



CHAPTER FIVE

TAKING ON RISKY ISSUES AS A GROUP AND WORKING WITH PARTNERS: *The Northern Forest Lands Collaboration*

THE ISSUE

Although the northern forests of New England and New York comprise the largest remaining expanse of wild and undeveloped lands in the eastern United States, it wasn't until the late 1980s that they received significant attention. Threats to the region—including several proposed land sales that put large tracts of land into the hands of developers and foreign timber companies—raised concerns about the viability of the local environment and traditional forest-based economy.

Environmentalists were alarmed at the potential impact of these sales and feared that it would result in increased second-home development, unsustainable forest practices—such as clear cutting—and overall fragmentation of the timberland.

In 1990, the governors of the four states in the region—Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and New York—released the Northern Forest Lands Study. It focused considerable attention on the region, now officially defined as the Northern Forest. It also resulted in the creation of the Northern Forests Lands Council (NFLC), a high-level commission whose mandate was to further study the region and develop specific policy recommendations.

I don't think there has ever been that kind of collaboration between local organizations—among each other and with national organizations. This was a unique development in American philanthropy. Part of our giving was tied to the requirement that this kind of collaboration be developed.

Steven Rockefeller
sponsor

*The Northern Forest Lands Collaboration
Summary Information*

Started:	June 1991
Ended:	June 2001
\$ Distributed (as of 11/01/00):	\$2,433,142
Grant Range:	\$500 - \$100,000
# of Grants (as of 11/01/00):	101
Sponsors:	Richard Rockefeller, Nancy Anderson, Steven Rockefeller, Ann Roberts, Larry Rockefeller
Key Partners:	Northern Forest Alliance
Staff:	Marcia Townley; Chris Page
Current Status:	Coming to conclusion, but will probably move into a next stage or new collaboration aimed at the economic development questions resulting from the loss of jobs in timbering in the Northern Forest area.

While the lands study and the establishment of NFLC presented opportunities for environmental groups and others to voice support for protection of the forests, there was no unified voice on conservation issues in the region. In fact, the conservation community was greatly divided and had no history of working together across state and local lines.

At the same time, regional conservative “property rights” groups became vocal. These groups played into the economic fears in the region. They actively opposed the creation of the NFLC and any recommendation that hinted at state or federal control of land. They also criticized environmentalists for their perceived lack of sensitivity toward local economies.

Over the past ten years, the Northern Forest Alliance (the “Alliance”) and its members have had tremendous successes. They helped designate the region as an important ecosystem, worthy of special protection and consideration. They raised

public awareness of the area as a threatened ecosystem and framed the debate about its future. They also successfully shifted the discussion on sustainable forest practices. And, from the start, they included discussion and analysis of economic issues. “Right from the start they said, ‘local jobs, local industry matter,’” says collaboration sponsor Richard Rockefeller. “We’re going to work with people, not against them.”

Another success in the region was the identification of ten “Wildlands” worthy of permanent protection. Since 1990, the Alliance and its members have helped protect well over 100,000 acres of these critical Wildlands with federal funds from Forest Legacy and the Land and Water Conservation Fund, as well as land trusts and private funds.

I would tell my neighbors what I do and have to explain what the Northern Forest is. Today, the President of the United States is citing the Northern Forest in his Millennium Budget as one of the top three conservation priorities.”

Andi Colnes
director
Northern Forest Alliance

CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

In the late 1980s, a survey assessing the Cousins’ giving for environmental concerns was conducted by the Philanthropy Department at Rockefeller Financial Services, revealing considerable long-term and ongoing support among family members for preservation in New York and New England. “It certainly is among the top two or three interests shared among the Cousins,” says Steven Rockefeller. Thus, this group of family members decided to sponsor the Northern Forest Lands Collaboration, which was formally established in June 1991.

Funding in the region was risky. It was a defined ecosystem with no clear policies and a divided group of conservationists that were just beginning to work together. “Funding this coalition building took real vision,” says Andi Colnes, director of the Northern Forest Alliance. “It meant taking a real risk.” The opportunity to invest collectively in a risky grantmaking program—as well as the traditional family support for the region—made the collaboration highly appealing to several family members.

“A lot of people were focused on saving the rainforest in Sumatra,” says Steven Rockefeller. “Here was a forest in our own backyard. Here was an opportunity to really do something local with international significance.”

The big lesson is — and I think this is a lesson for the whole environmental movement in the U.S. — if you collaborate together, you can be much more effective. Indeed, there are certain challenges that can only be met if groups and organizations are willing to collaborate.

—Steven Rockefeller

During the concept development phase, several approaches were explored, including an inventory of properties for protection and the establishment of a venture fund to facilitate land purchasing. TPC staff learned of several proposals and studies covering northern forest preservation, researched opportunities for collaborative activity, and sought proposals from regional environmental organizations.

INITIAL GRANTMAKING

The collaboration’s initial funding went to the Northwoods Coalition, a group of five regional environmental organizations, to conduct background research such as a land inventory, regional economic analysis, and marketing research.

After watching events unfold in the region and much careful consideration, family members and TPC staff came to believe that a broad base was needed to move a regional lands protection agenda. Northern Forest Lands Collaboration staff and family members played “a critical role in urging the Northwoods Coalition to expand its membership and develop an effective joint strategy,” as confirmed by a 1996 independent evaluation of the regional conservation campaigns. Yet while the Northwoods Coalition was contributing vital pieces of research, it soon became clear that it was not the most effective organization for building that broad base.

At the time, a new coalition-building effort—the Northern Forest Alliance (the “Alliance”)—was coming together through a “from-the-ground-up” process with leadership from inside the region. Without a history of cooperation, the Alliance—made up of local, state, and regional organizations—struggled through an exhaustive series of meetings to hash out ways to work together and overcome differences in order to work toward a common goal.

