

# An Investigation of Agency Perceptions of Transboundary Protected Area Cooperation: A Case Study of Wrangell–St. Elias and Kluane Protected Area Complex

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## Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore, understand, and describe the transboundary cooperation between Wrangell–St. Elias National Park and Preserve, Alaska, USA, and Kluane National Park and Reserve, Yukon Territory, Canada, from the perspective of agency managers. The strengths and weaknesses of the existing transboundary management activities were identified and the reasons behind them explored. Based on the research findings, suggestions for the improvement of management practices in this situation are discussed.

## Channels of Transboundary Cooperation

Various authors have argued that transboundary cooperation between internationally adjoining protected areas is desirable because the benefits more than compensate for the problems encountered in establishing such collaboration (Sandwith et al. 2001; McNeil 1990). These benefits may include a wide array of outcomes, ranging from safeguarding biodiversity, promoting ecosystem or bioregional management, and controlling species, to reducing political tensions stimulating the regional economy, safeguarding cultural values, and promoting bilateral understanding. However, strong political and managerial commitment is necessary if transboundary protected areas are to accomplish these multiple benefits on a long-term basis (Brunner 1999).

Zbicz (1999) identified six levels of interaction between internationally adjoining protected areas, ranging from *Level 0—No cooperation* to *Level 5—Full cooperation*. *Full cooperation* requires the full integration of the planning and management of the two protected areas, including joint decision-making, identification of common goals, and the existence of a joint committee for advising on transboundary cooperation.

This study was conducted as a case study (Stake 1995). Data collection methods included interviews, archives, and phone/e-mail contacts, primarily with agency managers. Qualitative data analysis used the NVivo soft-

ware package. The research findings clearly indicate that the occurring transboundary interaction between Kluane and Wrangell–St. Elias is largely limited to Zbicz's *Level 1—Communication*, and some elements of *Level 2—Consultation*. The protected areas' staff do work together to exchange information, but it is mostly an informal and unstructured relationship. Neither has responsibility to, or for the other, nor are there reporting requirements to either regional or national agency offices. The current relationship is based on mutual respect and understanding, personal good will, a shared boundary and shared interests, and a desire to be of assistance and be a good neighbor. It is also based on a desire to communicate and collaborate, and is truly voluntary. The relationship exists primarily "on the ground," with field-level park employees responsible for maintaining it. Both protected areas may initiate contact, and both occasionally do. Employees communicate at all levels either by telephone, e-mails, or face-to-face interactions. The park superintendents meet once per year and have phone conversations twice a year. Communication between lower-level employees occurs on an "as needed" basis and as frequently as every few months.

The relationship began at the ranger-warden level out of a desire to cooperate. Since the designation over twenty years ago of both areas as a single World Heritage site, the relationship has moved forward to a limited degree. Currently, transboundary cooperation

includes both formal and informal elements, both at the upper management level and the field or operational level between rangers and wardens, as well as between scientists.

An annual meeting of the management teams of the two protected areas is held. Although perceived as formal, this meeting barely exceeds information exchange. Moreover, neither protected area retains any minutes of these meetings in their central files, nor distributes them to staff who did not attend the meetings. Similarly, both protected areas possess little information relating to transboundary activities. In general, what scarce relevant information exists is stored in personal notes and files. With most information communicated by word of mouth and most transboundary knowledge limited to the memories of staff members, information flow can be interrupted and the record of activity lost as staff members retire or move.

Every two years there is the Borderlands Conference, a joint meeting between regional natural resource management agencies, including the two protected areas and other agencies from Alaska, Yukon Territory, and British Columbia. The conference focuses on discussing regional natural resource issues and exchanging information, research, and other concerns. Both the Borderlands Conference and the annual management team meetings represent forms of formal communication in that they are prescheduled and announced well in advance of the event.

Cooperation has been strongest at the operational level, driven by a specific need or issue ranging from search and rescue activities to law enforcement. However, staffs from both agencies perceive that interaction at this level has been significantly reduced and replaced by that at the managerial level. There are concerns by operational-level staff related to that shift, but these are somewhat mitigated by the recognition that the change was generated by a general lack of staff time and capacity. It is further recognized that the transboundary relationship is highly dependent on the individuals involved. A strong friendship and fellowship that was developed over the years can be notably weakened with the loss of long-

time staff and the arrival of new staff. As a result, a notion exists that to a certain extent a loss of continuity in transboundary cooperation occurs, which according to several staff members should be re-established.

