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6.4 Making rural partnerships work

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6.4.1 Introduction

Around 25% of the English countryside is designated for its landscape value, whether as an AONB or a National Park (NAAONB/NPE, 2015). These are categorised by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature as Category V, managed, cultural landscapes (IUCN, 1994), and increasingly seen as arenas for the pursuit of sustainable regional development (Mose, 2007). They are all managed in partnership with a variety of organisations, encompassing many stakeholders, who between them hold a wide range of objectives for how these places should be used. Whilst partnership working has long been a management feature, it is only relatively recently that it has been recognised as a new and emerging form of governance. Typically, this entails the coming together of multisector representatives with public, private, and voluntary and community sector interests to address a specific common objectives. The individual people who participate in a partnership (the actors) contribute a rich set of skills, knowledge and experience (Scott, 2012).

For our study, we sought to better understand the processes behind rural partnerships. Our project took place in Northumberland National Park, in the north east England. It is a rich, cultural landscape, encompassing part of the World Heritage Site of Hadrian's Wall, the valleys of the North Tyne and Redesdale, the sandstone ridges of Coquetdale, and the moors and grasslands of the Cheviot Hills, right up to the Scottish border (Figure 6.4 see the colour section). Northumberland National Park was designated in 1956 under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, the seventh and last English National Park to be designated during the 1950s. The two statutory purposes of these National Parks have changed little since 1949:

- To conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage.
- To promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities by the public.

Despite the designation of National Parks during the 1950s, it was not until the Local Government Act 1972 that every national park authority was required to publish a management plan. Subsequently, the Environment Act 1995 saw the creation of freestanding, independent national park authorities and the introduction of a statutory duty – to seek to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities within the National Park. They all require the assistance of other organisations to fulfil the statutory purposes and duty.

The Northumberland National Park Management Plan (2009–14) stated that the Authority's objectives would be achieved by:

- involving partners in developing and sharing ownership of the Plan and its priority actions;
- co-ordinating action, pooling resources and avoiding duplication; and
- building strong partnership agreements which foster trust and an understanding of each partners' strengths and abilities. (NNPA, 2009: 10).

Despite this commitment, there was little explanation provided as to how these intentions would be achieved, who would be responsible and to what extent, and how trust and understanding were to be fostered. It occurred to us that assumptions were being made around partnership working and our project was developed to find out what it meant in practice in Northumberland National Park.

The emergence of partnership working partly arose due to the perceived failure of the ‘top-down’ approach to stimulate progress (Barke and Newton, 1997; Scott, 2004; Derksen and Bock, 2009). During the 1990s, partnerships were viewed as the undisputed mode of governance in the UK. The growth of partnership working came to the forefront in Britain in 1997 with the New Labour government, with the newly elected prime minister, Tony Blair, famously stating that ‘joined-up problems demand joined-up solutions’ (Blair, 1997). This approach became a prerequisite across the EU as the Structural Funds under Objective 1 or 5b required partnership working. In rural areas, this was realised through initiatives such as the local action groups for LEADER, Rural Challenge, rural development boards and development areas, training and enterprise councils, enterprise agencies, economic partnerships, local enterprise companies and vital villages. Although rural policy formulation had fundamentally changed there was no blueprint for this new direction (Goodwin, 1998; Edwards *et al.*, 2001). Many partnerships came and went, with success often down to trial and error (Selin, 1999). Evaluations tended to be quite black and white, ultimately examining the destination – whether the partnership had achieved its ambitions – rather than the journey (Moseley, 2003a; 2003b). With this in-mind, the aim our research was to lift the lid on the processes underlying partnership working in rural areas.

