

social sciences

Building Bridges: Perspectives on Partnership and Collaboration from the US Forest Service Tribal Relations Program

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American Indian tribes have inherent rights to national forestland and resources codified in treaties, the US Constitution, statutes, Presidential Executive Orders, and case law. These rights require a government-to-government relationship between each tribe and the US Forest Service (USFS), which recognizes federal trust responsibilities and tribal sovereignty. This is implemented through government-to-government consultation. Along with consultation, the USFS seeks to create opportunities to work in partnership with tribes to support natural resource management for mutual benefit. The purpose of this article is to explore partnership building and collaboration between the USFS and American Indian tribes in the context of the USFS tribal relations program. The article outlines successful practices and barriers for building partnerships between federally recognized tribes and the USFS. Qualitative research methods were used to analyze 26 semistructured interviews with USFS employees with tribal relations duties to understand their perspectives on building partnerships and fulfilling the government trust responsibility with American Indian tribes.

Keywords: tribal relations, collaboration, partnership, American Indian, US Forest Service

American Indian tribes are sovereign nations that have inherent and reserved rights on US Forest Service (USFS) system lands and to resources as codified in treaties, the US Constitution, statutes, case law, Presidential Executive Orders, US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Regulations, and the USFS Handbook (Wilkinson 2004, USFS 2009). These rights include, but are not limited to, harvesting materials for cultural activities, hunting and fishing, spiritual and religious ceremonies, and access to sacred sites (USFS 2010). These rights require government-to-govern-

ment consultation between each of the 567 federally recognized tribes and the USFS (Haskew 1999, Donoghue, Thompson, and Bliss 2010, Bureau of Indian Affairs 2016). Along with mandated consultation, the USFS seeks to create opportunities to work in collaboration and partnership to manage land, whether this be through an exchange of Western and indigenous knowledge, environmental education and outreach programs, or joint research projects for mutual benefit (USFS 2009).

The USFS is responsible for working with federally recognized tribes to fulfill the

trust responsibility for program delivery and management of National Forest System lands (USFS 2015). The USFS tribal relations program consists of a national-level Washington Office of Tribal Relations in charge of overall policy and program direction, each of the nine USFS regions have regional-level tribal relations program managers in charge of coordination within their region and for regional policy, and within each region there are employees who work on the ground with tribes (often at the National Forest level). USFS tribal relations employees at each of these levels serve as two-way bridges between the agency and tribes (USFS 2009). An agency employee with tribal relations duties provides guidance on federal Indian law and policy, tribal interests, and potential conflicts (USFS 2015). In addition, policy documents outline the roles and responsibilities of tribal relations employees as being ambassadors to the federally recognized tribes, providing leadership for the consistent application of federal Indian law and policy, and facilitating opportunities to fulfill federal trust and treaty obligations (USFS 2015). They specifically have the responsibility to support

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USFS leaders with tribal consultation, coordination, and collaboration efforts while serving as the main point of contact for developing and maintaining relationships with tribes (USFS 2015).

Federal tribal relations have many formal and legal requirements, including government-to-government consultation with American Indian tribes outlined in Presidential Executive Orders (for example, the 2000 Executive Order 13175 Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal Governments) as well as agency regulations, which have implications for each federal agency and implementation of federal laws, including the National Environmental Policy Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, and the Tribal Forest Protection Act (see Wilkinson 2004). In addition, USFS tribal relations programs often engage with tribes to develop formal agreements that outline how the relationship between the tribe and the USFS will be implemented, protocols for consultation, time frames, and communication (Journey et al. 2017; for sample agreements, see www.fs.fed.us/spf/tribalrelations/index.shtml).

To minimize conflicts and fulfill legal responsibilities, the USFS attempts to build long-term relationships with tribes. This responsibility falls largely on USFS leaders, with decision-making authority or “line officers” at the local, regional, and national levels, and includes district rangers, forest supervisors, regional foresters, research station directors, and the USFS chief. The involvement of USFS leadership in tribal relations has been increasing over time and has had positive impacts on tribal relations (Catton 2016). The USFS tribal relations program started locally within individual National Forests and regions and has expanded to higher levels of leadership with the formation of the Office of Tribal Relations in the USFS Washington office in 2004 (Catton 2016). Despite the importance of USFS tribal relations, tribal relations initiatives in the USFS have received little study.

There is extensive literature on natural resource collaboration, environmental conflict resolution, and partnerships. Studies have shown that personal relationships, support from leaders, adequate funding, training, building trust, incorporating different perspectives, fostering relationships, diversity of stakeholders, and mutual learning are all important components of successful col-

laboration (Burns, and Sperry 2000, Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000, Daniels and Walker 2001, Cheng 2006, Davenport et al. 2007, Innes and Booher 2010, Dockry 2015). Studies have shown that many of these components of successful collaborations are also important for developing partnerships with indigenous communities. These studies show that it is important to develop formal and informal relationships; build trust; develop iterative and inclusive communication strategies; improve agency understanding of tribal cultures, history, and perspectives; provide opportunities for mutual learning; and increase opportunities for collaboration. (Hansen 2011, Emery et al. 2014, Vinyeta and Lynn 2015, Bussey et al. 2016; see also the 2017 *Journal of Forestry* Special Issue on Tribal Forest Management).

There are also examples of barriers to collaboration in the literature, including factors contrary to ones that support collaboration (e.g., lack of trust). Other barriers to collaboration within the USFS have included a lack of time, money, and personnel; frequent changes in personnel; conflicting goals and missions within the USFS; lack of administrative flexibility; confusing bureaucratic language; lack of support for collaboration; lack of incentives for collaboration; overlapping laws and multiple agencies working with tribes; and the difficulty for federal agencies to work with each individual tribe versus simultaneously working with multiple tribes (Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000, Thomas 2003, Kerber 2006).

The purpose of this article is to explore partnership building and collaboration between the USFS and American Indian tribes from the perspective of USFS tribal relations

specialists. The article outlines successful practices, strengths, and barriers to tribal relations from the perspectives of USFS employees working nationally in the Washington office, regionally in the regional offices, and within the Eastern Region (a 20-state area from Minnesota to Maine and Missouri to Maryland). The study used standard qualitative research methods to analyze 26 semistructured interviews with USFS tribal liaisons to understand their perspectives on their jobs and strategies for partnership building and conflict resolution.

Methods

Our study used a qualitative research design that was interpretative and inductive. We used semistructured interviews and adapted grounded theory analysis as outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2015). Our interview guide consisted of a series of open-ended questions related to perceptions of tribal relations job duties, tactics and strategies for building partnerships, barriers to partnerships, conflict resolution tactics and strategies, and perceptions of the future of USFS tribal relations.

We identified a sample pool of 37 potential interview participants working in USFS tribal relations for the National Forest System, Research and Development, and State and Private Forestry deputy areas (Table 1). At the time of our study there were five total employees in the national-level Washington Office of Tribal Relations and eight regional tribal relations program managers for each of the USFS regions. For additional depth of the sample pool, we included the 24 employees with official tribal relations responsibilities within the Eastern

Management and Policy Implications

US Forest Service (USFS) employees working in tribal relations suggest building partnerships with tribes by developing both formal and informal relationships; demonstrating respect, listening to tribal concerns and perspectives, and building trust; having strong leadership throughout the agency and beyond; and collaborating on natural resource management. Study participants also indicate that it is important to overcome several barriers to strengthen partnerships with tribes. Barriers include bureaucratic structures that make communication and budget coordination difficult; competing USFS missions, which can place tribal goals at odds with other land management goals; tribal relations has been focused on cultural heritage issues and archaeology, which can limit partnerships and projects; and differences in expectations, which can lead to mismatches in timelines, budgets, and perceptions of natural resource goals. Finally, interview participants indicated that a lack of USFS and tribal fiscal resources, a lack of time, and frequent personnel turnover could hinder partnerships. Despite barriers, USFS employees indicated that the tribal relations program has grown strong over the past decade, and further strengthening of tribal partnerships will be important to achieve USFS natural resource management goals.

Table 1. Number of USFS tribal relations employees at the national level, regional level, and within the Eastern Region and the number and percentage of employees interviewed.

USFS unit	Number of tribal relations employees	Number interviewed	Percentage interviewed
Washington Office of Tribal Relations	5	2	40
Regional program managers	8	4	50
Eastern Region	24	20	83
Total	37	26	70

Region (Northeast and Midwest United States) because of the large tribal relations program; it encompasses 20 states and includes 12 National Forests. In addition, this area includes 76 federally recognized tribes (some removed outside of the area to places such as Oklahoma) with interests in the area because of current or ancestral use or occupation (see Appendix B in USFS 2015). Semistructured interviews were conducted by telephone and digitally recorded and transcribed. Interviews were conducted until participants began to provide repetitive answers and no new themes or ideas were raised (interview theme saturation; Bowen 2008). We used an adapted grounded theory analysis that is an iterative open coding method to identify emergent themes (Corbin and Strauss 2015). Each interview transcription was read three times and themes were tracked and analyzed using QSR Nvivo 10 qualitative data analysis software. Thematic qualitative analysis was used to identify and analyze emergent, convergent, and divergent themes from the interviews (Braun and Clarke 2006, Corbin and Strauss 2015).

Results and Discussion

We interviewed 26 of the 37 USFS employees working in tribal relations in the eastern United States and at regional and national levels (Table 1). Thirteen participants worked in the National Forest System at the National Forest level, 7 at regional levels, 2 at the national level, and 4 from the State and Private Forestry or Research and Development deputy areas. Interviews were conducted between July 16 and Aug. 19, 2015 and averaged 53 min in length. Interview participants ranged in age from 40 to 66 years old (averaging 54 years old) with an average of 19 years of experience working for the agency and an average of 12 years working in tribal relations. Interview participants' gender was balanced with 13 male and 13 female participants. The interview

participants included 5 enrolled tribal members, 2 unenrolled self-identified tribal descendants, and 19 nontribal members. Finally, 7 of the interview participants had full-time duties related to tribal relations and 19 had other duties in addition to tribal relations (for example, they were also heritage program managers). Interview participants did not vary in their responses according to their demographic characteristics or whether they worked at the national level, regional level, or within the Eastern Region. The following subsections provide summaries of the interview data by theme and use interview quotes to illustrate each theme.

