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A Case Study in Cooperative Land Management: The Tapash Sustainable Forestry Collaborative

Introduction

Collaboration is widely recognized as a critical practice across many disciplines—in land management it is both essential and often contentious. Effectively and sustainably managing shared landscapes requires place-based, cross-boundary partnerships that bring together diverse stakeholders. However, the concept of collaboration is interpreted differently across the literature, shaping the structures and functions of different collaborative initiatives. This paper examines a case study of the Tapash Sustainable Forest Collaborative, a collaborative initiative focused on landscape-scale restoration and conservation and analyzes how its approach aligns with and challenges key theoretical perspectives on collaboration.

The Tapash Sustainable Forestry Collaborative

Background

The rugged hills, canyons, and forests in central Washington play an essential role in maintaining ecological integrity and resilience across the region. This landscape supports some of the few remaining mature ponderosa pine groves in the state, forming a critical part of the native dry forest and shrub-steppe ecosystem. Over the past century, this landscape has undergone significant transformation due to wildfires, land conversion, fire suppression, insect and disease outbreaks, invasive species, and climate change. In addition to these ecological pressures, a range of political, legal, and economic challenges have emerged, including shifts in the forestry industry, funding limitations, fragmented land ownership, and a lack of coordinated management among landowners.

The Tapash Sustainable Forest Collaborative (Tapash) was created to address these complex challenges through a cooperative, landscape-scale approach. In 2007, five major public, non-profit, and tribal land management agencies in central Washington – including the Yakama Nation, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), U.S. Forest Service, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, and Washington State Department of Natural Resources – formally established the collaboration through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). Figure 1 shows a map of the lands that fall under the Tapash collaborative. The word “tapash” (táp'ash) means “pine tree” in Sahaptin, the language spoken by members of the Yakama Nation (Washington, 2020).

Mission and Purpose

The official mission of Tapash is "to improve the ecosystem health and natural functions of the landscape through active restoration projects backed by best science, community input, and adaptive management" (Tapash Strategic Plan, 2020, p. 1). The collaborative goals include supporting healthy fish and wildlife populations, reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfires, preserving cultural values, maintaining forested landscapes for current and future generations, and promoting a sustainable economy. The guiding principles of Tapash emphasize landscape-scale, cross-boundary forest restoration, promoting active management to improve ecosystem health, while supporting local infrastructure and workforce development to enable restoration efforts.

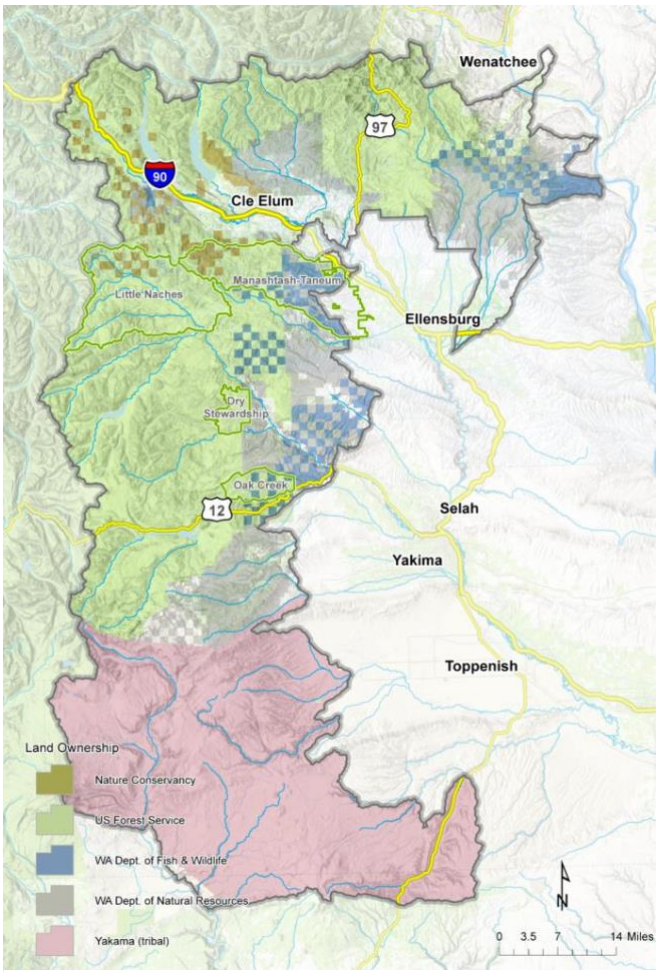

Figure 1. Land Under Tapash Forestry Sustainable Collaborative Source: Tapash, n.d.

