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Working in Partnership

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I feel privileged to have participated in a number of international partnership projects, both while working in Local Government and the Forestry Commission and during my time at the University of Greenwich. While an obvious benefit of international collaboration is accessing funding to do things that might otherwise not be possible, there are also significant benefits in continuing professional development and in sharing technical knowledge about ecology and environmental management.

Introduction

All partnership working depends upon finding common ground while accepting differences in points of view and working practices, and this is particularly nuanced when working across languages and cultures. In the early 1990s, I worked on two coastal and woodland management projects that were partnerships between stakeholders in Kent and Northern France. They were funded by INTERREG, a programme financed by the European Regional Development Fund usually involving member states with a shared boundary. The second project was easier than the first as we had learnt to accept some minor differences, such as in the understanding of the word 'deadline'.

Further afield, I have worked with Charles Darwin University (CDU) in Northern Australia on the Darwin's Landscape Laboratory proposal, a bid made by Bromley Council for World Heritage Site status for the house, gardens and countryside near London where Darwin lived and worked for forty years, including his work on 'The Origin of Species' (<http://www.darwinslandscape.co.uk>). As a result of working on the Historic Landscape Assessment, part of the World Heritage bid, funding was secured for four MSc students to visit Darwin, Northern Territory, for a memorable month taking part in the

centenary celebrations, and presenting material on Darwin's work. The partnership also led to an academic teaching partnership that gave MSc students from the University of Greenwich and CDU access to distance learning courses at either University – a particular benefit for UK students wanting to learn more about tropical forestry.

Case studies

Not only can partnership working be a route to funding but also it is immensely rewarding, particularly working in multi-disciplinary teams. Some recent examples follow.

1. EuroCoppice

COST is the longest-running European framework supporting trans-national cooperation among researchers, engineers and scholars across Europe. COST Action *FP1301 Innovative management and multifunctional utilisation of traditional coppice forests - an answer to future ecological, economic and social challenges in the European forestry sector*, for which I am UK lead, began in October 2013 and will run till May 2017. It involves representatives from over 30 countries exchanging knowledge about traditional coppice woodland management with the ultimate aim of formulating European policy for the coppice industry.

Effective partnership working

While there is no funding for research from COST, basic expenses to attend conferences and to contribute to specific activities, such as topic working groups, are reimbursed. Effective partnership working is facilitated by themed conferences, which are combined with management committee and topic working group meetings. To date these have been held in Italy, England, the Czech Republic, Romania, and Belgium (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Silviculture workshop in Romania.



Figure 2. Chestnut yard in Italy.

Partners have the opportunity to engage in Short Term Scientific Missions (or STSMs) to study specific aspects in depth, when common issues are identified. Partners can also be supported to host training schools for postgraduate students from different countries to come together, usually for a week, to share experiences and study aspects of coppice woodland management. One STSM, to compare chestnut *Castanea sativa* management in Northern Italy and South East England (Bartlett 2016), raised awareness of the impact of the oriental chestnut gall wasp *Dryocosmus kuriphilus* - introduced on scion wood imported from China - on honey and nut production, and the biological control methods available to combat it. In June 2015, this wasp was identified in England by amateur entomologists, first in woodlands near Sevenoaks, Kent, and later in St Albans. A Defra entomologist was quickly invited to Italy for an STSM, funded by the COST Action, to learn from their experience of dealing with this insect (Figure 2). The STSM report evaluating the potential control options (Everatt 2015) has been welcomed by the Forestry Commission. The most recent training school, held in July 2016 near Boppard, Germany, focused on biodiversity and was led by CIEEM member Dr Peter Buckley. It was promoted by partners and via the EuroCoppice website and involved 19 students from 12 countries and 15 different nationalities. There were two participants from the UK, from the Universities of Bangor and Greenwich.