USFS Tribal Relations Employee Roles and Responsibilities

Interview participants described their roles and responsibilities consistent with agency strategic planning documents as facilitating relationships, communicating with tribes, organizing consultation, and supporting and educating USFS leaders. They described their responsibility for building stronger relationships between tribes and the USFS by supporting the official consultation processes and maintaining government-to-government relationships. They also saw their role as facilitating communication and providing advice on how to avoid or resolve conflicts. Participants provided nuanced perspectives on their roles as building personal relationships, facilitating dialogue, resolving conflict, and implementing formal agreements. For example, one employee stated their role was "breaking down barriers, building relationships, facilitating introductions, [and] thinking with staff ... about how we can better partner with tribes, and bring them into the work that we do as a government."

Tribal liaisons explained that they were responsible to support day-to-day implementation and development of formal agreements (e.g., a Memorandum of Understanding or a Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act project) be-

tween a tribe or intertribal organization and the USFS. One participant stated it is "not just routine compliance, but it's actually enhancing our partnership and connections with tribes." Interview participants explained that one of their core responsibilities is to facilitate dialogue and build partnerships.

Finally, interview participants stressed that the ultimate authority for the federal trust responsibility with American Indian tribes lies with the USFS line officers. One interview participant, a line officer, stated, "Since it's a government-to-government relationship, I, as a line officer, have a role in connecting with the tribal government that we work with throughout this national forest. ... We're the ones that should be doing the consultation directly with the tribal leaders."

Partnership-Building Strategies

Interview participants identified multiple strategies for building partnerships between the USFS and American Indian tribes that ranged in scope from actions by individual employees to programmatic agency strategies (Table 2). We present the results as five distinct categories for analytic clarity; however, the categories are often interrelated. The following subsections summarize the interview participants' approaches to tribal relations and partnership building and use quotes to illustrate each theme that emerged from the interviews.

Upholding Formal Relationships and Agreements. Tribal liaisons in this study viewed formal relationships as necessary to build partnerships with tribes. Many participants stated that formal agreements and formal consultation provided the basis for strong partnerships. Formal relationships further the government-to-government relationships and the federal trust responsibility. They are also part of an ongoing collaborative process that builds partnerships. One participant stated that formal consultation is "an ongoing dialogue that's continuous, that builds a relationship and helps a manager understand what are the needs and interests of a particular tribe that we can do work to help fulfill our trust responsibility that will benefit tribes."

Interview participants also explained that formal relationships provided opportunities to strengthen tribal partnerships and broaden relationships. For example, one participant stated that formal partnerships are "much more in regards to relationship building ... going past the [formal] consultation process into a real relationship build-

Table 2. Themes related to partnership building that emerged from interviews with 26 USFS tribal relations employees.

Interview theme	Definition
Partnership building strategies	
Formal relationships	Government-mandated consultation, legal requirements, and formal written communication or agreements.
Informal relationships	Individual personal relationships between tribal and USFS employees that often occur outside of formal meetings or settings.
Respect, listening, and trust	Demonstrations of respect, support, honesty, integrity, trust building, and listening between the USFS and tribes.
Leadership	Support, collaboration, and engagement from leaders that foster or model positive tribal relations.
Collaborative resource management	On-the-ground collaborative management projects.
Partnership-building obstacles	
Bureaucratic structures	Constraints based on tribal or USFS bureaucratic structures that can be slow moving and hierarchical, fail to recognize intertribal groups versus individual tribes, and can limit communication and coordination.
Competing USFS missions	Challenge of balancing tribal rights, needs, and desires with USFS multiple-use mandates. Also differences in cultural resource versus natural resource management and corresponding disciplines.
Difference in perspectives and expectations	Differences in perceptions of what is expected, acceptable, or possible in the relationship between tribes and USFS, including comanagement and perceptions of time. In addition, differences in understandings of natural resources.
Lack of resources	Lack of time, education, or money required to develop partnerships.
Turnover in personnel and governments	Frequent turnover of employees and changes in tribal governments.

ing mode.” Another participant explained that when “you’ve done what you are required to do in a way that you are required to do it and perhaps when we get through that process, then we can move onto the next step. Which should be forging person-to-person relationships, building trust and being able to ask a question of things that I don’t know the answer to, asking for help, or finding out what is of interest to the tribes.” In other words, the formal relationships are critical and form the foundation of the federal-tribal relationships but are often only the beginning of broader relationship building.

Developing Informal and Personal Relationships. On the individual level, the interview participants indicated that there was a need to develop informal and personal relationships with tribal communities, governments, and individual tribal members. Most of the interview participants stressed that one way to do this was to engage tribal partners outside of official meetings. One participant shared:

A lot of that getting to know each other does not necessarily happen at meetings, at the table of the meeting. It happens after hours, when you go out for dinner, or go out for a beer or something like that and start really getting to know somebody and talking serious ... Because if you do those kind of things apart from a meeting, or while you’re at a meeting, it shows that you have an interest and you have a willingness to get to know them and work with them. Rather than I’m just here at the meeting because I have to be. It shows good faith.

