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RESEARCH

Catalyzing Collaboration: Wisconsin's Agency-Initiated Basin Partnerships

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Abstract Experience with collaborative approaches to natural resource and environmental management has grown substantially over the past 20 years, and multi-interest, shared-resources initiatives have become prevalent in the United States and internationally. Although often viewed as "grass-roots" and locally initiated, governmental participants are crucial to the success of collaborative efforts, and important questions remain regarding their appropriate roles, including roles in partnership initiation. In the midst of growing governmental support for collaborative approaches in the mid-1990s, the primary natural resource and environmental management agency in Wisconsin (USA) attempted to generate a statewide system of self-sustaining, collaborative partnerships, organized around the state's river basin boundaries. The agency expected the partnerships to enhance participation by stakeholders, leverage additional resources, and help move the agency toward more integrated and ecosystem-based resource management initiatives. Most of the basin partnerships did form and function, but ten years after this initiative, the agency has moved away from these partnerships and half have disbanded. Those that remain active have changed, but continue to work closely with agency staff. Those no longer functioning lacked clear focus, were dependent upon agency leadership, or could not overcome issues of scale. This article outlines the context for state support of collaborative initiatives and explores Wisconsin's experience with basin partnerships by discussing their formation and reviewing governmental roles in partnerships' emergence and change. Wisconsin's experience suggests benefits from agency support and agency responsiveness to partnership opportunities, but cautions about expectations for initiating general-purpose partnerships.

Keywords Collaboration · Partnerships · Watershed management · Agency roles

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Introduction

Collaborative and participatory approaches are recognized throughout the United States and internationally as significant institutional mechanisms for managing complex natural resource issues (Hooper and others 1999; Margerum 1999; Sabatier and others 2005; Scholz and Stiftel 2005; Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000). While the term, "collaborative," has come to encompass several forms of multi-interest organizations, these approaches generally focus on specific geographic areas and emphasize integration, stakeholder participation, and decentralized governance (Margerum and Born 2000). They apply to a broad set of issues including forest management (Cheng and Daniels 2003; Carr and others 1998; Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000), habitat protection and restoration (Leach and Pelkey 2001; Koontz and others 2004; Sommarstrom 1999), water resources (Born and Sonzogni 1995; Lubell 2004; Sabatier and others 2005), and more (Brick and others 2001; Conley and Moote 2001; Poncelet 2001). Experiences with collaborative approaches demonstrate numerous roles and functions for participants.

Research has examined a variety of outcomes expected to emerge from collaborative approaches to resource management. These range from specific accomplishments, such as resource management practices implemented and

environmental conditions improved (Bellamy and others 1999; Born and Genskow 2000; Leach and others 2002), to less tangible outcomes, such as increased social capital and legitimacy (Leach and Sabatier 2005; MacKenzie 1996; Mullin and Allison 1999). Studies evaluating the effectiveness of collaborative natural resource management initiatives have also identified a variety of factors considered critical to success, such as organizational and planning processes, participation, operational and decision rules, goal setting, and communication (Conley and Moote 2003; Imperial 1999; Margerum 2002; Sabatier and others 2005; Schuett and others 2001).

Active governmental involvement and support for collaborative efforts is recognized as one of the factors critical for achieving resource management outcomes (Born and Genskow 2000; Koontz and others 2004; Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000). Government roles in this new generation of collaborative approaches differ from the formal commissions, authorities, and coordinative bodies of the past (e.g., see Derthick 1974; Allee and others 1982). Agency participation in contemporary collaborative efforts may involve providing technical support, sharing staff resources, leading planning efforts, identifying and securing funds, or allowing input from partners to influence policy and management decisions. Opponents of agency involvement in these efforts have criticized them for creating power imbalances and permitting undue influence by local stakeholders on agency decisions (Kenney 2000; McCloskey 1999; Walker and Hurley 2004). However, local groups rely heavily on complicit involvement from government agencies to accomplish meaningful outcomes (Born and Genskow 1999; Hooper and others 1999; Koontz and others 2004).

There are several reasons why agencies support and participate in geographically based collaborative efforts. Foremost is their potential value for extending agency resources and for accomplishing integrated and ecosystem approaches to environmental management (Born and Genskow 2000, Cortner and Moote 1999; Agee and Johnson 1988). Grumbine's (1994) characterization of ecosystem management includes several elements germane to these efforts: (a) ecological boundaries that span administrative and political jurisdictional lines to address issues at the appropriate scales; (b) interagency coordination between multiple levels of government as well as private parties; and (c) organizational and administrative changes to resource management agencies in support of ecosystems. Collaborative natural resource management initiatives enable agencies to work beyond their jurisdictional authorities to focus on ecosystem needs. Further rationale for agency support is found in arguments that collaborative, locally based efforts promote efficiencies and expand resources, focus public and agency attention on priority resource issues at appropriate geographic scales, leverage limited state and federal resources, generate local credibility by involving stakeholders who are influential in management and implementation decisions, and create local capacity to address complex issues over time (Leach and others 2002; Margerum and Born 2000; Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000; Woolley and McGinnis 1999).

A variety of federal and state policies and initiatives in the mid-1990s further supported movement toward collaborative, place-based approaches in the United States. During that period, US Secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt, stated the need to consider "entire ecosystems" rather than single-issue management in order to avoid "national train wrecks" over natural resources, and no less than eighteen federal agencies were embracing geographically based resource management that emphasized collaboration (Koontz and others 2004; Morrissey and others 1994, NRC 1999, USEPA 1998). Several states also embraced those approaches. Statewide initiatives in Washington, Oregon, and Massachusetts emerged from state legislative and gubernatorial actions that allocated staff, technical, and financial assistance for developing and supporting broadly representative collaborative councils, teams, and partnerships for water resource management (Born and Genskow 1999; Habron 2003; Malone 2000; Michaels 1999). In California, state and federal agencies experimented jointly with "bioregional" councils (Thomas 1999), and several other states initiated a variety of programs to support place-based and collaborative efforts (USEPA 2002, Collins and others 1998; Born and Genskow 2000). Over time, budget constraints and shifting priorities have affected those initiatives (e.g., the Massachusetts Watershed Initiative was discontinued), yet experiences with state-level innovations provide opportunities for assessment and insights, particularly related to potential roles and actions for government.

