



Collaboration

in the

Northern Sierra

Collaboration isn't easy.

In this excerpt from Jim Morgan's autobiography *Applied Wisdom: Bad News Is Good News If You Do Something About It* (2016), you'll learn about the founding of the Northern Sierra Partnership, a collaboration between five respected organizations to work on conservation, restoration, and economic development in California's northern Sierra. It offers powerful evidence that a partnership among organizations with different roles and domains can work.

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Collaboration in the Northern Sierra

There is one more common challenge in traditional business that also is so important in the non-profit space that I feel it deserves its own chapter. In fact, it is something that inspired Becky and me to launch a new model for conservation.

If you want to grow an organization and build significant value, you must develop the ability to collaborate. Some of our biggest successes at Applied, such as our ability to penetrate the Japanese market at a time when so many other U.S. companies said it couldn't be done, had their roots in collaboration. A lot of companies talk about collaboration, but it's just lip service. Collaboration is not about scheduling a lot of meetings or forcing people to physically interact more. As I've explained, to be a successful collaborator, there are several guiding principles that you must embrace, including that you need to be willing to put your partners' needs ahead of your own so that you can both succeed.

But if that attitude is somewhat rare in business, as Becky and I became more involved in philanthropic projects, we could see that it was almost entirely absent in the non-profit sector. In fact, non-profits can be ruthlessly competitive and wary of one another. The reason is that non-profits are constantly fund-raising, and all the organizations in a given space tend to target the same donors or same kind of donors. In theory, this should create a market check on organizations and winnow out the ones who are not using their resources effectively. It should force organizations to focus on their strengths instead of diluting their resources.

In practice, the opposite occurs. Organizations pick projects on the basis of what they think offers the most compelling fund-raising story, rather than ones that reflect their true capabilities or the most important needs. They may not be forthcoming about their challenges because “competitors” may exploit that information to gain an edge with donors. They don’t like to admit weaknesses (nobody does), but therefore it’s hard for them to seek partners to complement their strengths. These are not necessarily personal failings of the non-profits’ leaders, but these patterns limit the effectiveness of their organizations. Becky and I thought there was an opportunity to develop a more extensive project in the Sierra Nevada.

The Sierra Nevada is the longest, unbroken mountain range in North America, a 400 mile-long expanse of granite peaks, deep forests, and sparkling lakes that inspired John Muir to call it the “Range of Light.” From this extraordinary expanse of wildness flows the one resource our modern society cannot live without – water. A full 60 percent of the water that supports life in California and also all of Northern Nevada begins as rain and snow falling on the Sierra. The Sierra also supports the greatest diversity of plant and animal communities in California, from Sierra big horn sheep to the spectacular birds of Sierra Valley. Finally, the Sierra plays a more intimate role for many people as a treasured place we go to hike, ski, and explore with our families. The region we wanted to focus on begins just south of Lake Tahoe and encompasses 5 million acres.

We brought together five partners that were all respected, competent, and had worked together in pairs. It’s called the Northern Sierra Partnership (NSP). And now, eight years into what is a path-breaking model of collaboration for non-profits, we have the evidence that it can be done. Collaborations are never easy. There always are egos on the line, personalities that clash, complexities from within and without that must be overcome. But we brought together partners willing to use the management principles I’ve stressed and the rules of collaboration that worked so well for us at Applied.

The NSP partners prioritized the most environmentally significant acres in the 5 million-acre region. To date, we’ve raised \$142 million

in public and private funds and conserved over 50,000 target acres of key properties in perpetuity, and we have a strategy to preserve as much as three times as many. Those numbers suggest that you really can achieve synergy among non-profit partners. I hope someday other organizations, both in conservation and in domains like education, can use our experience to set up their own collaborations and partnerships.

A small check goes a long way

The first investment Becky and I made in the northern Sierra was a \$500 check she wrote to the Truckee Donner Land Trust (TDLT) in 2000. The organization is led by a man named Perry Norris, who spent much of his career involved with education and the Outward Bound programs. Perry has an intense passion for conservation and deeply understands the issues of the Truckee region.

At nearly 6000 feet elevation, Truckee, California, is where the famous Donner Party was stalled when it tried to find a more direct route to California than the Oregon Trail. Many members of the party died of exposure during the exceptionally bad weather of 1846. Today, Truckee is within 30 minutes of half a dozen popular ski resorts including Squaw Valley, Alpine Meadows, Northstar, and Sugar Bowl. Bay Area residents and others who love to ski and enjoy the outdoors have flocked to new developments in the area with all-season homes and amenities like golf courses and spa resorts. As a consequence, the region is in danger of aggressive development ruining the natural beauty and wildlife habitats.

