

# Working Across Boundaries: A Framework for Regional Collaboration

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The case for thinking and acting regionally has been made in this country for well over 100 years. After surveying the West in 1890, John Wesley Powell published an essay titled “Institutions for the Arid Lands,” in which he articulated his vision that the most appropriate institutions for governing western resources are commonwealths defined by watersheds. He reasoned that “there is a body of interdependent and unified interests and values, all collected in [a] hydrographic basin, and all segregated by well-defined boundary lines from the rest of the world. The people in such a district have common interests, common rights, and common duties, and must necessarily work together for common purposes” (Powell 1890, 114).

Powell’s prescription to organize around watersheds was largely ignored in the formative years of the settlement and development of the West (Stegner 1953). His vision of watershed democracies, however, is part of a larger story of how American citizens and communities have attempted to govern public affairs on the basis of regions. Some 30 years after Powell’s writing, Lewis Mumford, Benton MacKaye and others created the Regional Planning Association of America in 1923 to focus largely on cities

and municipal regions, and to a lesser extent on rural and wilderness landscapes. Although the history of regionalism is characterized by a mix of successes and failures, there is renewed interest throughout North America in addressing land use, natural resource and environmental problems on a regional basis (see Derthick 1974; Seltzer 2000; Foster 2001).

Today, regional initiatives emerge in response to a growing number of land use and related issues that transcend political and jurisdictional boundaries and often involve business and nonprofit organizations. These issues are most often framed as a crisis or threat, and less so as an opportunity: sprawl across city, county and even state boundaries; water supply for growing communities; water quality protection; wildlife habitat; management of traffic corridors; economic development; and taxation. Effective solutions require people to work across boundaries (jurisdictions, sectors and even disciplines) on a regional scale that corresponds to the challenge or opportunity, as in the New York–New Jersey Highlands region.

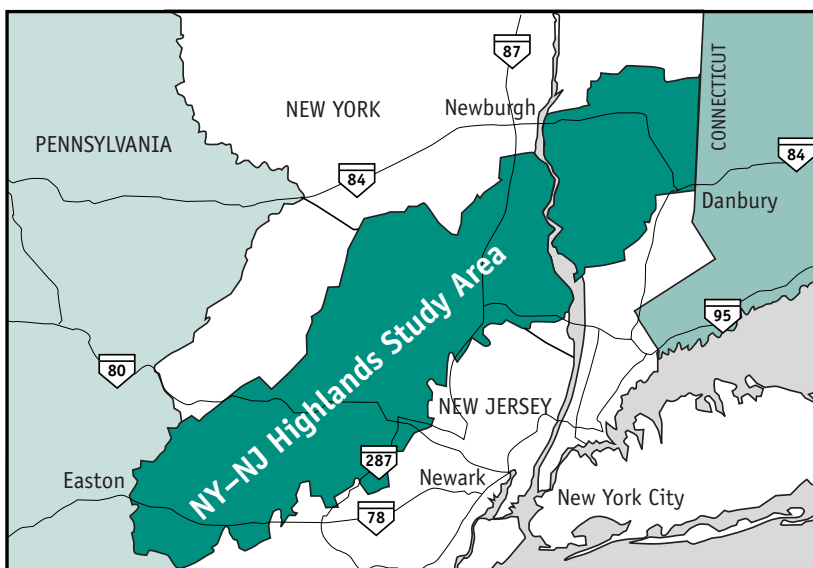
Existing institutions, however, rarely have the legitimacy and credibility to convene the plurality of stakeholders interested

in or affected by these regional issues. In response, policy makers will occasionally mandate some form of regional collaboration as the most logical way to address trans-boundary issues. Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), for example, are required to develop regional transportation plans in order to secure access to federal transportation dollars. Some landscape-based efforts, such as the Adirondack Park Commission and the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, also fall into this category. In these types of cases, policy makers mandate regional collaboration when it is apparent that responding within jurisdictional boundaries is ineffective or threatens the integrity of key resources central to community identity and prospects.

When policy makers are slow to act, or fail to act, stakeholders may become frustrated and ultimately realize that if anything is going to happen citizens need to step forward, with or without government participation. Thus, regional initiatives emerge as much from the bottom up as the top down. When people inhabiting a common place develop a shared recognition that acting together is the best way to address a regional crisis, threat or opportunity, or simply to



Source: New York–New Jersey Highlands Regional Study Technical Report. 2003. Newtown Square, PA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service (April): 46. ([http://www.fs.fed.us/na/highlands/atechnical\\_report/index.html](http://www.fs.fed.us/na/highlands/atechnical_report/index.html))



achieve economies of scale, we see regional initiatives arise more organically, bubbling up from a shared sense of destiny or fate.

In light of the growing interest in acting regionally, this article offers a framework to help organize our thinking about regionalism, and to begin to identify and promote best practices for regional collaboration. No single model or approach will solve all regional problems. By looking at regional efforts around the country, however, it is possible to identify a common set of goals and principles for initiating, designing and sustaining regional efforts.

