

# CONCEPTUALIZATION OF INTERACTIONS BETWEEN PARTNERS AND THE U.S. FOREST SERVICE

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**Abstract.**—Since the 1980s, U.S. Forest Service managers have faced reduced appropriations, constraining their capacity to manage recreation lands, facilities, and services. Downsizing and outsourcing continue as the “push for partnerships” persists in the administration of federal recreation lands. Despite this reliance on partnerships to meet targets, little is known about the nature of the interactions between Forest Service personnel and their partners. Twenty-one key informant interviews were conducted with Forest Service personnel and recreation partners, representing multiple regions, a range of management levels, a diversity of agency employees, and a variety of recreation work performed. Analysis revealed two main categories of interactions: institutional and relational. Key components of institutional interaction included duty, necessity, commitment, and effort; key components of relational interactions were interdependence, synergy, power, trust, connection, and communication. Better understanding of the institutional and relational interactions will help the agency develop, maintain, and evaluate recreation partnerships.

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## **1.0 BACKGROUND**

A “push for partnerships” in federal agencies began during the Reagan-era movement to downsize the federal government by reducing appropriations. For U.S. Forest Service land managers, this political movement has limited their capacity to manage recreation sites, facilities, and services. The agency continues to respond to these challenges by using recreation partnerships to stretch limited funding (e.g., the 1987 National Recreation Strategy), leverage additional funding (e.g., the 2000 Recreation Agenda), and provide

recreation services (e.g., the Forest Service Partnership Enhancement Act of 2005).

Despite the Forest Service’s long history of—and growing reliance on—working with partners to provide recreational opportunities, most partnership research focuses on collaborative planning and watershed management (Cousens et al. 2006, James 1999, Segil et al. 2003). Research on recreation partnerships has focused on stages of development (e.g., Darrow and Vaske 1995, Uhlik 1995) and effectiveness (e.g., James 1999, Selin and Chavez 1993). However, much of this research is based on case studies or anecdotal evidence (e.g., Mowen and Kersetter 2006) in varying specializations within recreation (Crompton 1999). Some contributors to the discussion on recreation partnerships have made pleas for study replication to better evaluate success (Uhlik and Parr 2005, Vaske et al. 1995), while others have suggested that preconditional variables should be determined first (Crompton 1999, Mowen and Kersetter 2006).

## **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

This study is part of a larger, multi-phase research project in which a conceptual framework is being developed to better understand recreation partnerships within the Forest Service. Ultimately, this framework will be tested empirically to strengthen its utility to the agency, its partners, and other organizations that rely on partnerships. This framework will also contribute to the partnership knowledge base by refining the preconditional variables of partnerships and enabling replication across various agencies, organizations, and specializations. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to examine agency and partner conceptualizations of one component of the emerging framework: the interactions between the Forest Service and its recreation partners.

The definition of “partnerships” for this project is based on federal policy: “arrangements that are voluntary, mutually beneficial, and entered into for the purpose of mutually agreed upon objectives” (Outka-Perkins

**Table 1.—Informant profiles**

Informant Type	Number of Informants
<b>Forest Service Informants</b>	
Administrative Level	
Region	2
Forest	10
District	3
Region	
2	1
4	1
6	1
8	3
9	9
Position Title	
Partnership Coordinator	3
Supervisory Forester	1
Recreation Program Manager	6
Public (Customer) Services Team Leader (Staff Officer)	4
Trails Specialist	1
<b>Partner Informants</b>	
Partner Group Type	
Trail Association	3
‘Friends of’ Group	2
Contractor	1
Region	
6	2
8	2
9	1
Multiple regions	

2009, p. 9). Following James’ (1999) recommendation, this study’s definition does not include collaborative planning groups because the needs of a partnership are “identifiable and readily understood” while collaborative groups do not have “a full understanding of the issues that generate the alliance” (p. 38).

