



MODEL PARTNERSHIPS FOR IMPACT

THE WILBURFORCE
FOUNDATION AND NATIONAL
WILDLIFE REFUGE ASSOCIATION

2016

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About Independent Sector

Independent Sector is the leadership network for nonprofits, foundations, and corporations committed to advancing the common good. Our nonpartisan coalition's networks collectively represent tens of thousands of organizations and individuals locally, nationally, and globally.

Our Vision & Purpose

We envision a world of engaged individuals, robust institutions, and vibrant communities working together to improve lives and the natural world, and strengthen democratic societies. To help create this future, we lead and catalyze the charitable community, partnering with government, business, and individuals to advance the common good.

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Independent Sector (IS) works to enhance grantee and funder organizations to ensure both are effectively helping society's most vulnerable populations. From Independent Sector's cornerstone Building Value Together Initiative, which outlined practices to help foundations and nonprofits achieve successful outcomes, to Charting Impact to Threads, IS has addressed how nonprofits and foundations can have healthier relationships with one another and best fulfill their organizational missions to strengthen the communities they serve.

IS is committed to being responsive to the sector and the knowledge gleaned during our 15 cross-country Threads conversations with 80 partner organizations. In every city IS visited, one consistent impediment to meeting mission was raised: the strained relationships between grantees and funders. IS seeks to respond to what we heard by building upon previous work by IS and others, and adding to the depth of knowledge needed to move grantee/funder 'power dynamics' in a more productive direction.

Our first contribution to this conversation is a series of eight case studies, featuring grantee and funder pairs, who exemplify healthy relationships and illuminate the practices and behaviors that contribute to a positive power dynamic.



The willingness to leverage a new opportunity, invest in a new partner, and work in a new way can lead to catalytic change.

“We drink a lot of bad coffee,” says David Houghton, president of the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA). “Some organizations have a very top down approach, and that is just not us. We are very grassroots and take our time to get to know the communities in which we work. Wilburforce Foundation (Wilburforce) understands our work is complicated and people-intensive. Long-term impact takes time and they give an enormous amount of deference to the need and forging public benefit. It is this philosophy which makes them a good partner for us.”

When asked how best to describe their relationship with NWRA, Denise Joines, senior program officer for Wilburforce, says,

“I would describe our relationship with NWRA as a true partnership. Our work together is holistic, encompassing all areas of work: policy, capacity building, conservation, and shared learning. We are in it for the long haul.”

The partnership between NWRA and Wilburforce began in 2006 when the foundation identified the opportunity for large-scale biodiversity impact in Nevada. After a conservation biology assessment of Western North America identified Desert National Wildlife Refuge Complex (Desert NWR) in southern

Nevada as a critically important conservation opportunity, Wilburforce began seeking non-governmental organization (NGO) partners to help protect this land. NWRA was a logical ally to raise the Refuge Complex's profile and help develop a local constituency that would speak and act on behalf of the refuge's wildlife.

What began with a \$25,000 investment in a pilot project in southern Nevada has grown to a \$485,000 per year programmatic investment in the organization's conservation work across the west, from initiatives in Nevada to Alaska. In addition to this monetary investment, NWRA also receives non-monetary professional development assistance for staff as well as other capacity building in advocacy and communications. The Wilburforce contribution makes up about 15% of NWRA's annual budget.

The work of both organizations is grounded in the importance of the national wildlife refuge system in protecting biodiversity. Both organizations aim to see big, connected, sustainable landscapes that are protected, fully resourced, and expanded.

Wilburforce Foundation opened its doors in 1991 and funds biodiversity conservation in the Western U.S., Western Canada, and Northwestern Mexico¹. Its mission is to help conserve important lands, waters, and wildlife in Western North America by supporting organizations and leaders advancing strategic solutions². On average, a grant relationship may range from \$50,000 to \$150,000 annually and may be maintained more than 10 years or longer. Denise Joines, who came to Wilburforce in 2000, emphasizes the value of developing lasting and trusted relationships, and investing in deep engagement between grantees, decision-makers, and diverse stakeholders. "Our theory of change is that these collaborative efforts will lead to greater resilience in both the human and natural communities we all depend on."

1. "About Us." Wilburforce Foundation. Accessed July 7, 2016. <http://www.wilburforce.org/about>.

2. "Grant Guidelines." Wilburforce Foundation. Accessed July 7, 2016. <http://www.wilburforce.org/for-grantseekers/grant-guidelines>.

NWRA was founded in 1975³. It works to protect America's wildlife heritage by bringing a unique perspective and creative strategies to conservation, namely through mobilizing citizens, advocating for conservation by working with decision-makers and engaging government agencies, private landowners, and conservation groups to protect wildlife beyond refuge boundaries⁴. Its annual budget is about \$2.7 million and is comprised of largely private foundation dollars, individual giving, and government grants⁵.

Houghton was always drawn to conservation work, and specifically that of NWRA since joining the organization in 2000. "Pound for pound - the Refuge Association works hard to be the most impactful conservation organization on the planet. This year we raised \$1 billion in public finance for fish and wildlife conservation, and conserved hundreds of millions of acres. Our secret is great partners like the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Wilburforce Foundation."

The Work of the Relationship

In 2006, Wilburforce and NWRA decided to experiment with leveraging public dollars available through the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act to boost visibility of Desert National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), the largest wildlife refuge in the continental United States. For both organizations, this pilot meant taking risks. NWRA recognized that action was needed to build the organization's capacity for large-scale refuge work. For the foundation, working with a new grantee with limited capacity on such a big project meant unpredictable outcomes. "When we entered the relationship we knew the risks involved, such as whether we could build a constituency in Las Vegas which supports biodiversity protection. We discussed these risks with NWRA," says Joines.

3. "National Wildlife Refuge Association." GuideStar Profile. Accessed July 7, 2016. <http://www.guidestar.org/profile/23-7447365>.

4. "About the National Wildlife Refuge Association." National Wildlife Refuge Association. Accessed July 7, 2016. <http://refugeassociation.org/about/about-nwra/>.

5. "National Wildlife Refuge Association." GuideStar Profile. Accessed July 7, 2016. <http://www.guidestar.org/profile/23-7447365>.

Said Houghton, “One of the best things about Wilburforce is that they give you the honesty, space, and trust to have conversations about what may go wrong. They defer to our expertise concerning how things will actually go on planet Earth, not perfect planet Earth.”

After the initial pilot in southern Nevada, Wilburforce learned more about NWRA’s methodology of working in communities. “We reach out to everyone who may be impacted by conservation efforts,” says Houghton. “We may be in a community for years before efforts begin because we believe stakeholder buy-in and sustainability is essential.”

This approach is a key part of Wilburforce’s funding strategy: investment of time and resources on the front end can lead to citizen ownership of conservation-oriented land management decisions in the long term. Witnessing this work led Wilburforce to transition NWRA to a multi-year grant, and facilitate NWRA’s partnership with three other organizations who collectively lead efforts to protect over a million acres of public land in Oregon and Nevada’s Great Basin, the Greater Hart-Sheldon Ecosystem.

The benefits of NWRA’s approach were detailed across daily newspapers in 2016, when militia members took over a federal building on the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon. This takeover was in protest of the federal government’s management of public lands in the West. The tensions and anxiety over land rights and ownership were not new. In fact, NWRA had been working in the area for many years to facilitate partnerships between local communities and the federal government. Both Houghton and Joines believe the resolution of this conflict was in part because of the goodwill NWRA had brokered on the federal government’s behalf by partnering for years in the community around mutually held interests. Houghton says, “We believe and trust, in all of the communities that we work in, that we all want

what is best for the land. That is a testament to bad coffee drinking.” Joines echoes this statement. “This situation demonstrated the importance of building and supporting the esprit de corps of public servants outside of the military. People who have dedicated their lives to federal agencies deserve to be appreciated, and to be properly resourced.”

Today, NWRA’s expertise also contributes to Wilburforce’s strategy and conservation outcomes in other regions, including Alaska. “We’ve focused for decades on protecting the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge,” said Wendy Vanasselt, program officer for Wilburforce’s Alaska Program. “But the Refuge Association highlighted for us opportunities to benefit wildlife and habitat connectivity by taking a larger perspective on where we work in Alaska, including neighboring landscapes. Just as importantly, by partnering with the Refuge Association in Alaska, we can build a deeper strategy of stakeholder engagement, grounded in the methodology and success of NWRA’s grassroots efforts in other parts of the United States.”

The Impact of the Relationship

In the past 10 years, NWRA’s efforts, in collaboration with others, have helped to expand the refuge system from 300 million acres to 568 million acres. Just in Nevada, the two new visitor centers at Desert National Wildlife Refuge Complex generate \$20 million in revenue each year. They have also created five trail systems and 38,000 additional acres of protected land.

Three fish - the Moapa Dace, Ash Meadows Pupfish, and Devil’s Hole Pupfish - have also been saved from extinction as a result of this work.

Their success in southern Nevada was replicated in northern Nevada and southern Oregon where three million acres of essential sagebrush habitat has been protected from industrial development. Lastly, the official U.S. policy regarding Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is to “protect wildlife, wilderness, and recreational values, conserve natural diversity, and provide opportunities for subsistence uses” in this area. This policy has been reinforced by the partnership of Wilburforce and NWRA.

Internal impact of this partnership can also be seen in NWRA's financial and organizational growth. As Joines says, "There is a high bar to be a Wilburforce grantee, but once you are, we want to invest in you and help make your organization strong. When we began working with NWRA, we saw the limitations of their organizational capacity and wanted to help." When Wilburforce works with an organization, they look at all aspects of the organization including leadership development, fundraising, and accounting. They also look to see if they can leverage expertise in communications or strategic planning.

Houghton says, "Wilburforce's willingness to explore what more they can do to make us as effective as possible is a huge honor and opportunity for us." He continues, "The Refuge System contributes \$40 billion/year in clean air and water. We know this, but it was Wilburforce who helped us learn how to communicate it better. Wilburforce has also paid for leadership training for my staff -- training that I otherwise would not be able to afford. It has helped my staff capacity tremendously."

The Future of the Relationship

As for the future of their work together, both organizations seem aligned on the vision over the next 10 years. "I see Wilburforce continuing to be a partner in our strategic planning as we expand our work and organization, but a smaller percentage of our organizational budget as we get better at telling our story and showing our impact to other funders to grow our total revenue base," says Houghton. Joines also says that she sees NWRA being able to leverage their skills, influence, and experience in other places important to the foundation, and Wilburforce will continue to invest in them to build their skills and expertise.



SECTOR LEARNING

This is one of a series of case studies that grounds IS' larger post-Threads power dynamic work by providing the cornerstone for a set of prototype tools to help aid the transfer of healthy behaviors, practices, and conditions from one relationship to another. This case study reflects a number of transferable behaviors, practices, and conditions, including but not limited to:

- **Grounded in a shared vision.** Both organizations share the vision of creating big, connected, sustainable landscapes and ensuring that they are protected, fully resourced, and expanded.
- **Invest in all aspects of an organization.** In addition to supporting programmatic work, Wilburforce invested non-monetary resources to increase staff capacity and communications resources.
- **Leveraging the work of others.** Both organizations recognized the opportunity presented through the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act and were willing to act to leverage it to create change. In addition, they created opportunities for continued work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
- **Organizations mutually influence one another.** Witnessing NWRA's approach in local communities contributed to Wilburforce's outreach in other portfolio areas, namely Alaska. Similarly, Wilburforce's support of staff capacity and communications resources helped amplify NWRA's organizational capacity and its ability to attract other funders.
- **Shared understanding of time needed to achieve impact.** NWRA is often in communities for a year, if not longer, before beginning formal work. This is part of building trust with the communities and local partners. Wilburforce understands this time is core to the long-lasting sustainability of the work.
- **Frequent and upfront conversations about potential challenges.** Initially in their partnership, each organization understood there were inherent risks in a new partnership and potential hurdles in establishing and cultivating a supportive community where they were working. This was discussed at the onset of the project and continues throughout their work together.

METHODOLOGY

Through a variety of sources, including, but not limited to, IS' Power Dynamic Advisory Group recommendations and IS member suggestions, we identified a universe of 112 potential examples of healthy grantee/funder relationships. From this initial universe, 40 nonprofits and foundations, constituting 20 pairs who believed they had healthy relationships, were interviewed via telephone for 45 minutes each between May 20 and June 15, 2016. Grantee and funder interviews were conducted separately so alignment between pairs could be better assessed.

All case studies were evaluated against the following set of criteria developed in partnership with IS' Power Dynamic Advisory Group. For the purpose of this work, a healthy relationship was defined as:

1. Alignment between the grantee/funder responses.
2. Embodying a relationship that is authentic/honest, representing the opportunities and challenges which come with partnership.
3. Discussing, at all or with some frequency, both productive and unproductive aspects to partnership.
4. Having jointly developed terms of the relationship/what the future looks like.
5. Illustrating demonstrative impact in their communities as a result of their work together.

Other factors which may have been considered in the determination of the final case studies, but did not rise to the level of required criteria were: (1) IS membership status; and (2) availability of the Center for Effective Philanthropy Grantee Perception Report (*GPR - the GPR provides funders with comparative, actionable feedback from their grantees based on responses to a customizable online survey*).

Each case study selected represents the experience of the specific individuals who participated in that particular grantee/funder pair. It is only meant to represent that individual relationship. The collection of case studies was selected to represent the diversity of the sector. This diversity includes but is not limited to: size of the organization's scale of investments, geography, and focus of organization. In showcasing a range of relationships within the sector, it illustrates the differences which make our sector fundamental to providing a vital voice to our most vulnerable populations.

The views expressed in this case study reflect the experience of those interviewed and not the views of IS. Each case study was chosen based on a series of criteria and evaluated by a panel of nonprofit and philanthropic sector professionals.



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