

# River Voices



## Coalitions

At first glance, a coalition seems so simple: an organization of organizations. We form coalitions when an opportunity—or threat—is too big for one group to take on alone. One person or organization seeks allies who share our view, at least on this one issue, gather them around a table and get to work.

Delving into the world of coalitions can be a uniquely challenging journey. Each place at the table is held by a distinct organization or constituency with its own goals and objectives, history, style and culture. The task of blending these people and groups together offers great promise for success, as well as myriad challenges to achieving it.

### Why Form a Coalition?

We form coalitions in order to gain more power. If your group faces a daunting legislative challenge, needs to convince an intransigent regulatory agency, or wants to educate all the citizens of a single watershed, you will likely need partners to help. A coalition brings together more money, people and visibility than any of its individual organizational members. It combines the strengths of all its member-groups, and can minimize their weaknesses as well.

You may find yourself forming a quick coalition in the halls of the legislature that lasts no longer than the week it takes to kill a dangerous bill. Or, you may set out to carefully craft an alliance and multi-year strategy with dozens of partners who want to remove concrete dams and return a river to its free-flowing state.



Many coalitions are formed around a single issue; others have a multi-issue agenda that works on the principle of “we’ll help with your priority issues if you’ll help with ours.” Once groups develop positive experiences while working together on one issue, they may decide to form a new coalition with a multi-issue agenda.

### Who Should Belong?

Any organization with a potential self-interest in the common goal of the coalition should be approached to join. The largest, most diverse base of membership will deliver the greatest power.

All too often, we jump too quickly to invite “the usual suspects,” groups that we have a history of working with,

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**River Network is a national nonprofit organization whose mission is to protect and restore rivers and watersheds through active partnerships.**

We support river and watershed advocates at the local, state and regional levels, help them build effective organizations, and promote our working together to build a nationwide movement for rivers and watersheds.

River Network also acquires and conserves riverlands that are critical to the services that rivers perform for human communities: drinking water supply, floodplain management, fish and wildlife habitat, recreation and open space.

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## From the President

# COALITION AS A WAY OF LIFE

*“Stay small but cast a big shadow,” a friend advises the organizations she consults with. At River Network, we want to stay small to protect intimacy and broad participation in decision-making. Yet the problems we face are enormous and require significant resources. One of our responses to this dilemma has been to work with others to achieve goals we could never achieve by ourselves. This has led to many variations on the art of coalition building.*

*In addition to serving local and statewide watershed groups, we work closely with watershed-based coalitions such as the Mississippi River Basin Alliance and the Yukon River Intertribal Watershed Council. These “groups of groups” come together to create a focus on whole watershed systems which are much too large, diverse, and complex for any single group to tackle. By using communication to arrive at shared goals and coordination to bring about concerted action, these coalitions create the possibility of effective protection and restoration for large, complex systems.*

*We also work with coalitions that are issue-based rather than place-based. Save Our Wild Salmon is a coalition of fishers, conservationists, taxpayer groups and others dedicated to reforming the management of northwest rivers to bring back the wild salmon which were, not long ago, fundamentally important to the culture and economy of the region. This is a particularly broad coalition working on a difficult but extremely important issue.*

*Just this year, we teamed up with the Environmental Protection Agency to offer over \$600,000 worth of grants to about 40 river and watershed groups, who are forming broad partnerships and coalitions. We will be monitoring the progress of the awardees over the next year. In addition to directly assisting the grantees, this program will help us better understand the possibilities and problems generated by partnerships.*

*Sometimes, a coalition can lead to important structural changes. Two years ago, River Network began working closely with River Watch Network, a national leader in teaching people how to assess and monitor the health of their rivers. Our programs fit together productively, and we have found that we can design and deliver services more powerfully together than separately. This has raised discussions of a merger between the two organizations. Watch for an announcement this Fall.*

*In brief, coalitions offer rich possibilities to many organizations in many circumstances. We hope this issue of River Voices will assist your group as you think about what might be accomplished through partnership with others.*

Sincerely,



Kenneth R. Margolis  
President



**“... we have found that we can design and deliver services more powerfully together than separately.”**

(continued from page 1)

and do not think carefully about inviting new potential allies to participate.

