



Collaboration as a Core Value

How Golden Gate NRA Uses Intrapark Collaboration To Meet the Challenges of a Large, Diverse Urban Park

Golden Gate National Recreation Area (NRA) has a long tradition of working collaboratively with a wide network of external partners including the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy and the Presidio Trust. This practice is part of the legacy of former superintendent Brian O'Neill, who led the park from 1986 to 2009 and who understood that parks need to build relationships with surrounding communities versus operating as isolated islands. O'Neill's [21 Partnership Factors](#) for external collaboration still serve as a set of best practices for community engagement.

Collaboration very much continues to be the *modus operandi* for operations at Golden Gate NRA and the two units, Muir Woods National Monument (NM) and Fort Point National Historic Site (NHS), it jointly manages. NPS employees collaborate with external partners and internally across divisions and work units. In fact, collaboration is so much a part of the park's DNA that collaborative principles are included in the parks' Foundation Documents, Strategic Plan, and General Management Plan.

This case study explores a few of the ways that Golden Gate NRA leverages collaborative approaches internally among park divisions and branches to more effectively meet the NPS mission and create an environment that promotes sharing, optimizes the additive strengths of teams, and inspires creativity.

Complex Challenges

As a large park in an urban area, Golden Gate NRA experiences some unique challenges in addition to the nearly ubiquitous budget and staffing shortages that parks experience.

Golden Gate NRA consists of park lands spread over a large geographic area. The park is located in the San



View of the Golden Gate Bridge from the Marin Headlands. Lands managed by Golden Gate NRA are set within a unique mix of urban, suburban, and protected open spaces. The park contains a wealth of diverse natural and cultural resources. Park staff use collaborative techniques to meet management objectives and serve the public and park constituents.

Francisco Bay Area, one of the largest and most diverse metropolitan areas in the United States with more than 9 million residents. The park is equally an international destination and a neighborhood park where local community members gather and recreate.

Established in 1972, Golden Gate is a relatively young park. It is also highly complex, with diverse natural, cultural, and recreational resources. The park has undertaken restoration projects that has rehabilitated natural features and landscapes, such as the restoration of creek, lagoon, and floodplain habitats at Muir Beach and the transformation of Crissy Field from a paved lot to a tidal lagoon. The park contains more than 1,400 historic structures, and many buildings are leased or occupied by nonprofit partners, or are used for community art or educational programs.

Many of Golden Gate NRA's challenges are interdisciplinary in nature requiring

"There's really no other way to do it. Collaboration makes us all stronger and makes us do better work. I don't think we could accomplish our goals without collaboration."



Alison Forrestel
Chief

Natural Resources & Science

Golden Gate National Recreation Area encompasses more than 80,000 acres in three counties (Marin, San Francisco, and San Mateo) in and around San Francisco. The park includes world-renowned destinations like Alcatraz Island and the Presidio, as well as a diversity of sites of regional and national importance, including the Marin Headlands, Stinson Beach, Fort Mason, Ocean Beach, Fort Funston, Sweeney Ridge, and Mori Point. The park has 121 miles of park boundary and 91 miles of bay and coastal shoreline.

The recreation area has incredible biodiversity, and is part of the UNESCO Golden Gate Biosphere Reserve. Thirty-eight threatened and endangered species are found within Golden Gate's boundaries along with more than half of North America's bird species. Golden Gate also commemorates a rich cultural heritage, containing 5 National Historic Landmark Districts, 13 National Register of Historic Places properties, 7 National Register-eligible properties, and an estimated 500 archeological sites.

Golden Gate NRA is the second most-visited unit of the National Park System with an annual visitation of more than 15 million.

Muir Woods National Monument preserves the primeval character and ecological integrity of the last remaining old-growth redwood forest in the Bay Area. Some of the redwood trees are nearly 1,000 years old and reach heights of more than 250 feet. More than one million people visit the 558-acre monument each year. Visitors explore the forest on six miles of boardwalks and trails, some of which connect to neighboring park lands and Pacific beaches.

Fort Point National Historic Site contains one of the finest examples of Third System Civil War-era forts in the United States. Fort Point was also the most proximal fortification responsible for guarding the Golden Gate. Annual visitation at Fort Point NHS is approximately 1.5 million. The fort sits on 29 acres at the south anchorage of the Golden Gate Bridge.

Muir Woods National Monument and Fort Point National Historic Site are managed as distinct park units within Golden Gate NRA.