Funding and Strategy

Tapash employs a diversified funding strategy that combines federal support, partner contributions, and philanthropic resources. A significant portion of funding initially came from the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) under the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, although that funding is no longer active (Tapash, 2013). In the absence of CFLRP funding, Tapash has leveraged diversified financial support from federal, state, tribal, and non-profit partners, as well as other grant programs.

Guided by The Nature Conservancy's Conservation Action Planning framework, Tapash's five partners defined Tapash's scope, vision, and ecological outcomes, producing key documents such as a 2010 CFLRP proposal and a 10-year strategic plan last updated in 2020. Tapash's overarching goal is to manage roughly three million acres of forest for climate resilience. Between 2020 and 2030, the collaborative is pursuing nine objectives focused on forest health, community engagement, and workforce development. Strategies include identifying lands at risk of conversion or degradation, prioritizing acquisitions, and implementing landscape-scale restoration through thinning and prescribed burns. These actions aim to reduce wildfire risk, restore natural fire regimes, and create open patch habitats critical for biodiversity. Additional goals include supporting the regional wood products economy, meeting restoration targets in Washington's 20-Year Forest Health Strategic Plan, improving recreation opportunities, and advancing community fire adaptation. Tapash also seeks to expand local employment, strengthen regional

collaboration, and engage communities and academic partners to ensure long-term forest resilience (Tapash, 2020).

Structure and Process

Tapash has a top-down organizational structure, directed by an Executive Team composed of one representative from each of the five Tapash partner agencies. The Chair and Vice Chair of the Tapash Executive Team change annually – the Vice Chair is appointed by the rest of the Executive Team, rotating into the Chair role each June (Tapash Strategic Plan, 2020, p. 5-6). The Executive Team is tasked with providing strategic direction to project-level working groups. The collaborative also includes a "full membership" group, encompassing all other stakeholders and partners, such as landowners, other state and federal agencies, non-profits, community groups, and policymakers.

All decisions are made by consensus at the executive level. Within the Tapash 2020 Strategic Plan, "consensus" is defined as "striving for unqualified agreement where an Executive Team member may have reservations but 'can live with it' and will support the group decision when away from the table" (Tapash Strategic Plan, 2020, p. 5). Formal decisions are made by the process of proposal, discussion, and an active check for executive team concurrence.

Key Actions

Since its inception, the Tapash Sustainable Forest Collaborative has focused on large-scale landscape and watershed restoration and conservation across central Washington. Early efforts included the transfer of over 10,000 acres of Plum Creek Timber lands to public ownership to prevent development and maintain forest health, laying the groundwork for cross-boundary collaboration (Tapash, 2022). Other notable projects include the Manastash–Taneum Resilient Landscapes Restoration Project, which focuses on thinning and prescribed burning to restore dry ponderosa pine forests and shrub-steppe ecosystems, and the Tapash Landscape Prescribed Fire Pilot Project, designed to reduce hazardous fuel loads and mitigate the risk of severe wildfire. Tapash has also advanced aquatic restoration through the North Fork Teanaway River Large Wood Additions, which enhance stream function and habitat connectivity, and supported the Little Crow Restoration Project on the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest, balancing watershed restoration with