Our first investment was not large, but our relationship with Perry developed. Within two years, we saw an opportunity to make a larger grant for an important conservation acquisition. Developers were eyeing Schallenberger Ridge above Donner Lake for its beautiful views. The problem is that development would encroach on an important watershed, and it threatened to dramatically alter the look and atmosphere of the lake and Donner Lake Memorial State Park.

We liked the idea of our family foundation acting as a stimulator for other investment so that an organization with an opportunity could make a rapid, critical move in a particular time window. We gave Perry

and the TDLT \$50,000 to seed the acquisition of Schallenberger Ridge. TDLT had good relationships within the community and an understanding of local issues. We also felt that the deal would help Perry with other potential donors if he could point to a high-profile success saving this iconic ridge.

Last but not least, TDLT had done that rare thing: collaborated with another non-profit. Perry had struck up a partnership with Dave Sutton of The Trust for Public Land (TPL) and that gave him supplementary skill sets, experience, and capacity for the Schallenberger deal. This was the kind of collaboration that seemed vital if we were going to make a real difference in this region.

The two organizations had complementary values and motivations, but they had different areas of expertise and access to resources. TPL is a national organization that works with federal, state, and local agencies to obtain funding for conservation-related purchases, acquire properties, and then transfer the properties to the U.S. Forest Service, other government agencies, or non-profit land trusts to manage as conserved areas. In the northern Sierra, TPL had created a multi-year initiative to address the consequences of President Abraham Lincoln's 19th century land ownership plan throughout the Sierra – the checkerboard sections of railroad and federal lands I talked about in Chapter 20.

The Sierra Checkerboard Initiative is a plan to consolidate and protect the remnants of environmentally strategic lands across the checkerboard. With such fragmented ownership, trying to set aside lands large enough to conserve wildlife and preserve watershed dynamics is very difficult and tedious work. The logistics alone are complex; layer on creating a new pattern of ownership that meets the human, economic, and ecological needs of the Sierra Nevada that have evolved for more than 150 years. When the two groups successfully purchased and conserved Schallenberger Ridge, both teams achieved an important victory for their organizations and for the public.

Pairing up for progress

Soon, we realized that several other organizations in this region were having success working in pairs as well. We were optimistic that with the

right support and leadership, we could build an even bigger partnership in the northern Sierra – and ideally we could inspire non-profit organizations to work together to achieve goals they could not achieve independently.

For example, TNC's Jim Gaither and his colleagues Henry Little and Greg Low, understood the value of having local partners. As a national organization, they realized that local knowledge and relationships were absolutely critical when working with folks like multi-generational ranchers and landowners. Families have complex connections to their land; there is not a “cookie cutter” approach to doing conservation easements or other transactions that works in every situation. Around 2004, TNC reached out to a man named Paul Hardy who at the time was forming the Feather River Land Trust (FRLT) in a region that he and his family had long called home. Paul, a trained research biologist, had worked at UC-Davis and for the U.S. Forest Service. He served first as a consultant to TNC. He was hired to help with their final stage of the Sierra Nevada Eco-Regional Plan, which later became TNC's Northern Sierra Project.

Jim Gaither believed that the formation of the Feather River Land Trust would be critical to successful conservation in the region. Gaither introduced Paul to us and Paul led us on a tour of the Feather River watershed, including Sierra Valley, Clover Valley, and Genessee Valley. We learned there were 230 or more species of birds in the area during the year; there was good potential for preservation and that would create possibilities for a birding center as well as economic opportunities for tourism. We liked the way Paul talked about the community and how to work with it. Later that year I asked our daughter, Mary, to join me on a canoe trip Paul had set up to tour the Maddalena property, newly acquired by FRLT. There were extensive wetlands on this working ranch. The Feather River region, once intensely exploited for its timber, is an exceptional habitat for birds thanks to its extensive wetlands and meadow systems. It also offers significant economic value for working ranches. I always gained useful information by porpoising into the different levels of Applied, but it turned out to be a lot more fun

porpoising with a canoe paddle in my hand to see for myself the incredible beauty and conservation potential of an area like Sierra Valley. We made a three-year capacity grant of \$111,250 to FRLT in 2006. Those resources helped Paul hire the organization's first development director and begin building a strong base of support.