Collaborators

Three NPS units (Golden Gate NRA, Muir Woods NM, and Fort Point NHS) are managed as part of Golden Gate NRA. Some staff are assigned to specific sites like Alcatraz or Muir Woods, but otherwise management of the park is organized into divisions that serve all park areas following typical NPS organizational practices. In FY18, Golden Gate NRA had 315 FTEs, and a budget of \$27.2 million.

Park operations, under the direction of the general superintendent and deputy superintendent, are organized into the following divisions:

- » Interpretation & Education
- » Visitor & Resource Protection
- » Cultural Resources & Museum Management
- » Natural Resources & Science
- » Facility Management
- » Planning & Environmental Programs
- » Business Management

- » Communications & External Affairs
- » Administration
- » Project Management

Staff from across all park divisions take part in collaborative efforts, but this case study focuses on the efforts of the following divisions and branches.

Natural Resources & Science

The Natural Resources Division has 25-30 FTEs and works to understand and care for the abundant natural resources found in Golden Gate NRA. Natural Resources staff restores natural processes and habitat, and uses the best available science to balance recreation and resource protection and to promote resilience in the face of future change.

Visitor & Resource Protection

Golden Gate NRA has a classic large-park Ranger Division that consists of law enforcement

rangers, firefighters, lifeguards, and investigators. Areas of emphasis include the division's aquatic safety program, park boundary encroachment, and visitor safety. The division has approximately 60 FTEs.

Interpretation & Education / Media Branch

The Interpretation and Education Division at Golden Gate provides interpretive services at park sites including Alcatraz and Muir Woods, has a formal education branch, an outreach program, and a social media program, all in service of promoting stewardship of park resources. It also manages the Golden Gates' volunteer and intern programs, a large collaborative effort that involves the entire park. The division has approximately 60 FTEs.

The Media Branch is responsible for the park's social media accounts, website, wayside exhibits, and park brochures.

Planning & Environmental Programs

The Planning and Environmental Programs Division is responsible for environmental compliance, planning and project review, sustainability, and environmental remediation.

The division works with project managers, other park divisions, park partners, and other stakeholders to on all aspects of planning from initial conception to approval. The project review process requires interdisciplinary collaboration which is facilitated by the division's environmental protection specialists.

Planning and Environmental Programs has approximately 16 FTEs, including two community liaison positions that are responsible for proactive communication with stakeholders and park neighbors.

a range of expertise and roles to address. Staff at Golden Gate NRA use a variety of collaborative strategies including standing up interdivisional teams that allow them to effectively address complex interdisciplinary issues.

Natural Resource Preservation

All NPS employees contribute towards meeting the agency's mission of conserving park resources for the benefit of future generations while allowing for their enjoyment, but Visitor and Resource Protection and Natural Resources personnel have tangible—albeit different—roles in the preservation of Golden Gate's resources. Golden Gate has found that to truly protect park resources, natural resource specialists and park rangers must work in unison, aligned by shared goals and sustained through mutual respect.

The ranger division and resource management work independently in some realms of park operations, but their operations are integrated in areas where success can only be achieved by collaboration. Sometimes one division literally cannot do their job without support from the other, such as in the case of sea cave inventorying: Natural Resources specialists cannot access sea caves without assistance from the Ranger Division, their boats, and skilled boat operators.

Much of the collaboration between the two divisions is informal and takes place at the field level, although Natural Resources Chief Alison Forrestel and Chief Ranger Chad Marin communicate regularly to advance shared goals.

Management of habituated coyotes in the Marin Headlands and other parts of the park is one of the pressing park issues that both divisions are tackling together. Coyotes that have lost their natural fear of humans have acted aggressively towards people. Consequently, NPS managers have employed countermeasures to address negative human-wildlife interactions, including hazing problem animals. They have also launched a public education program on wildlife feeding, and initiated a tracking study to detail coyote movements.

While the Natural Resources Division leads the project and is responsible for planning, funding, and permitting, the Visitor and Resource Protection Division plays a supporting but key role. Rangers assist wildlife biologists



The purpose of Muir Woods NM is to preserve the old-growth redwood forest for scientific values and inspiration. Redwood Renewal, a multifaceted initiative to protect and restore park resources and enhance visitor experiences, is ongoing and is scheduled to be completed by 2023. Priority projects include salmon habitat enhancement, implementation of a reservation system for private vehicles and shuttle passengers, rehabilitation of water and wastewater systems, redesign of parking areas and visitor amenities for sustainable park access, and road improvements.



