online Survey of Ecosystem Collaboratives in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed and in other Ecosystems Nationally
IV.   Conclusion

I.   Overview of the Research Team

This study was completed by a three-person team with the Institute for Engagement & Negotiation (IEN) at the University of Virginia. IEN is a recognized leader in public policy mediation, alternative dispute resolution, and community engagement. IEN's nearly 40-year history has included significant work in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed.

The research team included Tanya Denckla Cobb (IEN Director), Kristina Weaver, PhD (IEN Associate Director), and Mike Foreman (IEN Special Projects Manager). Denckla Cobb has worked as an environmental and public policy mediator with IEN since 1997. She has extensive experience conducting action research as well as building capacity for collaboration in environmental contexts. In addition to working with IEN as a senior facilitator and trainer, Weaver is a cultural geographer who draws from a multidisciplinary academic skillset as well a career as a grants consultant helping a broad range of organizations and projects build strategy and capacity to secure funding. Foreman joined IEN after a 36-year career with the Virginia Departments of Forestry and Conservation and Recreation, where he contributed to several conservation initiatives in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. Foreman has also worked alongside Denckla Cobb for nearly 20 years to deliver capacity building trainings through the IEN administered Virginia Natural Resources Leadership Institute (VNRLI).

II.   Synthesis of Key Recommendations: Metrics and Promising Funder Strategies

In this section we present metrics that NFWF may wish to consider building into its grantmaking selection or competitive criteria, as well as "most promising" strategies that funders may wish to consider in order to strengthen ecosystem collaboratives in relation to these metrics. Ideas are grouped within four broad areas, listed below in order of importance to success:

1. **MOTIVATION:** Factors that inspire and sustain engagement
2. **CAPACITY:** Factors that empower collaboratives
3. **EFFECTIVE PROCESS:** Factors that facilitate collaboration
4. **EVALUATION:** Factors that advance effectiveness and impact over time

1. **MOTIVATION:** *Factors that Inspire and Sustain Engagement*

External factors, such as broad ecological threats or new policy landscapes, are significant motivators in bringing stakeholders to the table and incentivizing partnerships. Once ecosystem collaboratives take shape, *people* and *relationships* typically matter more than structures or processes when it comes to why they are able to sustain engagement, build on successes, and ultimately achieve on-the-ground outcomes. Funders can help collaboratives harvest the passion and expertise of stakeholders by supporting the consistent meetings and periodic retreats required to sustain activity, engagement, and vision over the long term.

MOTIVATION

Metric	Evidence of Growth
Vision / Mission: Collaborative has articulated a strong Vision and Mission	• Collaborative has a Vision / Mission statement • Collaborative undertakes periodic strategic planning processes
Relationships: Collaborative prioritizes building strong relationships among members and stakeholders (with attention to attracting and retaining the "right stakeholders" to address local/regional needs and opportunities)	• Collaborative hosts / convenes face-to-face meetings (frequency reflects local needs) • Collaborative undertakes periodic retreats • Collaborative tracks engagement and periodically solicits stakeholder feedback • Collaborative involves stakeholders who represent a variety of sectors and communities, including those less traditionally engaged
Leadership: Collaborative has effective and dynamic leaders	• Collaborative has a documented governing structure • Collaborative tracks engagement and periodically solicits stakeholder feedback • Collaborative has plan / system in place to identify and cultivate next generation leaders
Communications: Collaborative actively communicates benefits of collaboration, success stories, and lessons learned	• Collaborative has a written communications plan

Metric	Evidence of Growth
	• Collaborative has a track record of telling its story to communicate the value of collaboration and champion a "win-win" mindset • Collaborative has leaders, staff, and/or dedicated volunteer capacity devoted to "telling its story"
Strategic Planning: Collaborative undertakes strategic planning	• Collaborative has a written strategic plan • Collaborative undertakes periodic strategic planning processes

