Identifying Ecological Restoration Needs:
Lessons Learned from the Cherokee National Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative

For many National Forests, restoration is an elusive goal. There are as many reasons for that as there are National Forests in need of restoration. However, some obstacles are universal. These include the need for an engaged and educated public, the need for scientifically credible restoration goals, and the need for sustainable restoration funding. Developing a meaningful collaborative process can be a very useful tool in surmounting each of these obstacles.

Likewise, there is no one formula for successful restoration planning. Each forest has its unique ecosystems, challenges and local social conditions making a "one size fits all" approach unacceptable. However, we believe there are universal good practices of restoration planning and consensus-building that, if applied, will greatly improve the likelihood of success. With this paper, we hope to show that the Cherokee National Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative (CNFLRI) can provide a model for addressing the multiple complex issues and obstacles surrounding ecological restoration in the Southern Appalachians and throughout the country.

This paper is designed to showcase the work of the CNFLRI both as a model for successful collaboration and as a model for Southern Appalachian ecosystem restoration. The CNFLRI was convened in 2009 and resulted in a comprehensive set of restoration recommendations for the North Zone of the Cherokee National Forest. The specific methodology and resulting recommendations from the CNFLRI can be found in the report (link below) produced by the Steering Committee and submitted to the Forest Service titled "Cherokee National Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative Steering Committee Recommendations to the Forest Service for the North Zone (Watauga and Unaka Districts) of the Cherokee National Forest." Therefore, this paper will focus on the process and concepts that can be transferred to other areas.

There were two main cornerstones on which all of the CNRLRI efforts were based. The first was building collaboration (including a public participation process); the second was ensuring that we used a scientific approach. The following is a list of lessons learned in tackling each of those challenges throughout the CNFLRI process that can potentially be applied to other forestlands, whether located in the Southern Appalachians or not.

Enabling Conditions

Supportive, Engaged Leadership

Collaborative processes are long and often time-intensive projects. In order to ensure that participants' time is valued and well spent, it is imperative for the collaborative process to be supported by the top decision-maker in the agency as well as any other key decision-makers within the agency. In the case of the CNFLRI, this was the Forest Supervisor and the two District Rangers. When efforts are intended to influence management of publicly owned lands, it is particularly crucial there are assurances that the results of the effort will be considered and

given favorable attention. In fact, there is little reason to undertake such a project without this support.

Additionally, an engaged and supportive leadership can be a huge help and ally when difficult times arise. Supportive leaders can provide a boost to morale or help get the group over a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. This is particularly true if they do not attend every meeting, but leave the group to complete its task independently and return only periodically or when requested.

Driving Force

There must be a motivating reason for people to participate in a collaborative process. The reason could be an imminent threat to Forest Health, or it could be as straightforward as a Forest Planning or revision process. For many members of the CNFLRI, the main driving force for their participation was dissatisfaction with the status quo.

In years prior to the CNFLRI efforts, the Cherokee National Forest Land and Resource Management plan revision process had taken nearly a decade in fits and starts. Since that time there had been numerous obstacles to fully implementing that revised plan. Chief among them have been budget constraints, lack of staff experienced in ecological restoration, and appeals/litigation. During the five-year review process, the Forest Service found that there were goals set forth in the plan that remained largely or completely undone, resulting in frustration on the part of Forest Service employees as well as members of the public. It became obvious that a new approach was needed.

The CNFLRI was an attempt to do something completely new. The frustration that stakeholders had felt became a driving force for the success of the CNFLRI project, because people were willing to try something brand new. Whether it is dissatisfaction at the current state of affairs, or some other urgent need, there must be a driving force behind your efforts that will keep people engaged throughout the process and provide a reason for the group to operate in some way into the future when the main process is complete. Without this driving force, any sustained process is likely to fizzle out.

Funding

Though a collaborative process will not cost nearly as much money as implementing the resulting recommendations, costs are still incurred. Logistical support for meetings, scientific data collection, modeling and technical support, facilitation costs, travel to meetings, even support for participants are all potential costs. Having a flexible budget that allows room to expand or contract line items as dictated by the needs of the committee members is extremely helpful. Also, as noted later in this paper, projects are likely to take longer than originally planned. Flexible budgets and the ability to find additional money to cover costs can be critical for project completion. The CNFLRI was done as a challenge cost share between the Tennessee Chapter of The Nature Conservancy and the Forest Service. The time donated by each participant to the process was counted as in-kind support for the project.

Best Practices in Collaborative Forest Restoration Planning

Role of the Convener

When collaborative efforts are designed to influence management of publicly owned lands, it is often important to have an outside convener. In the case of the CNFLRI, this was the Tennessee Chapter of The Nature Conservancy. The convener organization had one seat on the Steering Committee and served several key roles.

First, the convener was the "worker bee." Professional facilitators are generally not encouraged to provide solutions for a group. Therefore, someone in the group must do the work to offer a solution or an idea. For the CNFLRI, this often took the form of drafting a "strawman" for the group to "pick apart" and make changes to. Particularly in the beginning, it was important to have a committee member prepared to do this work. As the process proceeded, the work began to be spread more evenly among committee members.

