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Understanding the Factors Underlying Partnership Working: A Case Study of Northumberland National Park, England

Abstract

Although rural partnership working is a well-researched area, less attention has been paid to the particular challenges in IUCN Category V protected areas. This paper explores the policy and practice of partnership working in a case study Category V area – Northumberland National Park, England. Qualitative research was conducted through documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews with a sample of 23 stakeholders involved in the management of this protected area. It was found that a convoluted institutional history has shaped the present day approach to its management. The processes driving partnership working were understood in terms of governance factors with a relatively high degree of control and behavioural factors with a relatively low degree of control. There was a tacit acceptance among actors that success was dependent upon uncontrollable factors and in particular inter-personal relations between representatives of stakeholder bodies. These findings are important for all IUCN Category V protected areas reliant upon working within stakeholder partnerships to achieve sustainable development objectives. Management bodies can benefit from examining the history of these often complex webs of relationships and the implications for communications between organisations if they are to understand the processes that underpin this form of governance.

Introduction

Designating areas of land for environmental conservation is not a new occurrence. Mose and Weixlbaumer (2007) report that there is evidence of forestry conservation orders being used to protect hunting and timber production in Europe as early as the 8th and 9th Centuries. However, the modern trend for protecting land for its natural beauty or importance to wildlife had its genesis in the 19th Century. Alongside the rapid urbanisation of towns and cities came a greater appreciation of the value of rural landscapes and a desire to preserve them as the antithesis of industrialisation. Intellectuals and artists were drawn to these environments, with William Wordsworth's *Guide to the Lakes* (1810) providing an early example of the celebration of a particular landscape aesthetic. In the UK, early preservationist movements, such as the Commons Preservation Society (established in 1865) and the Lake District Defence Society (established in 1883), began organised campaigns to provide public access to open space and protect landscapes from development. While the growing appreciation for landscape and natural beauty was centred on the UK, the first national park designation took place at Yellowstone in the USA in 1872, reflecting contemporary concerns about the preservation of America's wildlife and wilderness

in the context of growing development pressures. Since momentum towards the formal designation of protected areas in the UK was slow, national parks began to appear in mainland Europe, starting in 1909 with Abisko National Park in the sparsely populated North of Sweden. Other European countries followed soon after, with the high mountains of the Swiss Engadin Valley (1914), the Picos de Europa Mountains in Northern Spain (1918), and the Italian Gran Paradiso area (1922). The number of protected areas has increased in recent decades so that it is estimated that approximately 25 per cent of Europe's land area is now designated in some way (Mose, 2007). The overwhelming majority of these protected areas are categorised by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as Category V, "A protected area where the interaction of people and nature over time has produced an area of distinct character with significant ecological, biological, cultural and scenic value, and where safeguarding the integrity of this interaction is vital to protecting and sustaining the area and its associated nature conservation and other values" (Lausche and Burhenne, 2011: 147). Whereas the US national parks are classified as IUCN Category II, natural systems, or in the process of restored to that status, the UK national parks are Category V, managed, cultural landscapes, (IUCN, 1994).

During the interwar period, anxieties grew in England and Wales over the loss of open countryside through development. Four influential organisations helped to stimulate debates about the creation of possible protected areas in the UK. These were: the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (established in 1865); the National Trust (established in 1895); the Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves (established in 1912, and changing its name to the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts in 2004); and the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (established in 1926, and changing its name to the Council for the Protection of Rural England in 1969, and then to the Campaign to Protect Rural England in 2003). In 1929 the Addison Committee considered the feasibility of national parks, reporting in 1931 that the objectives of designation should be to control development, to enable access, and to conserve nature (Addison, 1931). In 1936 a fifth campaigning organisation was established, the Standing Committee on National Parks (becoming the Council for National Parks in 1977, and then the Campaign for National Parks in 2008), with the directive to permanently protect vast swathes of the countryside for benefit of quiet enjoyment and appreciation of natural beauty by the public.

However, it was not until after the Second World War that UK conservation and access campaigners were able to harness enough support for designation. There was some debate as to the name of the designation since 'national park' was simply adopted from the so-called American 'wilderness' national parks, which are entirely different entities to the largely

private landscape of the UK (National Parks Bill, 1949: 1464). Although the changing political climate of the time provided new opportunities, Sheail (1984: 31) noted that legislative progress would have counted for little had it not been for “the complex web of personal initiatives and relationships.” The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1949 paved the way for the creation of ten national parks in England and Wales in the 1950s. The system was extended in the 1980s and again in the 2000s to include new national parks in Scotland and the south of England.