Civil rights activist Bernice Johnson Reagon once said, “Some people rate the success of the coalition on whether or not they feel good when they get there. They’re not looking for a coalition, they’re looking for a home. Coalition work is not done in your home. Coalition work has to be done in the streets... most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don’t, you’re not really doing no coalescing.”

In other words, if you feel perfectly comfortable with everyone sitting at the coalition table, you haven’t worked to bring enough new allies to

the table. Building a coalition creates an opportunity to challenge yourself to find new allies, reach out to communities you may not have worked with before, and build bridges to those who at other times may not have agreed with you. All they need to agree on is the single focus of the coalition.

### Weak ties vs. Strong ties

Veteran organizer (and Professor at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government) Marshall Gans talks about the theory of “weak ties versus strong ties.”

A coalition of long-time allies, such as a collection of environmental groups, has strong ties to one another, lots of history working together, and a high degree of trust.

The memberships of those groups, as well as their boards of directors, are likely to overlap significantly. In effect, each organization in the coalition is based on the same or overlapping group of donors, volunteers, activists and leaders.

Now consider a coalition of unlikely allies—groups that rarely, if ever, work together with a common agenda. This coalition, with weak ties, represents a much more diverse group of people, and their membership and leadership bases overlap to a much lesser degree. What may appear as weakness, or a challenge in the initial stages of organizing, delivers greater strength during the campaign. In other words, the most powerful coalitions may have the weakest ties at the initial organizing stage.

A coalition based on weak ties, however, faces additional challenges in bringing people together across cultural differences. How business executives and neighborhood groups run a meeting may be quite different; representatives of different ethnic constituencies may operate with different senses of time, and have varied expectations about how much time should be spent socializing vs. doing business at the meetings. Ways of making decisions (voting vs. consensus decision-making), and running meetings (Robert’s Rules of Order vs. informal meeting facilitation) all impact the way participants feel about a meeting and whether they feel welcome as part of the group. 🐟

## Coalition Types

### formal vs. informal:

A formal coalition may have written goals, agreements, and a mission or statement of principles that each participating group is required to sign when joining. Informal coalitions can be initiated on a handshake and may have a less-structured process.

### long-term vs. short-term:

A coalition stays together until its goal has been achieved; therefore its existence can range from a few weeks to many years.

### single issue vs. multi-issue:

The fewer the issues or goals involved, the greater the potential to find allies. Single-issue coalitions are more likely to dissolve when the goal has been reached; multi-issue coalitions may work on a wide-ranging agenda and shift from goal to goal as victories are obtained.

# How to Build a Coalition

## Step 1

### Determine whether you NEED a coalition.

Are you faced with a challenge that is too large for your own group to handle? Would you like to initiate a strategy or program that can only be won by a much larger and diverse group? Does your organization have the resources to initiate and take a lead role in a short or long-term coalition effort?