For this participant, informal relationships demonstrate that you are not just doing your job but you have a personal interest in working with the tribe. Another interview partic-

ipant compared this to cultural competency, respect, and understanding by stating, “When tribes invite us to pow-wows and stuff, it’s important to show up [and to recognize] in terms of partnership, the importance of food ... when we get together with our tribal partners. Everyone calls it cultural competency or something like that. Just knowing those steps that give the right cue to our tribal partners that we’re here and we’re for real and we respect you.” One participant stated, “I consider most of these folks I’ve worked with for many years as family. So they’re not just people I work with, they’re friends.” For this participant, tribal relations were something that goes beyond job duties to something you do to maintain relationships with relatives. Personal relationships were also said to facilitate the formation of formal relationships, closer collaboration, trust, and increased tribal involvement in USFS activities. In addition, almost every interview participant suggested that communication and networking were important to foster informal relationships and build partnerships. Suggestions included communicating consistently with tribes about projects and issues, networking with individuals at meetings and conferences, organizing field trips and site visits, and participating in informal gatherings and events with tribal communities.

Respect, Listening, and Building Trust. Interview participants stressed that building relationships requires a personal dedication to respecting tribal perspectives, listening to tribal views, and building trust. One participant explained that long-term relationships were built with tribes by “showing up, and showing respect, and be-

ing worthy of trust.” Many also stressed listening as a way to build relationships. One participant stated, “I think it’s all of our responsibility to listen once in a while and not just talk at people.” Another explained, “the way I look at it is I am only the bridge builder and the person who listens to the needs and brings the resources and the areas of expertise to help meet those needs.” Finally, one explained that listening needed to be followed by action to build partnerships and stated, “You have to ask the question, ‘What can we do for you?’ And then you have to listen to what they say and act on it.” In other words, listening both required action and understanding to develop trust and respect.

For many interview participants, building trust was at the core of successful collaboration and partnership building with tribes. One stated, “collaboration all has to be built on trust.” Another stated, “It takes a lot longer to build trust than destroy it.” Another participant explained, “I’m [not] going to build trust [just] because it makes my life easier. [I] genuinely to want to give the tribes a voice in things that go-on on the public land.”

Demonstrating Leadership and Engaged Leaders. Leadership was another important component identified by interview participants for building partnerships with tribes. Almost every interview participant suggested that demonstrating positive engaged leadership from the local to national level improved partnerships with tribes. Within the USFS tribal relations program, leadership provided critical support for partnerships; one participant stated, “We couldn’t do it without [our tribal relations

leader].... The tribal program ... is where it is because of [them].” Leadership outside of the tribal relations program and at higher levels within the agency was also important. A participant explained that having higher levels of USFS leadership involved “enhances the standing of our forests ... in the eyes of the tribes that we’re working with.... It’s that matter of respect ... [Tribes] like having that regional office, that bigger picture.” Another participant stated that USFS leadership involvement from outside of the tribal relations program is the “biggest achievement” recently in tribal relations. They stated,

In my first couple of years I tried to talk my forest supervisor into coming [to a joint USFS tribal conference] or someone, some sort of line officer into coming and I couldn’t get them to go. And then after a couple of years I finally got them ... to come and they have been going ever since. And now it’s forest supervisors, deputy forest supervisors, staff officers ... they make a point to go.... [L]eadership giving [tribal relations] attention has been the key [to our successes]. I would say that’s the biggest achievement.

Interview participants also said that leadership from all levels of the federal government help support tribal partnerships. Interview participants indicated that federal leadership from outside of the USFS fostered positive changes within the USFS tribal relations program. One participant stated, “I’ve seen more of a top down push from the Executive Branch to really elevate the importance of trust responsibility in the tribal relationship with the federal agencies.” Another stated, “I think that change in attitude and in leadership is probably the most important development in the past 10 years.... It’s reflected in leadership involvement in tribal relations all the way from the Deputy Undersecretary [of the Department of Agriculture] for Natural Resources and Environment ... [to the USFS] directors in the Washington Office ... It’s a good change in knowledge, experience and attitude.”

Demonstrating leadership in tribal relations, according to interview participants, involves getting leaders engaged in tribal relations and leading by example. They indicate that it involves leaders who model positive collaborative relationships and requires leaders who are committed to tribal relations and building trust between tribes and the USFS. A participant explained,

I think [collaborative partnership is] a really important thing to be role modeling. So the regional forester and the forest [supervisors]

are role modeling to the line officers, the district rangers, the importance of collaboration with tribal leaders.... If you don’t have leadership that values [tribal relations], it’s going to be really hard to make significant strides because it has to be role modeled from the top. If it’s not, tribes are always going to be an afterthought.

The involvement of higher-level USFS leadership was said to reduce fear and build trust among tribal partners. One participant relayed what a tribal partner told them, “We used to really fear [USFS leadership] turnover. When a district ranger left and a new one was coming in, we used to really be afraid that the relationship was going to go backwards ... Under [the forest supervisor’s] leadership, it is much easier to fear less and trust more.”

Collaborating in Resource Management. Interview participants indicated that collaborating with tribes on natural resource management projects can build relationships and achieve mutual land management objectives. Resource management projects (on-the-ground projects such as prescribed burning, stream restoration, or timber harvesting) bring the tribes and the USFS together on the land, build common bonds, and facilitate collaboration, according to several participants. One participant explained, “We can meet a number of objectives through shared stewardship ... and that’s going out to the ground, to the land, walking the land together, and seeing a common problem or issue, and working to develop a way that the tribe could actually help us with fixing that problem so that we could meet a number of different objectives ... and we would have a better working relationship.”