A definition of a UK national park was given by the Dower Report (1945), and accepted by the Hobhouse Committee in 1947, as:

“An extensive area of beautiful and relatively wild country in which, for the nation’s benefit and by appropriate national decision and action, (a) the characteristic landscape beauty is strictly preserved, (b) access and facilities for public open-air enjoyment are amply provided, (c) wildlife and buildings and places of architectural and historical interest and suitably protected, while (d) established farming use is effectively maintained” (cited in Smith, 1978: 2).

A key provision was the word ‘national’, which implied that they existed for everyone to enjoy. However, in the UK at least, most of the national parks that were subsequently designated were privately owned and privately controlled (Smith, 1978). The original criteria for the UK national parks have always relied on working with others to achieve their objectives. Only small proportions of land in each of the national parks are publicly owned for the pursuit of access and conservation objectives. Hence these are ‘contested landscapes’ where different social, economic and environmental influences operate simultaneously (Winter and Lobley, 2009).

Despite the Dower Report’s definition that a UK national park should be “strictly preserved”, in the subsequent years after the designations, “the parks succumbed to every kind of aesthetic insult: mineral extraction, nuclear power stations, water resource development, ploughing up of heather moorland, [and] blanket afforestation” (Price, 2007: 41). Other contentious management issues included the use of protected areas for military training, overgrazing by sheep, and excessive trampling of fragile soils and vegetation by humans (MacEwen and MacEwen, 1987). These pressures eventually lead to the legislation of the Sandford Principle in the Environment Act of 1995, which states that conservation should take precedence in instances where reconciliation of objectives proves impossible (Department of the Environment, 1996). With nearly 25 per cent of England and Wales

designated for its landscape quality, blanket protection from all development would be both unrealistic and counter-productive. A sophisticated understanding of the economic value of these landscapes is emerging so as to better understand how these protected areas contribute towards economic development (Price, 2007; Cumulus Consultants, 2013).

These conflicts over land use have shaped management approaches and over the history of UK national parks necessitated the development of complex partnership working arrangements. The development of this mode of governance has happened over many years and reflects the perception that more traditional governing styles will fail to sustain the interaction between people and nature. The responsible statutory bodies, the national park authorities, have a duty to promote both conservation and access, while at the same time to seek to foster the economic and social well-being of their local communities. Management plan documents increasingly reflect the realisation that this can only be done through and with other stakeholders. Behind the delivery of the plans is a complex pattern of partnership working that has evolved to become imperative to the management of Category V protected areas.

Across Europe, the accepted need for sustainable development is used as a reason to bring different stakeholder groups together (Mose, 2007). Despite this, as Lockwood (2010: 754), explains:

“Governing norms by which to steer traditional government functions are well established and understood; however, this is not the case for the new multi-level and collaborative approaches that characterise protected area governance. This is a largely new territory that makes novel demands on governance institutions and policy.”

Understanding these ‘novel’ forms of governance is critical to the future of protected area management. Political contracting framework theory explores the agreement between participants, and the development of ‘transaction costs’, which essentially means that in order for any given partnership to be successful, for each participant the costs of engaging must be outweighed by the expected benefits (Sabatier *et al.*, 2005: 180). However, there remains a lack of understanding of the factors that determine success (Benson *et al.*, 2013). This paper examines those factors with the governance of these Category V designations. It takes the example of Northumberland National Park, part of the UK network of protected areas, to report on findings of an in-depth case study on the workings of stakeholder

partnerships. While the research results relate to this particular case study, it is argued that there are broader implications for all Category V protected areas.

The two objectives of the research were:

- To develop an understanding of the processes underlying rural partnership working; and
- To identify any particular factors that are especially influential to the success of any given partnership.

The methodology used semi-structured interviews with a selection of participants from a range of partner organisations in the case study area. The participants were encouraged to describe the significance of partnership working through their own encounters with partners in Northumberland National Park (attributing their own levels of significance to their own examples) thereby creating their own narrative contribution. The research was exploratory in nature and did not serve to prove or disprove any hypothesis; it simply sought to better understand the underlying factors of successful partnership working.

Northumberland National Park

Northumberland National Park, in the North East of England, is a rich, cultural landscape, encompassing the central section of Hadrian's Wall, part of the Frontiers of the Roman Empire World Heritage Site, the valleys of the North Tyne and Redesdale, the sandstone ridges of Coquetdale, the moors and grasslands of the Cheviot Hills, right up to the Scottish Border. It was designated in 1956, following the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act.

The statutory purposes of national parks in England and Wales have changed little since 1949:

- To conserve and enhance their natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage; and
- To promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of their special qualities by the public.

Figure 1. Northumberland National Park, England. Also shown are the four 'Action Areas', where most of the nearby population reside, at the gateway communities of Wooler, Rothbury, Bellingham and Haltwhistle.