## Step 2

### Form an organizing team.

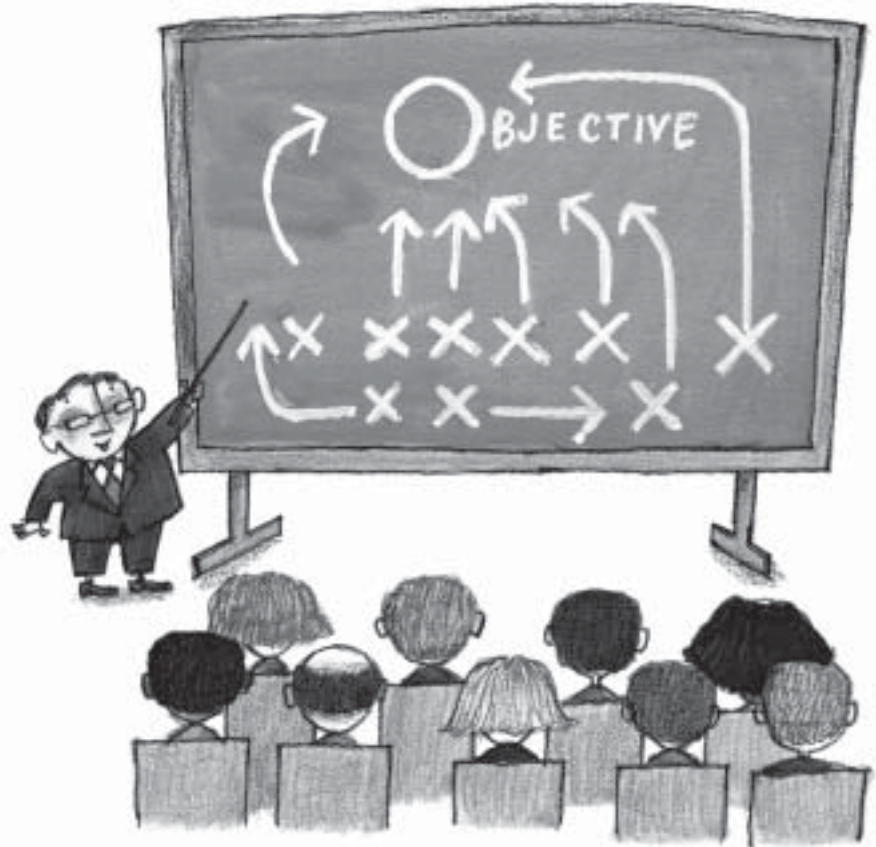
The team may be wholly from within one organization, or represent several core groups that want to build the coalition.

Assemble the team and brainstorm the list of every possible organization or constituency that may be affected by the issue you will be working on. Avoid the temptation to guess at what their interest in the issue would be; you won't really know until you meet and talk with them.

## Step 3

### Meet with each potential coalition member.

Decide who on your team should contact a key representative of each group. Arrange a one-on-one, in-



person meeting to talk with them; find out how and why their constituency may be impacted by the issue. If commonality emerges, invite them to consider joining the coalition. Determine their "bottom line" goals and concerns.

## Step 4

### Report back from the individual meetings.

Draft a preliminary set of goals and objectives for the coalition that incorporates key players' needs and concerns.

## Step 5

### Convene the coalition at an organizing meeting.

The meeting agenda should discuss clearly what membership in the coalition requires, including:

- money, people and activity required from each group.
- estimated length of coalition campaign (or is this an on-going coalition?).
- decision-making structure.
- basic strategies and tactics

(are we pursuing a legal strategy? trying to turn people out to public hearings? writing letters to the editors of local newspapers?).

- who will represent each organization at coalition meetings?

This process can be somewhat cyclical; you may need two or three rounds of individual meetings before you have a clear set of agreements that all coalition members can sign off on. You may also be asked to attend Board or Steering Committee meetings of organizations considering coalition membership.

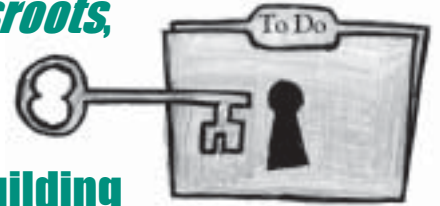
Larger, more formal coalitions may form agreements as to contributions required to earn a “seat at the table.” Recognize that some groups have more financial resources, and others more grassroots members by defining participation in the coalition as either “\$500 or 50 members.”

Forming a coalition can take time—more time when multiple groups or unfamiliar allies are invited to join. Individuals will need to go back to their organizations to get support committed and agreements made, and meetings may not occur frequently.

## coalition

**a temporary alliance of distinct parties, persons or states for joint action**

**In *Environmental Politics: Lessons from the Grassroots*, North Carolina activist/researcher Bob Hall writes about building a multiracial group:**



### To make a multiracial alliance work it takes:

1. constant energy, negotiation, education and commitment;
2. a self-consciousness among the leaders of their limitations without, and strengths with, a coalition;
3. consistent delivery of promises made and holding up one's end of the bargain;
4. a recognition of differences, including sometimes conflicting agendas;
5. a recognition of the power of racism in the history and contemporary life of the community and beyond;
6. education of the membership about the need of multiracial partnership; and
7. lots of practical steps that aim to solidify personal and political relationships.