Much of the discussion to date regarding governmental roles in collaborative initiatives has focused on agency and institutional barriers and constraints to effective governmental participation and involvement, such as limited authority of field staff/hierarchical agency structures, sunshine laws, and lack of local legitimacy (Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000; McGinnis and others 1999; Westley 1995; Kenney 2000). Research that has addressed potential roles has emphasized opportunities for supporting local initiatives through discretionary authority of leadership and application of local resources (Born and Genskow 1999, 2000; Imperial and Hennessey 2000). Notably, Koontz and others (2004), outline appropriate roles for government based on whether an agency is leading, encouraging, or following collaborative efforts. Koontz and others (2004) also identify several important remaining questions, including: the extent to which governments are willing

(and able) to share power; the means through which government efforts actually facilitate or hinder collaboration; the extent to which collaboration leads to better environmental outcomes; and how collaboration fosters public involvement and empowerment of civil society.

Wisconsin's experience adds a unique contribution to discussions of governmental roles and functions in collaborative initiatives. The State of Wisconsin attempted to establish and maintain multi-interest partnerships for each of the state's twenty-one major river basins through unilateral action by a single state agency. Lacking the legislative and gubernatorial leadership of other state efforts noted above, Wisconsin's experience started from a vision, promoted by the agency Secretary, to grow a statewide network of self-sustaining resource management partnerships. The vision was partly realized, and more than a decade later, about half of the partnerships have continued in some form despite diminished support from the agency; the rest did not last and disbanded. Wisconsin's experience provides insights regarding agencies as catalysts and conveners of collaborative efforts, agency processes for initiating partnerships at a statewide level, the use of collaborative partnerships to help meet state environmental objectives, and partnerships at an ecosystem scale as a mechanism for fostering public involvement.

Wisconsin's Basin Partnerships

Background

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) is the state's primary resource management agency with statutory responsibility for administering the full array of environmental quality and natural resource management programs. Agency functions encompass developing standards, issuing permits, planning, monitoring air, water, forests and wildlife, hunting and fishing, and management of state-owned lands. In 1996, WDNR embarked upon a departmental reorganization that involved several major administrative and staffing changes (WDNR 1996). The changes were driven largely by the agency's determination to bring about more effective resource management that reflected national and international movements toward ecosystem, collaborative, and community-based approaches. The reorganization included a variety of internal structural adjustments, new supervisory positions and relationships, the adoption of statewide management units based on ecosystem boundaries, and establishment of a statewide network of partnerships for decentralized interaction with stakeholders.

One of the reorganization's most significant innovations was adopting natural-resource-based boundaries for administering many agency programs. This involved switching from a traditional alignment with county jurisdictional boundaries to alignment with new "Geographic Management Units" (GMUs), which cut across multiple political jurisdictions. The agency considered a variety of ecological landscape divisions for defining the GMUs, but the final boundaries selected closely matched the state's major river basin boundaries, in part due to years of familiarity with regional watershed planning and management in some parts of the agency. After final adjustments and consolidations, WDNR defined twenty-one GMU areas ranging from approximately 850 km^2 (330 mi^2) to more than 10,000 km^2 (>4,000 mi^2) (see Fig. 1). Over time, WDNR staff, stakeholders, and partners dropped the "GMU" terminology, and the areas were referred to simply as "basins."

WNDR's reorganized internal structure included media-based Divisions of Land, Air, and Water. The changes also decentralized a variety of supervisory and decision-making authorities to basin-level staff. Realigning program administration and staff within the new divisions and along the twenty-one new management units (basins) involved staff transfers and reassignments, new supervisory structures, and new internal support structures. These reassignments affected nearly all staff with the exception of conservation wardens and a few others who remained aligned with traditional county-based management areas (WDNR 1996). As part of the change, each new basin management unit was assigned two new mid-level supervisory positions associated with the Division of Water and the Division of Land. These interdisciplinary positions, designated "land team leaders" and "water team leaders," largely replaced traditional line-reporting relationships to oversee a variety of programs within their geographical areas.

In addition to internal changes, WDNR sought to establish a mechanism for decentralized interaction and input from stakeholders. Shortly after completing structural and staff reassignments, WDNR initiated regional, multi-interest, collaborative partnerships for each new geographical area. As part of their assignments, the new WDNR land and water team leaders were expected to convene and organize these new collaborative entities, which eventually became known as "basin teams" or "basin partnerships."

By initiating agency-sponsored partnerships at the basin level, WDNR made a deliberate attempt to catalyze the formation of new long-term, place-based entities. This vision for active basin-level partnerships in every GMU (basin) was heavily influenced and strongly supported by the Secretary of WDNR. The vision presented by the Secretary and senior leadership included several key expectations (WDNR 1998). First, partnerships would