Second, the convener sets the tone for the group and needs to establish a good working relationship with each member of the group. It is helpful for the convener to understand the concerns and viewpoints of each member of the committee or group. This allows negotiations and "strawman" documents to be more effective.

Though it may be tempting for a convener to ally with one participant or "side" of an issue, it is best if that can be avoided. Though the convener is not necessarily neutral, it should be the primary goal of the convener to find consensus among the whole group.

Role of the Facilitator

The CNFLRI used a neutral facilitator chosen through the U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution. In many ways, the success of the CNFLRI process can be attributed to that facilitation and, therefore, it is recommended that any collaborative process involve a facilitator. Neutral facilitators play many roles. Chief among them is the creation of a non-threatening environment where all parties can be heard during discussions. Particularly on publicly owned lands, it is important to choose an outside facilitator. The Forest Service or other management entity is not and never can be neutral and will, therefore, likely adversely impact the creation of a non-threatening environment for discussion. Should the group agree that a facilitator is necessary, it is also important for all the committee or group members to understand and agree to the process that is used in hiring such a facilitator. Using the established criteria of the U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution was extremely helpful for the CNFLRI.

Embracing the Enemy: The Need for Diversity on the Committee

Picking a group that agrees on everything and calling it "collaboration" may be tempting, but it is not true collaboration. True collaboration on public lands must engage and include all the stakeholders. This means that, initially, many folks will feel that "the enemy" is on the committee. However, this is the only way to achieve meaningful engagement, and therefore lasting results. There are numerous benefits from taking this approach. Chief among them are:

- Everyone feels heard and has a stake in the outcomes.
- Diversity on the committee means you are much more likely to find common ground that is also middle ground, reasonable, and achievable.
- If you get the "warring factions" to agree, then the chances of having dissenters later is much less likely.
- Participation in a group forces individuals to relate to one another as individuals and may result in unlikely friendships. Many participants may find that they have more in common with their "enemy" than they thought.

One caveat to encouraging diversity on the committee is to beware of those that might participate simply to disrupt the process. It is important for all committee or group members to be ready to fully engage the process and be in a position to compromise and negotiate within the bounds of the process.

The CNFLRI conducted a committee self-assessment early in the process and determined whether additional members should be added to the Steering Committee. In the end this meant including groups and individuals that had historically been diametrically opposed to one another and even been on opposite sides of legal proceedings. In order to ensure all members were willing to participate, the CNFLRI convener interviewed every potential committee candidate prior to their invitation and asked about their willingness to compromise and negotiate on all issues.

Size Matters

While diversity is extremely important in a collaborative group, the number of people in a group is also an important consideration when you are convening a group. Having a smaller number of participants will make the coordination of meetings more manageable as well as encouraging a more intimate group dynamic. Therefore, it is important to think carefully about each member. Do they represent a new perspective that isn't currently included? The CNFLRI had a total of 13 participants (list found below).

Location, Location, Location

Do not expect participants to drive to the nearest major metropolitan area for your group meetings. In fact, asking them to do so shows that you do not respect their time and that you do not care enough about the place where you are working to drive there. This may be especially true in rural areas where it is very important not to appear as though someone from "outside" is telling them what to do. In many cases, our publicly owned lands cover large areas (the North Zone of the Cherokee spans seven counties) and traveling to those public lands can become difficult. Try to pick a location central to the management unit and most convenient for all stakeholders. If you plan to have a public participation component, be sure to plan for multiple meetings throughout the region covered by the management unit. The CNFLRI held public meetings in sets of three (Northern, Central and Southern portions of the North Zone of the CNF) in order to ensure maximum participation.

Develop Procedures Early and Follow Them

The process of developing procedures can be long and difficult. It often makes participants feel as though they are stuck and not making progress toward their end goal. However, these early negotiations over language and procedural details set the stage for future negotiations about much more emotionally charged issues. Additionally, developing procedures early can prevent larger difficulties later when unexpected difficulties arise. The old adage that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" applies well here. The CNFLRI policies and procedures can be found online at this link. However, each group is unique and what works for one may not work for another. Some key elements to consider when developing policies and procedures are:

- Requirements for continued service on the committee/group
- Replacing a member when they have to leave the process
- Voting or consensus finding procedures
- How to talk with the media and other outside entities
- Determining whether or not to use a facilitator (highly recommended)

It Is Not Over Till It's Over

The CNFLRI was initially scheduled to take 15 months. In the end, from the initial meetings with stakeholders to the presentation of the final document to the Forest Service took 25 months. However, extended timelines were often the least of our worries. Perseverance in the face of adversity was a crucial element. We had an extremely dedicated group of participants. There were many missteps along the way. However, the group was dedicated to finding solutions even if it was necessary to spend extra time, do more research, or have more discussions. Developing a similar atmosphere of dedication and perseverance will serve any collaborative group well.