Most Promising Funder Strategies: MOTIVATION

1. Provide funding to assist collaboratives in hosting meetings, outreach events, and/or social gatherings that build relationships and sustain momentum.
2. Fund a Collaborative Coordinator staff position to absorb day-to-day responsibilities and ensure forward progress.
3. Provide "pass through" funding that collaboratives can manage themselves to incentivize and reward members and stakeholders to participate.
4. Provide long-term and flexible operations funding to give collaboratives time to establish a strong foundation according to evolving needs and opportunities**.**

2. **CAPACITY:** *Factors that Empower Collaboratives*

While it is generally good for collaboratives to remain as lean and flexible as possible in light of local and regional contexts, they do need to reach a certain level of capacity in order to sustain engagement and ultimately achieve results. The most efficient way to boost collaborative capacity may be to fund a full or part-time staff position dedicated to coordination of core operating functions (e.g. meetings, communications, fundraising, and evaluation). In fact, funding a coordinator position emerged as one of the top strategies mentioned across the board in the interviews and survey conducted as part of this study.

CAPACITY

Metric	Evidence of Growth
Coordinator Staff: Collaborative has at least one paid staff position dedicated to	• Collaborative has at least one full or partial paid staff position dedicated to

Metric	Evidence of Growth
coordination (could be full or part-time depending on scope of collaborative's work)	coordination of collaborative operating activities
Operating Resources: Collaborative has resources to support coordination, meetings, communications, fundraising, and other core operating activities	• Collaborative has at least one full or partial paid staff position dedicated to coordination of collaborative operating activities • Collaborative has a core operating budget • In the absence of dedicated staff and funds, collaborative has a plan for allocating coordinating / operating responsibilities among members
Technical Staff: Collaborative has at least one paid staff position that provides technical expertise that fills a gap and does not duplicate resources provided by other organizations in the region served (could be full or part-time depending on scope)	• Collaborative has at least one full or partial paid staff position that provides technical expertise needed in the region served • Collaborative has a thorough understanding of technical resource gaps in the region served
Fundraising Strategy: Collaborative has a diversified fundraising strategy that is not solely reliant on grants from one sponsor, or which outlines a path towards greater sustainability over time	• Collaborative has a written fundraising plan • Collaborative has staff or dedicated volunteers tasked with fundraising • Collaborative has a track record of cultivating donors • Collaborative hosts fundraising events • Collaborative has a track record of pursuing grants from several funding sources

Most Promising Funder Strategies: CAPACITY

1. Fund a Collaborative Coordinator staff position to absorb day-to-day responsibilities and ensure forward progress.
2. Provide support for staff and leaders to undertake professional development and around managing collaboration (e.g. facilitation, evaluation, fundraising).
3. Provide long-term, stable, and flexible operations funding in recognition that it takes time to build capacity and develop talent in response to evolving needs and opportunities.
4. Provide pilot / innovation funding to allow collaboratives to test new ideas.

3. EFFECTIVE PROCESS: *Factors that Facilitate Collaboration*

Collaborative processes do not have to be complicated, but successful collaboratives define and document an approach to decision making, a governing structure, relevant policies, and key plans (e.g. strategic plans, workplans, communication plans, evaluation plans).

EFFECTIVE PROCESS

Metric	Evidence of Growth
Effective Meetings: Collaborative conducts regular, effective meetings, including face-to-face meetings. Note that *frequency* of meeting depends on particular needs of stakeholders, but consistency and quality of meetings are important.	• Collaborative has consistent approach to meetings with members / stakeholders, including face-to-face meetings as a complement to remote or digital meetings. • Collaborative meetings follow best practices (i.e. agendas, facilitation, and actionable notes that are circulated appropriately).
Decision-Making Protocol: Collaborative has defined and conveyed to members / stakeholders a clear approach to decision-making (e.g. consensus, Robert's Rules of Order).	• Collaborative has documented its decision-making process. • Collaborative shares its decision-making process proactively with new members, directors, staff, volunteers, etc.
Governance Structure: Collaborative has defined a clear structure for how its	• Collaborative has a documented governance structure.

