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Cross Watershed Network: Lessons for Peer-Learning

Introduction

The Cross Watershed Network (XWN) began as a regional network that connected watershed practitioners (practitioners) across watersheds in the Southwest U.S. through information sharing, collective capacity building, and collaboration. Members of the XWN Steering Committee wrote this case study to provide “lessons learned” for others who are setting up and implementing communities of practice and peer- learning networks. The study outlines XWN’s vision and accomplishments, approach to peer-learning and managing the network, and recommendations for future efforts.

A Peer-Learning Network to Advance Watershed Health

XWN was created to address a common need expressed by practitioners to increase collaboration among peers working in watersheds throughout the Southwest U.S. Founding members shared a strong desire to overcome geographic boundaries and more easily find and connect with peers working on similar issues. The network began by identifying strategies that would most successfully facilitate peer-

to-peer exchange of information (on-the-ground lessons learned, technical approaches to restoration, relevant academic research, etc.) across place-based watershed partnerships.

At the time, active natural resource peer-networks were largely focused on land trusts, conservation corps and topics such as water quality, invasive species, and wildfire. There were few existing networks in the Southwest focused on place-based watershed partnerships and organizations. To meet this peer-to-peer need, core partners building the network collaboratively developed the XWN mission, vision, and geographic scope (through participant surveys, workshop discussions, and Steering Committee strategic planning).

- **Mission:** To help watershed practitioners across the Southwest maximize their effectiveness through information sharing, collective capacity building, and collaboration.
- **Vision:** Healthy watersheds supported by a vibrant network of practitioners collaborating across boundaries.

In its eight years as an active network (2012-2020), XWN successfully engaged over 500 practitioners from agencies, organizations, universities, and consulting groups working on ecological restoration, conservation, and related watershed management efforts. Participants represented five states: AZ, CO, NM, NV, and UT. Many initially joined the network through annual workshops; others were targeted for recruitment by Steering Committee members. Over the past eight years, XWN has facilitated 25 place-based peer-learning events and additional virtual engagement opportunities across the Southwest and achieved the following outcomes for practitioners, their organizations, and stakeholders:

- Fostered many new peer-to-peer connections, learning and information exchanges
- Developed long-term relationships and collaboratives
- Institutionalized peer learning approaches within and among organizations
- Tested virtual engagement methods
- Bolstered interest in creating state-based networks such as the Arizona XWN
- Guided and informed the development of the Western Collaborative Conservation Network (WCCN)

Key Events:

- Peer-to-peer exchange events:
 - Six multi-day peer learning regional workshops:
 - Verde Watershed Restoration Coalition (2013 - AZ)
 - Escalante River Watershed Partnership (2014 - UT)
 - Arkansas River Watershed Invasive Plants Partnership (2015 - CO)
 - Gila Watershed Partnership (2017 - AZ)
 - Save Our Bosque Task Force (2018 - NM)
 - Virgin River Conservation Partnership (2019 - NV)
 - Eight cross watershed visits:
 - Colorado Riverfront Project (CO) and Verde Front (AZ) on the Colorado River in Grand Junction, CO (2014)
 - Desert Rivers Collaborative (CO) and Southeast Utah Riparian Partnership (UT) on the Colorado River in Grand Junction, CO (2015)

- Desert Rivers Collaborative (CO) and Southeast Utah Riparian Partnership (UT) on the Colorado River in Cisco, UT (2016)
 - Canadian and Purgatoire Watersheds (CO/NM) at DeHaven Ranch in Roy, NM (2016)
 - San Rafael River Restoration Project in Green River, UT (2016)
 - Western Slope Conservation Center, Colorado Canyons Association and River Restoration Adventures for Tomorrow on the Gunnison River in Delta, CO (2016)
 - Altar Valley Conservation Alliance and the Malpai Borderlands Group at Elkhorn Ranch in AZ (2016)
 - Middle Colorado Watershed Council along the Colorado River from Silt to De Beque, CO (2018)
- 10 topical learning sessions held across the Southwest

Peer-Learning Approach

XWN's approach has emphasized both peer-learning and the development of a community of practice, both proven strategies to achieve highly effective learning outcomes around sharing knowledge and building learning-based relationships. Peer-to-peer exchanges were supported by both in-person and virtual methods to help practitioners more easily find, connect and learn from each other with an intentional focus on positioning practitioners to share their own knowledge and experiences. The focus of learning events was determined through participant surveys in order to tailor conference, workshop and cross visit agendas to current participant interests and needs. Participant interests focused primarily on watershed restoration, collaboration and engagement, fundraising and other common challenges. Workshop design fostered active peer-to-peer problem solving and learning, constructive connections, and relationship building.