At the agency level there is a 1998 memorandum of understanding (MOU) dealing with "cooperation in management, research, protection, conservation and presentation of National Parks and National Historic Sites" signed between Parks Canada and the U.S. National Park Service (NPS) that allows and facilitate transboundary activities. The agreement does not require cooperation or precisely indicate what, how, and when cooperation should occur. Moreover, Wrangell-St. Elias and Klauane have been identified as and remain a top priority for collaboration between the two agencies. However, it is clear from this research that the scarce transboundary activities between the two protected areas fail to achieve the extent of joint cooperation and objectives that were outlined in the 1998 MOU.

### **Activities, Programs, Processes, and Behaviors**

Managers from both agencies indicated that they recognize opportunities exist to work with their professional counterparts across the border, and that this interaction is both helpful and enriching professionally as well as personally. Interviews indicated that friendships make it easier to work together and to be very direct and frank when dealing with an individual. They perceive the benefits of such interaction to be better understanding of the other's place, culture, people, ways of operating, and approaching problems; encouragement to think "outside the box" by being exposed to different perspective; and exposure to alternative models for managing protected areas. Talking to staff across the boundary and identifying their needs is perceived as valuable and useful for management approaches in both protected areas, as well as for sharing areas of joint concern and being aware of the other side's long-term plans. In case these are similar or the same, there is no "reinventing the wheel" situation, which leads

to the reduction of duplicating actions.

Several interviewees also stated that by looking at the other management regime there is an opportunity to discover their own agency's pitfalls and learn from that experience by having new ideas of how to question or change the existing approach to management issues. This process of "pollination" brings ideas and perspectives that differ from the same old patterns. In addition, managers perceive cost efficiencies related to collaborative rescues and training initiatives. Knowing people, building relationships, and understanding the differences make both staffs more confident and comfortable while greatly improving their morale. It is also concluded that while all of these opportunities are extremely beneficial, they are also very hard to quantify.

Currently, regular direct contact exists between the two agencies concerning search and rescue; law enforcement, predominantly aimed at controlling poaching; information exchange; and joint training programs in search and rescue techniques, mountain climbing, and rafting. There is a general belief that it is not the quality but the quantity of cooperation that should be improved. While the official position of both agencies regarding transboundary cooperation is to do so when there is such opportunity, there is a perceived need for improvement in exploring and using potential transboundary cooperation opportunities. For instance, there is no joint control or research program conducted between the two protected areas. Staff exchange does not occur even though there is awareness that it would certainly increase individual skills, improve relationships between the two protected areas, and enhance understanding. There is also a recognized need for additional specialist meetings that currently do not take place (e.g., between wildlife biologists, vegetation specialists, cultural specialists, historians, archeologists).

Respondents also indicated that numerous opportunities could be explored, but in reality none have been seriously considered or pursued. Enhanced tourism and education opportunities are completely neglected. For

example, there is no substantial interpretative information available on the World Heritage site designation, nor do visitors to either agency's two visitor centers have an opportunity to hear or learn about the other protected area. The two protected areas have not effectively utilized the World Heritage designation: they are not engaged in any significant formal activity regarding the designation even though managers consider the designation helpful in demonstrating to both governments the international and intergenerational significance of the area.

### **Facilitators of and Barriers to Transboundary Cooperation**

Research shows that the most important facilitator to transboundary cooperation between Klauene and Wrangell-St. Elias is personal interest and commitment to such cooperation. However, having a personal relationship of trust and sharing, as well as a collegial professional relationship, are additional factors that are recognized as enablers to successful cooperation. Modern communication technologies, shared interests that establish connections, the existing pathway to build on, personal initiative, and favorable opinions toward an individual are additional recognized facilitators.

