



Leveraging
**National Park
Partnerships**
in
Urban Areas

A Toolkit of Lessons and Best Practices

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Introduction

The National Park Service (NPS) has a long history of working with partners to help carry out its mission. As the agency looks to its next century and celebrates its centennial in 2016, its interest in partnering with others has never been stronger. Whether to stretch limited resources or to introduce and engage new audiences to our national parks, partners are critical, and partnerships simply make sense.

The National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) and NPS are looking at how national parks can have a greater presence and impact in urban areas. As such, NPCA chose to conduct research specifically on strong partner practices in and around urban areas. Our national parks have vast untapped potential to contribute to the urban communities where they have a presence.

NPCA has created this Partnerships Toolkit to serve as a resource for park managers and park partners (current or new) who want to build or strengthen partnerships.

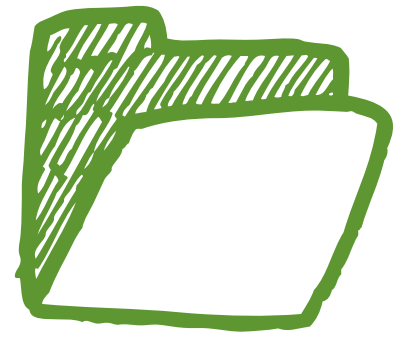
The information in this toolkit comes from interviews of park staff and partners in six national park sites across the country. We learned through the process that partnerships are more of an art than a science and that it is important to continually revisit the basics—relationships, goal alignment, and communication. To that end, we've assembled information that should prove beneficial to both partners and park managers. You'll find one section dedicated to park staff—Considerations for Parks—and another aimed at partners—Considerations for Partners—but we encourage everyone to review the entire toolkit for a holistic view of these often complicated yet ultimately worthwhile relationships.

A. WHO WE TALKED TO

We polled colleagues at NPCA and NPS to identify a list of parks and partners that partnered well. We looked for urban and near-urban parks and sought geographic diversity and a variety of park-type. We selected the following parks and partners:

- Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area and Boston Harbor Alliance, Boston, MA
- Cuyahoga Valley National Park, Conservancy for Cuyahoga Valley National Park, Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad and Cuyahoga Valley Countryside Conservancy (the local Farmer's Group), Peninsula, OH
- Lowell National Historical Park, University of Massachusetts Lowell, The Lowell Plan, Lowell, MA
- Mississippi National River & Recreation Area, Mississippi River Fund, REI Twin Cities, St. Paul, MN





- San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, American Youth Works, Los Compadres de San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, Catholic diocese, San Antonio, TX
- Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, Mountains Recreation & Conservation Authority, Santa Monica, CA

B. WHAT WE LEARNED

- Key park motivations for partnering include: filling financial and staff resource gaps, reaching new audiences, and access to more programmatic flexibility often offered by non-governmental partners.
- Key partner motivations for partnering with a national park site include: the cachet that the National Park Service can bring, access to untapped markets for products or programs, access to natural or cultural resources that enhance their programs or commercial offerings.
- Particularly in urban areas, creative partnerships can help the park enhance its presence in the community—to better bring its resources to bear and demonstrate itself as a community asset.
- As parks consider new potential partners it is critical to “do your homework” in order to understand what the partner’s motivation for partnering are. Approach new partners with their interest as the lead and how your park can help them meet their goals.
- Staff partnership skills (flexibility, creativity, communication, etc.) are critical to partnership success. Assign partnering roles to staff who are highly collaborative. Build these skills among the entire park team.
- Partnerships are a lot like a marriage. In many cases the strongest partnership are ones that evolve over time, often with ups and downs. Long-term commitment and willingness to work through the hard times is important.
- While partnering has always been important to the NPS’s ability to carry out their mission, there are challenges related to its bureaucratic nature that are important to be aware of. Talk about these issues openly in order to jointly develop strategies to mitigate.
- Partnerships are never “pain-free” and they require constant nurturing.
- Communication is essential—between partners and within partnering organization. Staff at all levels should understand the goals of the partnership and be empowered to support it.

2 Considerations for Parks

A. THE VALUE OF PARTNERSHIPS

Faced with shrinking budgets and an increasingly diverse American population, national parks are leveraging partnerships to reach new audiences, meet the needs of their communities, and fulfill their mission.

Parks in and near urban areas are uniquely positioned to partner with community organizations that serve a wide variety of audiences. These organizations may not be familiar with national parks and could include youth, minority groups, millennials, etc. These partnerships can help build awareness and appreciation for the parks and help the NPS better understand where it can contribute to communities.

Partnerships add value to parks by helping them complete projects, provide essential services, engage new populations, and leverage mutual strengths.

- **Filling essential resource gaps is one of the most frequently cited reasons to pursue partnerships in urban parks.** In some cases those gaps are financial resources; other times there is a staffing gap that partners can fill.

Partners often play the critical role of raising funds to help augment shrinking NPS budgets—from friends groups capable of driving donors to specific projects, to partners who can communicate the merits of the park to key public and private community leaders. Depending on the structure of the partnership, funds do not necessarily flow only one way into the park, rather partners can provide support for one another depending on the availability of budget resources.

- Partners can also provide the **labor to complete crucial tasks**. In Texas, San Antonio Missions National Historical Park has teamed up with American Youth Works to train young people to apprentice as masons. These apprentices help maintain thousands of square feet of both historic and modern masonry, which would otherwise be left to only two full-time masons. It is a win-win situation—the park can maintain invaluable historical structures while exposing young people from diverse backgrounds to careers in masonry, conservation, and park management. These paid apprenticeships provide valuable technical skills that can lead to future jobs. See page 10 to learn more.
- Depending on the partner, entities outside of NPS often have the **flexibility and leeway** to act more nimbly, communicate their needs more quickly, or cut through red tape. Because these entities are not working within the



“The best thing we do for the partnership isn’t actually money. The number one thing we can provide for the park is flexibility and entrepreneurship.”

—Katie Nyberg,
Mississippi River Fund

restrictive bounds of the federal government, they can often coordinate contracts with outside vendors more quickly, and get crucial work done much faster.

- **Partnerships provide an opportunity for parks to reach out to new communities, engage urban populations, and hear from a different set of stakeholders.**

Either by design or as an unintended benefit, partnerships are helping NPS engage new communities who might not otherwise use the park.

NPS has placed a great emphasis on reaching new populations, and this effort is critical in order to maintain and increase the value of national parks with the American people. Partnerships help to encourage public and private community groups to take advantage of park resources and/or to work with businesses and elected officials to strengthen civic pride.

The toolkit, “Making the Pitch” (see page 6) will get you thinking about how to reach out to new and different types of groups. Look creatively at your goals and those of potential partners. Here are some examples.

- Partnerships with local outdoor-centric businesses like REI or L.L. Bean. In these cases, the company could be looking to guide customers to places where they can try out new gear, and the park has an opportunity to more actively engage the company’s customer base.
- Inner-city schools looking for after-school or summer activities for their students. A partnership can offer students a safe and productive activity to fill idle hours, and the park has an opportunity to expose a new generation to the benefits and importance of NPS, and the great outdoors.
- Nonprofits looking for employment opportunities for young adults. The park can provide skills-building activities and exposure to career opportunities, and in return, can get free or reduced labor for needs around the park.



“Outreach is so important. We could never do that by ourselves. Our partner brings schoolchildren and other groups to experience a national park for the first time.”

—Cheryl Scherier, Cuyahoga Valley National Park & Mount Rushmore National Memorial



CASE STUDY

B. SANTA MONICA: REACHING URBAN POPULATIONS

“I get involved with [students’] communities. I try to encourage community projects in their neighborhoods to demonstrate that the park service cares about the environment, not only in our spaces, but where they’re from too. It increases our relevancy in their communities as well.”

—Santa Monica Mountains Youth Program Staffer

The Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area (SMMNRA) is a series of individual parks and green spaces scattered around the city of Los Angeles and surrounding suburbs. Authorized as part of the National Parks and Recreation Act of 1978 and jointly administered by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, the California State Parks, the Santa Monica Fund, and the NPS, SMMNRA is a partnership park by necessity. But SMMNRA—or “SAMO” as it is known—has taken advantage of this necessity, using its blended governmental authority and unique location near the urban core of Los Angeles to reach new and diverse populations that might not otherwise explore the parks.

One area where this outreach is visible is in the Santa Monica Mountains Youth Program. Working with individual schools and teachers in Ventura and Los Angeles Counties, the youth programs aim to connect students with outdoors that are literally next door to their homes, but where many have never set foot. The programs offer a variety of opportunities for youth, from summer and seasonal work programs that aim to engage students from high school and into college, to hiking and camping adventures to get kids interacting with their parks.

It is a mutually beneficial partnership. Beyond the completed projects and workers provided by these youth programs, the park has also built robust relationships with new and diverse audiences. Kids enthusiastically show off their projects and describe the things that they have seen, and all of

a sudden they are bringing parents, siblings, and friends into the park. In return, the students receive opportunities to be mentored, to have a safe place to go after school or during the summer, to explore different career paths, and to see what the great outdoors can offer.

But it is not always easy to engage neighborhoods, teachers, or kids. Many of the communities that SAMO aims to reach are distrustful of the motives behind or simply skeptical about the program. The solution for SAMO: work to engage community members who can serve as surrogates or messengers between the park and neighborhoods to help establish trust. Building a more diverse and representative staff is also a key goal of park leadership. Hiring diverse and local staff is another way to build relationships with the communities that the park aims to serve.

Another challenge faced by SAMO in their outreach to schools is the competing pressures on students’ time. As one park staffer noted, initially schools and teachers may have little interest in the program because of time constraints—and that’s okay. But after talking with enough teachers, and figuring out how your program matches up with their goals, you will find people excited about prioritizing the time and effort to get their kids into the park. Now after creating and establishing a highly popular program, SAMO is facing an overwhelming number of requests for programs. It is “a good challenge to have” says one NPS staffer.





C. MAKING THE PITCH

You are open to creating or deepening a new partnership, you've got a person or entity in mind, and now it's time to make your pitch. But what do you say?

Each potential partner is different, and the compelling points for one group might not be the same as the compelling points for another. Do your homework to learn about the potential partner, study what has made them successful, and what their priorities are. Put yourself in your target's shoes, think about what you want to emphasize, and figure out your selling points BEFORE you make your pitch. Focus on what is in it for them.

Some Things to Think about:

1. **What motivates the potential partner?** What is the primary goal or function of the potential partner? What has made them successful? Why would they want to partner with you? Would a partnership be mutually beneficial?
2. **What's your main motivation for reaching out to this partner?** Environmental stewardship? Economic impact? Civic pride? Something else? Pick partnership selling points that will resonate for your intended audience—not just with park staff.
3. **Why is this beneficial?** Will this increase publicity for your partner? Provide after-school programming for at-risk youth? Beautify a public space? Highlight tangible benefits that your partner could expect as a result of this endeavor.
4. **Are you speaking their language?** Many potential partners may not have extensive experience with NPS, or the parks. But that's ok—you can still collaborate! Avoid insider jargon, like acronyms or NPS "slang," to ensure your potential partner understands what you're aiming to do.
5. **Are you fostering trust?** Successful partnerships thrive on trust, and this is where you set that tone. From a project's start, include staff, surrogates, or community members who can relate to your intended target, including people with whom potential partners can see themselves working.

Different Audiences, Different Pitches

You have a meeting with a **local business**—do you talk about long-term environmental stewardship or about your park's economic impact on surrounding businesses? Most businesses have two primary concerns in mind—**customers** and **their bottom line**. A partnership with your park may be able to help with both, and it's your job to figure out how. Potential points to emphasize:

- "The park brings in 'x' visitors a year, with an estimated economic impact of 'y'."
- Complete this sentence: "This partnership will benefit your customers by..."
 - Providing classes for customers to test drive new outdoor equipment.
 - Giving wedding parties a picturesque backdrop to host ceremonies.
 - Bringing shoppers together for regular events like a farmers' market or food truck stop.
- Think like a publicist. How can you help people learn about this company's involvement in the partnership?
- Tax benefits or deductions: Will this partnership provide any tax-deductible benefits or opportunities for the business? This could include historic preservation tax credits; the assistance from the NPS's [Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance program](#); and/or tax deductions for charitable donations.
- Benefits to the city's overall image. This may be of particular interest to larger companies recruiting new employees willing to relocate. National parks improve the quality of life in the surrounding communities, helping to attract and maintain talented employees.

Organizations focused on engaging **students, reaching diverse children, or helping at-risk youth** probably have different goals in mind beyond conservation or environmental stewardship. For them, it may be about hands-on educational opportunities, jobs, and volunteer work that provide structure or leadership opportunities that will help with college admittance. Potential points to emphasize:

- Will this teach youth a tangible skill, like landscaping, office professionalism, or public speaking?
- Could students receive high school or college credit for their work?
- Does this opportunity provide a safe space or structure during the summer or after-school hours?
- Think about transportation. How will the partnership move young participants around so that it's feasible, safe, and convenient for parents or students?

Public officials, including representatives, city councilmen, and zoning board members, most likely have varied objectives as well. It may be civic pride, it may be a focus on one specific project, or it might be environmentalism.

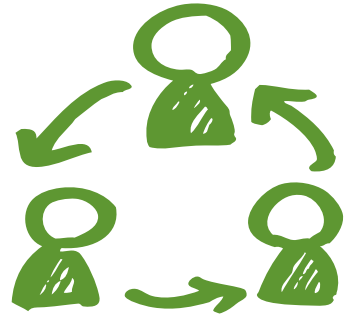
- **Think about the tax benefits.** More activity in the community can mean more jobs or increased spending, and that helps generate dollars for local businesses, restaurants, and the tax base.
- **What issues are important to that specific official?** Many officeholders have two or three issues, pet projects, or concerns that they care deeply about—from cleaning up the local river, to health care access, to programmatic opportunities for at-risk youth. Is there a way to connect your partnership idea to their focus?
- **Think like a campaign manager.** Most elected officials want (and need) to show their work to voters. Will there be opportunities for public events, meet and greets, or press releases that publicize the partnership's results and the official's efforts? Highlight opportunities to interact with voters.
- **Have a specific ask.** The park is a constituency of the elected official—make it easy for them to say yes to a partnership by bringing specific asks. Do you want them to explore a bike-share program that connects the park to the rest of the city or create a working group to clean up surrounding land? Bring a few tangible ways for the elected official to get involved.



Find out what the organization or person cares about and cater to their interests.

“When we started doing more programming with diverse kids from the inner city, we had to quickly learn new ways of engagement because these were not kids who showed up on their own to programs that they saw on our websites....these kids had no idea who we were. So the partners were able to help us bring those kids to the table because they had better connections in the schools and the community. And our [corporate] partners and friends group help us with the capacity to do the programming. If we relied solely on Uncle Sam, we would be doing nothing.”

—Paul Labovitz, Mississippi National River & Recreation Area



D. CEMENTING THE PARK'S PLACE IN THE COMMUNITY

Unique urban partnerships can also help cement the park's place within the community. These partnerships can prove the value of the park to the local community and increase positive perceptions about an area's high quality of life. Promoting civic pride is a powerful way to strengthen a park's outreach to stakeholders like community-based organizations, city and state officials, business leaders, or the media, just like they are doing at the San Antonio Mission National Historical Park (See the "San Antonio: Knowing How to Make the Pitch" case study on p. 10).

E. LISTENING TO THE COMMUNITY

Reaching out to new communities also provides an opportunity to think creatively about the uses of the park, especially when diverse stakeholders are actively engaged in helping shape a park's strategic vision. Urban parks are a resource for the community, and their use can extend far beyond the traditional solitude or hiking opportunities that most think of when they think "national parks." With prime, well-maintained real estate in centrally located and densely populated areas (and creative thinking by NPS staff to work through limiting statutes or regulations), there is an opportunity to explore—with community stakeholders—non-traditional park usages not readily available to their rural peers. Opportunities for living-history farms and farmers' markets, wedding services, or bike share services are a few of the potential partnership opportunities urban parks can explore. The key is to enter into discussion with community members with an open mind and a spirit of possibility.

F. STAFF CONSIDERATIONS IN PARTNERSHIPS

Time Commitments

Partnerships, particularly those designed to engage new audiences—require intensive time and effort. Engaging new partners requires a lot of trust, which can take months, if not years, to develop. This can prove a challenge for superintendents who frequently rotate from park to park. Superintendents may find that they have to leave the park just as they are making real inroads with a community, while those rotating in may

have difficulty building trust. In either case, it can be difficult for either superintendent to take credit or show progress, thereby decreasing the incentive for superintendents to prioritize partnering.

Involving Junior Staff in Partnerships

NPS junior/support staff should be involved in partnerships to ensure continuity when leadership changes occur at the park. They can help superintendents navigate partnerships during transitions and tend to have deeper connections to the communities surrounding the parks. Ideally, support staff will have been with the Park Service long enough to recognize the culture of the organization (while also being open to new ideas). Moreover, support staff should be expert at, or at least be willing to engage, with the administrative side of partnership bureaucracy in order to help serve as liaison between partners on things like a cooperative agreement.



We do a lot of smaller-scale partnerships in the region, working with local organizations as program partners to bring new audiences to the park. In some ways, it's the three-part partnerships that are most effective, because the Park Service and the friends group are bringing resources to the table, but [historically both are] fundamentally white organizations that recruit primarily white staff. So some of the kind of issues that the Park Service has, around being staffed for relevancy, the friends group does too. So community-based organizations that can bring diverse audiences to the table are also a key ingredient.

—Anonymous, Park Staff



CASE STUDY

G. SAN ANTONIO: KNOWING HOW TO MAKE THE PITCH

“The purpose of [our partnership is] twofold. Number one, to help the masons. Number two, to get young people interested in careers in historic preservation.”

—Susan Chandoha, San Antonio Missions National Historical Park

Recently nominated for consideration as a World Heritage Site, the San Antonio Missions National Historical Park has engaged in multiple partnerships over the years. A partnership park by necessity, the park shares control of the land and four historic frontier missions with the Catholic Archdiocese of San Antonio. Splitting responsibility between the actual land (NPS) and the four active churches on the property (the diocese), the partners have formed an effective relationship that engages a broad swath of San Antonio and cements the park's place in the community.

The national park has also formed a partnership with the Los Compadres Friends Group. Teaming up on fundraising initiatives and to support programs in the park, this partnership has played an essential role in helping the park thrive and increase programs and services. This partnership is a 20+ year relationship that has been built and nurtured over time.

The park, the diocese, and Los Compadres have shown that both individually and as a team, they understand how to engage new audiences, and know how to highlight the “right” strengths of the park and program when making their pitch to various audiences.

Building Off of Current Programming to Make the Pitch:

With hundreds of thousands of square feet of both modern and historic masonry, two full-time masons are tasked with maintaining the facilities around the park. A tight budget combined with a desire to provide local youth in the community an opportunity to learn a technical skill led NPS and Los Compadres to coordinate an education and green-jobs training organization from Austin, Texas. By providing funding for the program,

Los Compadres has helped American Youth Works and the park support several mason apprentices throughout the year. These apprenticeships provide stipends for the youth who participate, as well as an opportunity to learn a very technical—and increasingly rare—skill that they could turn into a career in historic preservation.

Benefits to the Park as a result of this program are twofold: (1) the park found a way to engage a new generation of young park enthusiasts via the apprenticeships; and (2) the program provides an easy conversation starter when pitching new ideas with other potential donors or partners, including local businesses willing to make a donation to Los Compadres in order to help support the initiative. The masons' efforts help maintain civic pride in this historic treasure, offer plenty of benefits to youth, and help the park save money and see projects through to completion.

Giving Businesses and Elected Officials What They Want:

The park, the diocese, and Los Compadres also know how to communicate their strengths to influential audiences, taking this message of civic pride—and the resulting economic benefits to businesses and government officials. With the help of NPCA, Los Compadres completed an economic impact statement reflecting the park's benefits to the local economy. This report (found here: <http://parkb.it/missionsimpact>) is **a tangible product that staff can take with them** to meetings with potential donors, potential partners, and city officials, and it has helped immensely in increasing awareness about the park's importance among community leaders.

3 Considerations for Partners

A. Partnering with the National Park Service

The National Park Service recognizes the value and the need for partnerships, and the agency is actively promoting the idea of urban national parks engaging in creative partnerships.

There are plenty of benefits to partnering with NPS as well as some challenges that are good to be aware of, so they can be addressed or mitigated.

- **When it comes to partnerships, NPS brings a lot to the table.** Staff members with the park and partners all pointed to the longstanding goodwill the national parks enjoy with the American people. The park service is seen as a passionate and knowledgeable conservator of America's most treasured natural and historical places, and has built a loyal following of supporters over its nearly 100-year existence.


As such, one of NPS's greatest assets for potential partners is the credibility it can bring to its cause. Current partners perceive the NPS arrowhead as one of the best brands in the country, and even proximity to NPS can help an external entity build its own goodwill in the community.

The national stature of NPS brings tangible benefits for partners that are used to operating at the local, regional, or state level. The immense size of the federal budget (relative to local partners) is an obvious example, although less obvious is the fact that federal guidelines can sometimes be less arduous than local or state guidelines in terms of allowing partners to hire staff or achieve other objectives.

The benefits that NPS bring to the table should be articulated to new partners while building the relationship and getting to know each other.

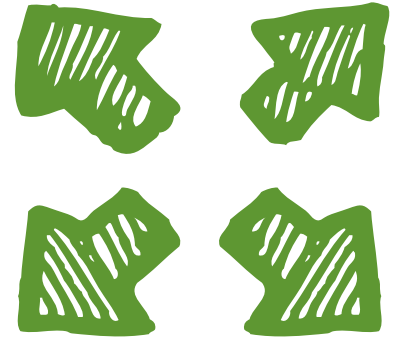
However, as park managers consider approaching new groups in partnership, they should not assume these groups will share the same perception of NPS. They may, in fact, know very little about the parks and the agency or have negative perceptions. Here are a few suggested ideas to communicate the benefits of a park partnership:

- Partnering with your local national park will help you tap into a new customer base of current visitors.



“The best thing we do for the partnership isn't actually money. The number one thing we can provide for the park is flexibility and entrepreneurship.”

—Katie Nyberg,
Mississippi River Fund



- The park may be able to provide new space for events, activities for your target populations, or programs that provide technical assistance or tax credits.
- In many urban places national parks and programs are under-leveraged assets in the effort to make communities better. From grant programs through the Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program or Historic Tax Credits to expertise in areas such as climate resilience, there is much that urban parks can offer their broader communities.
- **NPS is undergoing a cultural shift aimed at fostering and encouraging more partnerships.** One of the key drivers of this shift is the need for urban parks to engage “outside the boundaries” of the park. NPS is expanding its thinking about ways to better connect urban communities to their heritage, parks, trails, waterways, and community green spaces. It also embraces the goal of nurturing lifelong connections between the public and parks—especially young people—through a continuum of healthy outdoor recreational experiences, as well as educational, volunteer, and work experiences.

The majority of urban parks included in this study are sandwiched between land being used for other purposes, and natural ecosystems and cultural landscapes are not constrained by park boundaries. Partnerships help these urban parks remain effective and relevant in terms of land use and the cultural context of the community.

B. Changes Happening but Challenges Remain

It is important for partners to be aware of some of the challenges they may face in partnering with NPS. Many are inherent to a large federal agency, others are norms that will continue to shift. Often the park staff will be fully aware of these challenges. It will greatly benefit your partnership to talk openly about these issues and work together to come up with strategies for navigating potential challenges.

Staff and external partners say the Park Service is increasingly open to partnerships, but add that NPS could be more partner-friendly in certain areas.

- Better utilization of the brand is one such place. Many external partners fail to understand why NPS doesn’t make better use of its brand, which represents such a positive draw for partnerships. There is a sense that these brand restrictions cause NPS to miss opportunities to interact with new or broader audiences. One example includes



I dream that [in order to be a] park superintendent [you must be] trained in how to work in partnerships, and an executive director of a friends group or a key park partner [must] have some orientation to the National Park Service and how to partner with them.

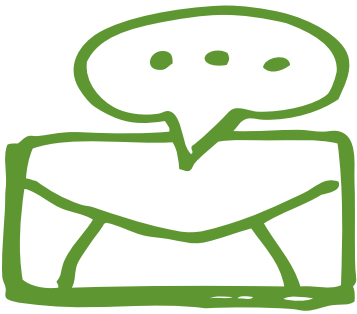
—Deb Yandala, Cuyahoga Valley National Park Association

a recent broadcast television show where NPS required actors portraying park rangers to appear without any NPS designation on their uniforms.

- Beyond branding issues, the agency as a whole is seen as a big bureaucracy, and will often flex its bureaucratic muscle to rein in attempts to push partnership boundaries. This slows the pace of projects, and creates a sense that NPS can be the “Agency of ‘No.’” One external partner described it as a “keepers of the ‘Ark of the Covenant’” mentality, where NPS staff come off as omniscient and therefore have little to learn from current or potential partners. As a result, when something goes wrong there is a sense that NPS wants to gloss over the problem instead of facing it.
- In that same vein, others see challenges with the overly democratic style of management that prevails in some parks. For businesses especially, who are used to a more autocratic workplace style with clear lines of responsibility and authority, NPS’s emphasis on consensus-based decision making is perceived as both confusing and limiting.
- Staff issues present another potential hurdle to NPS’s efforts to expand creative partnerships. There is an increasing emphasis within NPS to match staff skills with circumstances on the ground in a park when filling open leadership positions. This has not always been the case, and has led to some leaders not having the appropriate personality, desire, or ability to seek and maintain effective community partnerships.
- While there is a cultural shift happening at NPS, it remains to be seen if the pro-partnership culture will penetrate the agency fully, and/or whether its underlying bureaucratic structure will limit attempts to leverage new and creative partnership opportunities.

Finally, and outside of NPS’s control, the fact that the agency can be governed by national politics can present a challenge. Beyond unpredictable federal budgets that result in shrinking park budgets, the political dysfunction in Washington can undermine efforts to form and maintain partnerships. The government shutdown in October of 2013 provides a prime example; during which parks were closed for 15 days (and NPS staff were not even allowed to respond to e-mails). Situations such as these, which some perceive to be the result of political motives, are extremely frustrating and burdensome to a local partnering entity looking to move forward with an initiative.

4 Ingredients for a Successful Partnership



Regular, recurring, honest communications back and forth—ideally face to face—are important, as is common cause [among partners]. It's not about their program or our program, it's about the program. And hopefully, that is something where there's mutual agreement.

—Paul Stoehr, Cuyahoga National Park

The key ingredients for effective partnerships boil down to chemistry and personalities. Time and again, NPS staff and external partners alike identify both as absolutely essential to their success. The chemistry is either there or it is not, but there are things partners can do to maximize the likelihood of partnership success. These include:

- Being flexible and open to new ideas and creative ways of thinking
- Being honest about your goals and limitations, and knowing what you hope to gain from the partnership
- Understanding your partners' incentives—political, social, and financial—and helping them achieve their goals
- Being transparent, including openness about planned staff transitions or rotations
- Communicating effectively and being able to listen (especially in the first few months)
- Ability to sell ideas and benefits to internal leadership, such as NPS superiors or the board of a park friends group
- Ability to act decisively (e.g., prioritizing tasks that serve partnership vision or removing staff who are intransigent or resistant to partnerships and change)
- Being politically astute, which can mean understanding the motivations of local elected officials and knowing how to navigate the impacts of Washington on NPS as a federal agency
- A willingness to share the credit or even to let others receive the credit altogether—a good partnership strives to eliminate ego, making the partnership about a common goal rather than an individual person or organization
- Ability to get along with people from diverse backgrounds, which needs to be prioritized when hiring new park staff and should play a role in the promotion or hiring of leadership staff
- **In addition to personality and chemistry, tangible necessities for a partnership to thrive** include mission overlap, technical staff skills, and ensuring appropriate staff backgrounds.

Respondents differed on the necessity of mission overlap. For some, if personal relationships and trust are there, partnerships are possible even when mission overlap is not obvious. For others, mission overlap is absolutely essential. Without it, some participants feel that there

is little point to the partnership and even less chance that it will be successful.

That is not to say groups should never pursue partnerships that lack obvious overlapping objectives; however, it can require creative thinking when brainstorming new entities to engage. The exercise: Exploring New Partners (see page 18) can help you brainstorm some partners that might not have an obvious mission overlap.

Finally, there is a need to think critically about the backgrounds of a park's support staff. For a partnership built on trust, it is critical that at least some of the staff have deep roots in the community in order to help the new superintendent quickly navigate the environment and meet critical stakeholders in the partnership. Ideally, support staff should look like the community they aim to serve, or better yet, support staff should actually be from the area.



Sometimes groups are sort of like-minded or have like missions. But I'll tell you this: No matter what, it all boils down to the chemistry of the people. And so we have partnerships with groups that we might typically think we wouldn't be aligned with, [and those partnerships] are stronger because of personal relationships. [Meanwhile], we do nothing with some] groups that you would think we would be joined at the hip with, because of bad chemistry. So mission, topics and content is one thing... but it's all about the people side of it."

—Paul Labovitz, Mississippi National River & Recreation Area

[When arriving as the new superintendent at Lowell] my staff helped me navigate everybody and everything. So we had that combination of the new person who is rotating in and out bringing new ideas and the perspective of people who understand how it works in this city."

—Celeste Bernardo, Lowell National Historical Park

I think there needs to be overlap somewhere in your vision or your mission or a shared purpose."

—Celeste Bernardo, Lowell National Historical Park

Unless a partnership comes from overlapping goals, then it kind of just seems like a waste of time."

—Katie Nyberg, Mississippi River Fund



A. REACHING OUT TO NEW TYPES OF PARTNERS

We talked with partnership parks, community groups, and businesses across the country to brainstorm potential non-traditional partners. This is just a list to get you started in your creative brainstorming—each community is different, and chances are there are groups out there with aligned objectives.

Potential New Partners

Getting Folks Moving:

- City-based or regional bike-share programs.
- Regional transportation services that can help get people from the city to the park.
- Health-care organizations, such as hospitals, gyms, or Let’s Move groups.
- Healthy Parks Healthy People programs.
- Affinity groups, like runners’ organizations that may use the parks already but can be engaged in deeper ways.
- The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), American Legion, or organizations helping wounded warriors find work.

Public-and Private-Sector Champions:

- Outdoor-oriented businesses and outfitters looking to showcase their wares through active use.
- Large companies looking for employee team-building activities, or employees who can be engaged actively following their one-off volunteer day.
- Wedding planners, event planners, and photographers looking for picture perfect backdrops.
- The local Chamber of Commerce or Business Improvement District intent on getting folks into the city.

- City government officials, city councils, or planning and zoning boards interested in building upon the assets of the park.

Bringing People Together through Food or the Arts:

- Farmers’ markets that can use the space and attract consistent customers.
- Living-history farmers able to use the land and create living-learning opportunities for park visitors.
- Concessionaires, including short-term options like food trucks or pop-up restaurants.
- Art studios, art houses, or art classes that can help open the park to photographers, painters, and other artists (this can include art departments at local colleges or universities).

Connecting with Educational and Civic Organizations:

Colleges and universities. Lots of options here, like the biology or engineering departments at local four-year research institutions, student-led organizations that work with nature or kids in the community, local community colleges, or institutes of continued learning.

- K-12 districts, schools, or individual teachers could coordinate a field trip to learn about local history, help the park with a service project, or incorporate an urban park or ranger into lesson plans.
- Neighborhood, after-school organizations, or youth centers that work with diverse or at-risk youth, or nonprofits looking for employment/volunteer opportunities for young adults.
- Religious organizations and youth groups looking for volunteer opportunities or outdoor trust-building activities.

B. EXERCISE: EXPLORING NEW PARTNERS (4 MIN.)

- Set timer for 2 minutes.
- For 2 minutes, make a list of the most outrageous individuals/organizations that your organization would ever partner with. The more bizarre, the better!
- Reset timer for 2 minutes.
- Next to each individual/organization, list at least one interest that your organization shares with this individual/organization.

Outrageous Organization/
Individual

Shared Interest

1) NASA Space Center

Youth experiential learning

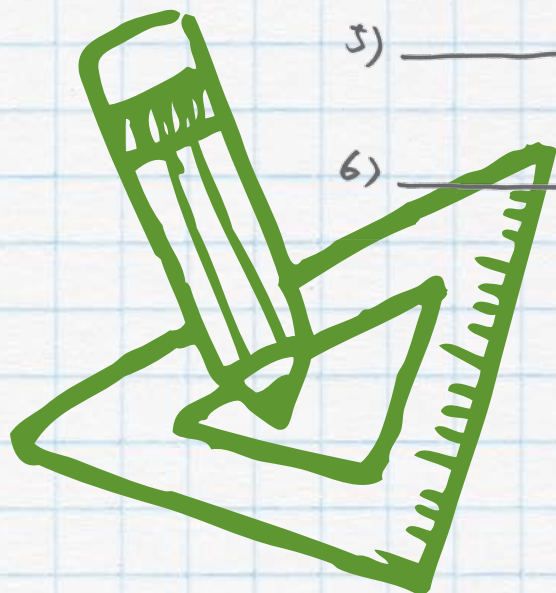
2) _____

3) _____

4) _____

5) _____

6) _____



5 Challenges to Creating a Successful Partnership

Real hurdles exist in creating successful partnerships, and those we interviewed who are most deeply involved in partnership projects, or who have experience with multiple partnerships over the years, point out that many of these hurdles are consistent from one project to the next.

- **A lack of clear goals, poorly defined tasks, or a failure to articulate a shared foundational and cohesive vision have led many partnerships to fall short.** While there may not be agreement that overlapping missions are critical for partnership success, there is a nearly universal recognition that failing to clearly communicate goals, tasks, and objectives will doom a project. Defining tasks and objectives is one of the first real opportunities to gauge a partnership's communications, collaboration, listening, creativity, etc.; when tasks and objectives are not defined, it can serve as a bellwether for larger problems to come.
- **Having a limiting or "empty" objective** can also prevent a partnership's success. Partnerships take a significant amount of effort, and without working toward a worthy result, some may begin to question the significant time required. Two primary examples of "empty" goals likely to fail include:
 - Partnering simply to show that you are partnering, and
 - Partnering solely to pursue a defined funding opportunity.
- **The wrong personality types can also create real barriers for success.** The likelihood that something can get off the ground is small when those tasked with building and maintaining a partnership seem personally averse to partnerships. Those in the position to nurture the relationship should have a core skill set that includes collaboration, trust, transparency, etc.

A tendency to singularly focus on the letter of the law, instead of the overarching mission, can also stifle creativity and hurt a partnership. Without concentrated effort to avoid the trap, too often partners can look at objectives or tasks as reasons "why we can't do this," instead of "how we can."

- **While partnerships can be extremely beneficial, they are not "pain-free."** Certain realities exist regarding partnerships, no matter how good the communication, how worthy the goals, or how efficient and effective the partnership structure. Getting through the partnership challenges requires patience, creativity, commitment, transparency, and a sense of humor.

For one, partnerships require a significant amount of time, effort, and resources. Without adequate input, the output will most likely be disappointing. For staff, one thing that can compound this reality is an unwillingness by others at NPS to recognize the amount of work that an effective partnership requires. Additionally, frustration can ensue when peers criticize partnership efforts or approaches without offering any real solutions.



You can never think that things are done or [that the partnership is] all set. You have to constantly sell your partnership to others and keep its profile elevated...

—Celeste Bernardo, Lowell National Historical Park

- **Maintaining open lines of communication both across partners and down staff ranks is important.** Another reality at the staff level is a necessity to communicate actions down the chain of command on both sides of the partnership. Again, because trust is essential to effective partnerships, junior-level staff distrust can prove extremely problematic. Junior-level staff members are less likely to see the overall value of the partnership or the direct benefits of it, and as a consequence can exacerbate conflicts regarding jurisdiction or who has responsibility for what.
- Both NPS staff and external partners involved in several different partnerships also mentioned that projects like these tend to ebb and flow. Sometimes partnerships can really excel, like when goals match up extremely well, personalities complement one another, and/or money is available. At other points the partnership may be in hibernation, or simply not producing to its full potential. Respondents say that while they sometimes feel sad about this reality, it is a natural occurrence of most partnerships. By maintaining lines of communication between partners, it can be relatively easy to pick up the partnership once goals or objectives more clearly overlap.

Lastly, it can get awkward when multiple nonprofits working with a park compete for the same pots of money. Unfortunately, it's the nature of the work, but an opportunity where open communication can help prevent conflicts about references or support.



Common goals need to be communicated down to the field because a lot of the partnerships are oftentimes great at the management level, but they lose some trust or some effect as they move down into the workforce. It seems as though the further you get away from that upper level, the more confusion there is over what the relationship is all about and who truly benefits.

—Paul Stoehr, Cuyahoga National Park

6 The Structure and Evaluation of Successful Partnerships

The partnerships included in this study ranged from those with structured budgets and legal agreements formalized by a congressional mandate, to efforts more reminiscent of good neighbors working together on localized initiatives. Regardless of the formality of the partnership, many of the best practices remain the same.

- **Once there is a commitment to partner, working out the specific details of the partnership can help ensure a successful venture.** This also provides an opportunity to identify potential rough spots and to address initial concerns.
- **Create a shared vision that can be easily communicated to a wider audience.** Within this vision, the partners should work together to identify specific goals, such as an expanded education program, and then sustain a commitment to those goals. Be clear about expectations up front. New partners should be candid and ask one another questions such as:
 - What do you hope to gain, and what can your partner expect to gain?
 - What is the main purpose of your partnership, and what is your motivation for being there?
 - What are the specific missions of each entity, and how do those missions align with one another?
- **Discuss how the results of the partnership will be measured both internally and externally.** It is critical that partners be realistic with one another about what they can deliver to this shared mission and share expectations for one another, even if there is some initial hesitancy. Questions that the partners should consider include:
 - How will the partners measure the contributions to the partnership?
 - In achieving the shared vision and goal, what are the specific metrics and benchmarks that the partnership will use to measure success?
 - See the Managing Expectations Toolkit on the following page to help with the early expectation setting conversations.





A. Managing Expectations

Partners can manage expectations for a project's success with the following tool. First determine: What does the project need? What does each partner bring to the table?

Work through this chart with your partners at the beginning of the planning process to help allocate roles and responsibilities for a successful project/partnership.

EXAMPLE:

	Partner	NPS	Partner#2 (as applicable)	Partner#3 (as applicable)
Got It.	Advocacy, Media, Volunteers, Money	Venue, Permits	Money, Volunteers, Participants, Materials, Experience	Volunteers, Participants, Experience
Need It.	Venue, Permits, Participants	Media, Participants, Volunteer, Advocacy	Advocacy, Venue, Media, Permits	Money, Venue, Permits, Advocacy, Materials
Can't Do It.	Venue, Permits	Advocacy, Money	Media, Venue, Permits	Money, Venue, Permits, Advocacy

Got It: refers to resources, capacity, expertise, etc. that each partner has and is willing and able to bring to the partnership.

Need It: refers to specific elements of the partnerships that each partner is specifically looking to other partners to augment in order to get the program or project done.

Can't Do It: refers to components of the project or program that each of the partners may simply not be permitted to do. These are often related to organizational rules/regulations, charters, mission, etc.



“**[It wasn't] 'We're here, we're from the government, and we're here to help...' [It was] 'We're going to partner, that's what we're going to do,' and that's what we did. And after a while, people began to believe us.**”

—Bruce Jacobson, formerly of Boston Harbor Islands

- **Talk about the money.** Especially for those organizations looking to fundraise for one another or share budgets, it's particularly critical that partners clearly understand the financial breakdown of their partnership. Address key questions such as:
 - Who controls what pot of funds?
 - Who has authority to raise or spend money?
 - What is the process for raising and spending funds, and are there concerns or limitations that the partnership should discuss?
- **Understand the timeframe.** Are you creating a partnership in perpetuity with long-range goals, or does your partnership have a finite objective that will be dissolved (or placed in hibernation) once the tasks are accomplished? Talking through the timeframe can help both sides get a better sense of what is realistic.
- **Ensure the partnership is tapping into each partner's ability, capacity and resources appropriately.** Ensure the relationship is within the partnering entities' comfort zone, particularly in the initial stages, while establishing trust. For example, large-scale financial commitments may create tension between partners and involve burdensome bureaucratic restrictions, so it may be best to start with smaller objectives. In general, think strategically about action items that are more likely to promote partnership success.

Also, as a federal agency with national expertise and experience, some perceive that NPS can become the “800-pound gorilla” in the partnership and can take over. Be cognizant of this perception, making sure that smaller or newer entities are afforded respect within the process.

B. Your Partnership as a House

Respondents see their partnership as a vibrant and living thing. During our interview research we asked participants to describe their partnerships as a house. Some of participants noted that the house “structure” actually starts with the empty lot, enabling workers to build one house, or a series of structures, tents, or cabins, depending on what best fits their needs. Nearly all of participants began their description by noting that an effective partnership “house” must possess a strong foundation, which combines overlapping mission, initial agreement structure, and trust.

Most believed the floor plans to be open and airy, like a group home or bunk house with a communal kitchen, rather than a lot of small rooms. The rooms that exist can have doors, but no one is suspicious when they are closed, and more often than not they remain open. Hallways present a challenge and are

a key issue in the house: how do you connect your rooms to others? And do hallways allow for additions, or are they closed to future inhabitants? Decisions about remodeling and decorating are communal and slowly enhanced over time with both shared resources and input.

By and large, our participants said they would be very happy to live next door to these houses, because they are happy places for collaboration. Gatherings and parties are fun and inclusive, but also respectful.



“**I’m envisioning** a kind of bunkhouse, because that’s kind of the mentality that I get from the partnership in the group is that we have lots of different layers of individuals that are involved, yet it’s a team atmosphere, with open areas for large gatherings.

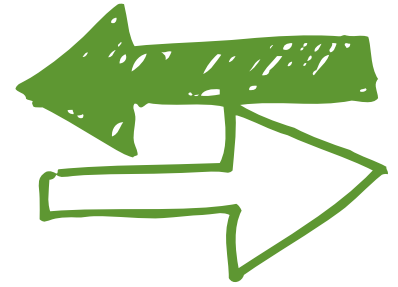
—David Vekasy, San Antonio Missions National Park

I think it’s friendly, warm, a little sloppy at times, you know, not always neat and clean, but always warm and friendly.

—Deb Yandala, Cuyahoga Valley National Park Association

Let’s say you’re going to add on a sunroom, and you don’t have that sunroom yet, but you work for it. That would be like the partners working together to help plan that sunroom out.”

—Cheryl Scherier, Cuyahoga Valley National Park & Mount Mushmore National Memorial



- **Respondents were not completely united on the best structure for a partnership, but common threads and considerations did emerge.**

In an effort to build trust and better communication, many felt that partners should be intricately woven into park-decision making and operations. This level of engagement can vary depending on the situation, but at minimum partners should feel welcome to attend one another's board or leadership meetings, even if they lack any official voting power.

Think about the physical location of the partnership. Some partners, such as the Tsongas Center at Lowell, have both the University of Massachusetts and NPS staff working side-by-side to run and expand the programmatic capabilities of the partnership. Sure, there are challenges, including what happens during a snow day or government shutdown, but by and large, this common space has allowed both entities to take ownership of the project.

Collocating partnerships, particularly partnerships between a park and a friends group, is something to consider when creating a partnership; however, it is also important to note that trust and cooperation must come first. Creating a shared office is not a panacea and could create problems on its own as well, especially when there are multiple government agencies with distinct jurisdictions, cultures, and union rules. Other considerations for collocating include:

Potential Positives

- Facilitates communication at all levels, especially among junior staff
- Provides more opportunities for NPS staff to test out ideas on non-NPS audiences
- Allows for mutual alignment of organizational goals

Potential Negatives

- Blurs boundaries, which can be problematic for junior staff
- Reduces geographic proximity to the community when one partner is initially located in the community but leaves it to co-locate

Additionally, there are benefits of a three-pronged partnership between the park, the friends group, and a local community organization that more fully represents the diversity found in a given neighborhood, as they prove valuable for urban parks looking to reach a broader audience. Park staff may possess the capacity and a friends group can provide the funds; the community organization has the reach and cultural knowledge to engage different target

audiences. American Youth Works in San Antonio’s Missions Historical Park is one such example of successfully engaging a community organization to expand a park’s reach.

For partnerships interested in more clearly (and legally) defining roles, a cooperative agreement (contract, memorandum of understanding, etc.) can serve as a useful tool. Cooperative agreements can provide structure and more clearly define expectations, force communications about the tenets of the partnership, and help ease staff transitions on either entity’s side. Moreover, cooperative agreements can provide cover when necessary, meaning that they can ensure that the partners are protected should something go a rye.

A cooperative agreement should NOT define the partnership, and interviewees were quick to point out that they do not know of successful partnerships defined solely by the “beauty” of their cooperative agreement. Rather, this is a tool that a partner is able to use when necessary during the duration of the partnership. The actual partnership is still based on relationships, trust, and good communication.

The process of creating a cooperative agreement often sets the tone of the overall partnership. If the process goes well and allows both sides to articulate needs, expectations, and limitations, it is less likely that the agreement will be referred to over the course of the partnership. On the other hand, if that process is bumpy, latent with suspicion, or fails to honestly address concerns, there is a greater likelihood that partners will refer back to the agreement to force one another along.

With this research, we asked participants to identify the most helpful and effective points in their cooperative agreements, as well as those they wish had been included in retrospect. See [Entering into a Formal Partnership](#) on the next page for more information.



The National Park Service is an awesome partner, but having the [friends group] there to support them makes a really easy communication channel for us.

—Anonymous, External Partner



C. ENTERING INTO A FORMAL PARTNERSHIP

These points provide helpful considerations for parks and partners ready to enter a cooperative agreement or other formal partnership structure.

- Identify which type of agreement best suits the partnerships' needs.
- Create a schedule, specifying regular meetings between principal partners and key staff—in effective partnerships regular meetings occur naturally, so this can also serve as a good “gut-level” evaluation mechanism.
- Include an expiration date that allows partners to revisit key issues and goals and evaluate the partnership—cooperative agreements take significant time and effort to create, so agreement timeframes of five-years are better than one year.
- Design the cooperative agreement so that it can serve as an umbrella agreement to implement future tasks related to the goals of the agreement. This allows partners to execute specific tasks or action items in a straightforward and simple way, without the need for additional agreements with each task. It is helpful to agree to a simple process by which tasks are executed.
- Consider employing basic evaluation mechanisms allowing partners to assess the partnership based on benchmarks agreed upon while creating the agreement.

Considerations when Formalizing Partnership

- Cooperative Agreement is just one type of formal agreement that can be entered into with the National Park Service. Others include, but are not limited to: Memorandum of Understanding, Contracts, Fundraising Agreement, Friends Group Agreement, etc.
- Take into account while planning that agreements are ultimately made with the NPS national office. Build in time for coordination between the local park and national office.
- At the time this toolkit was developed the NPS Partnerships Office webpage <http://www.nps.gov/partnerships/index.htm> was under construction and limited in its resources. Each NPS regional office has a Partnerships Chief and the staff in the National Office is available as a resource.

“The formal agreement does not define the partnership—it is a tool that you pick up and use through the life of the partnership. The actual partnership is about building trust and relationships.”

—Cheryl Scherier, Cuyahoga Valley National Park & Mount Rushmore National Memorial

- **Respondents offered diverse views on using formalized metrics to periodically assess the health of their partnerships.**

Some welcome the idea, and are actually in the process of reviewing potential evaluation models. Others worry that applying a formal evaluation system might be interpreted as a recognition that something is wrong. As a proxy for a formalized evaluation system, some suggest looking to the tenets of the cooperative agreement or strategic plan: Are partners meeting as agreed upon? Does it appear the process is following the structure?

- **Although few of the partnerships reviewed have a formalized process, review still takes place.**

Many rely on evaluating their partnership through a “gut” assessment, and tweak a process or rectify the problem if something is amiss. This self-evaluation includes looking for consistent communication and coordination between principals and more junior staff, confirming that funds are flowing appropriately, and perhaps most important, ensuring that tasks are being completed.



There are two additional considerations when reviewing a relationship with a friends group. Because for many the primary purpose is to help provide programmatic support and financial resources for the park, NPS staff want to know about the group’s financial situation and plans for raising additional money. Second, many place an additional emphasis on their ability to attend friends group board meetings, and look to see that their boards are active.

For more ideas to determine whether the partnership is working, or to work through challenges, see Toolkit: Is Your Partnership Working?

I would argue that if you’ve got to keep referring back to the paper, you probably don’t have a very strong partnership.

—Paul Labovitz,
Mississippi National
River & Recreation Area



IS YOUR PARTNERSHIP WORKING?

You've got your partnership, now how can you tell if it's working?

Signs Your Partnership is Working:

- ✓ Projects and tasks are being completed.
- ✓ Funds are flowing to projects.
- ✓ Partners are consistently communicating and coordinating efforts.
- ✓ You are invited to internal meetings with your partner, including their partnership or board meetings.
- ✓ You have opportunities to contribute to the partnership's strategic development process.
- ✓ Your staff members feel comfortable talking to one another and understand the mutual benefits of the partnership.
- ✓ Both sides see tangible benefits from their efforts.
- ✓ You're generating new ideas for the partnership. Partners get credit for their work.

Signs that Something is Amiss:

- ✓ You rarely talk with your partner.

- ✓ You spend a lot of time writing or talking about what you're going to do, but not a lot of time actually doing it.
- ✓ You feel blindsided by what your partner is doing.
- ✓ You hesitate to call your partner, or feel annoyed when they call you.
- ✓ Your staff members do not get along.
- ✓ There is high turnover among partner staff or board members.

What You Can Do if your Partnership is Not Working (courtesy of Mississippi River Fund)

- ✓ Bring in an outside facilitator to help with joint planning.
- ✓ Attend trainings together.
- ✓ Spend time together with one agenda item:
- ✓ Build the relationship.
- ✓ Bring in fresh blood on the board.
- ✓ Allow a junior staffer who is excited about the partnership to work on the project.

METHODOLOGY

On behalf of the National Parks Conservation Association,

Hart Research Associates conducted 31 interviews with individuals involved in partnerships at seven national parks. These parks were selected because of their locations near urban areas and for their successful experience partnering with a variety of public and private entities. Included in these interviews are staff and partners representing a diversity of geography and park-type. The interviews, with NPS staff and external partners, were conducted between September and December of 2013 both in-person and over the telephone. Most lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour.

A Few Final Words...

We hope that this toolkit is a helpful resource in your partnering endeavors. As we all look to the second century of our national park system, opportunities for national parks to play greater and more integrated roles in their communities abound. Partnerships will be vital. We'll leave you with two additional inspirational quotes that speak to key themes from this toolkit:

“*The most important single ingredient in the formula of success is knowing how to get along with people.*

—Theodore Roosevelt

We learn wisdom from failure much more than from success; we often discover what will do, by finding out what will not do; and probably he who never made a mistake never made a discovery.

—Samuel Smiles