6.4.2 Methodology

Northumberland National Park was chosen as the case study area because of the explicit focus on partnership working in its recent management plans since the turn of the 21st century (NNPA, 2003; NNPA, 2009). Our methodology was not to evaluate the performance of any given individual partnership. We designed a project that would reflect the experiences of the wide variety of stakeholders operating in Northumberland National Park and therefore required research techniques that would enable participants to share their knowledge and opinions. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain in-depth information from a wide range of participants. To determine which individuals would be interviewed, an initial list of 250 organisational stakeholders was constructed. These were then separated into nine different categories, which were then used to ensure that a range of different stakeholders were selected for interview. The categories were:

- community, voluntary, charity
- educational establishments
- local government
- local partnership
- membership organisation
- national government
- non-departmental public body
- private sector
- special-purpose local authority.

Using intrinsic knowledge of the key partners at Northumberland National Park, a shortlist of 18 different organisations was selected. From this, we selected actors who had significant knowledge of – or present involvement in – partnership working in Northumberland National Park. Overall, 23 actors were interviewed, including five from the National Park Authority, as the principal management body for the area. The interviewees included actor(s) from:

- a community development trust
- a parish council
- academics working in the field of protected area management
- Northumberland County Council, the local authority
- the Northumberland Uplands New LEADER Local Action Group
- Sustaine, a non-governmental organisation partnership board
- The Campaign for National Parks, a non-governmental organisation
- The Country Land and Business Association, a group representing rural landowners
- The National Farmers Union (NFU)
- The National Trust, a large conservation/amenity charity with land holdings
- The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), the government department responsible for national parks
- The Ministry of Defence, a government department with land holdings used for military training that cover some 23% of Northumberland National Park
- National Parks England, the body representing the English national park authorities to government
- The Environment Agency, the government agency responsible for environmental protection
- Natural England, the government agency with responsibility for landscape and public access in England
- a private estate from within the National Park
- a local tourism business
- Northumberland National Park Authority (NNPA)
- a political setting (i.e. a politician serving as both an elected Northumberland County Council Councillor and an appointed NNPA member)

In order to encourage interviewees to speak openly, honestly and freely, the identities of the actors who contributed to this research were anonymous. It would be wrong to assume that partnership values would be shared by all employees within an organisation (Larsen and Valentine, 2007; Van Huijstee *et al.*, 2007). Therefore the extent to which any individual could feasibly ‘represent’ an organisation is problematic, and perhaps reflective of the tensions that can sometimes exist between individuals and corporate goals. Nevertheless, the interviewees collectively had a significant level of experience

of partnership working with a wide range of organisations, and hence were able to provide detailed and in-depth insights into the processes and practices associated with partnership governance. Some of the partnerships that the participants were directly involved with were: Sustaine; Northumberland Strategic Partnership; Northumberland Tourism; LEADER+, and the subsequent new LEADER Approach; Cheviot Futures; the Catchment Sensitive Farming Partnership; the Lilburn Estates Farming Partnership; the Border Uplands Partnership; Coquetdale Business Club; the North Tyne and Redesdale Community Partnership, and the Glendale Gateway Trust.

6.4.3 A guide to rural partnership success

After the interviews were completed, the diagram in Figure 6.5 was constructed to help categorise the responses, which were divided into two broad themes, as shown on the left-hand side of the diagram. For each theme, responses were subdivided into a further three groups as on the right-hand side, so that they could be directly compared and contrasted between participants. What we have termed ‘governance factors’ are those factors with a