In 2004, to better understand the needs and the opportunities, we paid for the preparation of a report on Environmental Conservation Opportunities in the Northern Sierra Nevada. It confirmed for us that there was an opportunity for a large-scale ecological effort. At the Morgan Family Foundation we were putting the pieces in place to make a bigger move, and a key element in 2006 was hiring as director of Environment & Stewardship Programs for our Foundation, a woman named Carol Olson, a smart executive who had been CEO of the Mountain View Chamber of Commerce.

Becky and I sat with Carol and discussed issues and values that we felt were critical if we were going to be involved in the northern Sierra:

Broad impact. We wanted to seed projects then leverage other funding. We were not looking for personal control and credit, we were looking for high impact; collaborating with other foundations and organizations was the way to achieve that.

Strong leadership. Partners needed to appreciate the importance of timing and driving forces in creating opportunities.

Long time horizon. We wanted to take positions that encourage the long-term stewardship of landscapes. We wanted attention to preserving biodiversity, particularly around vulnerable riparian corridors. It wasn't enough for us to just conserve the land and move on; we wanted a viable plan for how the land would be restored and maintained well into the future.

Unique role. We wanted to work in the void and fund areas that other funders might reject. In the non-profit world certain capacities are critical but it can be hard to raise funds for more abstract activities. People like the idea that their gift goes to buying a piece of land, for example, but they may not be as excited about funding a study that helps an organization make better land-use decisions in general.

Good plan, good people. Becky and I stressed our mutual conviction that good decisions are based on both strong concepts and people capable of executing on the plan. Neither works alone.

With this guidance, Carol visited the Morgan Family Foundation grantees in the northern Sierra in September, 2006. She reported back that while the region had outstanding organizations and smart, visionary leaders, there were some serious challenges as well. There was a lack of local capacity for large-scale impact, a lack of resources, and no coordinated approach to attracting new funding opportunities. Carol's analysis was essential; she welcomed and leaned in to the bad news so we made sure we were going in with our eyes open to the challenges. We discussed those, as well as the larger driving forces related to the undertaking. We weren't put off by the idea of hard work, and after much thought and analysis were motivated to move by these driving forces:

1) Development pressure would only increase. The population of the Sierra Nevada region had tripled in 30 years. Truckee and Reno were increasingly putting pressure on the surrounding areas for more development. Unlike the southern Sierra where 90 percent of the land was in public ownership, 50 percent of the northern Sierra land was in private ownership and therefore susceptible to irresponsible development. Neither the partners nor the foundation were anti-growth, but we wanted to see the region embrace "smart growth" approaches that concentrated new development in existing communities. The problem was that developers were opting for sprawling resort and second-home development on the outskirts of communities. They were building golf courses, which raise water use and chemical run-off issues, and wanted to convert wild areas and key wildlife corridors to scenic but environmentally-costly resorts and vacation home neighborhoods.

2) All moves had to consider changing natural phenomena such as climate and wildfire threats. Due to a history of poor management practices in northern Sierra forests, the region was susceptible to catastrophic wildfire. For millennia, forest fires shaped ecosystems like the northern Sierra by periodically burning the underbrush and stimulating the growth of large, healthy trees. For the past 100 years, however, the practice of extinguishing virtually all wildfires has led to an unnatural

buildup of brush and small trees, making Sierra forests a tinderbox waiting to ignite. Climate change was also influencing the interval and severity of wildfires and the impact of those fires on local economies and watersheds. The forests of the northern Sierra have the potential to be among the largest and most productive carbon sinks on the planet but new approaches would be needed to address the increased risks of stand-destroying wildfire. Smarter forest management would have benefits for not only flora and fauna but also for people and communities so it had to be part of our conservation thinking.

3) Water quantity and quality will be critical issues in California for the foreseeable future. The northern Sierra furnishes water to more than 60 percent of California's population and supports the Nevada cities of Reno and Sparks. It needs to be an integral part of the solution to California's water problems. Unfortunately, there was a lack of clarity and focus on this region as part of the solution. It was crucial to position our conservation efforts as not just about the animals, plants, and recreation, but as the smart way to protect wild areas providing what may be the world's single most precious resource: clean water.