Interview participants also explained that tribes can play a critical role in achieving the USFS land management goals. Tribes were seen by participants as having knowledge, experience, and a desire to improve USFS natural resource management. USFS resource management can sometimes be affected by limited budgets, personnel, and resources, and interview participants believe that tribes can help solve these management issues. One participant stated, “I want Forest Service units to see tribes as part of the solution to our land management challenges, part of our Forest Service family, part of our team, part of our posse, in accomplishing long-term restoration and conservation of natural and cultural resources on our national forests.” Another shared that the USFS can learn from tribes to make more

holistic management decisions: “I think often times we can learn a lot from what tribal folks can share with us about their world in their eyes, what it means, and help us to make better land use decisions, help us to maybe better manage it with a more holistic approach and broader horizons.” To these employees, tribal partnerships can help solve USFS management problems, foster learning, and support sustainable forest management.

Partnership-Building Obstacles

Interview participants identified five main barriers to developing partnerships with tribes (Table 2). Although these obstacles are often interrelated, we present the results as distinct categories for clarity. The following subsections are summaries of the interview data and discuss each barrier as described by the interview participants.

USFS and Tribal Bureaucratic Structures. The bureaucratic structures of USFS and tribal institutions can sometimes create barriers to partnership according to the interview participants. They indicate that the USFS and tribes have their own institutional structures and cultural norms that can clash when developing partnerships. Both bureaucracies are seen to move slowly as one participant indicated: “They have a bureaucracy, we have a bureaucracy, so things take time.” The federal bureaucracy was itself seen as large and slow and, as one participant explained, made it “extremely difficult to be a good partner to tribes.” Another participant stated that “the biggest barrier is just because the federal bureaucracy is such a behemoth, massive layers of decisionmaking and authorizations.”

In addition, some interview participants explained that tribes do not always work within the USFS organizational hierarchy at the same level where specific decisions are made. Resource projects (e.g., timber harvesting, trail building, road closures) were said to happen at the ranger district or National Forest level whereas program direction and policy come from the regional or national levels. In other words, the interview participants explained that the USFS carries out site-specific projects on the National Forests and the authority for those projects lies with leadership at that level. Regional and national policy is decided at those respective levels. Interview participants explained that working with a USFS bureaucratic level that is not making, or is not authorized to make a specific decision, can

cause a mismatch between USFS authority and tribal expectations regarding who can affect a particular resource management goal. This may happen if a tribe has an existing relationship with an individual that does not have authority to make a particular decision or if a tribe believes that it is always better to work with the highest level of the agency possible even if the decision is being made at a lower level. One participant stated, "One of the points that I feel is really critical in your study ... is [that the] regional office, cannot provide programs, can't promise money, can't deliver plants, can't do a closure for a traditional and cultural practice. All that happens on national forests and grasslands."

Interview participants indicated that the USFS is used to working within specific timelines outlined in legislation and regulations that guide agency processes for soliciting input on projects, developing budgets, and communicating with partners. They explained that there are sometimes differences between agency timelines and tribal resources and organizational processes. According to interview participants, recent budgetary cycles have made it difficult to engage in long-term planning and partnership building with tribes. They indicated that there are often uncertainties as to the level and timing of USFS budgets and sometimes the USFS has to make very quick spending decisions. Other times, they reported, the level of funding is not known. Both of these can make it difficult for the USFS to work with tribal timelines, resources, and build long-term collaborative partnerships according to interview participants. One participant explained that this is a problem because

You're stuck ... asking tribal partners to work—well before you know-how much money you're going to have—on developing ideas for projects ... and going to tribal councils to get approval for doing things ... without any certainty that you will have the money. And that's not good for trust building. And also for institutions that are running on really tight budgets—and almost inevitably tribal professionals are—they're already just giving a tremendous amount of themselves. So to ask them to work on something that may not result in funding, it can be very problematic and often seem inappropriate, and maybe even a little bit unethical.

Not only does this participant believe that bureaucratic issues regarding the timing and level of funding are bad for building partner-

ships and trust with tribes, they question the uneven power dynamics in the relationship.

Another bureaucratic barrier identified by interview participants has to do with internal USFS coordination. Different units within the USFS do not always work together, according to participants, which could be a barrier to building partnerships with tribes. Interview participants indicated that there was little communication within and among the main USFS deputy areas (National Forest System, Research and Development, and State and Private Forestry), which sometimes created confusion and diminished the effectiveness of partnerships. One participant explained the "Forest Service isn't as coordinated as it could be. We have researchers running around. We have land managers running around. We have State and Private [Forestry] giving grants. How do we get coherent as an agency to work with tribes ... and identify what they know that can really help with long-term land management?" As this quote indicates, interview participants suggest that the USFS take a more coordinated approach to working with tribes by improving internal communication and developing projects that include all three deputy areas.

Communication was another bureaucratic barrier to partnership mentioned by most of the interview participants. Sometimes USFS bureaucratic language was seen as a barrier to partnership because it was confusing and unclear outside of the USFS. For example, one participant indicated, "I view partnership as using plain English. Typically, Forest Service sends out this letter in bureaucratic gibberish ... I know what's gonna happen when this gets to the tribal government. It's going in the recycle bin."

