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Strengthening Collaboration Between Washington State and British Columbia

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INTRODUCTION

There are a variety of benefits that arise from collaboration across the Canada-US border. In some sectors, the value of collaboration is measurable. For example, travel or trade volumes can be equated with specific economic benefits. This is the case with tourism and supply chain networks. There are traceable benefits associated with cross-border business integration and the development of a shared 'innovation ecosystem'. However, how does one measure the value of having good relations with neighbors? Or the benefits that result from developing more resilient environmental and economic conditions that are created by joint responses to shared natural disasters? The value of cross-border collaboration is far reaching and the benefits of strengthening it through a formal mechanism have intrinsic value to the quality of life of both British Columbians and Washingtonians. We are partners in trade relations, businesses, security, transportation, and industry. But most importantly, we are neighbors, families, friends, and sports rivals with shared goals for the region we call home.

BACKGROUND

The US and Canada have developed many successful and innovative cross-border partnerships that span multiple sectors and scales. At the national scale, our border agencies coordinate, our military, security forces, and coast guards collaborate, and the leaders of our respective federal governments regularly communicate. While the broader Canada – US relationship plays a role in setting the context for cross-border regions, it is sub-national organizations and networks that drive solutions and innovation from the ground up. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the region connecting western Washington State and British Columbia, which has a long history of cross-border collaboration. These efforts range from formal government-to-government agreements such as the 1992 Environmental Cooperation Agreement, to the Cascadia Innovation Corridor initiative[1], spurred by the private sector. Non-governmental organizations and civil society are particularly active in transboundary environmental collaboration. Tribes and First Nations also coordinate across the border through the Coast Salish Gathering and have used that platform to hold government-to-government discussions on high priority issues. While a comprehensive analysis of cross-border collaboration in this region is beyond the scope of this brief, it is important to note that regional efforts, while strong at times, remain largely informal and ad hoc. That said, the BC—WA region is consistently identified as a model for cross-border collaboration, both in North America and globally[2].

REGIONAL CROSS-BORDER COLLABORATION

In 2018, the BPRI hosted a one-day forum that brought together government agency officials, policy professionals, academics, and private industry to discuss the current state of cross-border collaboration in the region[3]. In 2023, the challenges remain the same, and include misalignment of funding, lack of data harmonization, and different governmental structures and jurisdictional authority. While some champion the benefits of collaborating across the border, for others it can be difficult to identify resources or political imperatives for engaging in cross-border work.

Climate Change in a Cross-Border Bioregion

Climate change is a complex, existential issue that requires regional and global action. In just the last few years, our region has been severely impacted by hot, dry conditions that led to forest fires and urban smoke in the summer months, and an atmospheric river that brought catastrophic flooding of the Nooksack River[4] in the autumn. Having structured and intentional working relationships across the border would foster resiliency and faster recovery in the face of shared challenges associated with natural disasters and environmental health. Both are of increasing concern in the face of climate change.

Shared Waters

The waters of the Salish Sea provide the most obvious example of shared issues of concern, with an international shipping lane overlying much of the border. Marine life such as the endangered Southern Resident killer whales require recovery and protection measures on both sides of the border. It's not just animals that are mobile; underwater noise travels, as do contaminants. Climate change exacerbates many of these environmental concerns, requiring a holistic approach to ecosystem restoration.

Map Authored 2021: Aquila Flower "Salish Sea Bioregion Map[5]"

Some common themes about the nature of cross-border collaboration in the region include:

Informal structures. Much of the region's cross-border collaboration is built upon informal structures rather than formalized agreements or processes.

Relationships. The most important element of collaboration is strong relationships and communities of practice; people who share a professional role learning and problem-solving together.

Geography & Identity. Shared lands and waters in the Cascadia/Salish Sea region can necessitate and/or mobilize collaboration.

A "culture of collaboration" in the region. We tend to see the value in collaboration, recognizing cross-border relationships and projects as advantageous rather than politicized or territorial.

Regional governance structure. There is a precedent and practice for regional governance in the BC and WA relationship, particularly at the governor-premier level and among some agencies.

Common barriers/challenges include:

Compartmentalization. Silos remain, and we need to start cross-pollinating ideas from one sector to another. This is particularly important in the face of all-encompassing challenges such as the impacts associated with climate change[6].

Shifts in policy and personnel. Federal policy guidance is inconsistent, and changes with administrations. Administrative turnover can also shape personnel and staffing arrangements, making professional relationships challenging to sustain.

Different structures and scales. Different funding cycles between countries inhibit alignment. Jurisdictional authority is also different on each side of the border; while there is sometimes interest in regional collaboration, federal barriers can be difficult to overcome.

Sector-specific advantages of institutionalized support for cross-border networks:

Transportation/infrastructure planning. In a typical year, over 12 million trips are made from BC to WA. Support for cross-border collaboration will improve future modeling efforts, increase efficiencies, and promote tourism, particularly in areas most impacted by Canadian travelers.