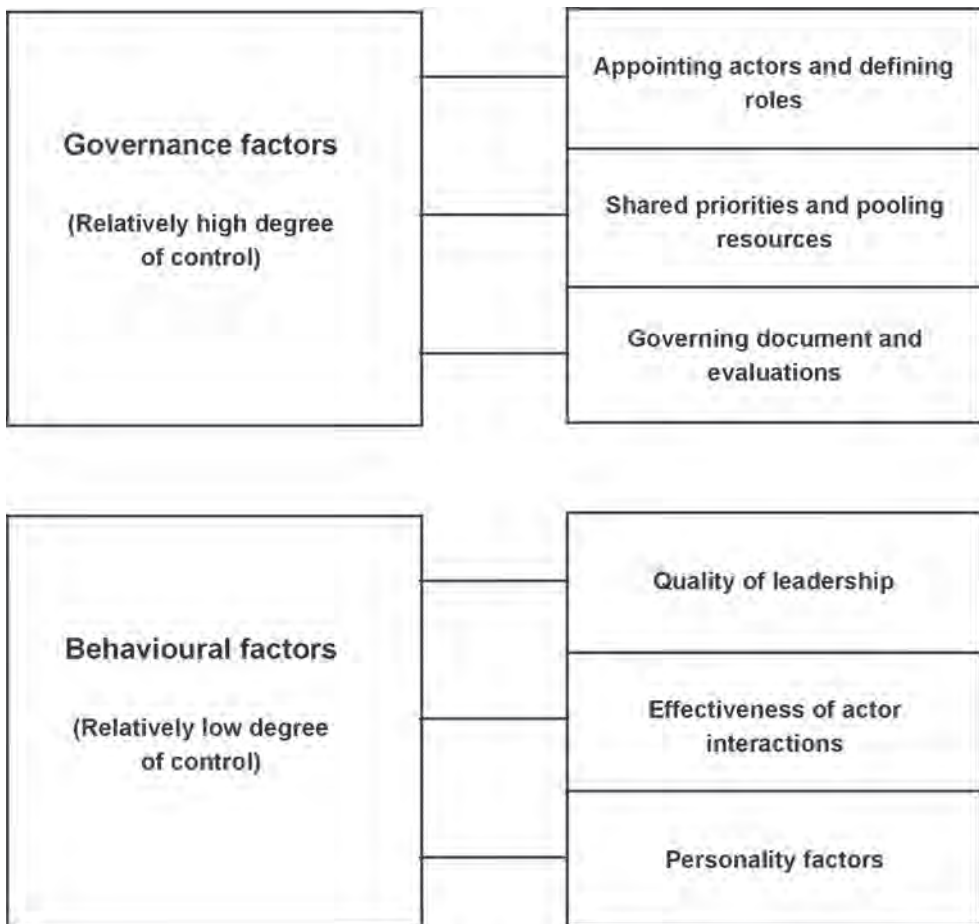


Figure 6.5 Themes used in coding survey responses: Northumberland National Park stakeholders

relatively high degree of control that organisations can actively manage. What are termed ‘behavioural factors’ have a relatively low degree of control and relate largely to the way in which actors choose to behave, and how they conduct relationships with each other.

Appointing actors and defining roles

This research identified several linked aspects of successful governance practice. For example, the participants from the Country Land and Business Association and the NFU emphasised the importance of actors’ authority and their personal time commitment to the partnership. Participants also cited the need to control the number of people in a partnership, with people voicing preferences for keeping the number of actors in the partnership low so that meetings did not become unwieldy. The Defra participant argued that certain personality traits are particularly important during the initiation of the partnership, such as enthusiasm and creativity, so that a sense of rapport can be quickly established. It was also noted that long-term partnerships need to be dynamic, with a flow of new people getting involved, as long-serving members make way to permit an influx of new ideas.

Review and cue

- Make sure you get the right people on board. If the partnership needs people with the authority to make decisions, then those are the people you should look to appoint.
- Be clear about the time commitments the partnership is likely to require. Estimate the number of meetings per year, and what your expectations are for the amount of work outside of meetings.
- Where possible, keep the partnership ‘fleet of foot’. Making sure every organisation that may have an interest is represented may make the partnership unwieldy and difficult to manage, so it’s best to concentrate on the ‘movers and shakers’. You can always invite others to join at a later date.
- At the start of a partnership, you need creative people who can set the vision and direction of the partnership, and generate enthusiasm in those around the table and beyond. People want to be part of exciting partnerships!
- For longer-term partnerships, establish a maximum number of years an actor can serve so that new people can join at a later date.