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# New Partnership Builds Power for River Protection

by Dwayne “Sparky” Anderson



## BAIT Members

Texas Clean Water Action  
Health Awareness Water Knowledge  
Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club  
Fishermen Involved in Saving Habitat  
Texas Association of Bass Clubs  
Central Texas Association of Bass Clubs  
Texas Black Bass Unlimited  
BASS Federation  
Honey Hole  
Sportsmen Conservationists of Texas  
The Chemical Connection (a public  
health advocacy group)  
Consumers Union Southwest Regional  
Office  
Bastrop County Environmental  
Network



On a sleepy Saturday in August 1998, a convoy of several dozen pick-up trucks, with bass boats in tow, converged on a local meeting hall in Seguin, Texas. Bearing hand-printed signs proclaiming the dangers of chemical treatment of waterways, the boats were there to protest the Guadalupe-Brazos River Authority's exclusion of herbicide opponents from the Authority's seminar on aquatic herbicides. Environmentalists, health advocates and community residents joined the anglers in protest. Drawing a crowd of over 150, they rented the room next to the official meeting to convene their own counter-seminar. TV cameras were rolling.

How did such unlikely allies come together? Who would have imagined that their alliance would blossom into a coordinated effort involving dozens of organizations with millions of members? Yet this is what occurred with the emergence of BAIT (Better Aquatics in Texas) and establishment of SMART (Sensible Management of Aquatic Resources Team).

BAIT and SMART are uniting diverse groups around their shared opposition to the practice of treating lakes and rivers with toxic herbicides. State agencies and

lakefront property owners in Texas and elsewhere have long resorted to chemicals in a misguided effort to eradicate 'undesirable' aquatic vegetation. These chemicals threaten fish, fish habitat and ultimately the health of humans using these waters for recreation and for drinking.

## BAIT's Beginnings

BAIT's beginnings can be traced back to December 1996, when Texas Clean Water Action, a few bass clubs, and the health organization HAWK (Health Awareness Water Knowledge) met with representatives of the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA) to discuss the LCRA's plan to clear Lake Bastrop of hydrilla by spraying it with 4,000 pounds of the herbicide SONAR.

The groups discovered, to their mutual surprise, that they all objected to the use of herbicides. Anglers liked hydrilla because it provides excellent habitat for trophy fish. HAWK feared the impact of chemicals on swimmers and local drinking water supplies. Clean Water Action had long opposed using chemicals in waterways because of potential impacts on drinking water and aquatic habitat.

A subsequent meeting with the LCRA drew even more organizations

opposed to chemical treatment. Together they persuaded the river authority to accept a one-year moratorium on SONAR use.

Inspired by this demonstration of their combined clout, the groups began holding meetings to discuss a common agenda and strategy. More and more groups joined in. The BAIT Network was born.

### Birth Pains

But there were birth pains. Participants had to grapple with differences in communication styles. Scientists spouted sentences such as: "Fluridone, when subjected to ultraviolet rays, can result in N-Methylformamide, which can exceed EPA-established health limits," instead of: "Pesticides in the water are bad." Anglers had a tackle-box full of fishing jargon, often difficult for other partners to comprehend. Political

differences were even harder to overcome, especially between proponents of all-or-nothing positions and those more willing to compromise.

Over time, BAIT participants have learned to share information, develop common demands, and coordinate advocacy efforts, while preserving their organizational autonomy. Partner groups represent more than 300,000 Texans (see previous page for coalition members).

Results have been impressive:

- Protests stopped herbicide application in four lakes. Planned applications in dozens more were suspended.
- Prompted by BAIT, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department established a task force to reexamine its approach to aquatic vegetation.

- Renowned bass fisherman Ray Scott persuaded Gov. Bush to borrow a mechanical harvester from the Tennessee Valley Authority to trim hydrilla in Lake Bastrop.
- The Texas Legislature is considering a bill which would curtail use of aquatic herbicides and allow BAIT to help river authorities formulate lake management plans. BAIT will continue to assure that lake management plans address its concerns.