After extensive consultation with local grassroots leadership in the region, the Northern Forests Lands Collaboration along with two other key foundations supported this “trust-building” process. “It’s an example of how things really work best,” explains Steve Blackmer, former president of the Alliance. “Funders weren’t doing things in a vacuum without consulting us.” Northern Forests Lands Collaboration staff attended some early Alliance meetings, staying in close contact with grantees and the process. The collaboration trusted local leaders, lending support during the often frustrating, formative coalition-building phase.

Northern Forests Lands Collaboration’s early and sustained support proved catalytic. While investing in organizational development and trust-building is generally not the kind of “hard-hitting” project that many funders seek, it was cited by family, staff, and grantees as key to the success in the region.

PROGRAM EVOLUTION

While the early trust building was key to the Alliance’s strength, the group faced real challenges around developing specific campaign plans, fundraising strategies, and ceding some control to a new central body.

One of the key concerns was that, by forming an Alliance, funding would be taken away from other groups. “It did the opposite,” says TPC staff, “and attracted money to other groups and the region as a whole.” Another key reason for the dissipation of this fear was the conscious decision of the Northern Forests Lands Collaboration to support not just the Alliance, but to provide grants directly to member organizations in key states. The Alliance managed to stay together under the leadership of a balanced and skilled team. Explains the Alliance’s director, Andi Colnes, “The funders trusted the leadership from the region. They funded an effort to build the Alliance and waited for us. It gave us time to build our relationships and come back with a proposed campaign that we developed.”

In 1993, the Alliance was ready to launch its first regional campaign. The group developed a three-pronged strategy to:

- permanently protect critical wild areas
- ensure healthy, well managed private forests, and
- promote strong local communities and economies.



This campaign achieved significant success. There has been a sharp increase in the public's awareness of the need for more protected lands and the Alliance strongly influenced the outcome of the Northern Forest Land Council hearings.

The campaign also laid the groundwork for land sales that began in the late 1990s. Unlike in the early 1980s, however, "the question is no longer should we protect larger areas," says Alliance Director Andi Colnes, "but how we should do it." Individual donors—including and especially members of the Rockefeller Family—were deeply aware of what was at stake and prepared to invest in this kind of land preservation. "Because of the Alliance's critical work—we were able to raise the money for the St. Johns River project in Maine in a very short time," said sponsor Richard Rockefeller of his efforts to raise money within the family. "On the strength of that, other Maine families put up the rest of the \$10 million and secured the loan. We would never have gotten the family involved at that level if they hadn't been primed for the last eight years through the work of the collaboration."

To date, almost a million acres have been protected either by fee purchase or through conservation easements. Building on these victories and finding the funding and political will for genuine, large-scale land protection is the primary challenge confronting the Alliance and the region.

FINDING AND WORKING WITH PARTNERS

There was never a push to secure contributions to the Northern Forest Lands Collaboration beyond the family. However, TPC staff actively encouraged other foundations to fund in the Northern Forest. The collaboration frequently hosted

It's not just the money. It's the advice, the strategy, and the contacts, the networking.

Steve Blackmer
former president
Northern Forest Alliance

and co-sponsored briefings so that current and potential funders could get updates and meet with regional organizations. "We always viewed ourselves as a facilitator," states TPC staff. "Although we probably gave the most dollars over time, our real contribution was in introducing the idea to other funders, holding briefings, supporting the Alliance's internal procedures and supporting immediate things that came up."

This approach proved to be highly effective. “One of the reasons we’re there,” says John Gilroy of the Pew Charitable Trusts, “is the Rockefellers’ strong commitment. It’s important to know that there is this consistent, leading partner.”

ENDING THE COLLABORATION

The utter transformation of the forest of Northern New England and New York into a nationally recognized and valued ecosystem is due, in large part, to forward-thinking conservationists and funders working in concert.

The Northern Forest Lands Collaboration’s early interest and sustained support contributed greatly to the emergence of the region as a nationally recognized and valued ecosystem. In addition, a well-organized, broadly funded environmental movement is now in place.

These successes reflect the goals of the Northern Forest Lands Collaboration’s risky grantmaking. In fact, an independent 1996 evaluation of regional conservation efforts concluded that “instead of investing in a low-risk project with immediate benefits...[they are] gambling on a risky, long-term venture which, if successful, will yield a much higher pay-off in the end.”

But change didn’t happen overnight. “There needs to be commitment over time,” Explains Hooper Brooks of the Surdna Foundation. “The Rockefellers really understand that and have stayed with this issue.”

Much remains left to be done to assure protection of this vital area. Protection efforts in the region are shifting from start-up campaigns to long-term maintenance. Multiple issues need investment, including community economics, direct advocacy and land acquisition. “It takes a different kind of thinking,” said Steve Blackmer. “Not creating something out of nothing, but recognizing that there is a lot going on, and asking ‘what part do I want to play?’”

The Rockefellers, more than anybody, had the vision. Their decision to invest up here was the work that fueled the Northern Forest Alliance. Their vision, their willingness to take a risk, their confidence—that was the anchor that brought in other foundations.

Andi Colnes
director, Northern Forest Alliance

In this context, funders and activists have to reconsider their roles. The year 2001 will mark the tenth year of the Northern Forest Lands Collaboration. Maintaining enough interest among donors to sustain the NFLC after ten years is a challenge. "The first three years, there was more money," says TPC staff. "Donors without a direct interest in the region have understandably fallen away. Those with the strongest interest in the region have stayed on at some level."

All of the region's issues weren't solved in a decade, and they won't be solved in another. "It's going to take a generation to do it," says Steven Rockefeller. "Many of us are going to stick with this."