Shared priorities and pooling resources

When participants were asked ‘Why do you engage in partnership working?’, the most common explanation was shared priorities. For example, the community development trust participant referred to synergy and common goals, whereas the participant from the National Trust spoke of mutual understanding, vision, aims, objectives and trust. Participants from the LEADER Local Action Group, Natural England, the local tourism business, NNPA and Northumberland County Council all spoke of mutual benefits as a reason to engage in partnership activity. The participant from the Campaign for National Parks pointed out that not every partner has interest in the same issues, and therefore a range of motives may underpin the membership of a particular partnership.

Opinions were divided on whether members are able to gain additional influence by bringing resources into the partnership. The parish councillor, the politician and the

Environment Agency participant felt that influence could be secured by financial means, whereas the LEADER Local Action Group and the community development trust participants did not feel that a financial contribution should bring influence with it. The value of local knowledge was raised by several participants; however, it was argued that all partners should be treated equally, regardless of the resources that they can contribute.

Review and cue

- Identify and elaborate on common points of interest between the partner organisations. Find areas of work that put everyone on the same page, no matter their reasons.
- Partnerships should be underpinned by equity and a spirit of fairness. Although funds are likely to come with strings attached, where possible partners should collectively make decisions and be accountable as a group.
- Respect and value social capital. It gives partnerships a head start and local people are often part of the legacy at the conclusion, so it's best to keep them engaged throughout.

Governing document and evaluations

There are two common ways of establishing a formal agreement between partners. In the first a legally binding contract sets out the roles that each partner will perform and the amount of resources they will invest. This approach is perhaps best suited to large projects where a significant amount of funding is involved. The second approach is based on a document that is not legally binding, which sets out the terms of the partnership. This may take the form of a memorandum of understanding, indicating agreement on a course of action. When discussing partnerships, several participants spoke of the importance of a unifying document, or speculated on what might happen if this instrument was overlooked, or not used effectively. Figure 6.6 outlines the basic structure of a memorandum of understanding, demonstrating that its formation does not need to be an onerous task. Ideally, anyone new to the group will be able to pick this document up and quickly understand the parameters of the partnership.

Various participants warned that partnerships operating on goodwill alone are more vulnerable than those where a firm commitment is in place. Participants generally paid close attention to the governing document, perhaps reflecting previous negative experiences of partnership working. This document is an important tool that allows partners to explicitly set out the priorities of the partnership and how resources will be pooled, helping to ensure that the goodwill which exists at the initiation stage is not lost following implementation. In addition, the participants from the NFU and the community development trust emphasised the importance of all partners accepting the governing document, with the National Parks England participant arguing for a light-touch approach in its formulation, so that it was precise but not unduly lengthy.

Once the governing document has been agreed and published, the work of the partnership commences. At certain stages, it may be necessary to review progress. Different opinions were expressed by participants about the need to remain true to the initial vision of the partnership and on the importance of evaluation. The community development trust participant said that partnerships should remain focused on their original ambitions; whereas participants from NNPA said it was important to ensure that

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING: [TITLE OF PARTNERSHIP]

A partnership agreement to co-operatively work together to manage and operate [PROJECT] in [PLACE].

1.0 Preamble

1.1 **[Brief summary of history of partnership and how it came about]**

1.2 The purpose of the memorandum of understanding is to document the:

- Written agreement between parties to co-operatively work together on an agreed initiative.
- Responsibilities of the parties.
- Procedure for dispute resolution.

1.3 This is not a legal document. It is designed to capture the goodwill of both parties, so that this agreement is clear and concise.

1.4 The parties as referred to in this document mean:

- [LIST ALL PARTNERS]

2.0 Timescale

2.1 This memorandum of understanding will come into effect from [DATE] and will run until [DATE]. Its effectiveness will then be assessed and the parties will decide whether or not to continue the arrangement

2.2 Six months prior to the end of the memorandum of understanding, the parties will meet to discuss the exit strategy, or continuation of this agreement.