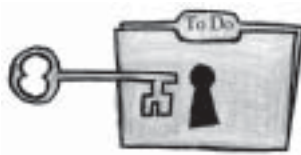
BAIT's success has spawned other projects. New alliances have been forged in Texas to work on TMDLs (To The Maximum Daily Loads), watershed assessment and protection plans, mercury contamination, and more.

### Getting SMART

BAIT founders have also formed SMART, aimed at curbing herbicide use throughout the nation, beginning in southeastern states. Unlike BAIT, which has no formal structure, SMART has a board of directors and 501(c)(3) nonprofit status. Combined membership of groups pledged to work with SMART totals several million. ➡

*Dwayne "Sparky" Anderson is the Program Director of the Texas Clean Water Fund, responsible for project design and development for the state office. He is also a regional coordinator for the Clean Water Fund in Washington D.C.*

## How to build broad-based partnerships:



- Agree on a unifying issue or set of issues.
- Agree to disagree on other issues.
- Develop and use a common vocabulary.
- Win significant victories.
- Distribute credit fairly.
- Understand and support groups' self-interest.
- Let no single person or group dominate.
- Move beyond stereotypes of partner organizations.
- Build personal relationships.





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# The Kennebec Coalition: Ten Years to Victory

An Interview with Steve Brooke

Steve Brooke began working on rivers as a volunteer with Trout Unlimited almost 20 years ago, and later served as the Chair of the Maine Council of Trout Unlimited. He served as a volunteer for the Kennebec Coalition and eventually was hired on a part-time basis. This summer, Steve transitioned into a new position as Director of the Maine Field Office for American Rivers.

**On January 1, 1999 a giant switch was pulled and the Edwards Hydroelectric Project was permanently shut down. When the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) refused to renew the operating license of the Edwards Dam, it marked the first time that FERC had ever ordered removal of an operating hydropower project for fisheries restoration.**

**Removal of the 162-year-old dam and site renovation work began on July 1, 1999. Once the 25-foot high, 917-foot long dam is breached—opening 17 miles of the river—the Kennebec River will become one of the East Coast’s most fertile spawning grounds for sea-run fish.**

**This precedent-setting event was the result of years of work by many individuals and groups. Steve Brooke of the Kennebec Coalition recently took the time to speak with *River Voices* editors Thalia Zepatos and Kathy Luscher.**

***RV: What were some of the conditions that sparked the formation of Kennebec Coalition?***

**SB:** In the Northeast, we’ve dammed and polluted rivers for many generations. We live with the remains of the industrial revolution—400-500 dams exist in the state of Maine alone. Those of us who use and love the rivers have grown up with these structures as part of the landscape. As we become more aware of the impact that these dams have on these riverine systems, we’ve started to ask some questions.

The Clean Water Act (CWA) changed our filthy polluted rivers into rivers

that can support life. When I was a student, this river was so polluted that you didn’t want to be close to it. Literally, paint would peel on houses along the river as a result of the sulfur fumes generated by the river. It was the CWA that reintroduced oxygen into the rivers. And the State of Maine took steps to remove log drives from rivers, which had been allowed up until the mid-1970s. By the late 1970s we were beginning to look at the rivers in a different light.

In the early ‘80s, a group of concerned citizens began questioning the existence of Edwards Dam on the Kennebec River in Maine. The ques-

tions led to the formation of several groups. In 1989, the Kennebec Coalition formed in anticipation of the dam relicensing process. It consisted of D.C.-based American Rivers, the Atlantic Salmon Federation, the Natural Resources Council of Maine (NRCM), Trout Unlimited and its Kennebec Valley Chapter.

***RV: During the initial formation stages of the Coalition, who decided which groups to include?***

**SB:** Two board members from a local advocacy organization were also on the board of NRCM. At the same time, a staffer at American Rivers was drumming up support for the Class of '93 dam relicensing. The Atlantic Salmon Federation also expressed interest and I served as the liaison for the Kennebec Chapter of Trout Unlimited. Each partner developed a collaborative budget and allocated individual staff time. No staff was hired until 1991.