Metric	Evidence of Growth
activities are governed or steered, who has authority to make decisions, etc.	• Important caveat: Governing structure does not need to be rigid or formal, but there should be a basic understanding of who is steering the process and how stakeholders can engage.
Defined Policies: Collaborative has codified policies and protocols that guide operations.	• Collaborative has written documents that explain operating processes and expectations. • Collaborative shares its processes and expectations with new members, directors, staff, volunteers, etc. • Important caveat: Policies do not need to be extensive (overly formal structures may be impediments to success), but there should be a basic understanding of how and when stakeholders can engage
Communications Plan: Collaborative has a communications plan.	• Collaborative has a written communications plan. • Collaborative has staff and/or dedicated volunteer capacity devoted to "telling its story."

Most Promising Funder Strategies: EFFECTIVE PROCESS

1. Develop and share recommendations, tools, case studies, replicable models, and best practices in effective process, management, fundraising, etc.
2. Provide funding for collaboratives to retain technical assistance for different purposes, such as facilitators and technical consultants to assist at key points, as well as linking collaboratives to vetted resources around collaborative process.
3. Provide or fund trainings for collaborative leaders and staff to gain key organizational and process skills (e.g. facilitation, communications, evaluation, fundraising).
4. Assist with strategic planning by funding retreats, providing hands on technical assistance around goal setting.
5. Require evidence of strategic and operational planning in funding applications.

4. EVALUATION: *Factors that Advance Effectiveness and Impact Over Time*

Normalizing evaluation fosters a culture of learning and growth in relation to changing needs and opportunities. In its early phase, a collaborative should place greater focus on establishing and evaluating *processes* and *structures* while also tracking programmatic / ecological metrics. As effective processes take root, evaluation can shift its focus towards ecological outcomes.

EVALUATION

Metric	Evidence of Growth
Programmatic Evaluation: The collaborative has defined indicators, goals, and ecological outcomes for its on-the-ground projects and programs.	• Collaborative has defined SMART objectives, goals, and indicators for its programmatic / project activities. • Collaborative has a logic model for its program / project. • Collaborative has a written evaluation plan.
Process Evaluation: The collaborative has defined indicators, milestones, and goals for the development of its capacity and effective processes.	• Collaborative has defined SMART goals, strategies, and milestones for building capacity and effective processes. • Collaborative has a Theory of Change. • Collaborative has a written evaluation plan.
Evaluation Plan: The collaborative has developed a system / plan for evaluation that includes both programmatic and process metrics. This system / plan could involve using internal capacity to undertake self-evaluation, a plan for developing this capacity, and/or a plan for engaging an outside evaluator.	• Collaborative has a written evaluation plan. • Collaborative has staff resources devoted to monitoring and evaluation. • Collaborative has a budget for evaluation. • Evaluation plan includes elements relating to key partner performance (e.g. indicators of engagement, contribution of what, efficacy in what, and opportunities to grow professionally or take on more leadership over time)

Most Promising Funder Strategies: EVALUATION

1. Provide or fund training for collaborative leaders and staff to learn why and how to undertake better evaluation of processes and programs.
2. Develop and provide free, easy-to-use templates, models, guides, and tools to support collaboratives in undertaking self-evaluation and associated planning.
3. Require grant applicants to include an evaluation plan – including both programmatic and process indicators – in grant applications. Be available as a resource to help less experienced applicants design / refine their evaluation plans during the application process and / or post-award.