2.3 During the lifetime of the agreement, [THE PARTNERS] reserve the right to terminate this memorandum of understanding with [NUMBER] days' notice. This must be given in writing for the attention of the [CHIEF OFFICER]. It is not expected that this right will be exercised during the first six months of operation. In the event that the agreement is cancelled, the management of [PROJECT] will revert back to [PARTNER] thereafter. All financial commitments from both parties must be honoured.

2.4 If major capital expenditure is required, both parties will meet with 14 days' notice to discuss how this should be funded.

3.0 Responsibilities of [PARTNER 1]

3.1 [PARTNER 1] operate [PROJECT] for a period of [NUMBER] years, starting [DATE].

3.2 [PARTNER 1] will be responsible for:

- [LIST OF RESPONSIBILITIES]

3.3 The costs for all the responsibilities detailed in 3.2 will be borne by [PARTNER 1].

4.0 Responsibilities of [PARTNER 2]

4.1 [PROJECT] will remain the property of [PARTNER 2].

4.2 [PARTNER 2] will be responsible for:

- [LIST OF RESPONSIBILITIES]

4.3 The costs for all the responsibilities detailed in 4.2 will be borne by [PARTNER 2].

5.0 Dispute Resolution

5.1 If a dispute arises between the operation of [PROJECT] with either or both of the parties, it must be investigated and resolved as swiftly as is possible, under the auspices of [PARTNER 1] and [PARTNER 2]. All resolution meetings must be documented.

5.2 If no resolution is found, the dispute will be referred to the chairs of [PARTNER 1] and [PARTNER 2].

6.0 Declaration

6.1 On behalf of all interested parties, both chairs:

- Confirm that, to the best of their knowledge and belief, all of the information in this memorandum of understanding is true and correct.
- Agree to deliver the partnership that is outlined.

Signed and dated by [PARTNER 1] and [PARTNER 2].

Figure 6.6 Proforma of memorandum of understanding

a partnership delivered strategically important and relevant objectives, which can be reviewed and updated. The National Parks England participant was weary of tick-box exercises that detract from delivering projects, suggesting that evaluations for their own sake are not a good use of time or resources. The Environment Agency participant argued that partnerships need to evolve, and that evaluations keep them warm by providing evidence that they are moving in the right direction. The approach from the private sector was much clearer cut because of the time and financial implications of

their involvement. The tourism business participant emphasised that if involvement in a partnership became disproportionately time consuming, the costs of being engaged could begin to outweigh the benefits, a point reiterated by the Country Land and Business Association participant.

Review and cue

- Partnerships work best if they are underpinned by a written document, outlining what the objectives are and what each partner will commit towards achieving those objectives. This may take the form of a memorandum of understanding or a more formal contract, depending on the scope of the partnership.
- Regular progress reviews help to maintain focus on the objectives. Agree how and when these reviews will be undertaken at the start. Evaluations are a tool to help to keep the partnership on track. Do not let them evolve into anything more than that.
- Be conscious that the actors from the private sector need to see results sooner rather than later, so as to justify their time. Identify some ‘quick wins’ at the start so the partnership can establish a track record for delivery and try to keep the momentum going.

As observed above, while interviewees had different perspectives on the governance factors it is generally possible to reach a point of consensus and agree the rules or codified practices through which a partnership will operate. However, there are a series of factors which elude attempts by organisations to exercise control over them.

The behavioural factors of partnership working were generally discussed in terms of the performance and competencies of actors. Even where the governance aspects are sound, partnership working can become more challenging if actors do not exhibit compatible cooperation behaviours (e.g. retaining rather than sharing, important information or adopting a confrontational rather than a collaborative approach). Hence, because how an individual conducts relationships and interacts in meetings is outside the direct control of the organisation, even if suitable governance arrangements are all in place, a partnership can still be fraught with difficulties, as will be discussed in the remainder of this section.

Quality of leadership

The actors in a partnership will usually look to the chair for leadership. With the role comes responsibility, which goes beyond facilitating meetings. An effective chair will guide the direction of the partnership and motivate actors to build and maintain momentum. This was also expressed in the literature on rural partnerships skills (Balloch and Taylor, 2001; Laing *et al.*, 2008; Saxena, 2005).

