



RCP Stages of Development

Regional Conservation Partnerships (RCPs) are generally informal networks of people representing private and public organizations and agencies who collaborate over time to implement a shared conservation vision across town and sometime state boundaries. RCPs are established by individuals who seek to achieve greater conservation and stewardship objectives through coordination and teamwork than they could do on their own. Although approaches vary, our research suggests there are often common steps that characterize RCP growth, and that RCPs can learn from each other on how to proceed along the path from “emerging” to “maturing” to “conserving” -- to enduring conservation success.

EMERGING RCPs: *Convene partners, choose their region, and get organized*

Partners meet and decide on their shared region and its boundaries. They choose a coordinator to convene and administer their meetings. They determine how they will make decisions as a partnership. Partners usually use this time to identify sources of funding for acquisitions, conservation planning, coordination, and programming. They draft the RCP’s mission, goals, and objectives. In doing this work, they often find they are more efficient when they form a steering committee, take meeting notes, and, in some cases, form working groups. They develop a website that includes (at minimum) partner groups, goals, objectives, and a map.

MATURING RCPs: *Increase their capacity to protect land through strategic conservation planning and engaging stakeholders like landowners, municipalities, and state and federal agencies*

Partners in Maturing RCPs use geographic information systems (GIS) to collaboratively map, analyze and prioritize their region’s natural and cultural resources. They often designate focus areas to be championed by the RCP as a whole, and/or by specific RCP partners. Some RCPs develop a strategic action plan for implementing their regional conservation map. In this stage, RCPs also reach out and engage the individuals (e.g. landowners and foresters), groups (other environmental organizations), and agencies (municipal, state, and federal) that would most likely need to be involved in order for the RCP partners to achieve their short- and long-term objectives. Partners often acquire funding from foundations and state and federal agencies in the form of grants to augment in-house capacity to support these activities. They can also engage new partners to increase the capacity of the RCP. RCPs in this stage may advance activities (e.g. educational programs and trail projects) separate from any planning process in order to produce momentum and keep partners engaged.

CONSERVING RCPs: *Coordinate or collaborate to raise funds and protect land*

Conserving RCP partners often follow-up on their strategic conservation map and plans with a case statement to illustrate and communicate their large landscape conservation project to prospective donors or agencies. The case statement can take the form of a Forest Legacy application, a PowerPoint presentation, or a brochure, depending on the source of funding. Partners determine how they will acquire the funds necessary to conserve the land: private money or public (or a mix), by one partner group or several. Usually the answers will depend on a combination of factors and constraints, such as the capacity of partner groups, which agency or organization will hold the land or interest, and the landowners’ objectives. More and more RCP partners are considering a capital campaign. Partners may run their own campaigns under one common vision, collaboratively with a shared development committee, or under a hybrid approach. They may hire a campaign coordinator, draft and adopt Memorandums of Agreement, agree on a communications plan, and use shared donor databases and easement templates in order to carry out their campaigns. Transitions in leadership and base funding can follow multi-year capital and land project campaigns. Partners may take time to work these issues out before they begin planning for the next set of land protection and/or stewardship opportunities.

RCP Check List: Ten Steps to Success

Every RCP has its own approach, but there are certain steps to success that many RCPs follow. This draft list is for discussion purposes during the morning workshops.

EMERGING RCPs: Convene partners, choose region, and get organized

Step One: Convene your RCP and decide on

- ✓ Your region's preliminary boundaries.
- ✓ Your RCP's likely host partner organization (to serve as fiscal agent, may employ coordinator).
- ✓ Your RCP's Coordinator (could be the initiator of the RCP).
- ✓ When, how, and how often partners will convene.
- ✓ A decision-making structure.

Step Two: Further organize your RCP

- ✓ Continue to convene and build trust among partners (e.g. invite partners to share about their activities and what they want to do during regularly scheduled, face-to-face partnership meetings).
- ✓ Research sources of funding that could pay for strategic conservation planning and land protection and acquire funding for programming and coordination.
- ✓ Draft your RCP's mission, goals, and objectives.
- ✓ Develop steering committees and working groups as needed.
- ✓ Facilitate periodic communication between partners outside of meetings.
- ✓ Develop a website that includes (at minimum) partners, mission, goals, and a map.
- ✓ Learn from peer and mentor RCPs (e.g. attend RCP Network Gatherings, trainings, and webinars).
- ✓ Implement partners' good ideas to build momentum and demonstrate the value of the partnership.

