



Case Study

FROM “FRONT PORCH” CONVERSATIONS TO AN EXPANDED, COMPLEX PARTNERSHIP: THE MALPAI BORDERLANDS GROUP ARIZONA, NEW MEXICO AND MEXICO

A small group of ranchers leverage a shared vision with scientists and conservationists to form a globally admired, large scale conservation effort.

In 1991, several cattle ranchers met at the Malpai Ranch located near the borders of Arizona, New Mexico and the country of Mexico. They were concerned about an increasing number of threats to the open space grasslands that their future depended upon. In order to regenerate, the grasslands require natural fires that had been a part of the region for millennia, but over the last eighty years, had been suppressed by the U.S. Forest Service¹. A crop of new home subdivisions in nearby valleys also added to the sense of urgency, as did environmental critics that sought to stop cattle ranching in the West on public lands.

Over the course of two years, Malpai’s neighboring ranchers along with a long-time locally active scientist were convening “front porch” conversations focused on these challenges. From these informal dialogs a strong sense of shared purpose, trust, and respect emerged, which laid the foundation for the success that was yet to come. One of the group’s early founders later wrote: “While not sure what we needed, we felt whatever it was should be driven by good science, should contain a strong conservation ethic, be economically feasible and be initiated and led by the private sector with the [public] agencies coming in as our partners, rather than with us as their clients.”

In the mid-1990’s, The Nature Conservancy’s path intersected with the Malpai group when TNC purchased a large, 500-square-mile ranch in the region known as “The Gray Ranch.” Originally TNC had sought to sell the ranch to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, but strong reactions both nationally and locally caused a course change. The local community, fearful that the buyer might be the federal government, went to a local ranching family. The family had substantial resources beyond their cattle operation and had also been a recipient of The Nature Conservancy of New Mexico’s award for good stewardship. The family was able to create a private nonprofit, The Animas Foundation, with which to purchase and manage the Gray Ranch with a conservation easement held by TNC.

In the course of these complex negotiations, TNC’s project staff was invited to join the front porch discussions taking place one valley away. Through an informal process, the front porch group created a “brain trust” of the best minds from both the local ranching community and the

¹ Due to government actions in the late 1800’s in the western U.S., Anglo cattle ranching settlement patterns (unlike the early Spanish) have included an odd mix of government owned and privately owned land. This long history of mixed land ownership pattern continues to create huge challenges for land management in the American West today.

greater scientific and agency community to face the conservation challenges of the region. The resultant Malpai Borderlands Group became an official non-profit land trust. Their first action was to end eighty years of fire suppression with a newly expanded group of partners, including the U.S. Forest Service. They accomplished their goal in eight months.

Today, the Malpai Borderlands Group continues to widen the circle and expand its relationships, working with over 20 “cooperators,” including all national and local units of the Department of the Interior, as well as with several universities. They hold an annual science meeting, an annual agency meeting, and a “Ranching Today” two-day workshop for interested ranchers and others who want to help protect open space.

One ranch house has served over 4,000 meals, plate by plate, over a fifteen year period to others – Western U.S. ranchers, the Maasai of east Africa, fishermen from Indonesia – who seek to continue traditional, open space ways of life in the face of modern threats. They are constantly reaching out to new partners and supporters while keeping the actual governance of the group small and focused.

Ongoing communications remain very informal. This helps the conservation effort stay together for the long haul when difficult, formal documents are required, such as the “Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan,” which pioneered a way to streamline endangered species and private property issues for the benefit of conservation and ranching livelihoods.

The group also works closely with ranchers in Mexico, and has held several Mexican “Ranching Today” workshops. In 2009, Mexico designated the Janos Biosphere protecting 1.3 million acres in a conservation effort that includes local Mexican ranchers in a Malpai-type effort where both public and private partnerships propel greater levels of conservation. The northeastern edge of the Janos intersects with the southeastern edge of the Malpai.

Widening the circle of stakeholders working on both sides of the border to protect open spaces has resulted in a roughly 2.3 million acre wildlife corridor at the confluence of the temperate and the tropical worlds, a place where jaguars and bison coexist. This is an area greater than Yellowstone National Park, and its success underscores the importance, hard work and opportunities involved when adding new partners.

For more information on the Malpai Borderlands Group, visit
<http://www.malpaiborderlandsgroup.org>.

For more information about the Janos Biosphere, visit
<http://www.nature.org/wherewework/northamerica/mexico/work/art15209.html>.