Despite the designation of national parks during the 1950s, it was not until the Local Government Act of 1972 that every national park authority was required to publish a national park management plan and to review it at least once every five years. The Environment Act of 1995 saw the creation of freestanding, independent national park authorities and the introduction of a statutory duty, to seek to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities within the national parks. Many people are involved with the management of the national parks, whether as individuals or representatives of organisations, across the public sector, the private sector and the voluntary/community sector.

Northumberland National Park is a particularly interesting case study because its management encompasses four significant areas outside of the statutory boundary, which are locally called 'Action Areas' (Figure 1). This extended but artificial boundary, defined in 2003, includes the main gateway communities of Wooler, Rothbury, Bellingham and Haltwhistle. The resident national park population of just 1,993 people, rises to 28,760 people once these Action Areas are included (Office for National Statistics, 2011). A consequence of this approach is that historically Northumberland National Park Authority has had to work in partnership with local communities in order to deliver its management plans.

Methodology

Northumberland National Park was chosen as the case study area because of the explicit focus on partnership working in its recent management plans (NNPA, 2003; NNPA, 2009). Furthermore, one of the researchers was an employee of Northumberland National Park Authority (NNPA) between 2006 and 2013, and another was a partner in a NNPA-administered partnership between 2008 and 2011. This enabled the development of a methodology which integrates insights from practice into the research process. Research interviews took place in 2010 and 2011 and this paper is a narrative of the findings of 23 interviews together with insights from the working life of the researcher and practitioner.

The methodology had to reflect the experiences of the wide variety of stakeholders operating in Northumberland National Park. It therefore required research techniques that would enable participants to share their experiences and opinions. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain in-depth information from a wide range of participants. While the researcher acknowledged his professional role as an employee of the National Park Authority, all interviewees were assured that their narratives would not be directly attributed to themselves. Although it was inevitable that the researcher's professional role would have some influence on the content of the responses, the sense that the interviewer understood the context in which they were working, and shared an understanding of the common institutional environments in which they operated, was judged to be helpful in eliciting in meaningful responses. The critical nature of many of the narratives suggests that interviewees were honest in their appraisals of the role of the National Park Authority.

a. Selecting Interviewees

To determine which individuals would be interviewed, an initial long list of 250 different stakeholders working in, around, with, or for, Northumberland National Park was constructed. These stakeholders were then separated into nine different categories,

notwithstanding in some instances a best-fit approach as used (for example, a membership organisation could also be a registered charity). This process was used to ensure that a range of different stakeholders would be selected for interview (Figure 2).

	Number of Stakeholder Organisations	Percentage of Stakeholder Organisations	No. of Interviewees
Community, Voluntary, Charity	54	21.6%	2
Educational Establishment	10	4.0%	1
Local Government	21	8.4%	2
Local Partnership	21	8.4%	2
Membership Organisation	36	14.4%	4
National Government	42	16.8%	3
Non-Departmental Public Body	19	7.6%	2
Private Sector	27	10.8%	2
Special Purpose Local Authority	20	8.0%	5
Total	250	100%	23

Figure 2. Classification of the types and volume of stakeholders in Northumberland National Park.

The next task was to determine which organisations to approach, and hence who would be asked to participate in interviews. Examination of similar qualitative research studies suggested that between 15 and 25 semi-structured interviews would generate sufficient depth and breadth of material from which to draw findings (e.g. Selin and Chavez (1995) undertook 23 interviews; Saxena (2005) 45 interviews; Larsen and Valentine (2007) 24 interviews; and Leach (2010) 30 interviews). Using intrinsic knowledge of the existing key partners at Northumberland National Park, a shortlist of 18 of different organisations was selected. From that list, the researchers selected actors who had significant knowledge of or present involvement in partnership working in this protected area. 23 actors were interviewed, including five from Northumberland National Park Authority, as the principal management body for the area.

The interviewees included actor(s) from:

- A community development trust;
- A parish council;
- An academic working in the field of protected area management;
- Northumberland County Council, the local authority;
- The Northumberland Uplands New LEADER Local Action Group (LAG), which allocates EU 'bottom-up' grants;
- Sustaine, a non-governmental organization partnership board;

- The Campaign for National Parks, a non-governmental organization;
- The Country Land and Business Association (CLA), an interest group representing rural landowners;
- The National Farmers Union (NFU);
- The National Trust, a large conservation/amenity charity with land holdings;
- The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), the government department responsible for national parks;
- The Ministry of Defence (MoD), a government department with land holdings used for military training that cover some 23 per cent of Northumberland National Park (Woodward, 1997);
- National Parks England, the body representing the English national park authorities to government;
- The Environment Agency, the government agency responsible for environmental protection;
- Natural England, the government agency with responsibility for landscape and public access in England;
- A private estate from within the National Park;
- A local tourism business;
- Northumberland National Park Authority;
- A political setting, i.e. a politician serving as both an elected Northumberland County Council Councillor and an appointed NNPA Member.