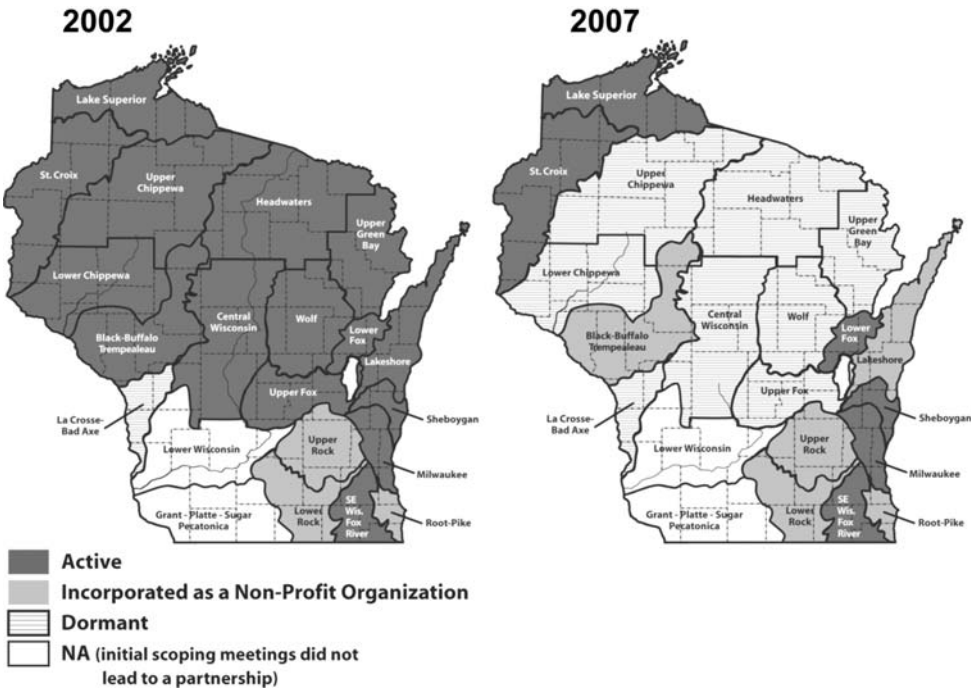

Fig. 1 Wisconsin basin partnership status

involve a broad variety of interests working together to set and address mutual priorities, and eventually, the partnerships would become self-sustaining, with limited agency support. Second, the partnerships would act on priorities and share resources to produce tangible accomplishments in their basins. Third, the partnerships would nurture integrated and ecosystem-based management by addressing "overlapping topical issues" and multiple programs in a coordinated and cooperative fashion. The vision stressed the importance of the partnerships themselves determining their form, directions, and the means by which they would pursue their priorities, yet stated clear expectations for new functional partnerships in each geographical area.

The general guidance provided by agency leadership (WDNR 1998) encouraged flexibility in partnership form and structure but included procedures for identifying potential participants (including a recommended set of core interests), convening and running effective meetings, identifying priorities, and developing action plans. Each team leader was also granted a very modest amount of one-time seed money (US $3000) as a way of supporting partnership start-up costs and providing a small funding base for activities. Land and water team leaders also had discretion to assign staff to support the partnerships. As basin partnerships began forming in 1998, WDNR collaborated with the University of Wisconsin-Cooperative Extension (UWEX) to create several new "basin educator" positions that would, among other responsibilities, provide initial facilitation and group process support for the partnerships; these educators generally served multiple basins (Shepard 1999). Through the partnerships' formative years, WDNR and UWEX coordinated to provide support and professional development opportunities for agency staff and stakeholders involved in basin partnerships(UWERC 2002). Together, they hosted several partnership "summits" to share information and build capacity across partnerships.

While the Division of Water generally supported the reorganized agency structure and resulting teams, the other agency divisions were less supportive of the changes. This lack of support was due to dissatisfaction with new, interdisciplinary supervisory hierarchies and perceived irrelevance of basin boundaries as geographical units for administering their functions and responsibilities. By 2002, WDNR had re-adjusted their structure to enable the other agency divisions to largely abandon the original basin/GMU boundaries and to disengage from basin partnerships. In late 2005, a decade after the agency reorganization began, WDNR discontinued remaining financial support for staff coordination of partnerships, yet encouraged agency "team leaders" to continue participating in viable efforts at their own discretion. The reduction in already limited support resulted largely from ongoing state budgetary challenges, changes in agency leadership (two other Secretaries led the agency during this period), and the lack of support for basin partnerships beyond the Division of Water. As depicted in Fig. 1, several partnerships did not survive the transition; others have proceeded in some fashion, generally with continued agency participation and reduced agency dependence.

Methods

Data for this study were collected in two main phases and drew from numerous sources, including interviews, written surveys, and document review. The first phase, conducted in 2002, involved interviews with 53 agency staff from WDNR who had been instrumental in partnership formation and ten WDNR staff in leadership positions who were not involved directly with the partnerships. Data from interviews were summarized, coded, and reviewed with word-processing and "N6" qualitative analysis software for themes related to actions, challenges, facilitators, accomplishments, and recommendations. Forty-two (42) of the 53 WDNR staff active in partnership formation also completed questionnaires regarding their partnerships' formation and their perceptions of WDNR and external partner expectations; this represented a response rate of 81 percent among WDNR partnership leaders. The first phase also included collection and review of plans, reports, meeting materials, and other documents related to the partnerships.

The second phase involved a mailed survey of every individual who had participated as a member of a basin partnership from the time they were initiated (generally 1998) until the survey was conducted in Autumn 2002. The population included all active members as well all individuals who had participated previously but were no longer active when the survey was conducted. The survey was developed and delivered following a modified Tailored Design Method (Dillman 1999) for mailed surveys. In total, 677 individuals received questionnaires, and 517 were returned, yielding an overall response rate of 76 percent. Eighty-three (83) respondents indicated that they had not participated sufficiently to provide detailed responses, and 434 returned usable questionnaires. Of those, 67 percent were active participants in their partnerships at the time of the survey, and 33 percent were no longer active.

Questions were structured using a variety of scales, multiple-choice, and open-ended formats. Topics addressed levels of participation, partnership purpose and value, activities, resource management focus, and accomplishments. Survey data were entered into SPSS statistical software and analyzed using descriptive statistics. Inferential statistics were not used as the entire population of partnership members was included in the study.

Results from partnership members were aggregated (UWERC 2003), and summaries for each basin were shared with individual partnerships. Conversations with agency support staff and partnership coordinators in years following the study provided ongoing anecdotal data. Telephone conversations with agency coordinators occurred in Spring 2007 to determine the status of the basin partnerships.