### 3.0 METHODS

This multi-phase research project employs a grounded theory research approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998) to develop, refine, and test a conceptual framework of recreation partnerships within the Forest Service. This study reports findings from the first phase, in which key informant interviews were conducted

with 15 agency employees at multiple administrative levels, regions, and positions (Table 1). In addition, interviews were conducted with representatives from six partner groups that provide a variety of services to the agency. Semi-structured interview guides were used for regional partnership coordinators, forest and district-level personnel, and partner groups. Interviews were conducted both in person (n=16) and via telephone (n=5). All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded for emerging constructs and relationships using constant comparison. Peer debriefing (Lincoln and Guba 1985) was employed to negotiate a shared understanding of the constructs and relationships and to model the conceptualizations. The second phase

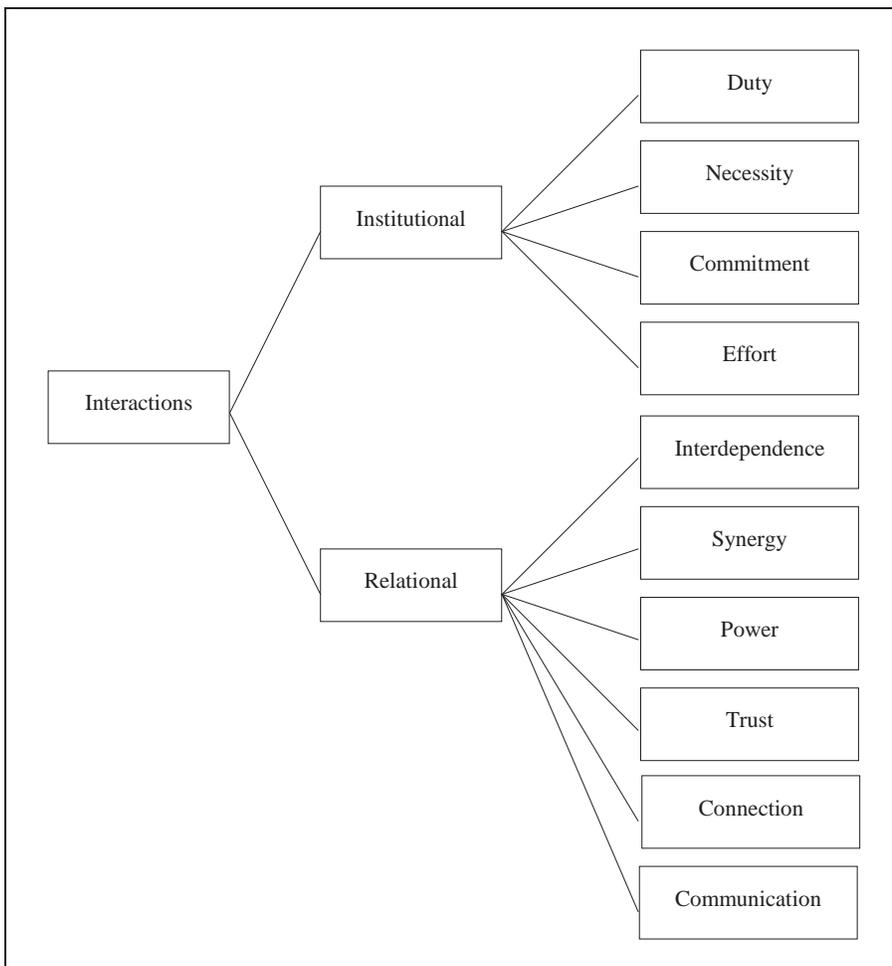


Figure 1.—Conceptual model of Forest Service–partner interactions.

of this project will explore and refine the conceptual framework using multiple case studies, and the third phase will test the framework with a national survey.

#### 4.0 RESULTS

Analysis of the interview data identified two main categories, or levels, of constructs related to Forest Service–partner interactions: institutional and relational (Fig. 1). Institutional interactions consist of four constructs (i.e., duty, necessity, commitment, and effort) that describe both the reasons to partner and the requirements to engage in partnerships. Relational interactions consist of six constructs (i.e., interdependence, synergy, power, trust, connection, and communication) that describe the needs of both the agency and its partners to maintain informal or formal contracts. Each construct is discussed below, “grounded” in the voices of the informants.

