

SOLVING PROBLEMS FOR THE COMMON GOOD

As a part of our Democracy Lens tools, for each state in our region, we report a data snapshot and case studies (called Bright Spots) about philanthropy's role in democracy. You can access all these data and Bright Spots on the [Democracy Northwest webpage](#).

Deepening political polarization is one of the greatest challenges facing American democracy. According to the Pew Research Center, “Republicans and Democrats are more divided along ideological lines – and partisan antipathy is deeper and more extensive – than at any point in the last two decades. These trends manifest themselves in myriad ways, both in politics and in everyday life. And a new survey of 10,000 adults nationwide finds that these divisions are greatest among those who are the most engaged and active in the political process.”¹



Ideological division affects our public life here in the West as it does in the rest of the country, in part because of the prevalence of public lands in the region² and the layers of regulation and bureaucracy that accompany them.³ In more recent times, a very different approach to western issues has taken root and spread to many quarters in the region. Conservationists, hunters and anglers, farmers and ranchers, loggers and even miners who had often spent decades at odds over public land and natural resource issues, have increasingly found common ground that they would never have imagined they might occupy together.⁴ The reason this matters so much is because democracy, at its very core, is about people solving problems together

Collaborative Problem-Solving in Idaho

Jan Brown ran a guest lodge in southeastern Idaho, on a blue-ribbon trout stream near Yellowstone Park.⁵ Her livelihood depended on the fact that there were big trout in the Henry's Fork of the Snake River, and that her guests liked to catch them. But the river was threatened from many directions. Cattle grazed near it, wearing down the banks that the big fish liked to slip under. State fish and game managers allowed more fish to be caught than the population



could ultimately sustain.⁶

The Henry's Fork Foundation (HFF), a conservation nonprofit, protects the Henry's Fork of the Snake River in southeastern Idaho. The group's aggressive advocacy had brought it into direct conflict with area ranchers, as it sought to remove cattle from the public lands abutting the river, where the ranchers had grown accustomed to leasing the public land. This was the environment into which Jan Brown stepped when HFF hired her as its executive director in 1991. Her presence in public hearings was met with hostility from farmers, as well as executive director Dale Swensen of the irrigation district. But Brown and Swensen eventually agreed to search for common ground by co-chairing a new group, the Henry's Fork Watershed Council (HFWC).⁷

The Idaho state legislature created the HFWC in 1994 as a response to pressure from Henry's Fork citizens, as well as a lack of cohesion regarding which government authority ran the Henry's Fork Basin, where over two dozen agencies claimed some authority.⁸ Government mismanagement had led to two manmade ecological disasters in 1992 that temporarily contaminated the water and ruined the fish supply.⁹ From then on, all perspectives would be heard before making contentious decisions again, so the council was made up of citizens, technical analysts and government agency representatives, who would review government plans surrounding the basin and make recommendations.¹⁰ The HFWC would not only serve as an open educational forum, but also work with agencies across multiple jurisdictions.¹¹ The organization has no formal power, but has become a trusted resource on watershed issues for everyone that has a stake.¹²

The Impact

From those very tentative beginnings, the watershed council met regularly for a good two decades until it was no longer really necessary. During that time, the HFWC had steadily, persistently, brought together all the competing interests in the watershed – farmers, ranchers, anglers, outfitters and guides, environmentalists – providing a forum where they could address whatever new challenges might arise on the Henry's Fork, abiding by the maxim that “none of us are as smart as all of us.”¹³ This collaboration has helped the HFWC take a leading role on projects such as a stream restoration effort, weed control project, and road improvements around the area.¹⁴ Today, the HFWC remains a platform for citizens and advocacy groups to share insights, such as seasonal climate predictions and updates on projects.¹⁵ The Council does not handle massive projects or those not relating to the watershed, but usually finds agreement to push forward on smaller improvement efforts.¹⁶