Although 20 per cent of Northumberland National Park is covered by forest (both in public and private ownership), it was decided not to interview an actor from the Forestry Commission. The reasons were thus: Kielder Water and Forest Park, the largest man-made forest in Europe, is located adjacent to, and therefore outside of, Northumberland National Park; two other similar organisations involved in partnership working in the case study area were selected (Natural England and the Environment Agency); three significant estate managers were also selected (the National Trust, the MoD, and a private estate); and the 23 actors chosen were deemed to be a sufficient number of interviewees from which to draw insights for this research.

In order to encourage interviewees to speak openly, honestly, and freely, the identities of the actors that contributed to this research are anonymous. It would be wrong to assume that partnership values would be shared by all employees within an organisation (Ashforth, 1985; Selin and Chavez, 1995; Larsen and Valentine, 2007). Therefore the extent to which any

individual could feasibly 'represent' a medium or large organisation is problematic. Nevertheless, the interviewees collectively had a significant level of experience of partnership working with a wide range of organisations, and hence were able to provide detailed and in-depth insights into the processes and practices associated with partnership governance. The overall format of the methodology was tested by way of a pilot interview with a fellow researcher from the Centre for Rural Economy, Newcastle University.

b. Undertaking Semi-structured Interviews

This research was a subjective piece of work that attempted to understand part of modern society and culture. The reality of partnership working can therefore be best understood through narrative representations.

Reflexivity was a crucial aspect of this research. This meant that it was important to show an awareness of the interviewer's background as an employee of Northumberland National Park Authority and how this affected perceptions. From the list of 23 participants interviewed, ten already knew the researcher as an employee of the Authority, and would therefore be most likely to have an association with this role, rather than as a student. We took some small steps to reduce the impact of this association:

- All written communications with the participants used official Newcastle University branded paper.
- The venue for each interview would be determined by the participant, in an environment where they felt comfortable. Although some participants suggested meeting at the headquarters of the National Park Authority in Hexham, where possible the researcher steered them away from this venue towards a more neutral location, so the participant did not feel affected by the surroundings.
- During the interview, the interviewer wore Newcastle University branded clothing.
- The interviews were recorded with relative anonymity, with participants attributed to an organisation (e.g. the NFU), or a type of organisation (e.g. a community development trust), where the organisation is micro-sized (fewer than ten employees or volunteers).

We decided to use qualitative interviewing as the principal research technique. Bryman (2012: 12) explained that this approach was often attractive to researchers because of the flexibility of its direction and its capacity to provide insights into how participants viewed the world.

“Semi-structured interviews are used so that the researcher can keep more of an open mind about the contours of what he or she needs to know about, so that concepts and theories can emerge out of the data.”

Protected area management was distinguished as a form of partnership working that was different to other forms (for example, health care, education, urban regeneration, etc.), so that the participant fully understood the context of the research. The one-to-one setting also allowed participants freedom to ‘ramble’ (often resulting in very interesting anecdotes), and the interviewer had the chance to probe responses where appropriate. The interviews were semi-structured using a script of predetermined questions (the interview guide), with scope for expansion. Questions were asked around the interviewees understanding of sustainable development, the factors they felt were important in partnership working, and their views of working with, or for, Northumberland National Park Authority. The interviews, which lasted around one hour, were recorded using a digital voice recorder.

The approach of initially contacting the participants with a letter, then arranging an appropriate date, time and venue that suited them, keeping the interview to around one hour, and then agreeing to provide a transcript to them within a fortnight, proved to be a successful strategy. No participant refused to be interviewed, and without exception, all stated their interest in learning about the overall findings of the study.

To support this qualitative research the interviewer kept a research diary (Bryman, 2012) to collate other forms of data, such as the participant’s body language, the tone of their voice, and any important insights revealed before or after the voice recording.

c. Analysing the Data

All the interviews were transcribed within a fortnight of the interview, with the draft sent to the interviewees for approval. Only five of the 23 interviews edited their transcript, and in each case, it was only to make factual corrections.

The researchers made sense of the data generated from the interview transcripts using a form of thematic analysis called coding. Coding is a tool for systematically handling large amounts of data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), in this instance, by labelling sections within the transcripts with specific themes thereby forming a ‘coding frame’ (Bryman, 2012: 248), which is then used to shape the framework of the subsequent analysis (Charmaz, 2006). The transcripts were supplemented by the research diary which allowed an element of

triangulation between the coded responses and observations made at the time of the interview.