In-Person Peer-Learning Strategies

Workshops

The centerpiece of XWN's strategy was the convening of annual in-person peer-to-peer exchange workshops. The first workshop, held in 2013 in the Verde River watershed in central Arizona, was co-organized with the local watershed partnership, the Verde Watershed Restoration Coalition. XWN drew on its Steering Committee members to design and facilitate the inaugural workshops, using a highly participatory approach to foster peer-to-peer exchange. Workshops in subsequent years adapted this design and rotated states. Smaller, topic-specific workshops were also organized and often incorporated or added onto an existing conference or event. Workshops were well attended and consistently received highly positive evaluations from participants.

The annual peer-to-peer exchange workshop approach followed these general steps:

- 1) Select state and local watershed partners to co-host the next workshop
- 2) Convene a planning team comprised of XWN and co-host representatives

- 3) Survey the larger list of XWN participants about their challenges and interests in the coming year to guide the design of the workshop agenda
- 4) Develop the agenda, tailored to best address the needs of participants
- 5) Announce and open workshop registration (with a small registration fee, \$25-40, to offset cost and help determine number of attendees, accommodations, etc.)
- 6) Secure co-sponsors to help fund the workshop, including providing travel scholarships.
- 7) Organize the field visit portion - half or full day tour of the host watershed to both learn about their programs as well as engage experienced participants in sharing their own lessons and problem-solving ideas to address local challenges.
- 8) Convene the workshop, with key agenda elements including: a set of world cafe sessions on priority topics, with facilitated tables/breakouts on key sub-topics, short presentations by experienced practitioners for each to set the stage, and an open space session to connect practitioners for practical problem-solving individual issues, a field visit, and networking and socializing time during longer breaks and one evening.

Benefits of the workshops and success factors:

- Built an active community of practitioners across watersheds
- Provided many in-depth peer-to-peer sharing opportunities that were highly interactive, and many site based, versus a conference of back-to-back presentations
- Valued a wide breadth of knowledge and not just traditional experts
- Engaged people in the field, exchanging experiences and building community
- Rotated which state hosted the workshop enabling new participants to engage, as well as provided on the ground experience in diverse watershed settings across the Southwest
- Design of a successful workshop methodology
- Outreach and messaging with a clear description/outcome
- Consistent use of and learning from post-workshop evaluations following each workshop
- Value of pre-workshop participant survey to guide agenda development tailored to meet the interests and needs of participants
- Use of volunteer professional facilitators to design and facilitate the workshops

Challenges of the workshops:

- Lack of time to go into greater depth in each of the topics, given the breadth of participants' high priority interests
- Limited staff/facilitation capacity to synthesize and share a compiled set of lessons and methods
- Time and funding for participants to travel to other states

Cross Visits

Cross visits - focused, field-based exchanges between two or more groups, usually hosted at the site of the more established group - proved to be an effective way to foster more in-depth, targeted peer-to-peer learning and action on specific topics. These exchanges can be simple or more complex, and include a field component, a joint agenda, time for reflection, team building exercises, and planning next steps.

Over the past several decades, cross visits have stimulated the formation of many of the current collaboratives and initiatives in the West and beyond. Given the perceived effectiveness of these cross

visits, and the need for more in-depth work on specific topics in XWN workshops, XWN decided to encourage additional cross visits on important issues facing watershed groups through a mini-grants incentive program. *This opportunity stimulated numerous XWN partners self-organizing to submit proposals for matching funds to convene their own targeted learning exchanges.* The application itself also served as a way for watershed partners to learn about how to organize a successful cross visit (in contrast to organizing a meeting or workshop). Continuing the XWN cross visit program would have been a high priority had additional funding been secured.

Virtual Peer-Learning Strategies

Website/Practitioner Directory

Another priority was to *establish a website for practitioners and interested partners to access network information, upcoming events and workshops, and a way to connect virtually outside of in-person gatherings.* A website with a practitioner directory function was proposed and a survey asked practitioners if they would use such a tool. With funding available for a website, and a high level of practitioner interest in a web-based search and connecting tool (similar to LinkedIn), the Steering Committee engaged a web designer to develop the XWN website and directory.