Key lessons learnt

It has been instructive to learn that the prevalent view across most of Europe is that coppice should be converted to high forest. Partners from different countries have contrasting views and one of the tangible benefits of meeting and particularly visiting woods together is in understanding these different views and questioning our own assumptions. The concept of semi-natural ancient woodland is virtually unknown outside the UK and in other countries there is frequent reference to 'near to nature' systems which appear to us to be plantations. In Germany, woodland can only be referred to as coppice if it has been cut within the last forty years, less than some traditional rotation lengths here; in some countries cutting coppice is illegal. This variation in views is both stimulating and challenging - even before short rotation coppice for fuel is considered! My specific role in EuroCoppice is to lead the working group on governance in the European coppice sector. Leaving aside the tricky issue of what is meant by governance, it has been sobering to hear about the problems for effective woodland management in the former communist countries where returning woodland to private ownership is fraught with difficulties. It puts concerns about fragmentation of ownership into perspective as woods are returned to people who have no interest in them, and are unable to sell or manage them. The next event will be a conference on coppice products, to be held in

Limoges, France, and the culmination of the COST Action will be part of the IUFRO (International Union of Forest Research Organizations) conference in September 2017 where a policy paper will be presented (see <http://www.iufro.org/events/anniversary-congress/> for more details). This will serve to remind decision makers firstly that coppice is important, secondly that a commercial coppice industry still exists, and finally that policy should be aiming to support those involved in this traditional activity that has so many wider benefits.

2. A partnership approach to managing the invasive shrub *Prosopis juliflora* in India

This British Council funded collaboration between the University of Greenwich and the Gujarat Institute of Desert Ecology (GUIDE), India, although ultimately very successful, was initially problematic. In fact, I offered to return funding on the basis that it was impossible to achieve the original aims set out in the proposal.

Indian scientists were concerned that the invasive shrub *Prosopis juliflora* was having a negative impact on biodiversity. The plant was introduced to prevent the spread of the salt desert and the GUIDE scientist wanted an eradication strategy, based on analysis of satellite imagery interpretation of the rate of spread. The Greenwich team were sceptical as to whether this was a realistic approach, and felt more information would be required before any decisions could be made and therefore suggested applying landscape character assessment and ecosystem service evaluation to the *P. juliflora* issue. Fieldwork, carried out over four visits, revealed the great extent to which rural people were dependent on this plant for fuel, fodder, honey and medicinal gum, making eradication an unpopular – as well as an impractical - option with the local communities.

Effective partnership working

Participatory working, with locals rather than with the ecologists from the Gujarat Institute of Desert Ecology alone, enabled a re-consideration of the role of *P. juliflora* in India (Figure 3). The landscape assessment and ecosystem service evaluation led to the production of a 'Natural Character Area' profile, along



Figure 3. Participatory working with local people in India.

the lines of those produced by Natural England. This identified that, in addition to valuing *P. juliflora* for a range of attributes, local people urgently needed fences as they were organising 24-hour patrols to prevent their crops being eaten by the protected wild ass *Equus hemionus khur*, nilgai *Boselaphus tragocamelus* and wild boar *Sus scrofa cristatus*.

Here in the UK, we make strong hedges from thorny shrubs, which are totally stock proof if they are 'laid' to form an impenetrable barrier. The British Council granted additional funding to enable research to see if *P. juliflora* would respond to this treatment. Three members of the UK team returned to India to see if we could turn the invasive plant into a stock proof fence.

Hedge laying requires the main stem to be cut almost through to enable it to be lowered towards the horizontal. The first plant wilted visibly in the high temperatures but by the next morning had completely recovered. Practical experimentation continued, using locally available axes, and a line of *P. juliflora* along a roadside was formed into a 'living fence' in preparation for a demonstration workshop. In addition, we worked with local farm workers to turn old chemical drums into simple charcoal retorts, a significant increase in efficiency over the earthburn techniques that were currently in use. Both the 'living fences' and the charcoal retorts were welcomed and the information sheets – English one side, Gujarati the other – are being distributed by both the Forestry and Rural Development services in the region (Figure 4). A great success – but a long way from the original intention of eradicating *P. juliflora*,

although commercial charcoal production was suggested as a means of reducing the impact of the shrub on the most important grasslands, such as the Lala Indian Bustard Sanctuary.