Shortly before his death, John W. Gardner, a long-time advocate for regional approaches to solving public problems, argued that there can be “no more regionalism for its own sake. We now need pragmatic regionalism with a purpose” (Parr et al. 2002, 3). While the specific objectives of regional initiatives vary, the overarching purpose of most regional initiatives is to integrate three goals (see Figure 1).

### Regional Leadership

To achieve these goals, regional initiatives require a certain type of leadership. In contrast to exercising authority by taking unilateral action (a command-and-control model of leadership), people who initiate regional efforts cross jurisdictions, sectors, disciplines and cultures to forge alliances with diverse interests and viewpoints. These “regional stewards” invite people to take ownership

of a shared vision and values, and they work hard to bridge differences and nourish networks of relationships.

Regional stewards share power and mobilize people, ideas and resources. They also provide integrity and credibility, and show a high tolerance for complexity, uncertainty and change. They emphasize dialogue and build relationships by respecting the diversity of ideas and viewpoints. Respect builds trust, which in turn fosters communication, understanding and eventually agreement.

Regional stewards tend to be committed to the long-term well-being of a particular place. They apply the same entrepreneurial spirit and persistence to solving regional challenges that business entrepreneurs apply in building a business; they are *civic entrepreneurs*. They see the need for more connected regional approaches to address social, economic and environmental issues; they are *integrators*. They build support from leaders, citizens, interest groups and policy makers toward a shared vision; they are *coalition builders*. Regional stewards hold themselves and each other accountable to achieve tangible results and sustained outcomes.

Regional stewards may be local elected or appointed officials, university or college professors, local business executives, program officers at philanthropic foundations, staff or board members of nonprofit organizations, and community activists. Regardless of their background or station in life, they share a common belief in the need to work across boundaries to accomplish the goals of regional stewardship (Parr et al. 2002).

### Principles for Regional Collaboration

To foster livable communities, vibrant economies and healthy environments through regional collaboration, we have distilled seven principles from the literature and our own experiences. These principles are not necessarily new, but they embody practices that, when used in a regional context, create the conditions for successful collaboration.

**1. Make the Case.** Working across boundaries is tough. There is tremendous inertia in existing political arrangements, so the reasons for working regionally must be clear

FIGURE 2  
Objectives of Regional Initiatives

- Build knowledge and understanding**
  - Conduct research
  - Acquire information
- Build community**
  - Inform and educate citizens and leaders
  - Promote mutual understanding
  - Shape public values
  - Stimulate conversation
  - Foster a common sense of place
- Share resources**
- Solve specific problems**
  - Provide input and advice
  - Advocate for a particular interest or outcome
  - Resolve disputes
- Govern**
  - Make and enforce decisions

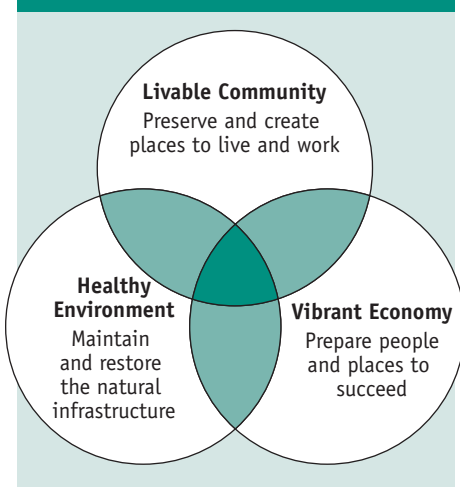
Source: McKinney et al. 2002

and compelling. Regional collaboration emerges when a core group of leaders recognizes a crisis, threat or opportunity that is not likely to be adequately addressed through existing institutional arrangements. Depending on the unique needs and interests of a region, initiatives might be organized to achieve one or more objectives (see Figure 2). Far from being mutually exclusive, these objectives reinforce one another and suggest a natural progression from knowledge- and community-building to advocacy and governance.

### 2. Mobilize and Engage Key Participants.

To be effective, regional initiatives must engage the right people. If the objective is to advocate for a particular interest or outcome, a different group of people will be required than if the objective is to build agreement on a regional vision or resolve a multiparty dispute among people with different viewpoints. In the latter types of situations, the regional forums should be as inclusive as possible, seeking people who are interested in and affected by the issue, those needed to implement any potential recommendation (i.e., those with authority), and those who might undermine the process or outcome if not included.