Partnership Accomplishments

The discussion below highlights experiences and accomplishments of Wisconsin's basin partnerships. These highlights are framed by WDNR's initial objectives and expectations and also through brief profiles of four partnerships. The subsequent section relates the experience to a broader set of themes for collaborative management.

A Statewide Overview

When they began the initiative, WDNR leadership set three general objectives for basin partnerships: (a) convene and function with broad stakeholder representation; (b) share resources among participants and act on management priorities to produce tangible accomplishments; and (c) improve integrated and ecosystem management for the basin area.

Building Partnerships with Broad Stakeholder Representation WDNR attempted to develop twenty basin partnerships, including one that spanned two basin areas (see Upper and Lower Rock in Fig. 1). Eighty percent (80%) of the basins initiated partnerships in 1998, and by 2001, some sort of partnership scoping process had occurred in all of the basins. Ten (10) percent of the partnerships never proceeded beyond initial scoping discussions.

Partnerships generally consisted of a variety of interests, and the diversity of their membership varied across basins. Sixty (60) percent of the partnerships had a majority of agency representation. Thirty (30) percent had a majority of private interests. Ten (10) percent had nearly equal amounts. As they emerged, basin partnerships interpreted their purposes in a variety of ways. Fifty (50) percent concentrated on coordinating other groups through networking, and sharing information. Twenty (20) percent reported their primary role as education and raising awareness. Fifteen (15) percent of partnerships identified their primary role as conducting natural resource management projects.

At the individual participant level, 65 percent of partnership members responded that their partnerships reflected a "broad representation" or "fairly broad representation" of the critical resource management interests in their basins. Twenty-one (21) percent felt their partnerships reflected a "limited representation" of the relevant interests in their basins; among WDNR staff, 36 percent felt their partnerships reflected "limited representation." For most partnerships, under-represented interests included recreational and tourist, environmental advocacy, business, agricultural, and local governmental.

Individuals participated to gain access to information and expertise from others and to coordinate their activities.

Table 1 illustrates the importance of various factors on individual decisions to continue their participation in partnerships. When asked an open-ended survey question regarding what they value most about their partnerships, 40 percent wrote comments related to communication and networking; another 15 percent wrote comments related to accomplishing resource management priorities, and less than 2 percent wrote specific comments regarding creating "trust" and building "diverse representation."

Shared Resources and Action on Mutual Priorities Nearly all of the partnerships that continued beyond the initial scoping discussions shared their resources and acted on mutual priorities, although this generally involved a fairly limited pool of resources and a limited set of actions. The general costs of communication, facilitation, and related issues were absorbed by agencies and partners. While they shared staff and technical resources, basin partnerships generally operated without substantial financial resources for projects or operations. Some partnerships were successful in securing additional funds for partnership projects and activities, generating from a few thousand dollars for specific educational or land-management activities to several hundreds of thousand dollars in grants and contributions. Seventy-five (75) percent of participant respondents felt that partnerships enabled extra resources to be pooled to meet basin, project, watershed, or partner needs.

Consistent with initial agency expectations, partnerships addressed a broad range of resource management issues at site-specific, sub-basin, and basin-wide levels. Information sharing and coordination among partners led to identification of new priority issues, increased awareness of the priorities and activities of other resource management interests, and created new opportunities for interaction and joint management. Figure 2 provides a rank-order listing of the issues that partnerships discussed and on which they took action. In aggregate, the most important natural resource management issues from the perspectives of partnership members were surface water quality, shoreland and riparian land conservation and restoration, and groundwater quality. Most partnerships conducted planning activities, educational programs, restoration projects, monitoring projects, or related actions that grew directly from partnership discussions.

In "taking action" on issues, partnerships produced educational videos, pamphlets, maps, and other materials; developed incentive programs for various actions; wrote advocacy letters; contributed to master-planning processes; created educational demonstration sites for desired management practices; organized on-the-ground resource management programs; hosted public discussions; initiated monitoring programs; addressed latent conflicts; and sponsored workshops for public and professional audiences. When asked to rate the impact of their activities on a variety of on-the-ground measures, partners (and WDNR partnership leaders) indicated that their greatest contributions involved improved management practices on riparian property and shore lands, management practices on local public lands, and practices on privately held wetlands.

Strengthening Integration and Improving Ecosystem Management "Ecosystem management" was not defined clearly for partnerships in written agency guidance, but consistent with available resource management literature (e.g., Grumbine 1994; Gunderson and others 1995) was generally expected to involve combining multiple resources, programs, and topical issues within a specific geographic boundary. In places where partnerships were active, WDNR leaders stated that partnerships clearly enhanced their level of interaction, coordination, and awareness of others' activities in the basin and that the awareness led to more systematic consideration of an expanded set of issues. Those leaders do not believe, however, that the partnership efforts influenced *intra*-agency efforts at integration and expanded ecosystem management. From the perspective of participants, 75 percent of survey respondents believed that partnerships incorporated the needs of outside groups into their goals and priorities; 62 percent of partnership members and 48

Table 1 Importance of factors influencing participation in basin partnerships

Factor	Percent of respondents indicating factor was "important" or "very important" for participation	
	Partnership members (%)	WDNR partnership leaders (%)
Opportunities to influence WDNR priorities	88	58
Access to WDNR information and expertise	78	62
Access to information and expertise of other organizations	86	81
Ability to coordinate natural resource activities in the basin	92	89
Ability to conduct (or enable) on-the-ground projects	87	96
Ability to conduct (or enable) public involvement and educational projects	90	90