Results

Participants were asked what factors they felt were important in partnership working. A range of responses were forthcoming, including examples of instances where partnership working was ineffective or had broken down completely. It was also noted that organisational and individual reputations had an overarching influence on partnerships functions. After all the interviews were completed, the diagram in Figure 3 was constructed to help categorise the responses. It was found that responses could be divided into two broad themes as shown on the left hand side of the diagram. For each theme, responses were subdivided into a further three groups as on the right hand side of Figure 3, so that they could be directly compared and contrasted between participants.

What we have termed ‘governance factors’ are those factors with a relatively high degree of control factors that organisations can actively manage. These constitute the institutional infrastructure within which actors can work. What are termed ‘behavioural factors’ have a relatively low degree of control and relate largely to the way in which actors choose to behave, and how they conduct relationships with each other.

Figure 3. Themes used in coding interview responses.

The governance factors comprise the usually codified rules through which a partnership operates. Even though with time and resource these issues can be settled, these issues can still be complex and fraught with potential complications.

- i. Appointing Actors and Defining Roles

Previous research has found that partnerships tend to be legally mandated (Selin and Chavez, 1995), initiated by a funding body (Craig, 1995; Mannion, 1996), and are often led by the public sector (Derkzen and Bock, 2009). This research identified several linked aspects of successful governance practice. For example, the participants from the CLA and the NFU emphasised the importance of actors' authority and their personal time commitment to the partnership. Participants also cited the need to control the number of people in any given partnership, with participants from the Environment Agency, the private estate and the LEADER LAG voicing preferences for keeping the number of people in the partnership low so that meetings did not become unwieldy. The Defra participant argued that certain personality traits are particularly important during the initiation of the partnership, such as enthusiasm and creativity, so that a sense of rapport can be quickly established. Several participants spoke of the need for people to understand the reason for their inclusion in the partnership and for the relationships between the actors to be open and transparent. It was also noted that long-term partnerships need to be dynamic, with a flow of new people getting involved, as long-serving members make way to permit an influx of new ideas.

ii. Shared Priorities and Pooling Resources

When participants were asked, "Why do you engage in partnership working?" the most common explanation was shared priorities, even if the language used was not always the same. For example, the community development trust participant referred to synergy and common goals, whereas the participant from the National Trust spoke of mutual understanding, vision, aims, objectives and trust. Participants from the LEADER LAG, Natural England, the local tourism business, NNPA and Northumberland County Council all spoke of mutual benefits as a reason to engage in partnership activity. The participant from the MoD gave a slightly different response, saying that they needed partners who were going to support them and who shared the same aspirations. The participant from the Campaign for National Parks pointed out that not every partner has interest in the same issues, and therefore a range of motives may underpin the membership of a particular partnership.

Opinions were divided on whether members are able to gain additional influence by bringing resources into the partnership. The parish councillor, the politician and the Environment Agency participant felt that influence could be secured by financial means, whereas the LEADER LAG and the community development trust participants did not feel that a financial contribution should bring influence with it. The value of local knowledge was raised by both the LEADER LAG participant and the community development trust participant. Indeed, it

was argued that all partners should be treated equally, regardless of the resources that they can contribute.

iii. Governing Document and Evaluations

There are two common ways of establishing a formal agreement between partners. In the first a legally binding contract sets out the roles that each partner will perform and the amount of resources they will invest. This approach is perhaps best suited to large projects where a significant amount of funding is involved. The second approach is based on a document that is not legally binding, which sets out the terms of the partnership. This may take the form of a memorandum of understanding, indicating bilateral or multilateral agreement on a course of action. When discussing partnerships, several participants spoke of the importance of a unifying document, or speculated on what might happen if this instrument was overlooked, or not used effectively.

Participants from NNPA, Natural England, the parish council, the Campaign for National Parks and Sustaine all warned that partnerships operating on goodwill alone are more vulnerable than those where a firm commitment is in place. The Environment Agency representative gave a lot of thought to this aspect of partnership working, acknowledging that some existing projects could benefit from the clarity that a governing document would provide. Participants generally paid close attention to the governing document, perhaps reflecting previous negative experiences of partnership working. This document is an important tool that allows partners to explicitly set out the priorities of the partnership and how resources will be pooled, helping to ensure that the goodwill which exists at the initiation stage is not lost following implementation. In addition, the participants from the NFU and the community development trust emphasised the importance of all partners accepting the governing document, with the National Parks England participant arguing for a light-touch approach in its formulation, so that it was precise and not unduly lengthy.