The purpose of Fort Point National Historic Site is to preserve and interpret Fort Point. Fort Point sits in a strategic location at the entrance of the San Francisco Bay. The fort was one of the first major U.S. Army installations in the Bay Area. Fort Point lies directly underneath the southern end of the Golden Gate Bridge and is part of the coastal corridor that extends to Crissy Field's East Beach.

by helping design the hazing program, identifying areas where human-coyote interactions occur, implementing wildlife-related closures, and doing firearms work. Communication between the staffs of the two divisions is essential for this project.

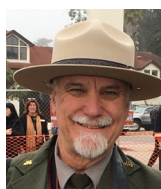
The two divisions also collaborate on

resource preservation issues such as boundary encroachments and violations of park regulations that damage resources. Boundary encroachments are a significant issue at Golden Gate NRA since much of the park borders private land. Visitor and Resource Protection handles the criminal part of



Golden Gate NRA is conducting a coyote tracking study in the Marin Headlands to better understand coyote movements and the areas where coyote-human interactions are occurring. Gabi Dunn collaborated with law enforcement rangers to conceptualize, design, and locate educational signs directing visitors to not feed wildlife in the park.

“Social media goes on and on. That’s part of the issue—every month we do posts and have to populate our editorial calendar. With a small team, and a lot of demands, we can’t do it ourselves. We definitely need collaboration between divisions in order to keep the content coming and to have it be high quality.”



Will Elder
Media Team Lead

External Partners

While this case study focuses on how Golden Gate NRA uses collaboration internally (i.e., between park divisions and branches), their intrapark practices are only one aspect of the park’s commitment to collaboration as a core value. The park uses beliefs in community, inclusion, and partnership as guiding principles, with meaningful community engagement as an emphasis area.

Golden Gate NRA partners with dozens of different outside organizations. Two of the park’s most significant partners are the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy and the Presidio Trust. The Parks Conservancy is the park’s cooperating association and philanthropic partner created to support park preservation, enhance visitor experiences, and build a stewardship community. The Presidio Trust is a unique federal agency mandated to manage the Presidio without direct taxpayer support.

A full list of Golden Gate NRA’s external partners is found on the [partners](#) and [community partners](#) pages on park’s [website](#).



encroachment incidents and Natural Resources personnel conduct damage assessment and make recommendations for restoration where warranted.

Social Media Team

Golden Gate NRA has an active social media program that regularly posts content on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. Interpretation’s Media Branch leads the social media team, which consists of approximately 10–12 core members mostly from Interpretation and supervisors at park sites like Alcatraz. Representatives from Natural Resources and other divisions are also important members of the group. The team uses an editorial calendar to schedule content, identifying topics based on current or upcoming park events, but also to align with agency emphasis areas such as commemorations or national events.

In the past, public communication through social media wasn’t always as effective as it could have been. For example, there were past instances when the park posted inaccurate information which affected the park’s credibility and potentially complicated efforts to protect park resources.

The interdivisional social media team was developed about five years ago to provide an effective mechanism to develop high quality content that utilizes the diverse expertises and perspectives of a cross-divisional team. Frontline interpreters know the subjects that interest the public and understand how to effectively communicate complex information. Resource managers and scientists provide the subject-matter expertise to accurately communicate technical information about current resource management projects. Golden Gate’s resource managers have been involved in social media posts that described telemetry (e.g., tracking) studies or species reintroductions. Law enforcement and public affairs team members participate to ensure that posts promote visitor safety and resource protection.

By working together, the social media team creates content that is compelling, accurate, promotes safety and resource protection, and is richer and more informative than could be developed by a person or a division working independently.

Collaboration with other divisions also provides the Media Branch with the

still imagery and video clips needed to connect and inspire viewers and effectively communicate through social media platforms.

To improve effectiveness, the social media team has developed a set of guidelines to help them craft messages about the park's natural resources without inadvertently communicating messages that compromise resource preservation or visitor safety. These best practices include tips about obscuring location information for sensitive species (e.g., providing broad location descriptions versus specific ones), using positive framing (such as highlighting the benefits of removing invasive species versus how they harm ecosystems), and avoiding the use of images that may show harmful behaviors like social trailing. The team has also established a process for subject-matter experts in Natural Resources to review drafts prior to posting online.