This atmosphere of dedication will also serve you well if there are underlying disagreements that don't come to the surface until later in the process. If that is the case, don't be discouraged. Simply accept that the process may take some more time, and persevere.

Keep It Real

It would be difficult to overestimate the value of laughter and fellowship among committee members. Sharing a meal, a story about one's family, or a social drink has a way of breaking down barriers that no amount of meetings can provide. These opportunities should be provided early and as often as possible. Particularly during a long process, family or health circumstances are likely to take a least one committee member away from your committee meetings for some portion of the project. Providing an atmosphere of understanding and fellowship is important to keep such absences in perspective. Additionally, when the sparks fly--and at some point they will-- having an established relationship between committee members may be the only thing that saves your process.

Likewise, to encourage better understanding and prevent miscommunications about forest conditions, there is no substitute for group field trips to see specific on-the-ground conditions and create reference conditions in the minds of the committee participants whenever possible.

Best Practices in Using Science in a Collaborative Process

The Myth of the Magic Answer

Scientific quests can often be costly to undertake and likely won't provide what you really want—an answer. Therefore, don't wait around for science to provide the one perfect solution. Chances are it never will. Instead, choose a tool that will allow flexibility in decision-making and show the potential impacts of each choice. The CNFLRI choose to use VDDT software that is based on Landfire Biophysical setting models. Other projects may choose different tools, but the benefits of the VDDT software should be universal to any tool used in a collaborative process. They are:

1) It is relatively easy to make changes to the VDDT model to allow for "localization" of the model.
2) The model-run results take less than a minute and can be changed in "real time."
3) The results show vegetative impacts of management decisions born out over 20-50 years as well as the potential financial cost of those decisions allowing the committee to collaboratively determine their values and priorities for restoration efforts.

"Best Available" Means Best Available

Southern Appalachian forests are extremely diverse. In the Southern Blue Ridge alone there are over 136 terrestrial communities and over 90 percent of those are endemic to the region (U.S. National Vegetation Classification (USNVC)). Restoration of these communities is extremely complicated. Science has yet to give us a perfect approach to achieving successful restoration of all the communities within our Southern Appalachian Forests, nor is it likely to. Therefore, we must use the best available science that we have, document our assumptions, and employ an adaptive management approach. It is important for all committee members to agree to this approach and accept that we have a lack of knowledge regarding many areas of restoration.

Make Sure They Get It

Take the time to ensure full understanding of any science, models, or tools used. Offer refreshers throughout the process. For example, the CNFLRI process was founded on the Landfire BpS models and VDDT software. The Steering Committee chose to have a panel of experts review the BpS models to ensure everyone was comfortable with them. Additionally, we held several meetings to review the VDDT software and several months later offered some refresher webinars to make sure the details were fresh in the minds of committee members as the first results were produced. This is particularly important if members of your committee are not scientists (and they shouldn't all be scientists, see section on committee diversity above).

Conclusion

Each location is unique; each group of participants contains its own blend of personalities. There is no guarantee that a collaborative process will be successful on your landscape. However, putting these best practices into use will help smooth out some of the bumps in the road that are sure to come up. For more information about the details of the CNFLRI, please visit the project website at http://www.communityplan.net/cherokee/

Case Study—the Cherokee National Forest

The North Zone of the CNF is 340,000 acres and is divided into two Ranger Districts, Watauga in the North and Unaka in the South. The CNF provides habitat for a diversity of plant and animal communities linked to broad gradients of topography, elevation, and rainfall.
True of all the National Forestlands in the Southern Appalachian region, the land comprising the Cherokee National Forest (CNF) has been altered by a history of clearing, burning and grazing before the procurement by the federal government. Later as a National Forest, introduced forest pests and pathogens as well as history of fire exclusion have contributed to a concern that the CNF is in a degraded and uncharacteristic condition. These are the primary driving reasons for restoration on the CNF.

Cherokee National Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative Steering Committee members

Geoff Call	**US Fish and Wildlife Service**
Dennis Daniel	**National Wild Turkey Federation**
John Gregory	**Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency**
Steve Henson	**Southern Appalachian Multiple Use Council**
Josh Kelly	**At Large-Environmental Community**
Dwight King	**Sullivan County Commissioner/Logger**
Joe McGuiness	**Cherokee National Forest**
Katherine Medlock	**The Nature Conservancy**
Catherine Murray	**Cherokee Forest Voices**
Danny Osborne	**TN Dept. of Agriculture, Div. of Forestry**
Terry Porter	**Tennessee Forestry Association**
Mark Shelley	**Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition**
Parker Street	**Ruffed Grouse Society**

Other resources and suggested reading

Though many elements were altered to suit the unique situation on the Cherokee National Forest, the “Bankhead National Forest Health and Restoration Initiative: Final Report” was a successful example of a collaborative restoration project in the Southern Appalachians that the CNFLRI initially used as an example.

“Clues to Achieving Consensus” by Mirja P. Hanson is an excellent source for information about building consensus in any group, the roles of facilitators, conveners and participants.