Business/trade integration. Canada is Washington's top bilateral trade partner, accounting for 21% ($23.3 billion) of Washington's trade portfolio, the majority of which moves through our land ports with BC. WA and BC also share integrated supply chains and increasingly connected businesses. An institutionalized structure can foster dialogue to alleviate jurisdictional complexities, barriers to labor mobility and innovation. It would also aid in the creation of public-private partnerships to assist Washington business interests.

Environment. The international shared waters of the Salish Sea face significant environmental threats that require collaborative efforts between BC and WA for progress to be made. Current efforts ensure regular communications and sharing of information such as the Governor's Southern Resident Orca Task Force and the Statement of Cooperation between US EPA and Environment and Climate Change Canada, yet there is a need to formalize stronger collaboration and alignment of both management strategies and goals to face these challenges[7].

RECOMMENDATIONS

The regional benefits of cross-border collaboration are promising, but will require a more formalized, ongoing structure to sustain and strengthen them. This can be accomplished through the institutionalization of cross-border collaboration at the state to province scale, which can then interface with both federal governments, Tribes, and First Nations.

Create a formal structure that is not vulnerable to political turnover. Informal collaborations are valuable; however, more structure, such as regular meetings or formal agreements with designated task groups, can ensure more sustained and functional collaborative processes. While issues, events, and specific projects can bring together stakeholders across the border, a lack of support leaves cross-border collaboration vulnerable as people change roles. Some form of institutionalization is needed for longevity.

Embrace a model of integrated governance. Collaboration in a cross-border environment is complicated by the fact that not only are there 'horizontal' linkages across an international border, there are also 'vertical linkages' across scales, including two federal governments, and Indigenous Nations. An institutional structure that supports collaboration between BC and WA should be designed with the ability to work collaboratively within a broader governance framework.

Foster a cross-sectoral approach. Cross-border collaboration in the region tends to be highly sectoral, with collaborative processes and projects existing within silos. A comprehensive cross-sectoral approach is evident with both the Cascadia Innovation Corridor and the Pacific Northwest Economic Region, both of which are efforts that should be leveraged to create more opportunities to learn from other sectors and innovate through sharing ideas and networks.

Co-management. Tribes and First Nations must be included in the process and respect given to their sovereignty and Treaty Rights.

BENEFITS

Collaborative processes create opportunities for practitioners to build personal relationships with one another, and this relational network in turn creates pathways for sharing best practices, leveraging comparative advantages, and fostering innovation. The BC- WA region should be a global showcase for well-developed cross-border relationships and systems. We already have the basic building blocks; cultures and economies that connect across the border, political systems work well together, and a desire to work on projects with shared values. We have an optimal environment for further innovation in collaborative processes yet, like most things, these efforts must be nurtured to excel. The support provided by an institutional structure initiated at a highly visible scale (i.e., the Governor's Office) would benefit many sectors and areas throughout the region, spanning agricultural trade in the east, to transportation networks along the coastal areas, to the development of more resilient responses to shared impacts from natural disasters.

CONCLUSION

Regions without institutional capacity will continue to address cross-border challenges in an ad hoc and piecemeal fashion. The Cascadia/Salish Sea Region is better positioned than any other region along the Canada – US border to gain the benefits of stronger cross-border collaboration. In addition to already having a 'culture of collaboration' and shared quality of life values, our region will welcome the 2026 FIFA World Cup, which is estimated to attract a larger audience than the Vancouver Olympics. While the urgency of climate-induced natural hazards is impetus enough to strengthen BC-WA relations, being positioned on a world stage is a tangible opportunity to embrace this goal.

ENDNOTES

1. "The Cascadia Innovation Corridor: Advancing a Cross-Border Economy," https://cedar.wwu.edu/bpri_publications/117/. BPRI Report.

2. North American Borderlands in Comparative Perspective, (North American Borders in Comparative Perspective | UAPress (arizona.edu).

3. "Regional Cross-Border Collaboration between the U.S. and Canada," https://cedar.wwu.edu/bpri_publications/113/. BPRI Border Brief.

4. Jefferies, Regina and Hager, Kit, "Learning from the Past: Governing Transboundary Nooksack River Flooding" https://cedar.wwu.edu/bpri_publications/133/. BPRI Border Brief.

5. Flower, Aquila, "Salish Sea Bioregion Reference Map" (2021). Salish Sea Maps. https://cedar.wwu.edu/salish_maps/4

6. Jones, J., Keller, P., and van der flier Keller, E. (2022). Salish Sea governance. Emerging Issues in the Salish Sea, Issue 1. G. Broadhurst & N.J.K. Baloy (Contributing Eds.). Salish Sea Institute, Western Washington University. https://cedar.wwu.edu/salish_pubs/33/

7. See State of Salish Sea report, 'Call to Action' section: https://cedar.wwu.edu/salish_pubs/6/.

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