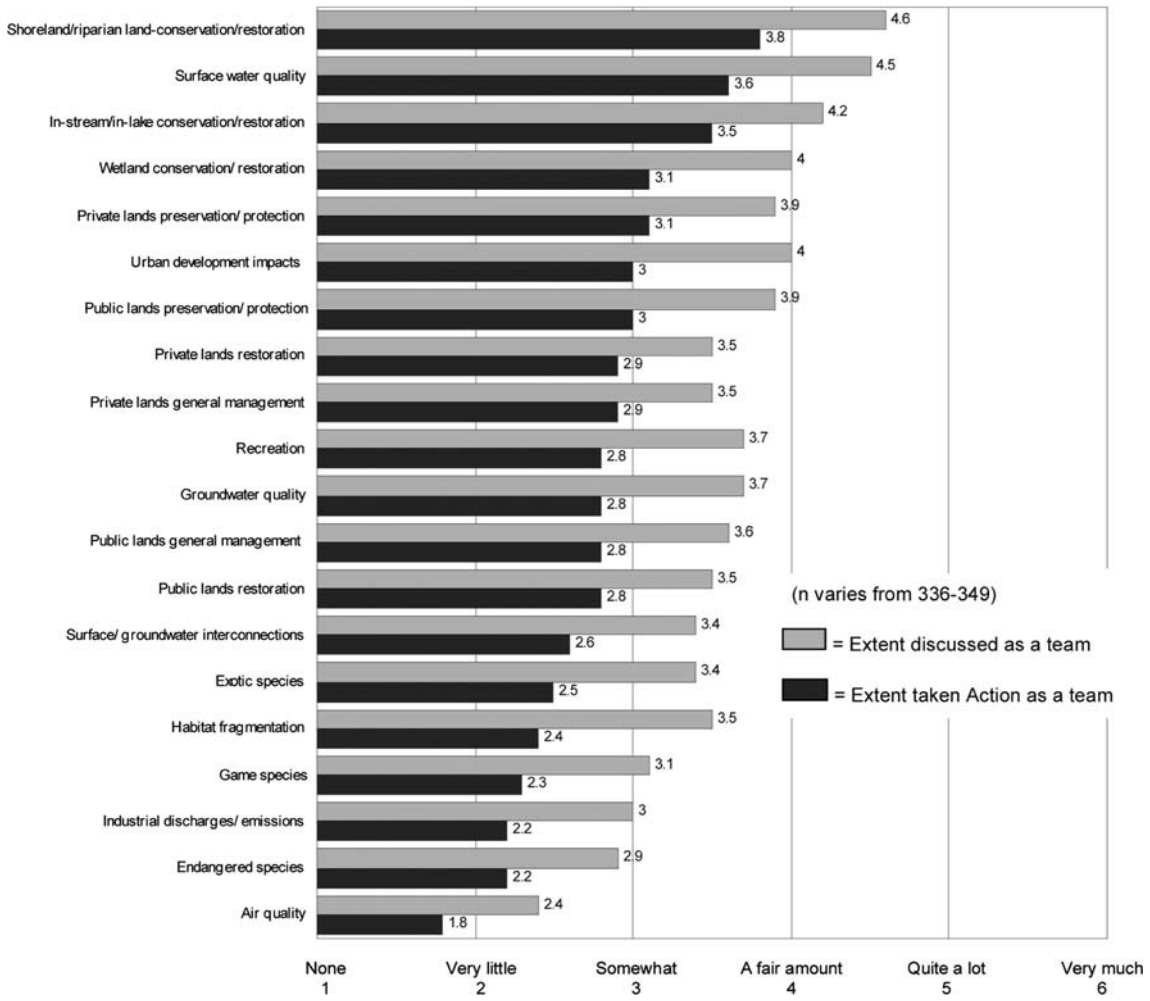

Fig. 2 Rank-order of resource management issues addressed by partnerships

percent of WDNR partnership leaders believed other groups incorporated basin partnerships' goals and priorities into their organizational plans.

Integration and ecosystem issue considerations occurred primarily through interactions at partnership functions and formal planning efforts. Sixty-five (65) percent of the partnerships made meaningful contributions to basin plans and reports developed to comply with federal Clean Water Act requirements. Contributions involved actually writing parts of the plan and sharing reports with the public through meetings and special events. At least 55 percent of the partnerships integrated other WDNR plans into their activities or influenced WDNR plans in some way. For example, partnerships provided additional perspectives to feasibility studies for land acquisition and land-management master planning. Partnerships also provided guidance to WDNR on the administration of specific projects and grants, adding elements that would not otherwise have been represented. Most basin partnerships incorporated local government plans addressing soil and water conservation and/or assisted local governments with conservation planning activities. Overall, participants reported that basin partnerships improved provisions for consistency review of resource management plans and projects.

Basin-Level Variations

Although given the same general charge from WDNR, the development, focus, activities, and longevity of individual basin partnerships varied substantially. Wisconsin's initiative did succeed in catalyzing partnerships in most of the state (Fig. 1) for at least some period of time. For a few years, they comprised a mostly statewide network of partnerships. Several did not survive the transition from agency leadership to self-direction when WDNR diminished their support. The experiences of individual partnerships, though varied, fell into four general categories: (a) those that continued to provide consistent leadership on a broad set of basin-level issues; (b) those that found a more narrow focus and purpose; (c) partnerships that disbanded once agency

support ended; and (d) those that simply lost momentum after a promising early start. As noted, others never progressed beyond the initial scoping discussions. The examples below illustrate experiences from each of the four categories by outlining the partnership's origin, initial emphasis, and general evolution.