Once the governing document has been agreed and published, the work of the partnership commences. At certain stages, it may be necessary to review progress. Different opinions were expressed by participants about the need to remain true to the initial vision of the partnership and on the importance of evaluation exercises. The community development trust participant said that partnerships should remain focussed on their original ambitions; whereas participants from NNPA said it was important to ensure that a partnership delivered strategically important and relevant objectives, which can be reviewed and updated. The National Parks England participant was weary of tick-box exercises that detract from delivering projects, suggesting that evaluations for their own sake are not a good use of time

or resources. The Environment Agency participant argued that partnerships need to evolve, and that evaluations keep them warm by providing evidence that they are moving in the right direction. The approach from the private sector was much clearer cut because of the time and financial implications of their involvement. The tourism business participant emphasised that if involvement in a partnership became disproportionately time consuming, the costs of being engaged could begin to outweigh the benefits, a point reiterated by the CLA participant. Finally, the NFU and LEADER LAG participants each saw the merits of treating evaluations as a learning experience, and part of a process of constant improvement that should be embraced.

As observed above, while interviewees had different perspectives on the governance factors it is generally possible to reach a point of consensus and agree the rules or codified practices through which a partnership will operate. However, there are a series of factors which elude attempts by organisations to exercise control over them. The behavioural factors of partnership working were generally discussed in terms of the performance and competencies of actors. Even where the governance aspects are sound, partnership working can become more challenging if actors do not exhibit compatible co-operation behaviours. Hence because how an individual conducts relationships and interacts in meetings is outside the direct control of the organisation, even if suitable governance arrangements are all in place, a partnership can be fraught with difficulties in relation to the series of factors discussed in the remainder of this section.

iv. Quality of Leadership

The actors in a partnership will usually look to the chair for leadership. The chair is therefore a vital component of any partnership (Selin and Chavez, 1995). With the role comes responsibility, which goes beyond facilitating meetings (Saxena, 2005). An effective chair will guide the direction of the partnership and motivate actors to build and maintain momentum. The parish councillor was well aware that the personality of the chair can affect the whole direction of the partnership, comparing those who want to lead by example to those who are happy to adopt a more passive role.

The NFU participant preferred an independent chair, whilst the tourism business participant spoke of a lack of enthusiasm in the private sector for taking administrative roles, because of the extra work required. The Defra participant said that the chair builds trust through empathy, by understanding the needs and expectations of partners. The NFU participant also spoke of the importance of creating an environment where everyone can share their views, rather than following a preconceived path, and fully explaining decisions to ensure

clarity around the reasoning. Indeed, the chair may have to mediate differences between partners, as acknowledged by participants from Sustaine and NNPA. Finally, as highlighted by the Environment Agency participant, the chair also requires good administrative support. Such administrative duties may be more suited to public sector partners, rather than the private and voluntary sector, because they can be time-consuming and labour-intensive.

The literature also reiterates the importance of the leadership abilities of the chair (Selin and Chavez, 1995; Saxena, 2005; Derkzen *et al.*, 2008; Derkzen and Bock, 2009). The chair can cultivate an environment that goes beyond achieving a corporate goal, creating an inspirational and motivated atmosphere that actors are keen to be part of. The crucial prerequisite for creating a positive leadership culture is having high level communication skills (Balloch and Taylor, 2001; Saxena, 2005; Laing *et al.*, 2008). Hence while the appointment of a suitable chair is 'controllable' in the sense that the governance document will set how this person should be appointed there are a range of factors which will make the identification of a chair with these leadership attributes difficult in practice. Finding a person with the requisite leadership skills who is able to harness appropriate support and who is widely perceived as independent is often a challenge. Such individuals tend to be in high demand for their chairing skills. The result is often that compromises must be made in appraisals of the suitability of individuals to act as chair, with consequences for the quality of the leadership.

v. Effectiveness of Actor Interactions

The actors in a partnership will communicate both within and outside partnership meetings. During the initiation phase of a partnership, it is important to convince other actors that any given project or partnership is worth investing in. Some participants used the term 'buy-in' and spoke of the importance of communication and information sharing, through face-to-face contact, telephone and emails. The participant from Northumberland County Council was particularly keen on building social relationships, stressing that those who make the time to meet people in-person and get to know them, to built trust at an early stage of the relationship, would pay dividends in the long term.

