The Fire Learning Network Goes Under the Microscope

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The Fire Learning Network Goes Under the Microscope
Raise your hands: How many of you would you like your Conservancy project to be the subject of a five-year academic study on its effectiveness — the results of which would be written up in five papers published in peer-reviewed journals and a proposed book? Without you being able to filter or spin the findings at all?

The Conservancy’s Lynn Decker, director of the U.S. Fire Learning Network (FLN), took the plunge. And not only did she live to tell the tale, she says that the study and feedback from researchers Will Butler (assistant professor of urban and regional planning at Florida State University) and Bruce Goldstein (now associate professor of planning and design at the University of Colorado, Denver) made the FLN even more flexible and adaptable.

But Butler and Goldstein were already impressed with the FLN, which they say provides a paradigm for conservationists trying to change ineffective but entrenched, bureaucratic ways of working on natural resource issues. How scary was it to go under an external microscope? And what other kinds of issues could a learning network such as the FLN tackle? I rounded up Decker, Butler and Goldstein and asked them.
For those who don’t know — what is the Fire Learning Network, and why did it come about?

LYNN DECKER: The FLN emerged in 2002 because TNC had identified altered fire regimes as a major threat to our ecoregional portfolio, which happened to have a high degree of overlap with the land administered by the federal agencies. So the TNC Fire organization engaged federal agencies in a roundtable discussion in 2001 and developed a partnership to address the threat.

The FLN came out of that partnership. It’s a conservation learning network. FLN has practitioners that work collaboratively with partners to restore large landscapes across the U.S. and Caribbean — like other Conservancy folks, their landscape partners include federal agencies, state agencies, private land owners, and county representatives. By operating as a network, linked at multiple scales, we can leverage lessons learned between practitioners, their partners, and landscapes and accelerate effective conservation across the U.S. We can also accelerate learning and effect changes in management at multiple scales.

Bruce and Will, why did you want to study the FLN? What questions were you trying to answer?

GOLDSTEIN: Will and I were focusing on how collaboration can address the limits in normal governance and decision-making. Rather than focus on collaborative dispute resolution, we were thinking about how collaboration is a catalyst for institutional change.

The FLN caught my attention when I read Stephen Pyne’s piece on how it was an effort to address the longstanding crisis caused by wildfire suppression. So, with Lynn’s permission, I crashed the annual meeting of the FLN in New Bern, North Carolina, and Lynn and I sketched out an idea on a bar napkin for an evaluation that would focus on FLN how to engage in collaborative learning not only within a single landscape, but across a national network of landscapes.

Lynn, how did you feel initially about opening up FLN to this kind of academic scrutiny?

DECKER: I was a little amused by Bruce’s persistence in wanting to study us, and he was very persistent. But after talking to him more, I got curious about the possibilities. I was very interested in understanding more about the answers to the questions he was originally posing. Only later did I start to think a little bit about the risk it would involve.

You did tell me when we talked earlier that you were scared to death.

[Laughter.]
DECKER: Well, that’s what I meant by risk. I was afraid of publications that might embarrass the Conservancy. But I think that’s sort of natural. And an outside evaluation would actually give me knowledge and perspective that I didn’t have. We had been monitoring our progress to make sure our strategy wasn’t defective, but I found the prospect of outside evaluation really compelling.

Bruce and Will, you concluded through your study that collaborative learning networks like FLN might be a way around the resistance to fundamental change in resource management agencies. What is it about these networks that breaks down that resistance?

WILL BUTLER: Three things. At one level, it welcomes the agencies in as partners or collaborators in a common shared purpose. We want to solve our crisis, and we want to do with you, and we are going to bring some resources to the table and you’re going to bring some resources to the table, and we can only do this if we do it together. So there’s a high motivation to participate, and instead of emerging out of a dispute, like a lot of collaborative processes, this began without an antagonistic relationship as a starting point.

The second point is the network really promotes creativity by having people not just from TNC and the agencies involved, but also bringing in other folks who have different perspectives to bring to the challenges that they face in each landscape, so we can generate new ideas and new approaches to doing things on the ground.

And then it does all of that operating at multiple scales. It includes line officers. It includes forest-level staff. It includes regional players. It’s got national-level administrators involved. It’s this multi-scalar approach that gives the network its power. And those folks operate in their own professional organizational networks, so there is the potential for diffusion of these innovative and creative ideas at multiple levels simultaneously. That is the leverage point for opening up the resistance to change.