III. Overview of the Research Methodology

1. Secondary Literature Review

IEN began research in December 2018 with a secondary literature review of more than 80 sources and nearly 60 academic journals in the areas of Environmental Collaboration and Governance, Collaboration, Organizational Development, and Evaluation. A bibliography of key sources, including annotation for select sources, was separately provided to NFWF. Select insights drawn from the literature review are summarized below:

- More general process and organizational characteristics highlighted in collaboration and organizational development literature are also highlighted in the literature on environmental collaboration. Characteristics most commonly cited include: *communication, leadership, data, organization, process, outcomes, culture/values, learning/development,* and *funding*.
- When engaging in data collection, it is imperative that collaboratives ensure the incorporation of **both local and expert knowledge**. When expert knowledge is prioritized over place-based knowledge, it shapes discourse and agenda-setting in ways that narrow options and obscure the possibility of building broad consensus among diverse stakeholders. Long term **community buy-in and engagement** are critical to success.
- Research on collaboration suggests an importance of organizing and operationalizing *behavior change* and adoption of innovative ways of thinking and acting.
- The Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory, developed in 1992 and updated in 2018, highlights six categories of "**success factors**" for collaboration (defined as "a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals"): Environment (history of working together, political climate,

social climate, etc.); Membership Characteristics (mutual trust, diverse stakeholders, capacity for compromise, etc.); Process and Structure (clear roles, flexibility, etc.); Communication (formal and informal channels); Purpose (vision, mission, goals, etc.); and Resources (funding, leadership, etc.)

- The literature emphasizes the value of undertaking **continual assessments** at the level of project, organization, and collaborative, in order to strategically adjust course towards reaching shared and individual goals.
- A surprising insight from the literature on evaluation suggests a need for **moderating expectations** in light of outcomes. While many organizations may strive for increased collaboration with other parties as an idealized value, fewer are willing to invest resources and undertake change efforts that could be **perceived as detrimental to the individual organization**.

In January IEN presented insights from its preliminary review to a steering committee invited by NFWF to provide feedback on the overall methodology for the project. The team was encouraged to clarify its understanding of "ecosystem collaborative," pushing beyond a more general starting point of reviewing research on organizational development and collaboration and towards an exploration of research on partnerships specifically in an ecosystem context. An expanded literature review generated a list of nine categories of "emerging characteristics" and sub-characteristics that research indicates as potentially important for the success of collaboratives:

- Communication
- Culture & Values
- Learning & Development
- Conflict Management
- Use of Data and Science
- Extent of Collaboration
- Collaborative Process
- Collaborative Outcomes
- Funding

IEN created a synthesis of this initial analysis to share for reaction in the next stage of research: interviews with academics and practitioners with expertise in ecosystem collaboration and evaluation.

2. Interviews with Subject Matter Experts

IEN worked with the NFWF team to identify nine individuals working in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed and in other areas of the United States for participation in in-depth interviews on the subject of identifying factors of success for ecosystem collaboratives. Of the nine people approached to participate, the following eight individuals were interviewed:

Experts in Ecosystem Collaboration (research + practice)
> Steven L. Yaffee, University of Michigan
> Julia M. Wondolleck, University of Michigan
> Richard D. Margerum, University of Oregon
> Bill Labich, Highstead Foundation

Expert in Collaboration and Evaluation (research + practice)
> Rebecca Woodland, University of Massachusetts Amherst

Leaders of Exemplary Ecosystem Collaboratives
> Wendy Walsh, Upper Susquehanna Coalition
> Allyson Gibson, Lancaster Clean Water Partners
> Marjorie Mayfield Jackson, Elizabeth River Project

In general, the interviews were very rich and pushed the analysis beyond considering metrics that are essential to collaboration and organizational success, and towards more a more focused understanding of potential factors of success for ecosystem collaboratives. Interviewees stressed the importance of human factors such as *passion, motivation, vision, clarity of purpose,* and *quality of relationships / interactions* as being more important than any particular governance or legal structure. While these qualities can be cultivated through investments in process such as strategic planning retreats and networking events, they can also be fostered through investment in pilot projects that create a feeling of optimism, success, and potential. In terms of structure, interviews suggested a general principle that collaboratives should ideally remain as lean and nimble as possible in relation to the actual conditions and challenges they are working within, while at the same time acknowledging that collaboratives do need to operate with—or proximate to—real authority to undertake projects and implement changes on-the-ground.