There are other communication barriers identified by interview participants that sometimes make it difficult for the USFS tribal liaisons to communicate with tribes. They stated that communication does not always get to the whole tribal community or to tribal leaders. One interview participant shared that the lines of communication between tribal resource professionals and tribal communities, governments, and elders was sometimes cut short: "We were working a lot with tribal foresters and saw that information wasn't always getting up to the elders or the councils."

Finally, participants indicated that there is a bureaucratic barrier for the USFS when distinguishing between individual tribes versus intertribal institutions or

groups of tribes. They said that sometimes it is difficult for the USFS to work with tribes as individual sovereign nations. One participant stated,

It's often difficult to be a good partner because being a good partner means understanding that every tribe is an independent sovereign nation, and leadership, I think, in the organization [USFS] doesn't really understand that. So often when they're looking to develop cooperation, they're asking for things to happen on what they think is a national scale, and that scale is often not a good fit for realities of Indian Country ... it's not where individual tribes live, and it perhaps compromises developing relationships and meeting the needs of individual tribes in favor of topics and efforts that wouldn't necessarily be of their choice, but correspond to the agenda of other people.

Although the USFS maintains formal and informal relationships with intertribal organizations and multiple tribes, the interview participants stressed that legally, the USFS is required to work with every federally recognized tribe individually.

Competing USFS Missions. Interview participants indicated that there are two ways that competing USFS missions can affect tribal partnerships: multiple and conflicting legislative mandates and USFS's institutional organization around multiple programmatic areas. They explained that legislative mandates can limit project options and place competing projects in direct opposition. For example, the National Forest Management Act requires the USFS to manage for multiple uses, among other things (US Congress 1976). According to interview participants, balancing multiple uses can sometimes conflict with requirements to work with and build partnerships with tribes. For example, National Forests are managed for timber production, wilderness, recreation, and cultural heritage resources, including American Indian sacred sites. USFS decisions on timber or wilderness management can sometimes conflict with management for cultural heritage resources or with tribal goals, values, religion, or treaty rights for a particular area (for example, see Cragun 2005 or Freedman 2002). One participant explained, "We're a multiple use agency. Congress gives us our mandate as multiple use. So, of course, we have a lot of conflict with tribes based on that congressional mission." Another participant stated that "the Forest Service does not create legislation, it implements the will of Congress, and so those create challenges as

well.” Another stated that “The biggest frustration for me, I think, is when we have congressional mandates in which we have limited discretion.” Although Congress also can mandate management that supports tribal goals (for example, as in the 2008 Farm Bill), the interview participants highlighted this barrier as something that restricted their decisions and sometimes made it difficult to manage National Forests to meet tribal goals.

A related barrier identified by interview participants can arise when new legislation is passed but the agency does not have policy in place for implementing the legislation. For example, the 2008 Farm Bill allows tribes to harvest “forest products for traditional and cultural purposes” (Title VIII Section 8105), but when it was signed into law, implementation was uneven because of a lack of national-level operational processes and guidance in place to allow for that to happen. One participant explained that “Conflicts arise when the tribes really want access to these resources and we don’t really have a process in place, and because there’s no process in place and it’s something new to the forest, new to the line officers, it really takes time for line officers and staff to get on board to say ... ‘tribes do have legal right to access [the resource]’.”

The second barrier with the USFS mission identified by participants involves the history of USFS tribal relations coming from within the cultural heritage program area. Since the 1970s, the USFS has organized itself into programmatic areas to manage for multiple uses on the National Forests. Part of this management includes adherence to several laws pertaining to cultural heritage, archaeology, and human remains (e.g., the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act and the National Historic Preservation Act). Interview participants explained that the USFS employees in charge of cultural heritage programs often have degrees in anthropology or archaeology, and they also are often charged with working as tribal liaisons in addition to cultural heritage management. This has created a counterintuitive barrier identified by most interview participants; tribal relations work can sometimes be seen as exclusive work for the archeologist or cultural heritage program manager and not a job for the line officer or other employees. One interview participant explained that this was “not appropriate” because “tribal relations was everybody’s responsibility.”

Compounding this challenge, interview participants indicated that because the USFS employee with tribal relations duties is often the archeologist or heritage program manager, they build strong partnerships with tribes around cultural heritage management, not natural resource management. One participant explained this by stating, “We have working relationships with most of the tribal historic preservation offices because we consult them. We work with them on a regular basis. The challenge is when opportunities come up in forestry or land management ... we do not know those tribal staff.” Another stated, “Sometimes we’re focused in certain arenas like cultural resources and the tribes care as much about the four-leggeds as the two-leggeds ... They’re concerned about wildlife and plants and traditional plant communities and traditional plants for a variety of purposes including food and medicine and ceremony.” This finding implies that USFS tribal relations could expand beyond archaeology and cultural heritage management to address tribal goals for the management of culturally important natural resources.