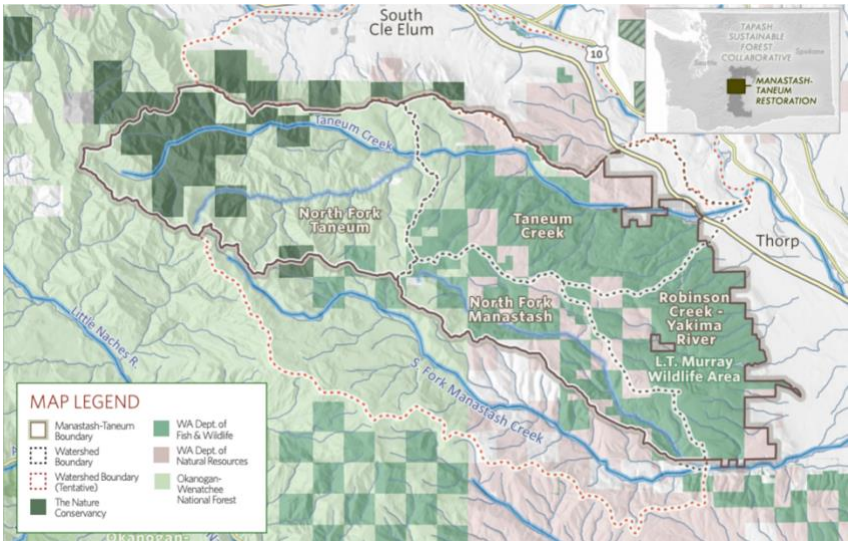

Figure 2. Map of Manatash-Teneum Restoration Project
Source: Tapash, n.d.

recreation access (Tapash, n.d.).

Beyond ecological restoration, Tapash has worked to strengthen local economies and expand collaborative capacity. Tapash projects create jobs in forestry and habitat restoration while supporting youth programs like AmeriCorps. Tapash also partners with community coalitions such as Kittitas Fire Adapted Communities Coalition to integrate recreation planning and wildfire risk reduction into its strategy (Washington, 2020). These partnerships provide education, planning, and technical support for residents and landowners, along with training programs that create career pathways for young adults in resource management—ensuring wildfire resilience strategies also enhance community access and enjoyment of these landscapes.

Discussion

Understanding Collaboration: Key Theoretical Foundations

Collaboration, as defined in the literature, is both an approach to and a process of bringing together diverse stakeholders to address complex, often cross-boundary challenges. Margerum (2011) describes collaboration as "an approach to solving complex problems in which a diverse group of autonomous stakeholders deliberates to build consensus and develop networks for translating consensus into results" (p. 6). This definition emphasizes not only the diversity and autonomy of participants but also the importance of deliberation, consensus-building, and network development. Margerum further outlines the "7 C's" of collaboration - communication, consultation, conflict resolution, consensus building, cooperation, coordination, and capacity building - as essential components of effective collaborative processes (p. 7).

Linden (2002) complements this view by emphasizing the structural and motivational elements of successful collaboration. He argues that effective partnerships require a shared, specific purpose, the presence of appropriate stakeholders, and a credible, open process that fosters joint ownership (p. 55). Importantly, Linden notes that "cooperation requires individuality," suggesting that collaboration not only works, but can in fact be even more effective when participants bring unique perspectives and expertise to a collective effort (p. 45). Innes and Booher (2010) add that successful collaboration depends on Diversity, Interdependence, and Authentic Dialogue, which together foster mutual learning and innovation in complex planning environments.

Tapash in Context: Alignment and Tensions with Collaborative Theory

The Tapash Sustainable Forest Collaborative aligns with many theoretical definitions of collaboration, particularly in its structure and goals. Formed through an MOU among five major land management entities, each representing distinct but overlapping organizational priorities, Tapash exemplifies the kind of diverse, autonomous stakeholder group that Margerum (2011) and Linden (2002) describe. The collaborative emerges from strong interlinkages tied to the regional forestry economy, which Margerum notes can facilitate collaboration by creating shared incentives among stakeholders (pp. 59–60). Its mission to restore forest health and resilience across central Washington reflects a shared, specific

purpose, while its consensus-based decision-making process and rotating leadership structure support joint ownership and trust.