Rock River Basin: Southcentral Wisconsin The partnership for the Rock River Basin took advantage of existing networks to create a new forum for sharing and coordination that has remained strong since its inception. Wisconsin's Rock River Basin covers approximately 9,800 km^2 (3,780 mi^2) and includes all or parts of ten counties in southcentral Wisconsin. The basin contains highly valuable wildlife habitat and natural areas, including several large cities, and is heavily dominated by agricultural land uses. Major resource management issues include water quality impacts from agricultural and urban land uses, habitat loss and fragmentation, and impacts on groundwater quality and quantity (WDNR 2002a). In 1998, local WDNR leaders in the Rock River Basin approached an existing watershed organization with a mission similar to that envisioned for basin partnerships to explore their interest in adapting to become the formal partnership for the basin. The Rock River Coalition, which had formed several years prior to WDNR's initiative, embraced the opportunity and reconstituted its board and organizational structure to accommodate a broader scope and set of participants. The new coalition defined its new partnership priorities through a partnership forum, which drew approximately 200 people to an afternoon and evening of planning and priority setting. The forum led to the creation of several standing issue teams, coordinated by the Rock River Coalition and serving as the main vehicle for engaging various interests on resource issues. Initial issue teams included groundwater, urban storm water, rural development, water quality, recreation, wetland and shoreland protection. Issue teams routinely involved a mix of agency staff, environmental representatives, and some private citizens. The Rock River Coalition and these teams have received numerous grants and awards, regularly host educational and outreach events, and facilitate coordination and integration. The partnership has initiated and maintained a communication network among place-based organizations within the basin as well as a network of volunteer water quality monitors who receive training in acceptable monitoring protocols and collect water quality data throughout the basin. While overall agency support and direct involvement has diminished, the coalition remains a strong and active presence for resource management issues in the Rock River Basin.

Root-Pike Basin: Southeastern Wisconsin The Root-Pike Basin partnership started by following the formation process outlined in WDNR guidance but abandoned that model and transformed into an innovative and self-sustaining organization. The Root-Pike Basin drains approximately 850 km^2 (330 mi^2) through the Root and Pike Rivers (plus the adjacent Oak Creek Watershed) into Lake Michigan. The basin is located in a rapidly urbanizing Milwaukee-Chicago corridor and includes the cities of Racine, Kenosha, and parts of several growing suburban communities in southern Milwaukee and eastern Waukesha counties. Although home to several highly valued natural resource areas, the basin has experienced extensive wetland loss, stream chanelization, and other significant water quality impairments (WDNR 2002b). Partnership efforts in the Root-Pike began in 1998 with an initial set of scoping meetings involving participation by eighteen agency and non-governmental representatives. During its first year, the partnership developed vision and mission statements and focused on coordinating for land protection and water quality management; issues included wetland and habitat restoration, shoreland protection, and addressing diffuse sources of urban and rural water quality pollution. Early activities primarily involved information sharing and coordination, and the partnership helped host an environmental education festival and conference. Several partners stopped attending during this planning phase due to time constraints and general loss of interest.

The partnership underwent a major transformation during its second year. Taking advantage of local private sector and foundation funding, the partnership reformed itself into the Root-Pike Watershed Initiative Network (WIN), an independent watershed-based granting organization supporting the priorities previously identified by the basin partnership. The Root-Pike WIN (borrowing upon an organizational model used in Michigan's Saginaw Bay) consists of a steering committee, a network of resource management professionals, a funding network, and a set of task groups, which focus on specific resource management priorities. The organization, which operates through an executive director and involves a core membership base, solicits project proposals and distributes small grants to organizations within the basin to address its priority resource management issues. Often, the task groups draw upon the resource network to work with applicants to strengthen and improve project proposals, including finding opportunities to link proposals to related efforts. The network also supports communication and coordination across agencies and non-governmental actors working in the basin. Although WDNR remains involved with the Root-Pike WIN, this partnership transitioned away from agency dependence shortly after its formation and has maintained itself as an independent organization since 2000.

Upper Green Bay Basin: Northeastern Wisconsin The partnership for the Upper Green Bay Basin began with active involvement of a variety of interests but eventually

disbanded with a reduction in agency support. The Upper Green Bay Basin consists of eighteen watersheds draining into Lake Michigan's Green Bay. Although initially defined by those watershed boundaries, the official "basin" lines were truncated on its northwestern border to match county jurisdictional lines and clarify management responsibilities with the neighboring Headwaters Basin (WDNR 2001). The partnership for the Upper Green Bay Basin survived several transitions before finally going dormant in 2005. Initiated by local WDNR leadership in 1998, the partnership attracted a diverse set of private citizens, local agency representatives, and environmental organizations and maintained a monthly meeting schedule throughout its first four years. Initial planning and priority setting identified an emphasis on land protection and shoreland restoration and led to successful pursuit of several project grants, including outreach on shoreland stewardship and research on coastal estuaries. The partnership also became involved in discussions of substantial land transfers within the basin, and their involvement in a series of public meetings was influential in securing approval for state land purchases. The partnership generally developed ad hoc subcommittees to coordinate specific projects. Participants found the greatest value in communication and networking enabled by the partnership, as well as access and regular interaction with WDNR staff. Yet, the partnership also experienced significant membership turnover and faced difficulties finding a consistent base of participants and volunteers. There was an expectation among partners that local WDNR leadership would respond to their collective priorities. As the agency gradually withdrew support, the partnership explored several alternative models for continuing, including joining with a neighboring partnership, but ultimately determined they could not sustain an organization without ongoing coordination and leadership from agency staff.

Upper Chippewa River Basin: Northwestern Wisconsin

Thee Upper Chippewa Basin partnership developed a strong emphasis on education and general coordination but gradually lost momentum and became inactive. The Upper Chippewa River Basin spans ten counties across mostly rural northwestern Wisconsin. The area is roughly two-thirds forested and includes numerous lake and river systems, many of which are experiencing land development pressures. Local WDNR land and water leaders convened the partnership in mid-1998, drawing approximately 30 people to initial meetings. The Extension basin educator assistance available to other partnerships was not available in the Upper Chippewa Basin until late 2000, and for its first two years, the partnership functioned through leadership from a core set of citizen and agency representatives. After 2000, the basin educator coordinated most partnership activities. The partnership involved a steering committee, co-chaired by the WDNR water leader and a non-agency member, and the partnership focused its activities around information sharing, coordination, and education. The partnership hosted an environmental education conference for area teachers, hosted an educational river fair for a public audience, and developed educational programs related to rural land stewardship. The partnership helped initiate other local organizations, and was called upon to play an intermediary role in recreational use conflicts within the basin. Over time, turnover in agency staff and partnership membership led to gradual declines in activity, and to eventual dormancy.