Key lessons learnt

It took a long time to get funding approved by the British Council, such that the former Greenwich student who had originally been the key contact at GUIDE had left to complete his PhD before approval was given. This created a problem as there was no one in GUIDE with any experience of either landscape or ecosystem service assessment. The disruption had the unexpected benefit that, instead of equal numbers of student exchanges, seven Greenwich MSc students were fully funded to work in India, providing practical research for theses as well as valuable experience of working in a different culture. The take-home message is that, although on paper partnerships are between organisations, in reality they are between individuals and, however well planned, it can be difficult to predict outcomes accurately.

Conclusion

Partnerships, whether with one person to combine skills on a project, or with organisations, can be productive and enjoyable but they can be very hard work. Identifying who you can – and who you cannot – have an effective working relationship with is important. It can be tempting but enthusiasm for collaboration, while important, is not enough to sustain a project in the long term. Partnerships are with people, even when nominally between organisations; individuals make partnerships work.

References

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Figure 4. Information sheets in English and Gujarati are distributed to local communities.

Not all partnerships go well. There is a lot of hard work involved, much of it outside working hours; it requires flexibility and being adaptable to partners' needs and this can mean letting go of personal aims and objectives. I've learnt to be cautious, to get agreements written down in plain English and I am grateful for my experiences as a trained mediator.

About the Author



Dr Debbie Bartlett MCLI FCIEEM is Principal Lecturer in Environmental Conservation at the University of Greenwich and combines this with consultancy. While

her life might seem exciting with overseas travel, it also involves lecture writing, marking, and all the administration that makes up the life of an academic.

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Meet the Author – Debbie Bartlett

What do you do?

I currently work for the University of Greenwich four days a week running the MSc in Environmental Conservation. I also teach undergrads and am horticultural and ecology advisor to the Facilities Management department, helping manage the seven University campuses. The rest of the time, I do consultancy, train dormouse monitors and do some bat work for Natural England.

What or who first inspired you to make a career in ecology or environmental management?

I had a very 'free range' upbringing in rural Kent and Surrey and was completely absorbed with wildlife right from the start. My family talk about my horrifying the health visitor with my snakes (being kept under observation in a disused metal baby bath) when three years old. There was never any question that I would end up working with animals – particularly as my mother was a botanist/horticulturist so I couldn't admit to any interest in plants. I've always had a commercial bent and earned well in my teens doing relief milking and general farm work, giving me a better understanding of practical land management issues than could have been gained from any course.

How did you get to where you are today?

Tricky question I didn't do well at school and suspect the label of 'backward' would now be 'dyslexic'. I scraped a place at university, being rejected by zoology but accepted by botany. Somehow, I came out top of my year with a physiology degree (it's all about systems and their interactions). Various jobs

resulted, including as a successful garden designer and working for the commercial department of Wye College, University of London. When my children went to school, I did the MSc in Landscape Ecology, Design and Management, joining IEEM in the early 1990s, and I went on to complete training as a Chartered Landscape Architect (Management division).

What have been the most important steps along the way?

University obviously but having a solid horticultural and land management background has made me a much better ecologist than anyone just doing any course. I find it frustrating that many people simply don't understand plant growth and the way vegetation responds to physical and biological factors. It is the context within which animals and birds function and often doesn't get the attention it deserves. Having such a varied background, including working for a local authority and with a government agency, has given me an understanding of different perspectives and I suspect this is a benefit for my students.

Are there any 'must-have' qualifications and/or experience?

Obviously, a CIEEM accredited MSc! But seriously, universities are often criticised for not teaching enough identification but really students have to do things for themselves. We can 'open doors' but no qualification can ever make a good observer and we don't do new entrants any favours by suggesting it's all about courses – it's down to hard work and a commitment to developing real skills

Do you have any advice for someone setting out on a career in ecology and environmental management?

I asked my MSc students this and they said 'don't expect to get rich' and 'everything is more complicated than you think'!

What's the best thing about your job?

Probably the students I certainly enjoy working with a wide range of people with different skill sets; I get to work in very different situations, both here and abroad; and I find thinking about how to solve unfamiliar problems stimulating.

What's the downside?

University admin. and traditional academic colleagues who don't seem to want to relate teaching to the work environment; not always being able to make time for my family.

What's next for you?

Who knows? I'm open to suggestions.

What is your top tip for success?

Be open to opportunities and don't expect your career plans to go to plan.

For further information

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