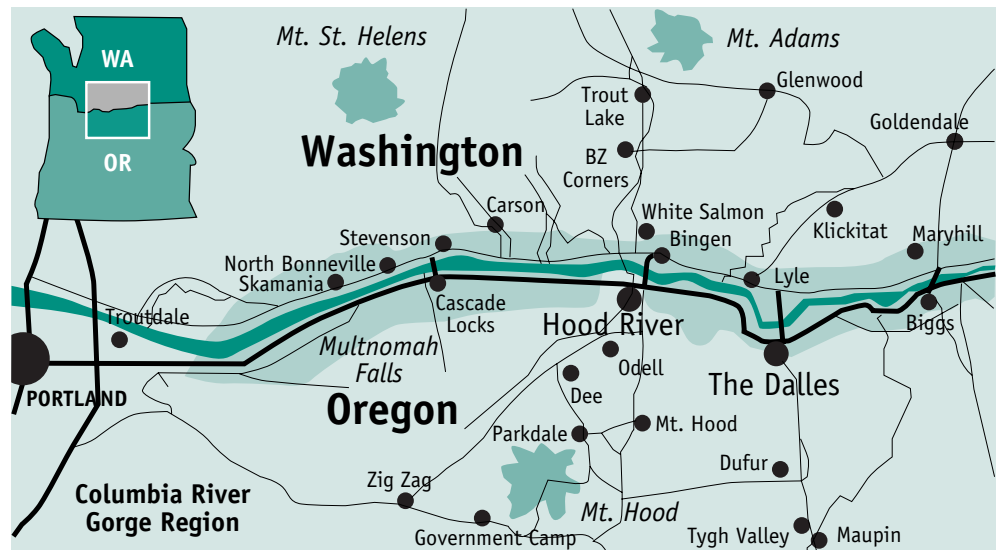
FIGURE 1  
Goals of Regional Collaboration



**3. Define the Region Based on People's Interests.** Regions vary in size and shape. Some are defined by a sense of place while others address a key function or purpose, such as a watershed, transportation corridor or ecosystem. How people define a region naturally flows from their interests and concerns. This variation in scale suggests that regionalism is at once a unifying theme and an adaptive concept. However it is defined, the region must engage the hearts and minds of people and appeal to shared interests. The precise physical boundaries of a region are often less important than the process of clarifying the core area of interest. Boundaries can be soft and flexible, adaptable to changing needs and interests.

**4. Foster Mutual Learning.** Regional efforts often begin by providing opportunities to learn about the region and how to think and act across boundaries. Building this common understanding fosters a sense of regional identity, and often the will to act. Regional forums should enable participants to jointly develop and rely on the best available information regardless of the source, thereby creating a greater sense of ownership in the region's story. Regional efforts should consider a variety of scenarios and options to shape the future of the region, and all participants should have an equal opportunity to share views and information.

**5. Forge Collaborative Decisions.** Since most regional initiatives do not have authority per se, they must create coalitions and forge collaborative decisions to foster social change and shape public policy. Collaboration is a social learning process where people share knowledge, ideas and experiences through cooperative, face-to-face interaction. The premise of collaboration is that if the right people come together in constructive ways with good information they will produce effective, sustainable solutions to the challenges and opportunities they face. Genuine collaboration occurs when people listen to each other, consider the rationales or interests behind competing viewpoints, and seek solutions that integrate as many interests as possible. Collaborative decision making may or may not result in consensus or



Source: Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service (<http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/columbia/forest/maps/>)

unanimous agreement, but it allows participants to create effective coalitions to get things done.

**6. Take Strategic Action.** The objectives of a regional collaboration should determine what people do. Experience suggests that early successes help build momentum and trust. It is important to develop the capacity to (1) communicate your message, make it relevant and compelling, and use multiple strategies to inform, educate and mobilize people (e.g., media, public events, publications, Web sites); (2) link your effort to established decision-making systems by seeking access to power rather than power itself; and (3) monitor, evaluate and adapt by developing indicators of performance and clarifying who will do what, when and how.

Being strategic and deciding what to do require an understanding of how regional action supplements efforts at local, state and even national levels. The desired outcomes for a region are often contingent upon many seemingly disconnected decisions. Regional strategies need to recognize these contingencies up front, and create opportunities to build bridges, coordinate actions and do things that otherwise would not get done.

**7. Sustain Regional Action and Institutionalize Regional Efforts.** Assuming there is a need to sustain a regional partnership, the key challenge is to keep stakeholders engaged and to recruit more leaders. Since

the region is no one's community, building a sense of regional identity, responding to the needs and interests of partners, and capturing and sharing accomplishments are critical to sustain any regional effort. To be effective, regional initiatives should be both idealistic and opportunistic. People's attention will naturally devolve to more established, usually local, institutions if the mission of the regional effort is not consistently and continuously reviewed, revised, renewed and adapted to address new information and opportunities.

Regional stewards should also explore the value of integrating regional efforts into existing institutions or designing new ones. Partners need to identify and develop the capacities to sustain the regional initiatives: people, resources (e.g., money and information) and organizational structure. Given the source and diversity of regional initiatives, it is not surprising that different organizational models have emerged to meet particular challenges.

### Tools for Regional Collaboration

To foster effective regional initiatives and support regional stewards, the Lincoln Institute offers the two-day skill-building course Regional Collaboration, usually in the spring. The Institute also convenes Regional Collaboration Clinics in selected regions, where we work with diverse groups of people to address the regional challenges and opportunities they face. Recently, we

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completed clinics in the New York–New Jersey Highlands and the Delaware River Basin, both regions experiencing tremendous growth and development. For more information on the course or clinics, contact Matthew McKinney.

The Alliance for Regional Stewardship is in the process of creating RegionLink, an online consultative network for regional practitioners. For more information on this tool, contact John Parr.

Our approach to regional collaboration is experimental. We are interested in working with and learning from people involved at different regional scales and on different issues. Please contact us to share your story and suggest how we might improve the

framework presented here to better reflect the practice of regional stewardship. **L**

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