The Sustaine participant provided a good example of how to cultivate an environment within which actors can interact and get to know each other. Here, a field trip was arranged for partners to the site of one of the partnership's projects. The participant ensured that all members had to travel to and from the site together, so the partners could interact en-route, and that their subsequent meeting took place near the site, so the location was unfamiliar to everyone. The participant claimed that members experienced a rich and joined-up meeting

that would not have been possible in the usual formal boardroom meeting environment. Hence, while actions can be taken to try and ensure positive interactions between actors are built, this is seen as a necessary precaution based on previous experience of problematic or non-existent actor interactions.

vi. Personal Factors

The literature on partnership working explores the notions of power and trust, and some of the impacts that these have on actors (Jones and Little, 2000; Mouffe, 2000; Derken *et al.*, 2008). Although an awareness of trust, honesty and power is important (Saxena, 2005), measuring influence is not straightforward (Clegg and Hardy, 1996). Participants in this study made very liberal use of the word 'personalities'. For example, an NNPA participant said, "Well a lot depended on the personalities" without actually explaining what that meant. This usage was a euphemism to hide instances of distrust, dishonesty, and a lack of activity. Participants from the MoD and the community development trust noted that partnerships should be made between partners (organisations) and not between actors (people), yet in practice organisations are always represented by people. Ultimately both these participants argued that personalities matter. On paper, the language of partnership strategies should be about organisations and not actors. However, a good relationship between the actors was said to facilitate successful partnership working in interview after interview. For example, with so many different stakeholders to work with, the National Trust participant reflected on the importance of maintaining good personal relationships in a professional way. The private estate participant said that without a sound relationship, it becomes difficult to negotiate on any given matter, with the tourism business participant adding that mutual respect was a necessary component of professionalism. The Sustaine participant described personal relationships as follows:

"I think they are absolutely crucial, actually. I do a lot of work where I get asked repeatedly to be an independent chair of things, which is partnership working. I think I get asked because I am alive to the challenges of it, but also I am able to make it work. The reason I can make it work is because of the personal relationships, you've got to get people's trust. You've got to take people seriously, and look them in the eye, and listen to what they say, and respond. The human level of it is a *sine qua non* of effective partnership working."

Sine qua non is a Latin legal term that translates to "[a condition] without which it could not be", or "without which [there is] nothing." Therefore, to the Sustaine participant, without good personal relationships, partnership working cannot be effective. The importance of

personalities and personal relationships is not a prominent issue in the literature. Whilst the literature examines the significance of power relations (Clegg and Hardy, 1996; Jones and Little, 2000; Mouffe, 2000), negotiation (Derkzen *et al.* 2008), and trust and honesty (Saxena, 2005), the collective impact of these personal attributes on actor relationships has not been explicitly considered.

Discussion

The research sought to better understand how partnerships operate in a Category V protected area, using Northumberland National Park in England as a case study area. The results were illuminating, with the 23 interviews providing over 26 hours of data, which were transcribed to 285 pages of interview transcripts. It was found that partnership working is a highly complicated business, and success is somewhat dependent on a number of factors simultaneously operating in harmony. The MoD participant made a general observation on partnership working to the researcher, saying, "There's no science to it, I'm afraid." If partnership working is not a science, then this research has gone some way to show that it is most definitely an art.

The diagram shown in Figure 3 was borne out of the research, and represents the culmination of the coding process. It neatly encapsulates six areas of partnership working, categorised by those to do with the governance arrangements, and those to do with behavioural aspects. There is an appreciation that it is more straightforward to exert a degree of control of the former than the latter. However, the researchers did not attempt to weight the six areas in terms of their importance to each other, but simply understood that there were a host of interlinking factors that determined the success of any given rural partnership.

One aspect of partnership working which was not captured by Figure 3 was the importance of reputations, whether organisational or individual. Several participants shared anecdotes or problems of working with particular partners, and in particular those from the public sector. The public sector dominance in partnership working has been considered in the literature (Edwards *et al.*, 2001; Moseley, 2003; Derkzen *et al.*, 2008; Furmankiewicz *et al.* 2009), and a significant amount of dissatisfaction was discussed during this research, principally directed at the bureaucracies of Defra, Natural England, the Environment Agency, the Forestry Commission, and the now-disbanded regional development agencies. Indeed, the often strained relationship between NNPA and MoD was noted on both sides, with a long history of irreconcilable differences over the management of the Otterburn Training Area in Upper Coquetdale (Figure 1). So even if the approach the partnership working is sound and

takes all the considerations in Figure 3 into account, actors will still be judged by historical relationships. This means that there is perhaps an overarching dimension to the six factors considered in this paper already, that of an organisation's reputation. Partnerships rarely start on a blank page; each actor is likely to come with a history, either personal or linked to the past actions of their organisation.