Project Review Team

Golden Gate NRA's Planning and Environmental Programs Division reviews and oversees compliance on approximately 1,000 projects a year. Golden Gate NRA has an extraordinary number of projects because of its young age (it has been a unit of the National Park System for only about 50 years), large number of historic structures, former land use, and many listed species. For example, parts of former military posts were incorporated into the park, including many buildings that have needed rehabilitation and/or are now used by partner organizations. Natural sites like Redwood Creek have required management action to restore disturbed sites and recover ecological function. At the same time, the park is also experiencing growing threats of high public use and intensification of climate change impacts.

The Planning Division has developed a review process that concurrently incorporates compliance for the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). The park uses the NPS Planning, Environment and Public Comment (PEPC) website to consolidate and share information and documents internally as well as with the public.

The park uses a dual tracking system for project review. Administrative review is used for smaller, less complex



An example of a Twitter post developed collaboratively by the Social Media team. This post engages the public on a natural resource topic and also provides a stewardship message.

Other Intrapark Collaborations

The four cross-divisional collaborations profiled in this case study represent only a fraction of the strategies successfully employed at Golden Gate NRA that leverages the diverse yet complementary skills of multiple divisions and transcend its traditional NPS organizational structure. Other examples of Golden Gate's collaborative teams include:

- » **Resource Sensitivity Training:** Natural and Cultural Resources staff offer a day of training once a year for field staff in other divisions such as the trail and road crews. These sessions are an opportunity to share information about threatened and endangered species, restoration projects, invasive species, and other natural and cultural resource topics, and what they can do to help protect park resources.
- » **Science Communication:** Golden Gate's Media Branch collaborates with the park's Natural Resources Division, the San Francisco Bay Area Inventory and Monitoring Network, as well as the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, to enhance public understanding of science happening in the park. The collaboration has produced Interpreting Science Toolkits, and develops content for both the recreation area and inventory and monitoring network websites.
- » **Green Team:** The Green Team consists of representatives from most of the park's divisions. Annually, the team develops priorities to make the park more sustainable and to prepare for climate change. Members also engage other park staff to help build buy in for the park's sustainability efforts.
- » **The Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Committee** focuses on strengthening the park's role as a multicultural organization that reflects the contributions and interests of diverse cultural and social groups in every facet of Golden Gate's operations and embraces members of those groups as influential employees. The committee presents outreach programs, fosters cross-divisional relationships, and hosts regular dialogues. Allies for Inclusion is a DEI program that provides opportunities for people to build trust, strengthen relationships, generate empathy for each other, and improve their communication and cultural competency skills.

Collaboration Elements in Employee Performance Appraisal Plans

One of the ways that Golden Gate NRA demonstrates its commitment to collaboration is collaborative elements in employee performance plans that clearly establish the importance of collaboration as a core park value.

“Collaboration and Partnership Effectiveness” is one of the five Critical Elements for division chiefs:

The effectiveness of the division chief in working collaboratively and effectively to engage the public and stakeholders within the park, including their fellow Leadership Team colleagues. The level of collaboration and co-leadership on initiatives with other division chiefs and staff. The extent to which the division chief provides effective communication, engagement and partnership with external stakeholders. The amount of success in the development and maintenance of productive partnerships with the Parks Conservancy, the Presidio Trust, and other agency and park partners. The level of professional and collaborative demeanor in meetings and other internal and external forums.

Plans for other staff members also include collaborative elements. For example, the “Effective Organization” critical element for a supervisory position within the Natural Resources Division includes a “Customer Service and Collaboration” measure:

Effectively communicates and demonstrates a commitment to internal and external customer service. Collaborates with NR colleagues as well as other park and NPS staff in such a way that prevents or resolves conflicts and assists with opportunities for enhanced division and park operations through teamwork.

projects wherein project managers and environmental protection specialists work hand-in-glove to develop project descriptions and guide projects through the NEPA pathway.

Full project review is typically used for larger, more complex projects that require interdisciplinary assessment. The project review team includes representatives from each division and meets regularly (usually monthly) to fully vet each project. This collaborative process takes full advantage of the team’s collective knowledge to comprehensively evaluate the potential impacts of any proposed project. The regular meetings and the formal structure provided by this review process enables problem-solving, consensus-building, and buy-in.

More recently, the Planning Division has started to use the administrative review track more often relative to full project review. Project managers have become more sophisticated about compliance requirements, and the experience they’ve gained by going through full review has been used to streamline the process for new projects.

However, there are circumstances when administrative review may not enable as thorough a review as can be accomplished when a cross-divisional interdisciplinary teams meet. Additionally, circumstances arise when a project on the administrative track turns out to be more complicated than anticipated. In these cases, the Planning Division takes an adaptive approach. Such projects may get evaluated by a small team or put in front of the full project review group.