MATURING RCPs: Increase the RCP's (and its partners') capacities through strategic conservation planning and engaging stakeholders like landowners, municipalities, and state and federal agencies

Step Three: Increase the capacity of RCP partners

- ✓ Learn about and plan ways to meet partners' needs and interests through the activities of the RCP (e.g. mapping, planning, outreach, programming to stakeholders, training of partners, etc.).
- ✓ Acquire resources to build partner capacity through mapping (Step 4) and programming (Step 5).
- ✓ Help partner groups, including municipalities, acquire grants and/or work on open space plans.

Step Four: Plan and map your regional, strategic conservation vision

- ✓ Using geographic information systems (GIS), collaboratively map, analyze, and prioritize your region's natural and cultural resources. Consider representing local and regional priorities.
- ✓ Identify focus areas to champion by the RCP as a whole or by specific RCP partners.
- ✓ Develop and draft a clear description of your shared conservation vision to inform your RCP members.

Step Five: Plan and implement your regional conservation programs

- ✓ Develop a strategic action plan for achieving your mapped regional conservation vision.
- ✓ Decide how and which partners would work together on specific tasks.

Step Six: Engage potential partners within your region

- ✓ Identify the people, groups, and agencies within your region that would most likely need to be involved in order for the RCP to achieve its regional conservation vision and plan (e.g. landowners, municipalities, foresters, other environmental organizations).
- ✓ Reach out and involve these people and groups in peer-to-peer learning events and other types of programs that would lead to their joining the RCP and/or becoming more involved in conserving and stewarding lands within the region, especially in your conservation focus areas.

Step Seven: Engage potential partners outside of your region

- ✓ Explore strategic partnership and funding opportunities that state and federal government agencies, conservation and financial organizations, other RCPs, and the RCP Network may represent.
- ✓ Engage partners in activities that would add relevancy, funding, and capacity to partners of your RCP and to the partnership as a whole so that you can protect and steward more land within your region.

CONSERVING RCPs: *Partners coordinate or collaborate to raise funds and protect land*

Step Eight: Promote your shared conservation vision

- ✓ Draft a compelling case statement that would illustrate and communicate your conservation vision to state agencies, foundations, donors, and landowners, and could be used for a coordinated or collaborative capital campaign.

Step Nine: Coordinate or collaborate to conserve

- ✓ Choose how your RCP's partners wish to increase funding and facilitate conservation across the landscape: coordinate individual organization actions and fundraising or collaborate in a joint capital campaign/initiative.
- ✓ Organize and/or develop the capacities (e.g. a campaign coordinator), teams (e.g. development committee), and tools (e.g. Memorandum of Agreement and donor database) needed for your campaign and/or your ability to advance land conservation on a regular and enduring basis, (such as a due diligence fund and/or long-term committed donors).
- ✓ Execute your capital and/or land protection campaign (a multi-parcel Forest Legacy application, for example).
- ✓ Evaluate and document your campaign and ongoing funding strategies.
- ✓ Celebrate your successes (earned media).
- ✓ Repeat and reinvigorate step nine as opportunities arise that align with your mission, vision, and plan.

Step Ten: Manage transitions

- ✓ Discuss changes in leadership, funding, priorities, and organization and make decisions about how the RCP should navigate them.
- ✓ Decide to move forward with subsequent conservation campaigns or transition to a new set of stewardship, smart growth and/or supplemental activities over time.

This document draws from Highstead phone interviews of 21 RCPs in 2012 on the needs and challenges of RCPs by stage of development and research by Highstead staff and academic colleagues: Labich, W.G., E.M. Hamin, and S. Record. 2013. "Regional Conservation Partnerships in New England," Journal of Forestry 111(5): 326-334. For further information contact Bill Labich: blabich@highstead.net or Emily Bateson: ebateson@highstead.net.