An additional strategy, called Linkers, was partially designed to provide a more personal alternative to the directory. Practitioners who were natural networkers would be asked to volunteer as “linkers” to help connect people with a relevant resource person based on the nature of their inquiry. While potentially useful in theory, creating an online service proved challenging - from finding willing volunteers (outreach time), to a cumbersome sign-up process (a long set of questions to vet and create a profile), to efficiently managing and tracking the match connections. As a result, the online match program did not realize its potential and was discontinued.

XWN was ahead of its time in a few ways. First, the vision for the virtual connecting aspect was there but the tools to implement it were not yet fully developed. The vision to have a social media-like experience for practitioners to find each other, aside from existing social media networks like Facebook or LinkedIn, was not readily available. Many government partners were also prohibited from accessing social networking platforms. However, eight years later, and accelerated by the coronavirus pandemic, virtual platforms now exist to serve more targeted networking functions (e.g., Mobilize).

Second, virtual learning was not yet common practice or easily accessed by many watershed practitioners, especially those in more rural settings. The COVID-19 pandemic has catalyzed a cultural movement to embrace virtual networking and learning. The technology and software are catching up to make these experiences interactive and valuable, and the availability of broadband and high-speed internet is becoming more widespread.

Managing the Network

Steering Committee and Staffing

A Steering Committee of XWN members was established to design and manage the network. The Steering Committee contributed significant volunteer time to XWN's primary programs and were assisted by one paid staff position and intermittent contracted support. RiversEdge West, a river restoration-focused nonprofit organization based in Grand Junction, CO, served as the primary fiscal agent and employer for staff and contractors.

Early on, there was grant funding to support Steering Committee members on a contract basis to provide expertise, staffing, and facilitation services. The Steering Committee also managed the staff position so that their priorities were driven by XWN rather than RiversEdge West. This shared staffing approach allowed the group to utilize each other's strengths and spread the workload.

As is common when a coordinator or other support position is hired to take on tasks and responsibilities, a volunteer board often reduces its active involvement in program management. Over time the Steering Committee naturally migrated to relying more on the coordinator and RiversEdge West, increasingly operating in more of an undefined, volunteer capacity. This shift put additional pressure on the coordinator to fulfill growing expectations and on RiversEdge West to ensure the coordinator was well supervised and fiscally supported.

Though network coordination ebbed and flowed, Steering Committee participation and commitment was consistent throughout the lifespan of the XWN. Its composition included: place-based watershed partnership leaders grounded in the issues and topics of focus, professional facilitators whose collaboration expertise helped design both the network and peer-to-peer learning events, and regional support organizations with watershed, river and restoration expertise.

Support Organizations:

- Deborah Campbell and Associates, LLC
- RiversEdge West
- River Management Society
- Southwest Decision Resources
- University of Utah- Environmental Dispute Resolution Program
- Utah Conservation Corps

Partnerships:

- Dolores River Restoration Partnership
- Escalante River Watershed Partnership
- Gila Watershed Partnership of Arizona
- Verde Watershed Restoration Coalition
- Virgin River Conservation Partnership

Funding

The XWN annual budget ranged from \$95,000 to \$138,000 and *relied on state and foundation grant funding, along with sponsorships for workshops*. The main challenge with most state and foundation funding was aligning with their mission and geographic scope. When XWN was able to appeal to funders to support resource practitioners with a specific geographical or topical focus, funding requests were often successful. This success was apparent in the funding of annual workshops which provided direct benefit to certain regions, while support for virtual collaboration tools, for example, was more difficult to secure

The overall coordination of XWN was most challenging to fund. Some of XWN's early funders, who were enthused about the innovative and creative mission, later experienced donor fatigue and shifting priorities. In the natural resources sector, there is a small pool of regional funders. This made it challenging to secure sustained funding for XWN as a regional network.

Catalyzing Other Networks

As with many initiatives over time, it is important to remain nimble and relevant. As flexible as XWN was, the Network was unable to weather both decreasing funding and turnover of staff and Steering Committee members. *XWN evolved to provide a tool kit and blueprint for other networks and entities looking to create collaborative networks for watershed and community-based conservation issues, and to increase the effectiveness of on-the-ground program activities*.