Communication and public education were essential to tie all these larger forces into the explanation of our agenda and ideas. In line with TNC's approach that conservation needs to be about saving nature for people, not saving nature from people, we needed to focus on the value of ecosystems, not fixate on preserving one species at great cost to people or other systems.

There also was a dynamic we needed to face realistically: the communities most likely to benefit directly were not a good source of financial support. Because of the relatively sparse population of the region and the nature of the economy, philanthropy in the northern Sierra was minimal. A study done by Sierra Business Council in 2006 showed that philanthropic dollars were disproportionately expended across the state: \$600 per capita in the Bay Area, \$200 per capita in the Los Angeles region, \$80 per capita in the Central Valley, and \$10 per capita in the Sierra Nevada. There seemed to be considerable philanthropic funding for conservation in the Bay Area, along the Coast, and throughout Southern California. But while many Californians spend time in the

Sierra Nevada region and get their water from it, they don't realize the importance of the region to the health of the entire state — or appreciate the threats it faces. On the positive side, our likely funders were sophisticated when it came to analyzing return on investment. Our dollars could not only go further in the northern Sierra due to lower cost of lands there compared to the Bay Area, but seeding projects within these organizations would have a big leveraged impact.

We had no desire to create yet another stand-alone organization. Non-profit organizations tend to take on certain functions and activities that are mainly about prolonging the life of the organization. We had a different goal, as I mentioned earlier: that of stimulator. We wanted to spark activity in a specific place and time, achieve a specific set of goals, and then eventually go away. We wanted to make an impact, and leave the partners in healthier financial shape, with stronger reputations, more donors, and enhanced capacity than when we started. We wanted the group to come together and appreciate the value and meaning of working together. In return, each partner needed to offer its strength and capacity to the effort.

In February 2007 the Morgan Family Foundation board of directors approved a \$1 million pool of funds to be awarded to The Nature Conservancy, with the idea that it would lay the groundwork to orchestrate a coordinated approach to conservation across the greater landscape in the region. We also made a \$500,000 investment in an effort by Truckee Donner Land Trust and the Trust for Public Land to purchase Waddle Ranch. The acquisition of this 1,462-acre property in the heart of Martis Valley was one of the Sierra Nevada's largest and most complicated conservation efforts in recent history. It was also a model for partnership between two organizations that joined forces on negotiating and fundraising.

Adapting the model

The original structure empowered TNC to efficiently administer our funds to worthwhile projects implemented through partners. The work in Martis Valley was very good, but we immediately sensed that the structure we had set up might not be the most efficient and effective

at pouncing on good opportunities as they arose. We wanted to inspire enthusiasm and a sense of urgency to identify and go after key properties. We met others who felt the same way. Around this time period, Becky and I would frequently talk about the larger possibilities.

Over a cup of coffee together in our kitchen one morning, Becky and I discussed that instead of having TNC oversee the distribution of grants to these organizations, we needed to find a structure where they actively worked together as partners. The vision emerged from the work of Jim Gaither at TNC that identified the most environmentally and strategically important land in the northern Sierra, and Dave Sutton's efforts with the Checkerboard Initiative for TPL. We determined that under one supporting organizational umbrella, we could provide a booster rocket for a time to cover more regions and types of conservation projects. We knew they had different strengths. The question was could we get them to work together?

Like most challenges worth taking on, it wasn't easy. We created a unique approach to collaborative conservation with five organizations that we have yet to see copied anywhere, despite powerful evidence that a partnership among organizations with different roles and domains can work. We had to make course corrections. We have had to spend considerable time and energy on interpersonal communication and negotiation between the partners, as we asked them to do things that non-profits rarely do.

Let's focus on the elements that might be most helpful for others attempting to think about a social or environmental problem for which collaboration can be helpful.

First, make sure you have a balanced team. Early on we identified five entities we wanted to work with: The Trust for Public Land, The Truckee Donner Land Trust, the Feather River Land Trust, The Sierra Business Council, and The Nature Conservancy. Four were conservation organizations, but the Sierra Business Council lead by Steve Frisch was made up of over thirty towns in the Sierra to assure the economic interests of the region were represented. We also reached out to Michael Mantell at the Resources Legacy Fund, an organization that had been instrumental in the development and administration of many statewide

conservation initiatives, and he agreed with us that more could be accomplished through collaboration. We convened the five organizations in a “Northern Sierra Funding Summit.”