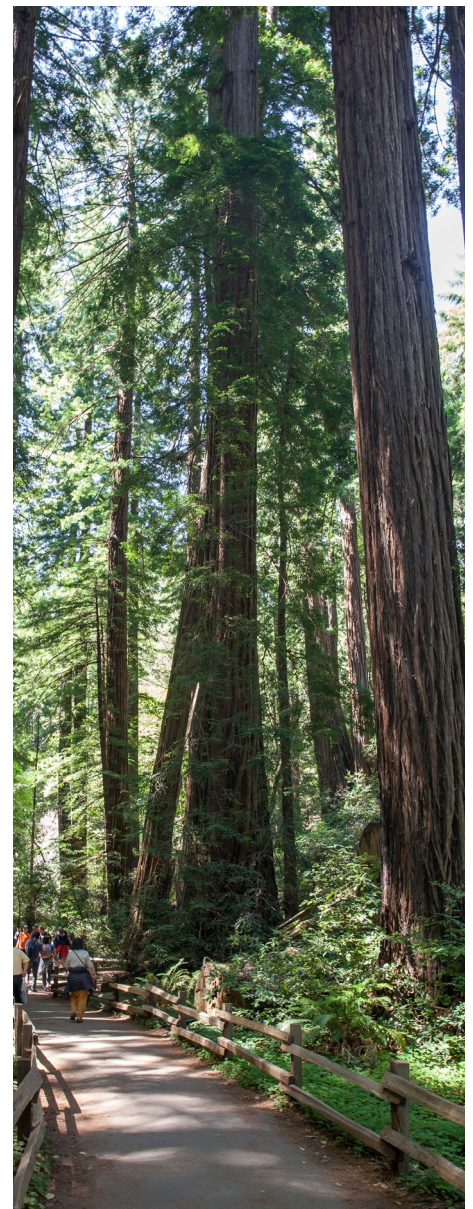
“Siloing leads to poor decision-making, frustration, and poor morale. The Geo Team is one way for everybody to gain respect for what others are contributing and see other perspectives and include them. And as a result, things get done better and get done quicker. Issues are surfaced earlier and people feel like they’re part of the solution.”



Mia Monroe
Community Liaison

Geo Teams

Golden Gate NRA first formed Geographic Leadership Teams about ten years ago for two iconic sites—Alcatraz and Muir Woods. Both areas experience heavy visitation and have complex natural and cultural resource issues, facility management challenges, infrastructure problems, and consequently have major projects ongoing or planned. Prior to the establishment of these Geo Teams, site supervisors and field staff at Alcatraz, Muir Woods, and other remote units felt disconnected from park administrators at headquarters



Muir Woods

Lessons Learned

- » Good communication is at the heart of successful collaboration. Communication can take place via in-person meetings, virtual meetings, phone calls, email, Microsoft Teams, and shared documents. Adapt communication methods to changing circumstances as needed. Also ensure that opportunities for collaboration are available to employees who have field-based positions or nontraditional work schedules.
- » Relationships are an essential element in all collaborative efforts. Nurture relationships on a regular basis so that collaboration team members are used to working together and have strong interpersonal ties when challenging situations or incidents occur.
- » Build a culture of collaboration so that working across divisions is an expected part of park operations. Service on collaborative teams can be assigned as collateral duties and be identified as elements, or components of elements, in performance plans.
- » Put results and tasks ahead of process in collaborative efforts. Don't go through the motions of having collaborative meetings just for the sake of getting together. Be aware that team members are busy with other responsibilities. Being respectful of each individual's time builds trust among team members, and enables focused attention during team engagements.
- » A willingness to take risks and engage in the collaborative process is essential. Collaboration also requires that team members are humble enough to work with others to develop new solutions.
- » Using interdivisional teams made up of staff stationed in a district or specific site in a large park is an effective management tool. It ensures good communication at the site between staff in different divisions and improves communication between headquarters and field staff. Geographic leadership teams can also leverage the expertise of field staff to address existing issues at a site and plan for the future.
- » Aim to develop a culture where ownership of projects or initiatives is park-based as opposed to that of individual staff members. Most parks have frequent staff turnover and many projects have long lifespans. Further, fostering an environment where projects belong to the park versus a person intrinsically builds teamwork and fosters additional collaboration.