#### 4.1 Institutional Interactions

Forest Service personnel described engaging in partnerships as an agency **duty** with some partners expecting to be able to partner and others demanding that the agency work with them. These expectations and demands appear to be related to nearby communities’ and specific partner groups’ engagement in service. Additionally, the enthusiasm associated with public willingness to partner elicits feelings of guilt in agency employees because of the agency’s commitment to serving the public. These guilty feelings make it hard for Forest Service employees to turn away willing partners, even when the employees do not have time to commit to the partnership. For example, one informant explained that “often our partners really want more time and have more enthusiasm and are more interested in things than we plan time to respond to their needs... It’s not that we aren’t interested, it’s just that they might have an idea to

do something and we might think it's a great idea, but we don't have time to devote to it" (Forest-level employee, partnership coordinator).

Agency personnel also view partnerships as a **necessity** because partnering is essential to meeting the agency's mission and goals. Employees explained that it is harder to provide recreational services and opportunities because decreased appropriations (i.e., personnel and budgets) constrain agency capacity. This necessity is also apparent to partner organizations. For example, a trail association informant explained that "it used be that the Forest Service perceived these partners to be PR [public relations]. It was all about PR and getting your picture taken in the newspaper or getting a small write-up in the newsletter. It didn't really mean anything to anyone. Now some Forest Service managers recognize that volunteer partnerships are the only way to get work done." However, partner organizations are concerned about the agency's loss of capacity – particularly, loss of technical knowledge and skills – because it limits the Forest Service's ability to truly partner and forces decisionmakers to focus more on outsourcing.

The **effort** required to partner can also be overwhelming to agency personnel. It is challenging to solicit and build new partnerships because the time and energy required to coordinate and nurture existing partnerships are substantial. A regional partnership coordinator explained the challenge by stating, "[it's] probably the fact that they are overwhelmed with what they are doing [agency tasks] and even if they had a party walk in the door today to help them do a task, they don't have the time and energy to put into it. Forest Service people don't have the time and energy to put into developing a partner to a point where the partner can be productive." Additionally, agency policies also require substantial time and energy. Navigating the red tape associated with administrative paperwork and required trainings, as well as ensuring compliance with agency work standards, requires substantial effort on behalf of agency personnel.

Although there is an "acknowledgment" of the need for partnerships by upper administration, participants perceived that there continues to be limited **commitment** to the resources (e.g., personnel) and recognition

(e.g., reporting) needed for partnerships. Oftentimes, dedicated employees act outside of their job descriptions to develop partnerships because these local-level leaders are committed to public service and building community relations. At the same time, agency employees are concerned that partners may not follow through with their commitments, leading to lost opportunities with other partners or failure to accomplish certain tasks. This concern about commitment is also expressed by people from partner organizations like this trail association informant:

*I think the important thing to reiterate is the notion of leadership. It's not in the public's interest for our organization to be in a leadership position on trail maintenance. We could take that on, but it's not in the interest of the public for us to decide what trails to maintain. We need leadership in the agency. What's happening is that it's like a vacuum in the Forest Service. It's all hollowed out. We are at a stalemate. We are waiting to see where the agency will go. But I don't think we want a bottom-up approach here, with organizations like ours leading from the bottom up. It would be total anarchy. We need to meet in the middle. We need some commitment, some match, a certain level of commitment. We need to know that the lights are on over there.*

As this informant implies, agency commitment, as well as commitment by partner groups, reduces feelings of uncertainty.

## 4.2 Relational Interactions

Forest Service employees view partnerships as **interdependent** relationships. Both partners and agency personnel must contribute effort and provide inputs (e.g., physical and financial resources, and personnel time) for the relationship to have mutual benefits. Mutual benefit implies having a common interest to accomplish a specific task, as well as having shared goals. However, shared goals tend to be less apparent than common interest, as explained by a forest-level recreation manager:

*It was one of those things where our goals and their goals are not exactly the same, but certainly there are*

*areas where they coincided and we really hammered [that point] hard. Experience taught me that one thing the Forest Service is sometimes guilty of is thinking that partners are here to help us get our jobs done and actually partners are here so we can help them get their jobs done... I think as long as we realize that and find some areas of mutual interest, we can be very successful as we were with them.*

Over time, and when relationships have this interdependence, the relationship has **synergy**. For example, a forest-level partnership coordinator explained, “some partnerships have been with us [for so long] we just take it for granted almost that [districts] have partners. Sometimes we do it so naturally that we forget that it’s something actually special.” This increased flow creates greater outcomes (i.e., accomplishing more tasks) by smoothing relationships and allowing greater access to partnership networks. However, the agency must remember to balance partner priorities and agency goals.