XWN, for example, has stimulated and supported the development of three peer-learning networks, all of which have active involvement of several members of the XWN Steering Committee:

- **Arizona XWN**, a state-based network. This mid-scale approach (between local and regional watersheds) increases both funding opportunities and engagement that are difficult to obtain at a multi-state, regional level. State-based networks can also take advantage of the continuity within its boundaries and the increased likelihood of local practitioner participation in workshops. While every state is different, this smaller scale approach has proven to be effective in Arizona.
- **[Southwest Collaborative Support Network](#)** (SWCSN), a peer-to-peer regional network of facilitators, coordinators, and leaders of place-based collaboratives who share methods, practical tools, and lessons, and collaborate to solve common challenges.
- **[Western Collaborative Conservation Network](#)** (WCCN), a regional network supporting and linking community-based collaborative conservation efforts in forests, grasslands and watersheds. This network serves as an umbrella for smaller, state and place-based networks and collaboratives.

Lessons Learned in Peer-Learning

Peer-to-peer learning was a highly effective and valuable process. Workshop evaluations and testimonials consistently emphasized the value of peer-learning among practitioners. They expressed appreciation for targeted problem solving, meaningful interactions, and ongoing engagement and

relationship building for the benefit of their work. While this was successful, there is always room to grow.

The following lessons learned by XWN could be valuable to other networks as they are established or evolve over time:

- **Establish tangible and objective indicators of the network's impact:** While it was evident that practitioners found value in the network and various workshops, what was not as evident is the actual on-the-ground impact. A large focus was put on the process of collaboration however, having some established metrics to define success would have been helpful for both continued participation as well as from a fundraising perspective. Success was defined by anecdotal evidence.
- **Consider sub-regions (e.g., SW Colorado) or state-level convening:** The regional scale of convening across five states proved to be challenging. Participants mostly travelled to nearby events so each workshop drew more people from the host state. Alternating states provided a way to reach deeper into that state but travel distance meant that the regional network could not fully engage its membership (in person) every year. Spending more time strategically at a more local scale would have been helpful in cultivating more participation, but this approach can be more resource intensive. The Arizona XWN has been successful at engaging important new partners with a state level focus (e.g., state agencies) as well as partners who would more readily participate within their state but seldom had the ability to travel out of state for workshops.
- **The importance of defining workshop outcomes up front:** The peer-to-peer workshops were well attended due to every workshop having an established topical focus and intended outcomes. This guided people on whether they were truly interested in participating. Active participants were thus more fully engaged and vested in the defined outcomes.
- **Design content to be more topic-focused:** XWN workshops focused on broad, overarching issues (e.g., watershed health) versus more specific topics (e.g., riparian restoration). This approach was useful for engaging new participants and conveying the integrated nature of watershed issues. It was challenging, however, to simultaneously address multiple topics with sufficient depth. Pre-surveys and methods like the world café were extremely helpful but these watershed-wide events inherently meant less time could be devoted to each topic. Cross visits were extremely helpful for this more in-depth and targeted engagement that resulted in greater practical usefulness to participants
- **Provide a clear message behind the methods:** The XWN intentionally embraced peer-to-peer learning and variations of this learning model in order to be as effective as possible. Peer-to-peer learning is generally understood, however, clearer messaging about how this approach generates intended benefits and outcomes, as well as effectiveness metrics, would have been beneficial to participants.

- **Use a pilot approach to test tools:** A large upfront investment supported the design and launch of the website and practitioner directory, but it may have been wiser to test each tool and receive user input before launching the site (e.g., a social media platform). User input in the website development stage would have helped the XWN team make better informed decisions to support virtual learning and networking. Effective online linking, searching and participatory database functionality often needs more than a web designer’s skill set.
- **Use financial incentives to help with participation:** XWN was successful in securing grants to incentivize participation in cross visits and workshops. Scholarships and matching funds were always appreciated by participants. This funding helped engage people who would not have been able to afford travel or time off to participate and helped diversify and expand participation.

Lessons Learned in Managing the Network

One of the most challenging aspects of XWN was managing the network. The Steering Committee and staff were committed, capable, and invested significant time in strategic planning and evaluation, which were critical to shaping and growing the network. In hindsight, some structural components, such as continuous role clarification and adaptation, improved tracking systems, and a stronger fundraising effort, would have been helpful in sustaining the XWN and its activities.