Discussion

Wisconsin's experience offers a unique opportunity to learn from one agency's attempt to initiate and catalyze a set of multi-interest, place-based resource management partnerships with statewide coverage. The experience also sheds light on potential advantages and limitations of agency roles in partnership initiation. Six general themes provide a framework for discussion:

Clear Goals and Agency Objectives for Partnerships

WDNR initiated a statewide network of partnerships for a variety of general purposes (e.g., stakeholder input, joint action, integration), but the agency did not clarify state-level goals and objectives for natural resources—WDNR expected that partnerships would identify joint goals and objectives from among the broad set of issues in their basins. Outside of an agency mandate to form basin partnerships, Wisconsin's basins generally lacked clear drivers for collaboration that would unite stakeholders across a broad range of issues. Distinct from other statewide efforts such as those in the Pacific Northwest (Sabatier and others 2005; Sommarstrom 1999), Wisconsin was not confronting large-scale crises such as endangered species issues. Scattered episodic conflicts over natural resource management are always present, but statewide there were no consistent threats around which to rally. In the absence of a clear statewide threat and a resource-specific mandate from the state, the purpose, focus, and expectations of basin partnerships became open to wide interpretation. The initial broad scope of issues reflected in many of the partnerships was necessarily narrowed over time. Participants whose issues were not group priorities stopped attending. Yet, the ability of partnerships to reduce issues and identify a clear focus proved critical for their long-term viability. Partnerships in largely urbanized southeastern and northeastern Wisconsin found roles emphasizing coordination among the many extant resource management interests and their

various initiatives. Partnerships in less populous areas found stronger interests for initiating new projects, yet suffered in transitions as they attempted follow-up activities, sometimes without additional participants.

The issue of agency power sharing in integrated and collaborative efforts has long been a point of contention and continues to drive important research questions related to participation and agency influence (Deyle 1995; McCloskey 1999; Koontz and others 2004; Mitchel 2007). Access to WDNR and the potential to influence agency decisions was a strong driver for participation in Wisconsin's partnerships. Original guidance from agency leadership suggested a potential to influence WNDR work planning and discretionary staff assignments, but it clearly excluded any explicit authority or partnership involvement in regulatory issues. Despite this initial lack of authority, as the partnerships progressed through their early organizational phases, several sought formal recognition or status from the agency and expressed expectations regarding expanding agency responsiveness to partner requests. For some participants, inadequate agency responsiveness and a lack of formal authority for partnerships deterred their continued involvement.

Support of Traditional Statewide Partners

Wisconsin's experience was a unilateral attempt at basin partnerships—they were initiated and "owned" by a single agency. Key partners and related agencies participated and in some cases became deeply vested in particular efforts, but with the exception of UW-Extension, no other state-level agencies or nongovernmental organizations participated consistently across the basins. The importance of stakeholder "buy-in" is found throughout the literature (e.g., Thomas 1999, Margerum and Born 2000, Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000, Lubell 2004, Bonnell and Koontz 2007), but that support was absent or tepid among key statewide stakeholders in this experience. WDNR was not able to fully accommodate the interests of statewide and local partners in the initial development and design of the partnership effort, and some important constituencies were not satisfied that the partnership structure met their needs. As an example, Wisconsin's Conservation Congress—an influential statewide organization of hunting and fishing interests—initially identified a representative for each emerging partnership, yet very few of those representatives stayed involved beyond one or two formative meetings. Consistent with suggestions that organizational coordination should reflect participant goals and decisions contexts (Alexander 1993, Quirk 2005, Bidwell and Ryan 2006, Margerum 2008), important statewide partners found other existing forums for coordination and decision making more compelling than the basin partnerships.

Support of Local Partners

Much of the literature on collaborative partnerships emphasizes issues of participation by local and grassroots stakeholders (NRC 1999, Born and Genskow 2000, Lubell 2004, Bidwell and Ryan 2006, Koehler and Koontz 2008). As noted in the discussion of accomplishments, all of the basin leaders in Wisconsin were successful at engaging a broad set of interests in initial scoping discussions for basin partnerships. Some maintained fairly stable participation from original members, some experienced substantial turnover and redirection, and others changed dramatically in both composition and focus. Several of the partnerships moved through cycles of formation, action, dormancy, and re-emergence. This dynamic cycling reflects the depth and breadth of potential resources within each watershed and their likelihood to engage and disengage based on opportunity and timing (Genskow and Born 2006). It is important for agency staff and stakeholders to recognize the potential for this kind of cycling in place-based environmental partnerships and the need both to frame issues to attract stakeholder interest and to provide opportunities that will support their continued involvement.

Untapped local support and participation is evident in the portion of Wisconsin for which viable basin partnerships never formed (Fig. 1). In those areas, staff charged with partnership formation found limited (or no) support for regional collaboration, yet failure to establish basin level partnerships did not equate to a lack of civic capacity or conservation interest in the area. Across Wisconsin there is a strong legacy of collaborative and partnership-focused relationships through statewide non-governmental organizations for rivers, lakes, land trusts, wetlands, and woodlands, as well as for traditional partners for fish and game management and for local conservation initiatives. Those areas where basin-level partnerships did not form did concurrently support numerous collaborative conservation efforts at smaller watershed and stream-reach scales, notably through long-standing efforts such as the Black Earth Creek Watershed Association (Born and Sonzogni 1995) and investments from national conservation interests such as Trout Unlimited. Similar to reactions from statewide stakeholders, local partners in those places reported general satisfaction with existing networks addressing issues for their "place" and were not convinced of additional benefits from participating in new basin partnerships.