The study identifies factors that most significantly inhibit the current transboundary cooperation, such as lack of staff, time, and, to a lesser degree, money. In addition, the boundary between the two protected areas is fairly inaccessible and located far from the headquarters of either unit, inhibiting the extent and frequency of transboundary cooperation. In both areas management focus is not placed on the border region, but rather on either side, toward Alaska or the Yukon, where the infrastructure and majority of visitors are located. Furthermore, as a part of agency philosophy, staff in Wrangell-St. Elias change every several years, making it difficult to maintain the continuity of the transboundary relationship, whether at a professional or a personal level. Some agency employees indicated that the insufficient transboundary activity was the result of inertia and the fact that trans-

border collaboration was a low priority both at the protected area and the agency levels. Furthermore, it is perceived that this informal level of cooperation is very comfortable, and therefore preferable to keep, because no reporting is required, nor is there any sense of obligation.

The resistance of local and state politics in Alaska to both the United Nations (U.N.) and international engagement in general (Bleakley 2002) is perceived as an additional burden to both practicing and improving transboundary cooperation. More recently, the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, has significantly restricted cross-border interactions between the two protected areas. In addition, there are no national policies in either country that foster transboundary relationships between protected areas. Decision-making is entirely left to personnel at the local level and the vision they have—or do not have. In short, there is no administrative obligation. Moreover, it is widely accepted by both agencies' managers that Canadians appear more comfortable with international relationships than many Americans. Few, for example, object to either the national government or the U.N. in Canada, while there is significant animosity to both in the U.S. generally, and among Alaskans in particular.

### Suggestions for Improving Transboundary Cooperation

Based on the research findings and the reviewed literature, the following suggestions are proposed:

- *Establish a formal transboundary protected area agreement and joint transborder committee.* Working within the framework outlined in the agreement, the committee should develop short- and long-term strategic plans, coordinate the development and implementation of cooperative work programs, undertake a regular review of progress, and report annually to agency heads.
- *Develop joint management plans.* Such plans would help to further safeguard biodiversity conservation as well as other resource stewardship goals. The sheer vastness of the protected areas already facilitates the protection of migratory species, but additional joint monitoring, scientific research, and collaboration might increase the long-term health and maintenance of the regional ecosystem.
- *Develop an annual work plan.* An annual plan should be implemented with clear stipulation of goals, activities, programs, and expectations.
- *Report and evaluate the protected areas' transboundary activities and accomplishments at regional/national agency offices.* Annual reports should be prepared and serve as a basis for performance evaluations.
- *Develop collaborative professional development of staff members through staff exchange.* The need for seminars, training programs, meetings, and exchanging information more often at all levels is recognized, and therefore should be implemented.
- *Keep documentation on the transboundary activities and make it available to the protected areas' staff.* For example, a park botanist who is not invited to attend a meeting between the two protected areas should be informed of the possibilities or achievements of the transboundary cooperation.
- *Explore the potential for developing shared tourism information, interpretation, cultural and education activities, programs, and materials.* There is a need for communicating continuous messages across the boundary through development and production of jointly designed maps, brochures, videos, or display materials. Given the similarities in visitor profiles and markets, there are further benefits to be gained by integrating thematic messages, visitor programs, and marketing approaches, as well as designing a common logo. In particular, much more could and should be done to raise the profile of the World Heritage designation. Attractiveness to visitors could be enhanced by a joint effort to publicize and

increase awareness of the significance of this World Heritage site.

- *Identify and implement opportunities for supporting and strengthening socioeconomic development of local communities and indigenous people.* Such opportunities could be explored through tourism, local cultural heritage, and appropriate infrastructure.

### Conclusion

While transboundary communication between Wrangell–St. Elias and Kluane does presently occur, more contact and cooperation could substantially increase benefits to the two areas, visitors, and local communities. Ultimately, enhanced cooperation will require a formal agreement that would enable agency managers to move upward from the current communication level to full cooperation. Such an agreement should include specifics, imperatives, goals, timelines, and measures of success. As a result, an agreement would reduce the present dependence of transboundary interaction on individual initiative through implementation of regular monitoring of progress and reporting to regional and national agency heads.

Indeed, without integrated management mechanisms and agreements, cross-border ecosystem integrity cannot be guaranteed (Fay 1992). Unfortunately, neither park- nor national-level staff believe that this is likely to happen in the near future. NPS is hesitant to establish formal procedures, and prefers to remain non-directive-oriented and vest authority in superintendents to either engage in transboundary activities, or not, at their discretion.

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