“Golden Gate is really supportive of collaboration. Sometimes I actually think that there’s too much, and too little. Too much meaning that sometimes there are meetings where people have invited so many different people and not necessarily all of them are going to benefit from contributing or even going. Then some people feel a fatigue from getting too many opportunities. Too little is not the right meetings. We’re trying to figure out this sweet spot of what is enough, and what are the right meetings to be having. And determining where expertise and time are going to be best used.”



Gabi Dunn,
Administrative Assistant,
Natural & Cultural Resources

and co-workers based at other locations. The result was that all parties lacked information necessary to make data-driven decisions for these areas.

The Geo Team concept is based on the premises that there should be cross-divisional communication and that field level staff also have important expertise and can contribute in substantial ways to address management challenges at sites. Geo Teams have an assigned facilitator and representatives from each division, with the deputy superintendent usually in attendance. External partners participate on Geo Teams as appropriate.

Geo Teams meet regularly, usually monthly. Meetings are typically held in person, and sometimes incorporate a field visit, although during the busy season, a conference call or electronic update may replace a regular meeting. Meetings consist of updates from each

divisional representative as well as a shared task such as developing a standard operating procedure or reviewing blueprints for the next stage of a project.

The Stinson Beach Geo Team was formed more recently following an assessment of Stinson Beach’s vulnerabilities to sea level rise along with the realization that a lot of projects, including a Federal Lands Highways Project to improve the road and parking lot and upgrades to visitor facilities, were ongoing. There was also a need for the park to address concerns from the local water district about park water use.

Other sites that have Geo Teams include Nike Missile Site and Fort Point NHS. Golden Gate NRA has also utilized Geo Teams for short periods of time for a set of specific needs related to a site and disbanded them when they were no longer needed. For example, a



Stinson Beach

“We’re our strongest when we’re working together—protecting resources, sharing this amazing place with visitors and communities, making sure that we’re providing visitor amenities, but doing it in a way that’s environmentally responsible. A side benefit of collaboration is that it makes our work lives so much better. Working in concert with each other boosts morale. Everyone has a better experience at work when they’re not working at odds with colleagues and getting frustrated and feeling like things aren’t going how they want.”

Alison Forrestel
Chief, Natural Resources & Science



Collaboration allows Natural Resources and Science to do some things that they otherwise wouldn’t be able to do, such as surveying sea caves along Golden Gates’ rocky coastline.



Preserving the historic buildings on Alcatraz involves some complex management challenges. The Alcatraz Geo Team and the collaborative project review process ensure that historic resources are preserved for the benefit of future generations.

Geo Team was stood up for Fort Baker during the “post-to-park” transformation of this former military base into a park site with diverse recreational and cultural opportunities, while also serving as a unique model of partnerships and programming.

Continuing Collaboration

Employees at Golden Gate NRA, Fort Point NHS, and Muir Woods NM have long found that adopting collaborative methodologies helps facilitate effective management of park resources and better serve visitors and park neighbors. Working across divisions and units is so much of a part of the park’s culture that employees understand that it is part of their performance expectations, and many employees actively look for new ways to work with one another across the park’s traditional organizational structure.

Golden Gates’ collaborative practices have helped the park weather new

challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the necessity of adopting new technologies that enable remote working. They also help them address emerging challenges like the impacts of climate change, rising sea level, extreme fire conditions in the region with the associated issues of widespread smoke impacts and power safety shutdowns.

By adopting collaboration as a core value, the employees of Golden Gate NRA have increased their capacity to serve park visitors and neighbors, and protect vulnerable natural and cultural resources, while at the same time creating a more rewarding work environment for themselves.

To learn more about the Golden Gate NRA collaboration, read an [oral history](#) on the collaboration available from the [NPS Data Store](#).

The National Park Service Collaboration Network

The National Park Service Collaboration Network is a group of dedicated employees who recognize the value of collaboration. We believe that we best serve our parks, and the American people, when we embrace our collective power—the diversity of skills, people, experiences, and expertise that comprise our NPS community. We believe that the mission of preserving our resources, unimpaired, for this and future generations is what unites us across disciplines and administrative boundaries.

To this end, our work is to pave the way for a successful cultural shift—a shift to a more collaborative environment within our organization.

To learn more, visit the [Collaborative Leadership](#) pages on the NPS Common Learning Portal, or contact [Terri Hogan](#), Invasive Plant Program Manager, Biological Resources Division, terri_hogan@nps.gov, or [Golden Gate NRA](#) at goga_info@nps.gov.

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