GOLDSTEIN: As Rahm Emanuel once said, you should never let a serious crisis go to waste. The wildfire crisis had gone on for decades, and ecological and resource impacts, fire risk to communities, and escalating costs had unsettled the status quo in wildfire management. But the crisis also was threatening to wildfire managers, who resisted external pressure to change.

We think one reason the FLN has been so successful is that it has worked with wildfire managers, rather than trying to change them from outside. This partnership promotes trust and common purpose — reorienting funding and priorities from within rather than through external political channels.
You write that networks like the FLN allow resource managers to be autonomous and creative within their individual landscapes but also be unified in their overall approach. That seems like a tall order.

GOLDSTEIN: Lynn and her colleagues established and managed a network of collaborators and linked them at landscape, regional and national scales by providing them with information and technologies and developing effective ways to communicate. This enabled coordination across the network as a whole, without either having to centrally manage priorities and actions or cultivate close relationships among participants, which would have been impossible across such a dispersed network.

BUTLER: To me, it's about asking the right questions and providing a framework for engagement. FLN says: "We want you to think about these issues and these challenges in a structured and organized way, working through these kinds of tasks, but we are not going to presume that we know the analytical tools you are going to use. We are not going to presume we know all the data that you have. We are not going to presume to even know your ecological or social or political realities that you are working in. We are going to get the conversation started and provide a framework for that conversation."

So you get a lot of people across the country responding to similar kind of questions and structured exercises or focusing on particular kinds of problems, but that are applying their knowledge of the social and ecological systems where they are operating to answer those questions.

Lynn, this was a five-year study. What did you and the network learn as the study progressed, and how did you apply that learning to the way FLN functioned?

DECKER: I learned an incredible amount just by working with Bruce and Will. It gave me access to their insights on network theory and collaboration science, and I’d take those insights and immediately make small adjustments to improve the network’s function and outcomes.

We also struck a deal in the beginning that I would get their early results, so that I could be aware of their findings without waiting for the papers to be published. So I was able to make some fine-scale adjustments and provide some opportunities that would improve the network process based on those findings, like getting some leadership skills training to the network leaders quickly. Having them there helped us incorporate the best social science into the management of our network faster.

Fire is a thorny issue — but there are other natural resource challenges like climate change that are possibly even thornier. Bruce and Will, you’ve written that what FLN has done could apply to challenges like climate change. How?
BUTLER: A lot of the resource challenges we face today are geographically large-scale, institutionally cross-sectoral, and scientifically complex. There’s a lot of uncertainty involved with them, and so they necessitate ways to work across organizational, disciplinary and jurisdictional boundaries. What FLN demonstrates in the fire context is these kinds of problems can be addressed not only at specific locations or within specific institutions, but rather that this multi-scalar network can come at the problem in multiple levels on multiple fronts simultaneously, breaking down a lot of those barriers that keep us from being able to deal with some of these complex problems.

GOLDSTEIN: Yes, one thing we have begun is to look at how learning networks are emerging globally to address climate change, which has all the features Will notes, as well as the challenges of entrenched institutions and demands for social equity. We’ve been following Lynn’s recent efforts to develop a climate learning network, and look forward to continuing our research partnership.

Lynn, it sounds as if you recommend the experience of external academic evaluation and feedback. What other projects at TNC might benefit from this kind of study? And which might benefit from learning networks?

DECKER: Learning networks are a tool important to making our overall strategy effective. The tool really makes sense in our context. For others such as ecosystem-based adaptation, I can’t think of a way that you couldn’t use the power of place-based collaboration to help make your case. You do have to factor how much energy and resources you’re willing to put to it because, if you don’t make it high-functioning, it doesn’t necessarily help you.

About being evaluated, I would definitely say yes. Since we’re a science-based organization, I think it makes sense to subject what we do to science-based evaluation, even in these operational things like how are we hypothesizing a network to function to meet the outcomes we are interested in.

GOLDSTEIN: I’ve been asked a similar question by colleagues about how was it to partner with TNC. My response has been that it’s been different than just observing a collaborative process — its been more of a research partnership, because Lynn and her colleagues are not just applying an existing model, they are coming up with new collaborative approaches and trying to learn by doing and adapt all the while. So it’s been more like a collaborative research project. Working with a learning organization like TNC is much more dynamic and exciting and offers more possibility for discoveries that can have wide application. SC
Want to go deeper? Below are links to some of the papers Will Butler and Bruce Goldstein published on the FLN as well as a link to their proposed book on the network:


