



Voices from Golden Gate NRA

An Oral History of Their Approach to Internal Collaboration

Employees of Golden Gate National Recreation Area (NRA) have a rich tradition of collaboration. The park's cross-divisional teams address management challenges by leveraging the collective power of working together.

Golden Gate NRA preserves diverse natural and cultural resources, and offers recreational opportunities to Bay Area residents and visitors from around the world. It contains Alcatraz and the Presidio, is part of the UNESCO Golden Gate Biosphere Reserve, and manages Muir Woods National Monument (NM) and Fort Point National Historic Site (NHS).

The Social Media, Geographic Leadership (Geo), and Project Review teams, as well as the ways that the Natural Resources and Science and Visitor and Resource Protection divisions work together, are examples of the multi-disciplinary, solution-oriented partnerships that distinguish the park's operational style. The Social Media Team brings together subject matter experts and communication specialists to promote stewardship of park resources. Geo Teams address complex management challenges requiring interdisciplinary expertise and teamwork at high-profile sites such as Muir Woods and Stinson Beach. The Project Review Team tackles compliance and planning using a whole-park approach. Natural Resources and the Ranger divisions work together to address natural resource issues.

Members of these collaborative groups spoke about how working together helps them avoid inefficiencies of siloed work, accelerates problem-solving, and sparks innovation. Here, they tell their story.

Complexities of an Urban Park

David Schifsky Golden Gate is not a giant place in terms of acreage, but it spans three counties and is the one of the two most-visited NPS units. It also has a tremendous number of threatened and endangered species.

Gabi Dunn Golden Gate is very decentralized. It's a big site that is spread out—presenting a significant communication challenge. The distance makes it pretty hard for staff members to get to know each other.

Brian Aviles This is a new park. We're still in the process of getting through our "teenage years." We don't really know what we're going to be, and sometimes we date weird people. But we've gone through some interesting stages. We have 20 million visitors and 9 million neighbors, and a lot of interactions with different communities and interest groups.

Laura Castellini Golden Gate is such a complicated park with so many different types of resources and issues. It always feels like we're not doing enough to collaborate. And there's always things that you find out about and you wonder how you did not know about them. Or think that a person would have checked in with you about something.

Roles for Everyone

Alison Forrestel I think a hugely important part of the job is collaborating with other division chiefs, both to make the park run smoothly, and to work on issues that cross-cut divisions. It supports the work of my own team—without the support of the other park divisions, we can't do the work that we need to do.

Mia We've been very insistent that the Geo Team not just be another committee. We ask that the team members have a clear avenue to the chief and to others.



Brian Aviles
Chief, Planning &
Environmental
Programs



Laura Castellini
Sustainability
Coordinator



Gabi Dunn
Administrative
Assistant,
Natural & Cultural
Resources



Will Elder
Media Team Lead



Alison Forrestel
Chief, Natural
Resources & Science



Mia Monroe
Community Liaison



David Schifsky
Deputy
Superintendent

Reasons to Collaborate

Will Elder There's just too much for us to do alone and too much knowledge needed to do this correctly without having a collaboration between the different divisions and access to a much larger pool of expertise.

Gabi When I started on the Social Media team, we were often in a reactive state—catching mistakes or issues with things that had already been published. Those mistakes are really harmful to the park's scientific integrity.

Mia For Geo Teams, information-sharing and decision-making needed to be free-flowing and nimble. It was recognized that collaboration among divisions and project managers with a good knowledge of the site was really important.

Brian Geo Teams get everybody comfortable working with one another. The Maintenance group is on a first name basis with our Natural Resources group. We all know Law Enforcement and what's happening. I think this is pretty fundamental to our success, particularly with compliance efforts.

Mia Sometimes it is practical—how to get a job done. Sometimes it was a safe way to bring issues up. Sometimes many heads working together to solve things is often better. Others may see a solution, or may be able to point out some things that could really help. Geo Teams were really a wonderful recognition that field staff have a lot to contribute.

Ways to Work Together

Alison Start with building relationships and mutual trust.

Brian We've intentionally tried to be more efficient by doing more environmental review administratively rather than having everybody get together and fully kick the tires in a special session. We got into a habit of feeding the process and not necessarily responding to the true need.

David It's pretty informal, it's very organic and really driven by what's going on.

Alison There is a kind of a strategy around our Geo Teams. They are a little more formal—yes, we need one here; we don't need one there. I think there's a little nervousness around meetings because we all have so many meetings.

Mia We are very respectful of people's time. Summers can be busy for people who work in the field. Not everybody works the same schedule. We came up with a variety of tools to make it easy for people to participate in Geo Teams.

Alison Most of the collaborations aren't formalized or structured enough to have articulated goals or objectives. They've all evolved organically. The Law Enforcement and Natural Resources collaboration's objective is resource protection—the core of the Park Service mission.

David Maintain relationships, not when you really need something, but all the time. That way when you're chasing around to get stuff done yesterday, it's easier because those relationships have already been built.

Alison Because we're a big park and in an urban area, we're not the kind of park where staff socialize on the weekends. Everyone is kind of far-flung and doing their own things, and maybe in a way that helps. But in a way, a real testament to how strong our work culture is that we are still so able to work well across park divisions and have respect for each other.



Siloing leads to poor decision-making, frustration, and poor morale. Through collaboration, people feel like they're part of the solution.



Mia Monroe



Brian We all recognize that people want to be heard. Maybe that's an underlying culture here as well—that staff get heard.

Communication is Essential

Laura Having all the people who have input on a particular issue in one meeting to hash through issues is really helpful.

Alison Our Leadership Team has weekly meetings. It's important connective tissue for all the divisions. For the resource protection piece, I feel like some more face time between Law Enforcement and Natural Resources would probably be pretty awesome.

Alison There are generally good relationships across divisions, commitments to common goals, and to working together. Overall, the collaborations have been successful. Of course, there's always cases where it's not happening, or where people are working at odds with one another. I think it's just always communication.

Brian All communications build on each other. If it were only the project review meetings, I think that we would fail. Because we have multiple opportunities to touch base, we're not dealing with surprises and we can think comprehensively. Through them, our team learns about different aspects of the project and that goes the same for other divisions. We embrace all projects and consider them to be park projects.

Laura It's hard to track what's going on between meetings. I'm trying to figure out ways to stay connected between the meetings, but haven't quite figured out how to do that yet.

Collaborative Outcomes

Alison I think a really wonderful thing about the Park Service is that, generally speaking, there's a very high level of

dedication to our mission. Having that shared commitment to mission as the starting place for everything is a huge help to collaboration.

Will Without collaboration, we simply wouldn't be as productive. We would be kind of dabbling in social media, but wouldn't have a serious program that is as diverse in content as we have now.

Alison We can do more when we work together. We can do our jobs better and have more fun when we work together. Fun is really important and it's easy to lose track of it.

Gabi The end product and result is always going to be richer with collaboration. Just the diversity of ideas and backgrounds leads to better outcomes. It also means that there is less of a load for each person to carry.

Mia Siloing leads to poor decision-making, frustration, and poor morale. Collaborations like Geo Team are a way to see other perspectives and be inclusive. And as a result, things get done better and get done quicker. Through collaboration, issues are surfaced earlier and people feel like they're part of the solution.

Insights about Challenges

David At Golden Gate, it's really easy to get really deep into your silo. It's not that we forget about each other, or lose sight or exclude each other. It's just that everybody has a lot going on in their own division.

Gabi Much of the barrier to collaboration and getting things right is ego. My number one suggestion is to leave egos at the door. Just remember that we're all working towards the same goal.

David Our relationship with other divisions is different just because we've got 300 plus employees at Golden Gate.



The big take-home message for me is to establish and maintain relationships. Engage each other early. It's always easier to talk about issues ahead of time than to try to try to clean it up afterwards.



David Schifsky

Alison could hire a whole crew of resource management folks, and I may never meet a single one of them.

Will One of the main issues with these collaborative efforts is that everybody is pretty much maxed out in their job. Unless there's a real emphasis on collaboration, it's really hard to find time to do it.

Gabi Pre-pandemic, most of the communication was in person. We had opportunities to run into each other and share information which led to more collaboration. With the pandemic, we've shifted to virtual. It requires more effort to have those same type of run-in conversations.

Brian COVID-19 really set us back in terms of working in silos. We've gone backwards in terms of integrated decision-making. The longer we're in this, the more of a habit we get into. No longer do we have conversations in person or through incidental contact.

Final Thoughts and Lessons Learned

Gabi The benefits of using collaborative approach include the diversity of expertise and perspectives that allows for innovative, more proactive and engaging content and strategies, as well as efficiency in time and money. We all have limited capacities due to staff shortages and budgets.

Brian Collaboration is not an alternative for us. Our park is too complicated. We're committed to this.

Laura Having patience and persistence, or in my case, stubbornness, always helps. Sometimes there'll be setbacks or people who don't have the time. Following up is very helpful.

Gabi Sometimes I think that there's too much collaboration, and other times, too little. Some people feel fatigued from too many meetings. Too little is not having the 'right' meetings. We're trying to figure out the sweet spot of what is enough, and what are the right meetings to have. And determining where expertise and time are best used is critical to our success.

David The big take-home message for me is to establish and maintain relationships. I tell my rangers, "Relationships are everything. Establish, maintain, and nurture them positively because you have to work together so closely all the time." Engage each other early. It's always easier to talk about stuff ahead of time than to try to try to clean it up afterwards.

Brian It's expected that you're going to take a collaborative approach. So, move on from there and make it work for you. You've got to trust this and make it part of your culture. Recognize that nobody has all the answers. Projects are too complicated for isolated thinking. Projects have a long timelines. There's turnover. If there are projects that are largely held with one person, what happens when that person moves?

Gabi Prioritize opportunities to build relationships with co-workers outside of your division. Join committees or take time to introduce yourself when you see someone you don't know. Set up a phone call or a video meeting instead of an email conversation. Set action items or use shared documents to collaborate remotely. If you want to be a better collaborator, it starts with building relationships. Because when you build that initial rapport, then you open a door.

The National Park Service Collaboration Network is a group of dedicated employees who recognize the value of collaboration.

To learn more, read the [case study](#) about the collaborative efforts at Golden Gate NRA available from the [NPS Data Store](#) or 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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