Differences in USFS and Tribal Perspectives and Expectations. Differences in expectations derive from how people understand the world, perspectives on goals and priorities for management, and perceptions on the role of the USFS. These differences, according to interview participants, can create mismatches in expectations between the USFS and tribes and are seen as barriers to partnership building. One of the ways these differences were said to manifest is that many tribal partners want to move toward more collaborative or comanagement of national forestlands. Interview participants indicated that there are few clear legal authorities for this (however, see examples from projects under the Tribal Forest Protection Act of 2004 and MOUs for off reservation management such as the USFS Memorandum of Understanding [MOU] with the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission). In addition, they explained that the USFS culture (institutional way of understanding the world) involves managing by the best-available science and valuing scientific expertise derived from peer-reviewed literature and academic degrees in the sciences over other ways of knowing such as traditional knowledge, collective tribal experiences, and tribal observation and experimentation. Although the 2012 USFS Planning Rule explicitly calls for an integration

of traditional ecological knowledge, few National Forests (and none in the Eastern Region) have revised their management plans under this rule to date.

Interview participants explained there is a tension between the need to adhere to the requirements outlined in the National Forest Management Act that requires the USFS to make management decisions for national forestlands and comanagement concepts. In other words, the USFS is legally required to make management decisions and cannot allow others to do so for them. One participant stated, “We have some people in the Forest Service who are scared that working with tribes will give up control, will give up authority and stuff like that. It’s not really a fear, but there is that whole ‘We’re the Forest Service. We’re in charge ...’ but there is some fear with some leaders, who I think just aren’t well-prepared, that [believe] we’re somehow giving up control.” Another explained, “Tribes have a real orientation toward comanagement which is hard to define because everybody you talk to has a different definition for comanagement. But the main idea is shared responsibility. In [the] Forest Service, I guess they don’t even like to use that term because we can’t divulge our authority to another entity to manage the land.” This quote indicates there are different conceptions of comanagement, and although there are several examples of these types of projects happening throughout the USFS (for example, through stewardship contracts and the Tribal Forest Protection Act of 2004), according to interview participants, some decisionmakers may not be fully comfortable with the concept.

Interview participants indicated that attitudes toward time frames and planning priorities can also be a source of tension between tribes and the USFS, with tribes often emphasizing overall management over the long term and the USFS often focused on planning and implementing short-term projects. One participant stated, “There’s conflicts in timelines and thinking. Tribes are very concerned with the long run, very concerned with the children and the grandchildren and the great grandchildren who aren’t even here yet. We’re like, ‘we have a five year plan’ and our agency short sightedness [short term focus] can lead to conflict when we’re getting asked more fundamental questions.” Within this context, the tribal relations employees we interviewed explained that they often work to lower this barrier and educate the other USFS employ-

ees on what to expect when working with and building partnerships with tribes. For example, one participant stated that “keeping to schedules and budgets can result in expectations from the Forest Service where the tribes are involved. And they’re not reasonable. They don’t allow the amount of time needed. I think some forest managers have expectations that are unrealistic.”

Interview participants also described differences in expectations related to the time needed to build relationships, get tribal input, and implement projects. Many interview participants indicated that the USFS can want things to move at a faster pace than tribes need to comply with their own internal processes and protocols. For example, “Every time [a National Forest] tries to fast-track partnership building I have to remind folks that it takes time, it takes investment, and it takes a lot of patience for things to bear fruit.”

Another difference in perception described by interview participants has to do with different understandings of natural resources. Different perceptions and definitions of natural resources can create conflict when building partnerships with tribes, according to participants. They explained that sometimes agency perspectives reduce natural resources to recreation or economic resources whereas tribal perspectives often recognize the same biophysical resources more broadly and as being intimately connected to tribal cultural identity. One participant explained that “working with regulation-type definitions ... can be frustrating sometimes, especially when you’re dealing with cultural resources in this case rather than natural resources. An example I think is that ... wild rice is a resource, a natural resource. It’s food, but it’s also a sacred resource, traditional cultural property. It has ... more flexible definitions in tribal culture.” In other words, although a biologist may see wild rice as a part of a wetland ecosystem or a subsistence food resource, a tribal member may see wild rice as intimately connected with their tribe’s identity and existence. A failure to recognize these differences in perspectives can be a barrier to partnership building.

Lack of Resources for Partnership Building. Another theme repeatedly mentioned by interview participants is the lack of time, money, and personnel on both the tribal and USFS sides to build partnerships. Interview participants also indicated that the USFS often lacks budgets (particularly for

travel to meet with tribes), full-time tribal relations staff, and resources to implement collaborative projects. They explained that for the tribes, they not only collaborate and consult with the USFS but with every other federal agency, some state agencies, and other tribes. One participant stated,

I do hear tribal members speak of these processes that don’t take into account their needs: their lack of manpower, their schedule, their abilities or funding to handle all of the requests. They talk of being inundated by agencies—not only the Forest Service expecting them to jump when they call—and it’s a very consistent statement being made at these meetings, that agencies have to be patient or plan further ahead.