The Role of Philanthropy

Dozens of watershed councils and other landscape-scale, cross-ideological collaborative efforts have sprung up around the region in recent decades.¹⁷ For example, the Central Idaho Rangelands Network is a group of conservationists and farmers dedicated to utilizing and spreading better land and water protection practices in the Upper Salmon River, Lost Rivers

and Pioneer Mountains region of central Idaho. One of the entities that has supported the Rangelands Network is the Brainerd Foundation, which was also an early supporter of the Henry's Fork Foundation during Jan Brown's leadership. Brainerd's investment in these organizations was primarily in support of their advocacy activities.¹⁸ That has been the case in many of these instances of collaboration, when a strong advocacy organization begins to search for common ground with the "other side." Foundations like Brainerd that have trusted their creative grantees and continued to support them as they proceed to solve real problems and devise solutions that no amount of advocacy could have produced – those philanthropists have made a contribution to democracy they may not have intended, but that may outlast any more traditional investment they could have made.

Key Takeaways

- Citizen-run forums can alleviate division within communities, encourage civic participation on local projects, and be a useful resource for government agencies working in the area.
- Active involvement in and support of local land and water use councils, which have become common in the Northwest due to the prevalence of public lands, can foster democratic collaboration.

Endnotes

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4. Daniel Kemmis and Matthew McKinney, Collaboration and the Ecology of Democracy (Dayton, OH: The Kettering Foundation, 2011), 19-21, https://www.kettering.org/sites/default/files/product-downloads/Kemmis_Collab-Ecology.pdf; Nancy Langston, "Beyond the Oregon Protests: The Search for Common Ground," Yale Environment 360, January 28, 2016, https://e360.yale.edu/features/beyond_the_oregon_protests_the_search_for_common_ground.
5. Patti Sherlock, "Idaho learns to share two rivers," High Country News, May 13, 1996, <https://www.hcn.org/issues/59/1841>.
6. Kemmis and McKinney, Ecology of Democracy, 19.
7. Kemmis and McKinney, Ecology of Democracy, 19-20; Sherlock, "Idaho learns."
8. "Henry's Fork Watershed Council," Ecosystem Management Initiative, accessed July 26, 2018, <http://seas.umich.edu/ecomgt/cases/henrysfork/description.htm>.

9. Barb Cestero, *Beyond the Hundredth Meeting: A Field Guide to Collaborative Conservation on the West's Public Lands* (Tucson, AZ: Sonoran Institute, 1999), 21, <https://sonoraninstitute.org/files/pdf/beyond-the-hundredth-meeting-a-field-guide-to-collaborativeconservation-on-the-wests-public-lands-07011999.pdf>.
10. Ecosystem Management Initiative, "Henry's Fork Watershed."
11. Cestero, *Beyond the Hundredth*, 21.
12. Sherlock, "Idaho learns."
13. Ecosystem Management Initiative, "Henry's Fork Watershed."
14. See Cestero, *Beyond the Hundredth*, 21-28; Edward P. Weber, *Bringing Society Back In* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), 141-164, http://www.untagsmd.ac.id/files/Perpustakaan_Digital_1/ACCOUNTABILITY%20Bringing%20society%20back%20in%20%20grassroots%20ecosystem%20management,%20accountability.PDF for more details about the projects.
15. See "Henry's Fork Watershed Council," Henry's Fork Foundation, accessed May 8, 2018, <https://www.henrysfork.org/henrys-forkwatershed-council> for examples of updates.
16. Cestero, *Beyond the Hundredth*, 24-26.
17. "About," Southeast Alaska Watershed Coalition, accessed July 19, 2018, <https://www.alaskawatershedcoalition.org/about/>; "About Us," Montana Watershed Coordination Council, accessed July 19, 2018, <https://www.mtwatersheds.org/about/>; "Who We Are," Network of Oregon Watershed Councils, accessed July 19, 2018, <http://www.oregonwatersheds.org/who-we-are/>.
18. "Conservation Capacity Funding," accessed July 19, 2018, Brainerd Foundation, <https://www.brainerd.org/funding/conservationcapacity.php>; see "Organizations We Funded," Brainerd Foundation, accessed July 19, 2018, <https://www.brainerd.org/granteeprofile.php> for a partial list of grantees.