Collaborations work best when each partner brings a high level of competency but also complementary strengths. In business, those strengths may be qualities like additional products, new markets, strategic thinking, operational experience, or excellent sales skills. Organizations have different kinds of resources, executives have followed different experience paths that may be valuable, and then you want to make sure the personalities can work together. Among the five partners was a global organization with extensive resources in all 50 states and several countries (The Nature Conservancy); a national organization skilled in working with federal and state agencies (Trust for Public Land); two regional land trusts with knowledge and sensitivities to issues and opportunities in the northern Sierra (Truckee Donner Land Trust and Feather River Land Trust); and finally, the Sierra Business Council, which represented the interests of communities throughout the Sierra Nevada.

Second, use your analysis of driving forces to galvanize decisions and build momentum. Agreeing to collaborate “in theory” and hoping to find work to do together is not sufficient to get people focused. At the April 2007 summit, we tried to focus the potential partners’ attention and urgency by discussing driving forces and other factors that augured for immediate action. Establishing a plan to conserve, restore, and enjoy the fantastic northern Sierra was clearly an effort at the right time, at the right place, and with the right capability. At a tactical level, we had some clear opportunities: The Governor had created a new agency to support the region called the Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC). The Governor and the California State Legislature were supportive, bonds had been passed, and grant programs would soon be available. Groups that could present a collaborative strategy would be the most likely to receive this support. Clearly, regions that organized quickly to submit funding proposals would be in the best position to obtain support from the state.

Secondly (and, in retrospect, ironically) in 2007, the economy was going strong. After the “dot com bomb” several years prior, technology had recovered and other elements of the economy were enjoying the cost-savings of innovation. On a state basis, there was a tremendous level of individual wealth in Silicon Valley and the rest of the state. Foundations were doing well and looking for new opportunities for impact.

The environment was a rising issue, particularly in regard to climate change, catastrophic fires, water, and habitat destruction. The media and others were moving beyond the doomsday talk of global warming and were now focused on sustainability and a green economy. I felt that people were actively looking for ways to support a sustainable planet but feeling a little overwhelmed by the options. The northern Sierra offered a familiar and frankly beloved option; it could become a laboratory to test sustainability ideas and large-scale conservation’s impact on climate change adaptation. It could also help scientists study strategies to enhance carbon sequestration, optimize water availability to the state, and improve other ecosystem services.

Another key message was that land costs in the region were so much more affordable than those in the Bay Area, where many donors were likely to come from. We needed to communicate the urgency to potential donors that there was an opportunity to move quickly to protect a lot of land, but that situation was not going to go on indefinitely. Lands in Sierra Valley, about 25 miles from Truckee and Reno, were clearly in the path of the next phase of regional development. Some properties were in a generational transition. Many had been homesteaded in the 1800s and now many of the descendants wanted cash. Properties were coming on the market for the first time in years and we had to be facing the elevator door and be ready to act.

Later, as an example, one of our major successes was the work we did to preserve Webber Lake, owned by a family that was only the fourth official owner beginning with the U.S. Government in 1850. With the Truckee Donner Land Trust in the lead, we enabled the landowner’s goal of preserving the lake and meadow for public use, and we saved

the upper reaches of the Little Truckee Watershed. That watershed provides much of the water for Reno and Sparks in Nevada; it merges with the main Truckee river out of Lake Tahoe. It also has a diversion below Webber Falls that sends some water north to Sierra Valley, adding to the wetlands that feed the Wild and Scenic Middle Fork of the Feather River. The Feather River, in turn, drains to the Oroville Dam in California. This opportunity would not last much longer: Once land transitioned from long-time owners, property values were bound to shoot up and speculators and developers would move in. We first focused on getting a solid preliminary plan for the region. Our foundation made a grant to Resources Legacy Fund for planning support in the amount of \$25,000. Michael Mantell was a true partner with us and Resources Legacy Fund (RLF) matched the amount and the Northern Sierra Partnership was in the works. An additional \$100,000 was given by the two organizations several months later based on the scale of the effort and the potential impact being envisioned.

This was an exciting time. In fact, then-Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger made a visit to Donner Lake to support NSP's work and it seemed like even Mother Nature lent her endorsement: In the middle of his speech, a bald eagle made a swooping dive to skim the surface of Donner Lake and grab a trout.

But we had serious and difficult details to work out going forward. Most importantly, we had to get the partners collaborating on fundraising instead of competing with one another. The partners decided that a Campaign Committee needed to be formed – a group of individuals who could attract top donors to the effort. Later renamed the Governing Council, the members of this body would serve as advisors, offer their own networks to increase the fundraising capacity of the partnership and fulfill other non-profit board-like duties. RLF, as fiscal sponsor, would provide the fiduciary responsibility.

Becky and I agreed to co-chair the Campaign Committee and in December 2007 the Morgan Family Foundation board of directors pledged \$10 million to the Northern Sierra Partnership. To motivate the Committee and the partners, the pledge was a challenge: the gift would be accessible when NSP raised an additional \$50 million in private

fundraising. We structured it in this way because we were trying to build a partner capability that could have a significant impact. To meet the goals, the organizations would need to collaborate and expand conservation fundraising for the northern Sierra.

The elevator reverses direction

Each of the partners brought a unique strength to NSP, and all had other sources of funding outside of NSP. But the differences in their missions and their own self-protective instincts made them nervous about sharing donor lists. We hired an executive director who we borrowed from TNC. Then, we hit our first speed bumps. The sub-prime mortgage crisis in late 2007 had triggered a landslide of bad news throughout the financial services industry that spread to the economy as a whole. The country was headed into a period of recession, and fund-raising outlooks that had seemed so promising the previous year were now grim.

On the positive side, we'd secured a \$10 million commitment from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and enlisted the help of Mike Sweeney, executive director of TNC California. Mike got involved in early strategy and organization, and he facilitated a \$2 million grant from TNC. We also received two individual gifts of \$100,000 each. On the negative side, some donors Becky and I had been confident would join us in the northern Sierra, did not. As an economy pulls back, the list of what philanthropists consider their most critical investments contracts as well. We found that some foundations that had been active in conservation did not want to get involved in land purchases; they wanted to work on changing policies and on projects overseas. We could see the challenge for private and public fundraising was going to intensify. So much for retiring from an industry with dramatic cycles!

It was a beautiful late spring day in 2008 when 100 guests of the Northern Sierra Partnership toured the Sierra Valley region and enjoyed a BBQ at Lucy Blake's ranch. Becky had known Lucy, who was the founder of the Sierra Business Council (SBC), for some time. When Becky ran Joint Venture Silicon Valley, she met with regional stewardship organizations forming across the state, including SBC. Lucy had pioneered innovative approaches and solutions that fostered community

vitality, environmental quality, economic prosperity, and social fairness in the Sierra Nevada. SBC was serving a critical role in Sierra Valley by introducing local ranchers to conservation easements and other tools for retaining their properties as working ranches. Lucy had left SBC and moved on to several other important projects in environmental advocacy and policy, but she was a passionate supporter of what we were trying to do. She shared our belief that collaboration not only among organizations, but also between organizations and communities, is critical.

Unfortunately, the weather and company were a lot more inspiring that day at Lucy's ranch than the economy. What's more, we could see that the partners were struggling to work together. During a very difficult economic period for the country, raising funds to keep themselves afloat in addition to advancing the partnership was tough. One point of light was that as our interactions with Lucy Blake continued, Becky and I were more and more impressed with her energy, local knowledge, and capacity. Over time, we urged her to replace us as Chair of the Governing Council, and eventually in June 2011, she became president of the partnership.

Lucy's first priority as president was to work with the partners and the Governing Council to complete a detailed strategic plan and marketing tools for NSP. To learn from best practices nationwide, she hired a fundraising firm to advise us on how to staff and execute a coordinated campaign. Our foundation supported this step and provided additional funding for it, realizing that the level of collaboration we were hoping for was something altogether new. We also supported a philanthropy position at TNC focused on the northern Sierra that was filled by Elliott Wright. Through Elliott and Lucy's leadership, and the focused efforts of all the partners and the Governing Council, the partners have been able to protect some incredibly important conservation lands they would not have been able to preserve alone, such as the Little Truckee watershed. We have healthy, intense debates about project priorities, with different partners advancing their view of the most important opportunities. The good news is that NSP's efforts began with a grounding in science. We have a plan. The measures of our success are not only the total acreage conserved, but the key points

of leverage and connection that a given property may represent. We make strategic moves to connect important watersheds and wildlife corridors and protect natural areas that provide society with important ecosystem services like fresh water filtration and carbon storage.

Every piece of land has a story, a social history, and an environmental role in the region. Those interested can find in depth stories and details about the keystone projects NSP has conserved at *northernsierra partnership.org*. But one particularly satisfying project involved the protection of one of the northern Sierra's real gems: Independence Lake.

Independence Lake



Independence Lake is a key resource in the Little Truckee Watershed; it is a 2.4 mile-long lake 15 miles north of Truckee and resembles Donner Lake as it was a century ago. The setting at the base of some steep cliffs dotted with evergreens and aspen is spectacularly beautiful. The lake also is a unique refuge for the Lahontan cutthroat trout—a fish that has been lost from 99 percent of its historic range. The surrounding forest is home to black bear, mountain lion, and the Truckee-Loyalton deer herd. Bald eagles and osprey hunt fish in the shallows. What's more, the lake is part of a vital watershed that provides water to large communities in Nevada, especially during drought periods. The lake feeds the Truckee River, which crosses the border to the communities of Reno and Sparks.

At one point in the 1970s, the Disney Corporation considered buying the property and building a family-oriented ski “village” in the area; much later, Steve Jobs of Apple wanted to buy the area around the lake and set up a private conference retreat. What was always an issue, however, was the lake’s role in supplying fresh water to the region. Jobs’ plan stalled, for example, when the state water authorities refused to give him the right to control the water in the lake (by law, private landowners in California cannot own a dynamic water resource, they can only obtain rights to utilize or draw from water on their property).

TNC’s Nevada team had been trying to come up with a plan to buy and conserve Independence Lake for years, and NSP became a participant in that effort. TNC finally acquired the land around the lake in 2010. TNC’s ability to work with then Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid from Nevada was critical to achieving this purchase, and it’s an excellent example of how TNC, as a national organization, had resources and relationships that complemented those of NSP.

But the NSP team brought vital contributions as well, including our commitment to public access. Out of concern for the Lahontan trout, TNC originally planned to prohibit fishing in the lake. But there are other fish species in the lake and TDLT knew local people and visitors would enjoy hiking, boating, and fishing. The result was that we came up with a plan to prevent the introduction of aquatic invasive plants and animals by providing watercraft for free that was never used anywhere else; we implemented forest management strategies to decrease the risk of wildfire; and we allowed visitors to enjoy the property and lake in ways that are compatible with the conservation of this precious resource, such as by requiring that fishermen follow catch and release for the Lahontan species.

NSP held a July 4 weekend celebration at Independence Lake in 2015, and it was satisfying to see the friends and family of NSP get together to celebrate conservation with a picnic and boating on the lake – and even a little fishing.

Independence Lake and many other successes were made possible by the foundational planning, trust building, and shared vision of NSP. I will never forget a celebration at Royal Gorge after we secured about 3500 acres of what is the largest cross-country ski area in North America. A woman who lived nearby came to me and said she was so excited about our work that she had taken out a \$25,000 mortgage on her home so that she could make a contribution to the fund-raising campaign we had run. As you recall, one challenge Carol Olson had identified was that it was going to be difficult to raise funds in the actual region being impacted. This woman's excitement gave me hope that continued efforts by NSP that were sensitive to local communities and scientifically supported in terms of our priorities, could ignite local pride and support for our efforts that would be a positive factor for many years to come.

This has proved to be true. The strategic plan is guiding our work, the leadership is strong, and the procedural infrastructure is in place. With the Partnership's support, the partners are operating at a faster pace and bigger scale. NSP, and TNC's David Edelson even partnered with a non-NSP organization called American Rivers Conservancy to preserve 10,000 acres of checkerboard to consolidate the land at the headwaters of the North and Middle Forks of the American River. Each success tends to build on the one before, attracting new support from private donors and public agencies in a virtuous cycle that enables the Partnership to get more done.

The Partnership is now entering the long home stretch of our campaign, a three to four year period in which we hope to conserve another 100,000 acres of high priority lands across the northern Sierra with a new emphasis on acquiring conservation easements on private land. This is an appropriate strategy when the goal is to protect the natural resource values without having to provide for public access.

A major focus of NSP's work, with TNC and Feather River Land Trust in the lead, is the 120,000-acre Sierra Valley, which rivals Lake Tahoe in size and beauty, but remains one of California's best-kept secrets. Sierra Valley's wetlands support the greatest diversity and concentration of waterfowl, shorebirds, raptors, and other birds in the northern Sierra, and are a key stopover on the Pacific Flyway. This region is

a birder's paradise. It is also the largest agricultural landscape in the Sierra Nevada, one that was settled in the mid-late 19th century by Swiss Italian families.