Furthermore, whilst it was generally accepted by those who discussed finance that "influence comes from the chequebook" as the parish councillor said, this was challenged by others as to whether or not this should be the case. The ability of partners to pool resources is linked to personal factors, and in practice the divisions are not as clear as they are on paper. For instance, if any given partner has significant funds to direct to a partnership, it is the way in which those funds are directed that is crucial, i.e. whether money is used to exert control, or whether it is used to empower others. Either way, an outstanding finding from this research was that the personality of the individual actors engaged in partnership working can influence its likelihood of success. Despite being repeatedly told of the importance of 'personalities' in the interviews, this issue was seldom mentioned in the literature. While actors can work together to draw-up a governance document or undertake evaluations, the ability of individuals to be co-operative cannot be assumed. This is not necessarily something that can be taught, though perhaps can be learnt through experience. Such was the importance of personal factors one participant described this as the *sine qua non* of partnership working with the firm belief that success was largely dependent on this particular behavioural factor.

Partnership working in protected areas is both important, and in certain respects distinctive, because of the significance it assumes in the management of these substantial, multi-use areas of land. Category V protected areas are typically large areas of high landscape and biodiversity value that provide a range of societal services while also sustaining the livelihoods of the communities within them. Many stakeholders pursue multiple objectives while land tenure patterns are often complex and particular to the protected area in question. Partnerships tend to consist of actors with established professional relationships often involved in multiple partnership structures relating both formally and informally to the management strategies of the protected area. While partnership structures proliferate the prerequisites of good partnership working are essentially the same.

Conclusion

This paper set-out to examine partnership working in Northumberland National Park. It was an interesting case study to examine because the 'actions areas' approach adopted in 2003,

and reaffirmed in 2009, obligated the National Park Authority to work in partnership with others in this particular protected area, since previous efforts had been somewhat hindered by the statutory boundary that excludes the four gateway communities. This forward-thinking approach was later endorsed by Defra in the *English National Parks and the Broads UK Government Vision and Circular* (Defra, 2010: 25):

“Co-ordination between public agencies, not-for-profit and voluntary organisations and the private sector is essential to planning towards and achieving national park purposes and helping the public to enjoy the national parks. More formal partnerships and strategic alliances can also provide a way of achieving aims for the national parks and improvements in service delivery by the national park authorities. But effective partnerships need to focus; their purpose and benefits in achieving objectives for the national park must be clear. The national park authorities should produce an action plan with associated monitoring and review, and governance needs to be transparent; providing leadership, managing risk, building trust, reviewing representation, establishing exit strategies and clarifying relationships with other partnerships.”

Despite this commitment to work in partnership, the *Vision* sets out the final destination, rather than providing assistance and insight for protected area managers to get there. Working in partnership is an important management tool across the IUCN protected areas. This form of governance is especially relevant in Category V protected areas because they are already human-influenced, and each has a range of stakeholders interested in their management. Therefore there are wider conclusions that can be drawn from this research that can be applied to Category V protected areas.

Most Category V protected areas face the challenge of operating within a small budget, at a time when an ever greater emphasis is being placed on the importance of the services that these areas provide to society. Furthermore, protected areas are also increasingly seen as arenas for the pursuit of sustainable regional development (Mose, 2007). Much is now required of 21st Century protected areas. In order to meet the challenge of simultaneously addressing these objectives the organisations tasked with managing protected areas must continue to work in partnership. Inevitably while they share a common interest in the protected area in question, they often have different goals and priorities. In protected areas this brings a wide range of organisations with environmental, social and economic interests to the partnership table. Collectively they must negotiate a sustainable future through the management decisions that they make in partnership. Increasing the effectiveness of these

partnerships should therefore be a priority for the organisations involved and for researchers interested in protected areas (Hammer *et al.*, 2012). As this research shows, some behavioural factors, such as history and personal relationships, can be difficult to control, but other aspects, like the willingness of public sector organisations to provide good administrative support and to develop relevant skills and capacity within private and voluntary/community sector organisations, may be more manageable. Furthermore, it is important to increase awareness of where things can go wrong and encourage actors to look critically at how their partnerships are working, thus enabling them to act swiftly to address any instabilities caused by personality clashes, rivalries or a lack of good leadership.

Working in partnership is a multilateral process, therefore protected area managers should think about what they can offer partners and carefully consider how they can better address the challenges of partnership working. To assist them, this research has demonstrated the importance of two themes discussed in the literature on working in partnership (governance and behaviour), and has further identified six relevant areas within those themes (appointing actors and defining roles; shared priorities and pooling resources; the governing document and evaluations; quality of leadership; effective actor interactions; and personal factors). Protected area managers can openly discuss how these factors interact to refine and improve their collective approaches to working in partnership.

Protected area management differs from other industries in a few subtle ways. Examples of this are the geographical scale, the amount of public interest, and the aim of sustainable development. In Europe and beyond, the size of the protected areas means that many different organisations are stakeholders. The sustainable development agenda, which is increasingly underpinning the work of the management bodies as a constructive way forward, has been particularly accepted as crucial to the work of the UK national park authorities. It is, as the academic participant said, the universal goal that brings different partners together.

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