Tapash's process around project selection and working group formation are relatively undefined. This flexibility enables the collaborative to adapt to emerging priorities and align with other regional initiatives, reflecting the idea that adaptive collaboration is needed to respond to uncertainty and changing conditions (Margerum, 2011, p. 10). However, this also introduces ambiguity and potential transparency issues. Similar to the San Francisco case studies discussed by Innes and Booher (2010), where unclear boundaries and shifting roles complicated accountability, Tapash's lack of explicit protocols for project selection and stakeholder engagement raises questions about inclusivity and clarity in decision-making.

Tapash benefits from what Margerum calls "legitimate brokers"; large, credible organizations that convene and lend authority to the process (p. 59). Its founding partners include federal, state, tribal, and non-profit entities, which allows stakeholders to identify with at least one convener and trust the process. This legitimacy is critical for building confidence in collaborative governance and sustaining long-term engagement. At the same time, the concentration of decision-making power among five very large and influential organizations may limit broader stakeholder influence. Margerum (2011) cautions that such stakeholder-based collaboratives can risk "mirroring existing power structures" (p. 76), especially when public participation is limited. At the same time, large-scale, regional restoration is difficult to accomplish entirely at a grassroots level, making the leadership of major landowner agencies—while engaging smaller landowners as needed—a pragmatic approach for achieving landscape-scale objectives.

While Tapash's priorities emphasize community engagement and its documents indicate that grassroots working groups and volunteers often participate in restoration projects (Washington, 2020) participation at the project level does not necessarily translate into influence over strategic decisions. Tapash's consensus model reflects a pragmatic approach but may fall short of the transformative dialogue envisioned in DAID theory (Innes & Booher, 2010). Without further information about the deliberative processes that have taken place over the years within Tapash, it is difficult to evaluate whether decision-making has been transparent and inclusive. The available documents do not specify whether mechanisms exist for gathering community feedback, resolving conflicts, or ensuring that diverse voices beyond the five signatory organizations influence outcomes. It is unclear if and how outside stakeholders are involved in strategic decision-making and whether meeting facilitation practices effectively encourage broad input. This ambiguity raises questions about whether Tapash's structure and processes enhance adaptability at the expense of transparency.

Despite these limitations, Tapash demonstrates many of the success factors identified in recent empirical studies of collaborative conservation. Wilkins et al. (2021) identify common motivations for collaborative conservation in the U.S., including ecological restoration, economic revitalization, and cultural preservation, all of which are central to Tapash's mission. McIntyre and Schultz (2020) further highlight the benefits of collaborative

policy innovations in forest management, such as increased capacity, shared learning, and improved ecological outcomes. Tapash's work in strengthening local economies through workforce development, upholding cultural values by honoring treaty rights, and restoring ecological integrity using both scientific and traditional practices underscore its strong commitment to achieving the goals of successful, landscape-scale collaboration.

Conclusion

Collaboratives like Tapash demonstrate that the success of large-scale land management depends on an integrated, holistic approach that combines ecological restoration, cultural values, and economic sustainability. Tapash is an example of collaborative theory in practice, showing how cross-jurisdictional coordination, diverse knowledge integration, and adaptive strategies can advance resilience in complex socio-ecological systems. Its ability to align major landowner agencies, tribal partners, and community stakeholders has enabled significant progress toward landscape-scale restoration goals.

However, the case also underscores persistent challenges. Tapash's centralized governance structure and reliance on a small executive team raise concerns about transparency and inclusivity, particularly in strategic decision-making. While grassroots participation in projects is evident, influence over priorities and processes remains limited, reflecting the tension between efficiency and deep community engagement.

Ultimately, Tapash illustrates both the promise and complexity of collaborative conservation. Its achievements affirm that integrated, adaptive approaches can deliver ecological and social benefits, while its limitations demonstrate that balancing power, participation, and transparency is essential for long-term success. As collaborative governance continues to evolve, Tapash offers valuable lessons for designing partnerships that are both effective and equitable in managing shared landscapes.

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