

SACO RIVER WATERSHED COLLABORATIVE ASSESSMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



SOURCE: MWV CHAMBER OF COMMERCE/WISEGUY CREATIVE, FLICKR

Alice Elliott • Sophia K. Paul • J. Garrett Powers • Kaitlyn Pritchard

JANUARY 2018

INTRODUCTION

The Saco River watershed is home to visually stunning and ecologically diverse landscapes. Spanning two states and more than 23 municipalities, the watershed's political and social fabric is similarly complex, with a range of governments, economies, and activities represented in different sections of the watershed. The river itself serves many important functions, providing clean drinking water for its residents, abundant recreational opportunities, renewable energy, and habitat for ecologically and commercially significant species. However, a number of issues threaten the watershed, and the lack of watershed-wide coordination and communication has been cited by many as a potential barrier to effective stewardship of the watershed and its resources.

Although residents have long discussed the need for greater collaboration in the watershed, it was the 2010 creation of a stewardship network for the Saco River Estuary that catalyzed discussions for the creation of a watershed-wide collaborative in the Saco. Members of the Saco River Estuary Project encouraged the Wells National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR), the collaborative's facilitator, to consider expanding collaborative efforts to cover the broader watershed.

To further explore the possibilities surrounding the creation of a Saco River watershed collaborative, Dr. Christine Feurt proposed a Master's project on behalf of Wells NERR to the University of Michigan's School for Environment and Sustainability (SEAS) in late 2016. A research team of four graduate students, representing an array of academic and professional interests and specializations, selected the project in January 2017. They engaged Dr. Julia Wondolleck, a SEAS professor and expert in collaborative natural resource management, as the project advisor.

This project's deliverable is a nonpartisan, independent assessment of current values and aspirations, issues, and possibilities for collaboration in the Saco River watershed. It is intended to inform and advise all residents who aspire to greater collaboration in the watershed, as well as the existing Saco Watershed Collaborative, which has taken shape over the same time period as this project.

METHODS

To complete this assessment, the research team utilized three methods: a literature review, semi-structured interviews, and case profiles. First, the team reviewed literature on elements of successful collaboration in the context of natural resource management. From May-August 2017, the team conducted in-person and phone interviews with 52 individuals representing 30 organizations, including nonprofits, state and federal agencies, municipalities, universities, and businesses. The project team probed what interviewees value about the watershed, what they hope for its future, their perceptions of issues facing the watershed, and how they envisioned a collaborative might contribute to stewardship of the watershed.

Finally, the team examined existing watershed collaboratives in New England and around the country that face analogous issues or were founded in similar issue contexts. This document provides a brief summary of findings and recommendations for the creation of a Saco River watershed collaborative, both of which are described in much greater detail in the final report.

FINDINGS

A. VALUES OF THE SACO RIVER WATERSHED

When asked what they valued most about the Saco River watershed, interviewees consistently referenced the same attributes. Recreation was cited by the most interviewees (58%) as both an opportunity for people to experience the watershed and a valuable part of the region's economy. 42% of interviewees valued the river's clean water. Interviewees also valued the watershed's biophysical attributes (mentioned by 42%) and aesthetic qualities (mentioned by 38%). Some spoke of the watershed's notable geological and ecological features, including the stratified-drift aquifer, as well as the beauty and character of the river and the role it plays in their communities. Finally, 33% of interviewees specifically valued the water for drinking and irrigation.

B. ASPIRATIONS FOR THE SACO RIVER WATERSHED

As with values, interviewees shared many aspirations for the watershed. Often they expressed a desire to preserve characteristics they valued or address issues of particular concern. Specifically, interviewees aspired to a future where the unique ecology of the watershed and its high quality water are protected. Specifically, they hoped to see better land management practices and more land conservation, and they hoped that recreation would occur in ways that did not degrade the river. Additionally, they hoped to see more coordinated and credible science generated in the watershed that could inform decision makers.

Interviewees also hoped to see greater public awareness about the river and more public concern about the issues facing it. Additionally, some interviewees hoped to see higher levels of coordination between the many government agencies, local governments, nonprofits, and other agencies operating in the watershed. Finally, they hoped to see groups taking a more proactive approach to protecting and managing the river.

Shared values and aspirations can provide a foundation for collaboration. The prevalence of each amongst interviewees is a good sign of the potential for collaboration in the Saco River watershed.

C. PERCEPTIONS OF ISSUES IN THE SACO RIVER WATERSHED

Interviewees mentioned a wide array of issues related to the Saco River watershed, reflecting the geographic, social, economic, and ecological diversity within the watershed. Some issues are specific to particular sections of the river, while others are more widespread.

Most commonly, interviewees expressed concern about recreation (mentioned by 67%). Although many interviewees noted the social and economic benefits of the Saco River's robust recreation industry, they were concerned that overuse of the river was leading to environmental degradation and safety issues. 35% of interviewees were concerned with development, which has accelerated in recent years in the Conway and Saco/Biddeford areas. They noted how the loss of riparian buffer and increase in impervious land cover threatened the watershed's ecology and water quality.

35% of interviewees discussed the issue of dams and fish passage. Some interviewees noted the benefits of the river's numerous hydroelectric dams, citing the environmental value of clean power generation. However, others expressed concern about the dams' impacts on the river's ecosystem and anadromous fish

populations. Others discussed the role of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) dam relicensing process and what they perceived to be the inadequacy of FERC standards in promoting ecological connectivity.

Finally, 29% of interviewees raised the issue of water extraction, particularly by Poland Spring (a subsidiary of Nestle Waters North America, Inc.), which extracts water for bottling. This is a particularly complex issue with many sub-issues, and interviewees expressed a variety of nuanced perspectives. Some interviewees were concerned with the ecological and political implications of private water extraction. Others mentioned a distrust of the science produced by Poland Spring about the viability of water extraction, and they were particularly concerned about the impact of extraction on public water supplies under future climate change scenarios. Some expressed concern about social impacts of water extraction, particularly regarding local control of local resources, water as a public good, and how benefits from water extraction are distributed.

Given the wide range of issues, a collaborative should prioritize which issues it seeks to address. Additionally, different government entities and private landowners have explicit jurisdiction and responsibilities for dimensions of these issues, as well as different capacities for addressing them. Any collaborative will need to consider these authorities and engage those with jurisdiction in order to address issues effectively.

D. PURPOSE OF A SACO RIVER WATERSHED COLLABORATIVE

Interviewees expressed a clear interest in creating a collaborative organization in the Saco River watershed to improve communication and coordination between individuals and organizations. However, they had a wide array of ideas about what purpose or purposes such an organization might serve in the watershed.

48% of interviewees believed a collaborative should exist to bolster networking and information-sharing among parties operating in the watershed, while 15% hoped a collaborative would focus on coalition and capacity-building. These purposes would serve to build relationships between members of the collaborative and help them to increase their own knowledge and capabilities.

Some interviewees hoped a collaborative would influence the behavior of others in the watershed by educating the public (31%), advising local and state governments (17%), or advocating for specific policies or legislation (8%).

Finally, some interviewees hoped that a collaborative would help enable watershed-scale management and planning by bringing an ecosystem-perspective into decision making (21%), coordinating conservation efforts (8%), or addressing issues that span multiple jurisdictions such as recreation (4%).

A Saco River watershed collaborative could adopt one or more of these purposes. Discussing these varying ideas about a collaborative's role in the watershed and collectively deciding which purpose(s) to focus on will be a foundational step for any Saco River watershed collaborative moving forward.

E. STRUCTURE OF A SACO RIVER WATERSHED COLLABORATIVE

Slightly over half of interviewees had not thought about how a collaborative would be structured. The structure of a collaborative is usually shaped by its purpose, so - unsurprisingly - interviewees' perspectives on purpose informed how they thought decisions should be made, who should be involved, and other

issues related to structure.

Thoughts about structure were also influenced by the controversy around Poland Spring's involvement with and funding of the current collaborative. Some interviewees supported accepting Poland Spring funding, some were cautious, and others preferred that Poland Spring have no role in a collaborative at all.

While most interviewees had not given much prior thought to a collaborative's potential structure, it was clear that interviewees wanted the process to be credible and transparent. This would ensure that they could trust the collaborative to be fair to them and their interests. Additionally, many interviewees were in favor of a flexible process, since they had different levels of interest, different levels of capacity to participate, and interest in engaging with different issues. Finally, interviewees wanted a process that would focus on issues that were important to them, thereby making the process personally worthwhile.

CASE PROFILES

The research team profiled nine existing watershed collaboratives in New England and around United States that face similar issues to the Saco and/or have similar ecological, geographic, or social characteristics. Each profile describes the collaborative's genesis, purpose(s), goals, structure, and key activities and accomplishments. The cases profiled are:

- Androscoggin River Watershed Council (Maine & New Hampshire)
- Animas River Stakeholders Group (Colorado)
- Charles River Watershed Association (Massachusetts)
- Connecticut River Conservancy (Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Vermont)
- Coos Watershed Association (Oregon)
- Huron River Watershed Council (Michigan)
- Merrimack River Watershed Council (Massachusetts & New Hampshire)
- Millers River Watershed Council (Massachusetts & New Hampshire)
- Salmon Falls Watershed Collaborative (Maine & New Hampshire)

Most of these collaboratives have created mission statements that encapsulate their values and organizational aims, as well as goals that describe their aims in more detail. Many began due to external pressures. For instance, several had waters so polluted that they were harmful to public health; other collaboratives faced economic impacts from possible Superfund designations, or listing a local organism on the Endangered Species Act. None of these collaboratives were formed proactively. In contrast, several interviewees in the Saco River watershed emphasized a desire for proactive management - a way to maintain the Saco River's excellent water quality for generations to come. Since the Saco River is not facing any kind of external mandate or urgent problem driving the need for the creation of a collaborative, there are a wide array of potential purposes a collaborative could adopt.

These collaboratives have formed different structures in keeping with their different purposes and the needs of their different participants. The case profiles demonstrate the breadth of potential purposes and structures that a Saco River watershed collaborative might consider and provide transferable lessons that could inform a watershed collaborative.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Those interested in advancing collaboration within the Saco River watershed should use shared aspirations as a stepping stone to discuss a common vision or mission statement that might capture the future they would all like to see. Vision statements can be motivating and provide a reference point to keep the collaborative on track.
2. Capitalize on common values of the watershed as a stepping stone to collaboratively develop specific goals and objectives. These goals and objectives should capture the major issues and aspirations in a manner that will be compelling to those who care about the Saco River watershed and will encourage their engagement in the collaborative. Clear goals and objectives provide critical focus for a collaborative.
3. Those interested in advancing collaboration in the Saco River watershed should recognize the varied interests and concerns at stake and prioritize which issues they want to address in both the short and long-term. They should also recognize the various entities with jurisdiction over the issues and engage them as possible in the process in order to ensure informed and effective solutions are developed.
4. People in the watershed interested in collaboration should discuss the various purposes a collaborative might serve and which purpose(s) will best advance the interests and aspirations of those involved.
5. Recognizing some of the undercurrents of distrust simmering in the watershed, consider ways to ensure a collaborative's broad credibility. Careful attention to who is involved, who makes decisions based on what information, and how funding is secured will help enhance a collaborative's credibility.
6. To increase trust, consider ways to structure a collaborative in order to ensure its transparency such as having regularly scheduled meetings that are open to the public, making information about funding broadly available, and regularly publishing a newsletter or web updates.
7. Given the broad range of concerns and participant's limited time, consider ways to structure the collaborative in order to enable flexibility in participation in it. This could include activities specific to different stretches of the river, subcommittees, and/or different membership levels.
8. Ensure that the process is structured in a way that will make a difference in the watershed and be worthwhile for individuals and organizations to participate in. This may include focusing on issues that are particularly important to participants and/or tackling projects with a visible impact.

For further details, please contact: saco-project@umich.edu.

The full report, "Saco River Watershed Collaborative Assessment", will be available in February 2018.