The interviews emphasized one particular opportunity for funder investment that was very much substantiated by results of the online survey administered later: Provide **funding for a coordinator position** to absorb basic operating, administrative, fundraising, and evaluation

functions that volunteer members do not have time to sustain. Interviews also emphasized the importance of technical expertise that can be recruited in a variety of ways, from funding for a dedicated position staffed by the collaborative, to creating technical teams comprised of collaborative members. Some interviews emphasized the opportunity of collaboratives to provide GIS visualization expertise to the regions they serve, as this is often a less available resource particularly in rural contexts. Interviewees did underscore that collaboratives should staff technical expertise in order to fill a gap in their region, and should not duplicate existing services provided by partner organizations.

The interviewees emphasized two areas of significant *opportunity* that tend to be under-resourced: *Communications (Storytelling)* and *Evaluation.* Representatives of model ecosystem collaboratives expressed the desire to have more time, funding, and training to apply towards communicating successes, best practices, lessons learned, and the case for collaboration, as well as a desire to learn more from the experiences of other collaboratives. Discussion of evaluation emphasized the critical importance of fostering a learning / growth mindset through process and developmental evaluation, and not just impact / outcomes evaluation. While ecological metrics should be monitored and tracked continuously, it may be a mistake to *evaluate* newer collaboratives on ecological outcomes until they have been able to focus on building momentum and sustaining engagement for five or more years.

One surprising insight from the interviews is that external threats, such as ecosystem degradation or new policy landscapes, may have more impact than any other factor in bringing stakeholders to the table to collaborate. This observation may indicate that funders do well to invest in regions where threats are keenly felt by a broad cross-section of organizations and stakeholders.

Top insights of interviewees from the three represented model ecosystem collaboratives are captured below:

Upper Susquehanna Coalition
Network of 17 Soil & Water Conservation Districts in NY and 4 Conservation Districts in PA
u-s-c.org

- Prioritize relationships with local partners and help them increase their efficacy and access to resources (do not compete for funding).
- Gain a deep knowledge of local needs and opportunities and develop technical resources that specifically fill those gaps.
- Funding a coordinator role is one of the most efficient ways to sustain and accelerate the collaborative's project / implementation activities.

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Lancaster Clean Water Partners

Diverse group of participating organizations working towards a common goal of clean and clear water for Lancaster County

lancastercleanwaterpartners.com

- Invest energy into making the case for collaboration across a broad range of sectors and communities; the "collective impact" framework more commonly used in the social sector is a powerful tool in environmental collaboration and helps stakeholders to understand why the long-term pay-offs of collaboration merit the time invested.
- An informal "coalition" structure has worked well; focus on building relationships while reassuring partners that the collaborative will not compete for resources.
- Providing "flexible" funding is one of the most important things a funder can do to build the success and impact of ecosystem collaboratives.

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Elizabeth River Project

Model collaboration of citizens, businesses, government, and academia working to achieve a world-class legacy: a thriving urban river.

elizabethriver.org

- Collaboratives can become more effective by engaging independent professional facilitators to help convene diverse stakeholders and ensure all voices are respected.
- Collaboratives should invest in strategic planning to build a shared vision and identify goals and opportunities, but formal structures such as boards and by-laws may be impediments.
- Collaboratives can build momentum by taking time to celebrate successes.

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Qualitative analysis of interview findings, considered alongside the literature review, generated a focused list of four categories encompassing key "factors of success" for ecosystem collaboratives: Motivation, Capacity, Effective Process, and Evaluation. This framework was then presented for feedback from a group of experts in Chesapeake Bay Watershed conservation who convened as part of a workshop hosted by NFWF.