- **Align and evolve leadership with network needs/scope:** The needs of the network changed over time; however, the capabilities and expertise of the Steering Committee did not parallel changing needs. The Steering Committee focused on its expertise, i.e., leading peer-learning, workshop design and facilitation, and provided technical expertise on topics such as riparian restoration and river management. The host nonprofit, RiversEdge West, as a relatively small organization with a discrete focus on riparian restoration, had difficulty at times aligning with the broad XWN watershed-focused mission. XWN’s longevity may have been better positioned with the recruitment of a fiscal sponsor/host organization with more capacity or a broader mission (e.g., a larger NGO or university). In addition, a more diverse Steering Committee membership with fundraising expertise, broader networks, and technical expertise on other topics of interest to the network would have been helpful as well.
- **Clarify and promote the role of the host organization:** RiversEdge West was the fiscal sponsor for the network, but also provided other critical resources such as mentorship for the coordinator, continuity across organizations, Steering Committee cultivation, a practical perspective on day-to-day operations, and existing relationships with funders. This support is critical when organizing a collaborative across a broad geographic scope. It is also important that the host organization assign and support at least one full time staff member or a team in the coordinating role.
- **Define roles and a plan for succession:** Leadership and staffing is often a moving target as organizations evolve, with staff turnover and shifts in focus seen as contributing factors. XWN saw a rapid change in coordinator responsibilities and in overall staffing. It would have been prudent to frequently evaluate the scope of the coordinator’s role as the Steering Committee’s

active engagement decreased. In addition, it would have been helpful to redefine the roles of the Steering Committee as some members went from receiving some grant funding for their participation, to having to volunteer their time. Reassessment and reorganization would have helped the Steering Committee members better align capabilities and time commitments to navigate turnover.

- **Coordinator or contracted facilitator:** Contracting professional facilitation for the overall network, workshops and initiatives, could be a successful and viable strategy for a network given the level of expertise needed and the need for consistent, long-term support for coordination with the host organization and assigned staff and interns.
- **Establish and maintain a project and document management system:** The Steering Committee was consistently in touch with practitioners through workshop evaluations and surveys which provided understanding of successes and feedback for improving the network. A consistent system for storing survey or evaluation data for efficient reporting would be important, as well as a spreadsheet with all metrics for tracking progress and preparing annual reports. XWN chose Google Drive for document storage and sharing which worked relatively well.
- **Budget appropriately for technology:** All websites require time and funding for ongoing marketing, maintenance, security upgrades, and content editing. Technology is always changing and in order to keep up, an active website needs a dedicated person, firm or organization to provide the necessary oversight. This could have been improved by building an adequate budget for the hard costs and articulating web responsibilities appropriately in the XWN Coordinator's job description.
- **Take responsibility for setting fundraising goals and securing financial resources:** It is important to develop a unified approach and understanding about fundraising and its associated challenges. Leveraging fundraising networks to garner sponsors and write grants takes time and capacity. The XWN could have benefited from the implementation of a sustainable funding stream such as a cost-share or membership model. In a cost-share model, key partners or Steering Committee members share the costs and responsibilities for fundraising. This creates a unified, vested interest in the ongoing success of the network. In the membership model, all participants, stakeholders and beneficiaries, pay an annual membership fee. These ideas were discussed but not resolved given disagreement about charging for services or providing them free of charge. As a result, XWN was unable to secure sustainable revenue through fees, dues, subscriptions, or sustained grant support.
- **Need for a champion:** All great ideas need someone driving that idea forward, providing energy, expertise, and a drive to get things done and think outside the box. A champion sees a need or opportunity and leads the charge toward reality and sustainability.

Conclusion

From a widely expressed need, to a promising concept, to an inspiring and useful reality, XWN developed a successful approach to convening watershed practitioners across the Southwest through information sharing, collective capacity building, and collaboration. The network served as a community of practice and professional space for practitioners to engage in peer-to-peer learning and increase individual and collective effectiveness in the field. Creating connections across geographic, jurisdictional and disciplinary boundaries, instilling a philosophy of collaboration, and facilitating relevant and interactive learning, XWN's successes and challenges as an innovative peer-to-peer network will hopefully continue to provide lessons and insights to similar future efforts.

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