Turnover in USFS Personnel and Tribal Governments. Finally, many interview participants discussed how frequent turnover in personnel and governments had major impacts on building partnerships with tribes. Frequent turnover requires new relationships to be built and includes educating new staff and leaders about USFS tribal relations in general and specific tribal issues and projects at their location. This issue is exemplified by one interview participant who said that there are “sometimes problems when a manager either transfers or retires and you have a new person come in there’s the education process of building, of teaching somebody again. There’s also the relationship building process that needs to be started again.” Interview participants explained that this is also an issue when there are changes in tribal governments. One interview participant stated that when there was turnover for both USFS and tribes, “The [USFS] corporate memory is gone and no one remembers that we need to reach out to all of the affected tribes, not just one or two. And it goes both ways ... because, following tribal elections, you have the same thing.” Another participant called “the revolving door of leadership” one of the biggest challenges in “fostering relationships with tribes.”

Although this is a constraint, USFS tribal relations employees saw themselves as being able to help minimize the disruption of changing personnel. One way they explained they did this was to create networks of relationships so when personnel changes happen there was a wider network of people to minimize the disruption. Another interview participant explained that they themselves serve as a bridge to facilitate partnerships when employees turn over. They stated, “One of my important roles in part-

nership is when we have a change in staff, helping handshake and introduce that new staff in with the tribes. Those relationships are based on person to person ... Part of partnership is bridging the changes in personnel.” Another suggestion given by several interview participants was to hire more American Indian employees and people who have strong partnership-building skills. Finally, a couple of interview participants indicated that formal agreements such as MOUs can also minimize turnover disruptions by having clear guidance, goals, and operating protocols in place for new employees to follow.

The Future Direction of USFS Tribal Relations

Interview participants expressed great hope for the future of USFS tribal relations and that it will continue to be important in fulfilling the overall USFS conservation mission and trust responsibilities to tribes. They point to the successes of the USFS tribal relations program, strategic plans, the 2012 Sacred Sites report and interdepartmental MOU, engaged leadership, and the promise of integrating traditional ecological knowledge into forest management. Interview participants discussed hiring more American Indian employees within the USFS, more employees with tribal relations experience, and newly mandated tribal relations training for line officers. Many interview participants shared the belief that traditional ecological knowledge would be integrated into USFS management as a way to not only build trust and relationships with tribes but to solve real USFS management issues such as climate change and ecological restoration activities. One participant stated that working with tribes “in partnership and stewardship” can “help us deliver clean water, and to help us to restore forests so that they’re resilient and resistant to catastrophic fire, but also resilient ... [and] divers[e].” Another stated that they believed tribes would have “a more direct role in the management of federal public lands especially those areas ceded by treaty.” Finally, one participant stated, “I think if we keep moving forward and listening, you know, USDA and Forest Service keep listening to the tribes, use our services and use our skill set and we serve; I think the agency is just going to keep continuing to get better and better.” These visions of the future of USFS tribal relations not only include expanded tribal partnerships but also stress the

centrality of tribal collaboration in accomplishing the USFS conservation mission.

Conclusion

This is one of the first studies exploring federal partnership building and tribal relations from the perceptions of federal employees engaged in the on-the-ground work. Our study analyzed interviews with 26 tribal relations employees working in the Eastern Region and national levels of the USFS. The interview data show that there is consistency in how tribal relations employees view their positions and responsibilities and the USFS guiding documents. These employees facilitate partnerships by building figurative bridges between USFS and federally recognized American Indian tribes by organizing and supporting formal relationships; building informal and personal relationships with tribal communities; demonstrating respect, listening to tribal perspectives, and building trust; engaging leaders in tribal relations; and collaborating on natural resource management projects of mutual benefit. These findings are consistent with other research studies examining collaborative partnerships with indigenous communities (Hansen 2011, Predmore et al. 2011, Emery et al. 2014, Vinyeta and Lynn 2015, Bussey et al. 2016). Our study also found barriers to tribal partnership building to be similar to barriers identified in other research into USFS partnership building, including tribal and USFS bureaucratic barriers; conflicts between USFS multiple-use mission and tribal legal responsibilities; differences in cultural perspectives on natural resources; and challenges with USFS and tribal personnel turnover (Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000, Thomas 2003, Kerber 2006). The barriers presented in our study and others appear to represent challenges and conflicts inherent in government-to-government relationships.

Our study results suggest that USFS and tribal partnerships can be enhanced by focusing efforts to enhance the five partnership-building strategies and minimizing the five partnership-building obstacles identified by the interview participants. The results also indicate that the future direction in USFS tribal relations appears to be moving toward tribal consultation that includes collaboration and partnership building and that tribal relations is broad and includes on-the-ground management that incorporates tribal knowledge, goals, and experience. Most interview participants in our research

study worked within the Eastern Region, but our study also included tribal relations employees from the Washington office and the regional program managers. Additional research with USFS tribal relations employees working in the other USFS regions may highlight different strategies, barriers, and issues due to different cultures, histories, and tribal realities. Analogous research is also needed to understand tribal perspectives.

Data from our study suggest tribal relations is more than a cultural heritage program and is important for achieving the broad USFS mission. However, interview data indicate that it is sometimes difficult to reconcile USFS history, culture, and authority with the goals of building partnerships, establishing collaborative projects, and developing comanagement arrangements with tribes. USFS employees are using multiple strategies to reduce conflicts and build partnerships with tribes to fulfill the federal trust responsibility and to improve the management of our shared natural resources. According to the participants in this study, the tribal relations program will continue to be important for solving tribal and USFS natural resource management challenges now and into the future.

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