The NFU participant preferred an independent chair, whilst the tourism business participant spoke of a lack of enthusiasm in the private sector for taking on administrative roles, because of the extra work required. The Defra participant said that the chair builds trust through empathy, by understanding the needs and expectations of partners. The NFU participant also spoke of the importance of creating an environment where everyone can share their views, fully explaining decisions to ensure clarity around the reasoning.

Indeed, the chair may have to mediate differences between partners, as acknowledged by participants from Sustaine and NNPA. Finally, as highlighted by the Environment Agency participant, the chair also requires good administrative support. Such administrative duties may be more suited to public sector partners because they can be time consuming and labour intensive.

The chair can cultivate an environment that goes beyond achieving a corporate goal, creating an inspirational and motivated atmosphere. Hence, while the appointment of a suitable chair is ‘controllable’, there are a range of factors which will make the identification of a chair with the right attributes difficult. Finding a person with the requisite leadership skills who is able to harness appropriate support and who is widely perceived as independent is often a challenge and such individuals tend to be in high demand.

Review and cue

- The choice of chair is central to the success of the partnership. Identify and persuade someone with good leadership, motivational and communications skills. Before the appointment is made, informally speak to the other actors on the partnership and explain the proposal and your rationale. The chair should be appointed by a simple vote on an annual basis.
- When considering a vice-chair, be wary that there may be an expectation that at some point they will succeed the chair. Therefore your search for a vice-chair should use same criteria. The vice-chair should also be appointed by a simple vote on an annual basis.
- If there are representatives from the public sector on the partnership, who are paid to be involved, they should assume secretarial duties, such as putting the agenda together, taking minutes and arranging field trips.

Effectiveness of actor interactions

The actors in a partnership will communicate both within and outside partnership meetings. During the initiation phase of a partnership, it is important to convince other actors that any given project or partnership is worth investing in. Some participants used the term ‘buy-in’ and spoke of the importance of communication and information sharing, through face-to-face contact, telephone and emails. The participant from Northumberland County Council was particularly keen on building social relationships, stressing that building trust at an early stage may pay dividends in the long term.

Review and cue

- The chair will need to build rapport between the actors in the partnership. Contact details for all actors must be shared and the partnership should be as transparent as possible.
- Trust is developed over time. Get to know the people you’re working with professionally and always remember that emails are not a substitute for face-to-face time!

Personal factors

Although an awareness of trust, honesty and power is important, measuring how they influence a partnership is not straightforward (Jones and Little, 2000; Derkzen *et al.*, 2008; Furmankiewicz *et al.*, 2009). Participants in this study made very liberal use of the word ‘personalities’. For example, an NNPA participant said, ‘Well a lot depended on the personalities’, without actually explaining what that meant. This usage was a euphemism to hide instances of distrust, dishonesty and a lack of activity. Participants from the Ministry of Defence and the community development trust noted that partnerships should be made between partners (organisations) and not between actors (people), yet in practice organisations are always represented by people. Ultimately both these participants argued that personalities matter. On paper, the language of partnership strategies should be about organisations and not actors. However, a good relationship between the actors was said to facilitate successful partnership working in interview after interview. For example, with so many stakeholders to work with, the National Trust participant reflected on the importance of maintaining good personal relationships in a professional way. The private estate participant said that without a sound relationship, it becomes difficult to negotiate on any given matter.

Review and cue

- Personalities matter. At the start, why not let the actors define the spirit of the partnership they want to operate in? You will find that respect, openness and cooperation are important to everyone. You may even wish to write a statement of culture and values, to underpin the ethos of the partnership.

6.4.4 An aide-mémoire for partnerships

Our research sought to better understand how partnerships operate in an IUCN Category V protected area and the results are illuminating. It was found that partnership working is highly complicated and success is dependent on a number of factors simultaneously operating in harmony. The Ministry of Defence participant made a general observation on partnership working to the researcher, saying, ‘There’s no science to it, I’m afraid’. If partnership working is not a science, then this research has gone some way to show that it is most definitely an art.