In Sierra Valley, the primary focus of NSP's work will be to partner with local ranching families to conserve ranches with easements and ensure they are managed for sustainable agriculture and wildlife. We will also look for opportunities to acquire a limited number of properties to enhance public access and create new opportunities for education and low-impact recreation, while preserving the unique character and culture of this historically rich ranching community.

Through the work in Sierra Valley, NSP is continuing to engage new government partners like the California Department of Conservation and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service that recently decided to invest \$9.97 million in our Sierra Valley project. The agencies, just like private donors, are interested in opportunities to leverage their resources, and working with groups like ours that can bring additional state and private funds to the job.

As this book goes to print, the Northern Sierra Partnership is still a work in progress. While much work lies ahead, our family can see that the time, energy, and funds we've invested have had a real impact on the ecological, economic and human prospects of the northern Sierra. As we hoped, what began as a modest plan to enhance the level of collaboration among groups we supported has evolved into a fully functional partnership that is attracting the kind of investment needed to get the work done. Collaboration is never easy, but the partners are seeing the many practical benefits of working together to achieve their ambitious vision.



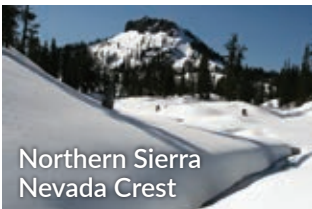
Feather River
Headwaters Valleys



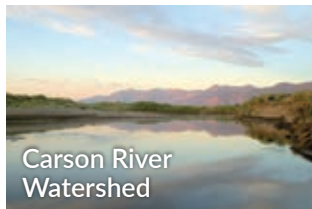
Sierra Valley



Little Truckee
River Watershed



Northern Sierra
Nevada Crest

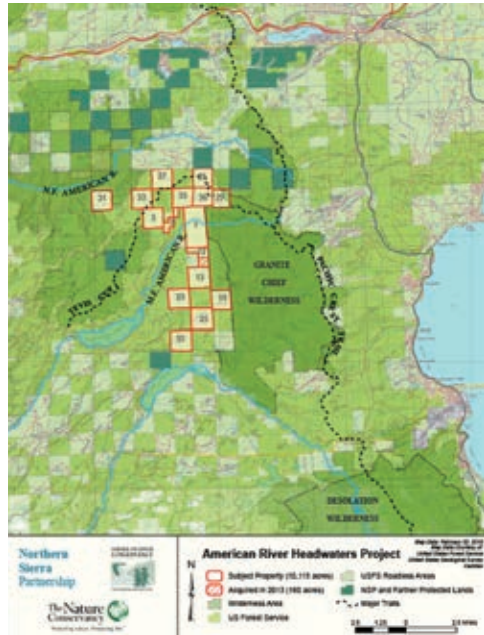
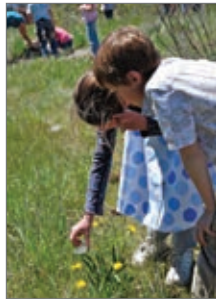


Carson River
Watershed



Greater Truckee

California's northern Sierra is a beautiful and environmentally important ecosystem that supplies fresh water to California and northern Nevada. Becky and I have been pleased to help protect and support this region through the Northern Sierra Partnership.



Clockwise from top left: My first meeting with The Nature Conservancy's Asia Pacific Council (APC) Hong Kong 2002; APC visit to Mongolian Steppes before a Beijing meeting 2009; The 'checkerboard' that NSP and other conservation groups have struggled for decades to reconnect to create wildlife corridors and other protected regions; Becky and me at Independence Lake; Birding by canoe in Sierra Valley; Mark Tercek presenting me the Oak Leaf award for conservation leadership; Northern Sierra children enjoying the Feather River Land Trust's excellent environmental 'learning landscapes' program.

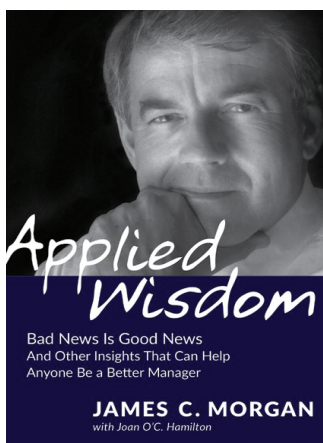
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