Another aspect of relational interactions is **power**, specifically the loss of agency control over the process and outcome that comes with shared decisionmaking about a task. Leadership is needed to keep things on track, as highlighted by a forest-level public relations staff officer:

*Well, the only challenge we faced in that work project is that there was too many chiefs. In hindsight, when we talked to the staff that organized the workday, they could have done something that would have minimized that whole problem. They did not anticipate it. They did not think about it ahead of time, so we learned a little bit more about volunteer management.*

Although strong leadership in both the agency and the partner group can help overcome some power issues, the process is a juggling act. The ideal is to share authority and control but maintain the ability to rework the partnership terms when expectations are not met.

**Trust** is another factor in relational interactions. Trust is a concern for both agency personnel and their partners, and trust can be hindered by too much ownership of a project. From the Forest Service perspective, partners

with too much ownership may feel they have the liberty to conduct unauthorized work; conversely, agency personnel with too much ownership may have limited vision of how and when to use partners. A trail association partner provided this example:

*We had to convince them [the Forest Service] that they didn’t have to come out and monitor us. To them, volunteers were people who didn’t show up; you couldn’t rely on them... It took a while for them to realize that we were serious, that we would show up ... that we would do a good job. Our crew leaders had to break them in to recognize the value of volunteers. It was about building trust and showing them that we are an organized, skilled workforce.*

Building such trust is easier with formal organizations that provide satisfactory training to their members and have demonstrated organizational commitment over time. Another concern related to trust is abuse, particularly when a financial exchange occurs (e.g., subcontracting work is awarded to a partner organization) or when goals change after the partnership agreement is made.

Not surprisingly, the **connections** that develop from partnerships are a component of relational interactions. Cultivating relationships is sometimes more important than accomplishing tasks; this process involves viewing partners as equals or work companions. Leadership (by agency employees who are willing to commit the time and energy) cultivates these connections. Agency champions tend to develop strong connections with their partners, creating additional support for recreation, a district, a forest, or the agency by establishing external champions (i.e., individual partners). When explaining how a trail volunteer and a recreation technician developed a connection that led to the formation of a trail association, the technician explained, “...and he’s been with me for 10 years now. If it wasn’t for him, there would be no trail.” The trail association founder replied, “...and if it wasn’t for this guy, I wouldn’t have started the association because his support has been phenomenal.”

These relational interactions enable the Forest Service to access needed skills and workforces. Yet, these relational interactions require both formal (e.g., meetings, financial exchanges, task orders) and informal (e.g., day-to-day interactions about progress and needs) **communication** between agency personnel and partners. Explicit communication allows for transparency (i.e., clear expectations and roles), but requires open, two-way communication between the agency and its partners and multi-level communication within the agency and within partner organizations.

## 5.0 CONCLUSIONS

Understanding Forest Service–partner interactions is important because it enables better assessments of the skills and responsibilities required of the agency and its personnel. For example, the agency needs to make more formal institutional commitments (e.g., dedicate more staff positions) to partnerships so that connections are not lost when employee turnover occurs. Relationally, the agency needs to provide feedback to its partners by evaluating work and determining the value of the partnership, which in turn will build trust. Though limited in scope, these implications illustrate the need for a conceptual framework that enhances our understanding of recreation partnerships as an institutional mechanism to meet the agency’s mission and accomplish tasks. Once refined and tested, this emerging framework will help the Forest Service secure funding to promote and support recreation partnerships, and will help the agency strengthen its partnership interactions.

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The content of this paper reflects the views of the authors(s), who are responsible for the facts and accuracy of the information presented herein.