While recognizing the need for flexibility, the agency strongly discouraged its basin leaders from foregoing new partnership formation, regardless of the existing social networks and collaborative arrangements already in place; water and land team leaders were expected to initiate new groups. This directive reinforced observations by Hooper and others (1999, p. 754) that "[m]any government

agencies prefer to develop and apply a standardized approach to problem solving, because that is the easiest to justify. Every region is treated the same, and therefore no region can be said to be getting an advantage or special consideration. However, the reality is that places are different." Those differences confound formulaic requirements for collaborative or coordinative mechanisms (Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000; Bidwell and Ryan 2006; Margerum 2008).

Support Within the Initiating Agency

Despite several apparent advantages to Wisconsin's approach, it was too much, too fast for agency staff to fully embrace the application of basin partnerships. Advantages were that top administration strongly supported and endorsed the basin/GMU structure and the concept of collaborative partnerships, the effort was integrated into a major agency reorganization, and the department created a cadre of team leaders who were responsible for initiating and sustaining a partnership presence in their basins. Koontz and others (2004) emphasize the benefits of senior leadership challenging agency norms to enhance collaboration, and WDNR's leadership certainly challenged norms regarding ecosystem and collaborative management. Yet, as evidenced by further re-organizational adjustments five years later, the agency had been pushed too far beyond its own comfort level. Shifting to basins and interdisciplinary supervisory structures disrupted traditional functional management approaches of foresters, fish and wildlife managers, and others. The use of basins—water resource boundaries—was viewed positively by those working mainly on surface water issues, but was problematic for those in other programs. The agency's return to a more traditional line structure and the ensuing disengagement from basin partnerships by most divisions reflects a tension over resource managers' expert training and allegiance to professional norms and concerns over yielding influence to interdisciplinary leadership and local partnerships in collaborative, place-based initiatives (Thomas 1999; Cortner and Moote 1999; Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000; Schlager and Blomquist 2008). Also, initiating basin partnership immediately on the heels of new structural arrangements, major staff reassignments, and new position responsibilities, required staff to accommodate yet another complex change.

Process Support for Basin Partnerships

To their credit, WDNR recognized the need and provided resources to support process and logistical aspects of basin partnerships. Each partnership had access to staff with capable group facilitation and organizational process skills, each had similar guidance, and each had access to limited "seed money" to initiate projects and leverage resources. A variety of organizational procedural factors, meeting times and locations, use of process rules, and availability of quality meeting facilitation are consistently considered important for engaging appropriate participants and sustaining these efforts (Leach and Pelkey 2001, Margerum and Born 2000, Hooper and others 1999, Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000). Involvement of Cooperative Extension and agency partners with strong group process and facilitation skills appeared to largely control for these factors in Wisconsin's experience. Shared leadership across organizations and participants is also noted as an important aspect of partnership process design (e.g., Ferreyra and Beard 2007). Participants underscored this by consistently identifying leadership from agency and local civic leaders among the most important contributors to their partnerships' effectiveness.

Scale of Basin Partnerships

The geographic scale of coordination influences how participants interact, how issues are framed, and what issues are addressed (NRC 1999, Cheng and Daniels 2003, Currie-Alder 2007). The scale of Wisconsin's basins was useful for those participating as part of their professional work, but it proved to be problematic for engaging citizens as partnership members on resource management issues. For those who could address issues at a regional scale, basin partnerships provided opportunities to connect and coordinate numerous related local initiatives, but only some of the partnerships found a way to do this. For example, the Root-Pike partnership channeled financial and technical resources for local projects, and the Rock River partnership facilitated outreach and information exchange among place-based organizations. This "umbrella" communication and support function is beneficial, but individual participants weigh them against additional time and travel costs, and when issues addressed at meetings are not salient to individual interests, they opt out. Several partnerships tried but failed to maintain participation of more focused, sub-basin groups. Partnerships that succeeded were able to reduce the scale of issues and focus some efforts at a sub-basin level.

Conclusions

Wisconsin's experience with basin partnerships suggests that agencies can unilaterally initiate multi-interest partnerships that become successful and independent collaborative efforts. Wisconsin's efforts led to partnerships and collaborative activities that would not have

happened otherwise. The experience also resulted in failed efforts at forming and sustaining partnerships, and reinforced challenges of unclear goals, agency dependence for leadership, and formulaic approaches and structures.

Based on this experience, agencies should be cautious in mandating broad collaboration for general management goals. Agencies initiating collaborative resource management efforts are more likely to succeed by providing a specific purpose and focusing on specific issues and areas. Wisconsin's experience supports other research suggesting the form of coordination should match the internal and external situation faced by an initiating organization (Alexander 1993, Born and Genskow 2001, Margerum 2008).

Large sub-state regions (e.g., river basins) present obstacles for engaging private-citizen partners on relevant issues, yet agencies can connect with multiple interests by integrating basin activities with local efforts at narrower reach and sub-system scales. Clear statements of potential authority and influence of those interests engaged in partnerships can avoid misunderstandings and misplaced partner expectations. Agencies are able to support partnerships directly through seed funds, capacity-building grants related to project management, and general responsiveness when approached locally by representatives of new citizen initiatives. Institutionalizing staff roles and modest leverage funding to support these efforts can prepare agencies for substantive and enduring involvement with local partnership initiatives through inevitable changes.

Regardless of the scale and focus of partnerships they might attempt to initiate, agency resource managers should be prepared for the variety of outcomes experienced in Wisconsin. Some partnerships will form, attract relevant participants, and continue on their original course for several years. Some will transform multiple times, adding new interests, dropping others, and taking new directions. Some partnerships will continue to evolve and move in new and varied directions, and others will lose focus, disband, and perhaps eventually reform again with similar participants addressing overlapping issues. Others will never get off the ground. Staff commitment and preparation for partnerships can play a major role in their success. This is not to suggest that agencies should resort solely to ad hoc arrangements. Rather than attempting to drive new partnerships where needs are unclear, agencies would best position themselves to support and catalyze collaborative arrangements by preparing staff to recognize opportune situations, to encourage communication and volunteer networks that can help identify opportunities, and to match local resource management needs with an appropriate organizational response.

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