The diagram shown in Figure 6.5 neatly encapsulates six areas of partnership working, categorised under governance arrangements and behavioural factors. There is an appreciation that it is more straightforward to exert a degree of control on the former rather than the latter. However, we did not attempt to weight the six areas in terms of their importance, but simply understood that there were a host of interlinking factors that determined the success of any rural partnership.

One aspect of partnership working not captured by Figure 6.5 was the importance of reputation. Several participants shared anecdotes or problems of working with certain partners, and in particular those to do with the bureaucratic nature of the public sector. So even if the approach to partnership working is sound and takes all the considerations into account, actors will still be judged by historical relationships. This means that there is perhaps an overarching dimension to the six factors considered in this chapter already, that of an organisation’s reputation. Partnerships rarely start on a blank page;

each actor is likely to come with a history, either personal or linked to the past actions of their organisation.

Furthermore, while it was generally argued that ‘influence comes from the chequebook’ as the parish councillor put it, the legitimacy of this financial influence was challenged by several participants. For instance, if any given partner has significant funds to direct to a partnership, it is the way in which those funds are directed that is crucial: whether money is used to exert control, or whether it is used to empower others. Either way, an outstanding finding from this research was that the personality of the individual actors engaged in partnership working can influence its likelihood of success. While actors can work together to draw up a governance document or undertake evaluations, the ability of individuals to be cooperative cannot be assumed. This is not necessarily something that can be taught, though perhaps it can be learnt through experience.

Partnership working in protected areas is both important and, in certain respects, distinctive, because of its significance in the management of these substantial, multiuse areas of land. IUCN Category V protected areas are typically large areas with high landscape and biodiversity value that provide a range of societal services while also sustaining the livelihoods of the communities within them. Many stakeholders pursue multiple objectives while land tenure patterns are often complex and particular to the protected area in question. Partnerships tend to consist of actors with established professional relationships, often involved in multiple partnership structures relating both formally and informally to the management strategies of the protected area. While partnership structures proliferate, the prerequisites of good partnership working are essentially the same.

6.4.5 Conclusion

Our research set out to examine partnership working in Northumberland National Park. It was an interesting case study to examine, because the management plan obliged the National Park Authority to work in partnership with other organisations. Despite this commitment to work in partnership, however, the document sets out the final destination, rather than providing assistance and insights for protected area managers on how to get there. This form of governance is especially relevant in IUCN Category V protected areas because they are already human influenced, and each has a range of stakeholders interested in their management. Therefore some wider conclusions can be drawn from this research and applied across IUCN Category V protected areas.

Most such protected areas face the challenge of operating within a small budget, at a time when an ever greater emphasis is being placed on the importance of the services that these areas provide to society. Protected area managers must continue to work in partnership. Inevitably while partners often share common interests, they often have different goals and priorities. This brings a wide range of organisations with environmental, social and economic interests to the partnership table. Our research found that some behavioural factors, such as history and personal relationships, can be difficult to control, but other aspects, like the willingness of public sector organisations to provide good administrative support and to develop relevant skills and capacity within private and voluntary/community sector organisations, may be more manageable. Furthermore, it is important to increase awareness of where things can go wrong and encourage actors to look critically at how their partnerships are working, thus enabling them to act swiftly to address any instabilities caused by personality clashes, rivalries or a lack of good leadership.

Working in partnership is a multilateral process, and therefore protected area managers should think about what they can offer partners and carefully consider how they can better address the challenges of partnership working. To assist them, this research has demonstrated the importance of two themes discussed in the literature on working in partnership (governance and behaviour), and has further identified six relevant areas within those themes. We identified 17 learning lessons for success, which collectively form an 'aide-mémoire' for anyone looking to set-up a new rural partnership.

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Figure 6.4 The Northumberland National Park

Note: The headquarters of the Northumberland National Park Authority is in Hexham