3. **Workshop with Chesapeake Bay Conservation and Restoration Funders and Practitioners**

IEN facilitated a half day workshop with 17 experts in Chesapeake Bay conservation and restoration. Workshop participants were identified by the NFWF team in consultation with IEN, and they included representatives of funding bodies as well as experts in conservation, collaboration, and evaluation. After being briefed on the research methods and preliminary findings generated to date, workshop participants weighed in on gaps and opportunities for

strengthening the project as well as their insights into what factors may be most important to the success of ecosystem collaboratives. Common themes raised in the workshop included:

- Interest in identifying *when*, in the life cycle of a collaborative, grant funding may make the most difference (e.g. launching new collaboratives vs. scaling up established collaboratives).
- Observation that there cannot be a "one size fits all" approach, but that collaboratives should demonstrate that the scale of their operations reflects the scale of the ecological and social / political landscape they are working within.
- Emphasis on the importance of collaboratives engaging the "right stakeholders" and being responsive to community needs and ideas.
- Emphasis on the importance of marketing (storytelling) to motivating participation and investment, and to sharing best practices and lessons learned.
- Concern that metrics be specific enough to be trackable while being flexible enough to account for the complexity of particular local and regional, dynamic ecological and socio-political conditions.
- Anticipation that ecosystem collaboratives would benefit from funding and technical assistance around coordination, governance, leadership, marketing, strategic planning, and fundraising.

Workshop participants also advised IEN on how best to proceed with the final stage of research: development and administration of an online survey of ecosystem collaboratives in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed and elsewhere in the United States. Participants weighed in on survey design, how best to incentivize participation in the survey, criteria for selection of survey recipients, and recommendations of specific collaboratives to consider including.

4. **Online Survey of Ecosystem Collaboratives in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed and in other Ecosystems Nationally**

The final stage of the research process was development and administration of an online survey to representatives of 27 collaboratives in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed and 14 collaboratives in other geographic regions of the United States. The survey was disseminated via email to one point of contact for each of the 41 collaboratives, were identified for inclusion by the NFWF team in consultation with the workshop participants. These collaboratives were included because they are already believed to be having a significant impact in terms of accelerating conservation and restoration goals in their ecological regions. Recipients of the email were asked to complete the survey and to also share the link with at least two additional representatives of their collaborative. A total of 77 responses were recorded, representing a

response rate of 63% relative to the aspirational target of three responses per collaborative (n=123) or 187% relative to the number of people invited directly by IEN (n=41).

Survey respondents fielded questions in three categories: a) their own participation as part of an ecosystem collaborative, b) four areas (Motivation, Capacity, Effective Process, and Evaluation) that encompass potential "factors of success" for ecosystem collaboratives, and c) related to opportunities for funders to make a difference in incentivizing and strengthening these factors.

A separate report submitted to NFWF presents a thorough, anonymized summary of all survey responses. In general, respondents ranked factors related to Motivation and Capacity as most important to collaborative success, with Effective Process and Evaluation ranked as third and fourth most important, respectively. Across all open text responses in the survey, the idea of funding a Collaborative Coordinator position emerged as the most commonly mentioned strategy for making a difference to collaborative success. Providing flexible funding; long-term funding; training and/or technical assistance in process skills (e.g. facilitation, evaluation, strategic planning); and convening and networking opportunities were also frequently mentioned.

IV. Conclusion

In summary, a four-stage qualitative research process—a multidisciplinary literature review, interviews with eight subject matter experts, a workshop (focus group) with Chesapeake Bay Watershed funders and practitioners; and an online survey of more than 40 ecosystem collaboratives—generated a succinct set of recommendations within four categories: Motivation, Capacity, Effective Process, and Evaluation. The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation may wish to consider focusing on particular metrics and funding strategies within these areas as it seeks to incentivize and strengthen ecosystem collaboratives towards accelerating the conservation and restoration of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed.