

NCCARF TB Travel Report

Collaborative cross-scale governance as a climate adaptation strategy? The science and values of large landscape conservation

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Large landscape 'connectivity conservation' initiatives are gaining prominence across the world, motivated by a desire to halt biodiversity decline and preserve ecosystem processes in the face of climate change. Despite extensive analysis of their scientific underpinnings, the requisite conditions for robust cross-scale governance and collaboration for large landscape conservation have received scant attention. My PhD will trace the lineage and practice of the concept of connectivity – from a contested scientific concept, to a powerful social metaphor and then into projects attempting to connect vast swathes of the landscape as a climate adaptation strategy. Through participatory social research, this PhD will identify and integrate insights from emerging connectivity conservation initiatives in Australia and a longstanding case in North America. The research seeks to illuminate the complex interactions at the nexus of science and practice and investigate how this complexity is negotiated through collaborative, cross-scale governance arrangements. This NCCARF grant supported a visit to the University of Montana to collaborate with Dr Matt McKinney, Director of the Centre for Natural Resources and Environmental Policy. The primary focus of the visit was to attend the 2nd annual Roundtable of the Crown of the Continent in Montana in September to both observe the deliberations and contribute insight from Australian experiences of large landscape conservation.

Major Findings

This visit provided an opportunity to gain further appreciation of the contrasting approaches to large landscape collaboration in North America and Australia. Australia has a much longer history of collaborative conservation than the US so many of the conversations that I observed at the Roundtable seemed to be concerning issues that Australia faced through Landcare and the creation of the regional Natural Resource Management Bodies. A particular focus of the Roundtable was on capacity building for collaborative conservation and the challenges of bringing together government agencies with community groups. I also had some interesting conversations about challenges involved with operationalising adaptive management in a collaborative context, and much like Australia, a challenge made worse by the paucity of data, monitoring and evaluation. Many of the emergent collaborative conservation ventures that I encountered through my time in the US have been formed in an effort to subvert litigation or regulation associated with the US Endangered Species Act and to overcome longstanding conflicts between conservation groups and extractive industries in the region. My interviewees suggested that the combination of a litigious context, an individualistic culture and distrust of Government in the Northern Rockies created a sense that collaborative governance initiatives seeking to manage large landscapes should emerge from the grassroots, without structure or coordination. Whether or not it is possible to coordinate and collaborate across large landscapes without some kind of structure is an unanswered question and I was really struck by how the different socio-cultural and ecological contexts shaped the different approaches to large landscape collaboration in Australia and the US. In Australia, similar initiatives have had much more government involvement and have also placed far greater emphasis on creating governance structures to facilitate coordination and alignment across jurisdictions, land tenures and land uses.

Outcomes of the Collaboration

This trip has substantially improved my understanding of how the socio-cultural context has influenced collaborative governance and the science policy interface in the Northern Rockies. The litigious and conflict ridden landscape has historically driven advocacy groups to place more emphasis on doing science to validate conservation approaches over applying science to conservation outcomes. This comparison will feed directly into my PhD research as it has given me a greater appreciation of the need to look beyond collaborative ventures themselves to ask questions about how socio-cultural context shapes the relationships between science and practice in collaboration.

While at the Roundtable and the University of Montana I further developed my networks with academics and practitioners in the region. I am working with an academic at the College of Forestry and Conservation to prepare grant applications to pursue postdoctoral research in the US. I was also invited to join a network of

academics interested in exploring the role of universities in promoting, researching and engaging with large landscape conservation to be hosted by the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.

During my time in Montana I met with a number of PhD students working on collaborative conservation. Connecting with emerging researchers is always inspiring and I am now collaborating on a paper with two other PhD students. Our paper will examine three initiatives operating at different scales seeking to promote collaborative conservation within the Northern Rockies. The paper asks how the dynamics of collaborative conservation change at different spatial scales and from that analysis we hope to draw some conclusions about governance arrangements to support nested cross scale collaboration.

Significance to adapting and protecting Australia's terrestrial biodiversity

The connectivity conservation approach has been adopted as a climate change adaptation strategy through the Federal Government's nascent National Wildlife Corridors Plan. While there has been substantial movement across Australia formulating visions and gathering support for this approach, a number of questions about collaborating across such vast landscapes remain. North America and Australia are at the forefront of this approach to conservation thus it is logical to share lessons across these continents. From the outset, my PhD has been guided by empirical observations, participation in and dialogue with people working in the connectivity conservation space. The early formulations of research questions were developed to address issues of theoretical interest and the emerging challenges faced by practitioners seeking to implement connectivity conservation initiatives. The PhD has been undertaken through an iterative process that has enabled empirical and theoretical insights to be discussed with practitioners throughout the research process. Thus the intention of this collaborative visit was to share insights from Australia with practitioners in North America. I will now, through formal presentations and informal dialogue, discuss these findings with practitioners who I have been working with since I began my research.