***RV: Did all the coalition groups contribute at the same level?***

**SB:** The contributions were equitable, but not exactly the same. The Kennebec Valley Chapter of Trout Unlimited committed 25% of their annual budget, and other coalition groups worked collaboratively to raise the balance of the funds. In some years, some partners could not raise the projected funds. But over time, the balance of funds raised was very equitable.

In the Fall of 1991, I started working part-time for the Coalition as its



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*Left to right: Under Secretary of Commerce Terry Garcia, Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt and Maine's Governor Angus King signing the May 28, 1998 Lower Kennebec Settlement.*

only staff. However other individuals dedicated a substantial portion of their time to the cause; this went on until the very end. We also sought legal counsel and were able to secure pro bono support from a national firm. As we went through some of the peaks, we added an additional law firm, who also worked pro bono. Between 1991 and 1998, we made decisions with five lawyers and myself on telephone conference calls.

***RV: Did you try and get other groups to join the Coalition?***

**SB:** There are benefits and drawbacks to signing up a lot of partners. We never sought other groups. To be effective, we felt we needed to be able to move quickly and have a tight core group that would work well together. This was a legal effort that

needed quick reactions, not a lot of overhead or many organizations. The Coalition needed to be light on its feet, able to draft arguments, talk on the phone and disseminate information.

***RV: Could other groups become involved?***

**SB:** We encouraged other nonprofits to endorse our efforts, as opposed to becoming a member of the Coalition. We crafted endorsement language specific to the needs of the parties endorsing. A significant number of local and statewide groups were supportive. One of the cities downstream endorsed the dam's removal. We kept a list of the endorsing groups and used them as a support network.



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Edwards Dam on the Kennebec River, Maine.

**RV: Did the Coalition ever adopt a formal structure?**

**SB:** We never had a formal structure, never filed for tax-exempt status. That worked for us because of the commitment and mutual confidence of all the parties involved. Each organization had their own staff who was given a free hand to work on this issue.

**RV: How did you spend your time?**

**SB:** My job was to build public support at the local level. I spent a lot of time on the rubber chicken circuit. One year, I did 30 or 40 evening slide show presentations, to as few as 5 or as many as 150 people.

That level of outreach, while time consuming, developed working relationships with people in the community. It's important to answer their questions, and also to tell them when you don't know the answer.

**RV: How did you keep momentum going and the energy level high?**

**SB:** That's where the resource took over. The river was growing its fishery populations every year; it was clear that this had enormous potential. That clarity helped my continued grounding in reality. Sometimes we get so wrapped up in process that we lose sight of what our goals are. We need to constantly go back and be very clear about what we're trying to do and why.

From a personal perspective, this work takes dedication; you have to do this work because you believe in it. It needs to be done with love—it's not just a job, and certainly not a part-time job.

**RV: When you first organized the Coalition, did you envision success as a one-in-a-million chance? A 50/50 chance?**

**SB:** The environmental benefit was clear from the start. Once it became equally clear that the economic benefits of keeping the dam were quite marginal, we developed increased confidence that we would prevail. Our proposal tried to create a solution that was in the best economic interest of the owners; a win-win situation gets there a lot quicker.

**RV: Were all partners crucial to the Coalition's success?**

**SB:** I don't think we could have won without any of the member groups; each group played a crucial role. As needs arose, we found a vehicle to address those needs.

We had legal work and the public education work. We did the media work with a lot of support from the NRCM, who were extremely helpful with their press contacts—writing, planning press events, communicating clearly, working on our message. Having their very capable general counsel was also very important.

**RV: How did you keep Coalition members abreast of new information and events?**

**SB:** We talked on the phone, sometimes daily, weekly, or as needed. Everybody looked out for everybody else. You need to develop a team that you can work with and trust. You learn the strengths of each partner on the team. Lone rangers don't succeed.

**RV: It seems as though you started early enough to be able to gener-**

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***ate the support you needed over a period of years.***

**SB:** It takes a long time to turn around a dam, a federal agency, or a state. It takes democracy a long time to catch up with what we see clearly. That's the price we pay for democracy, and also the benefit. We live in a society that wants instant results, and we're impatient.... One of the benefits of reaching 50 is that you realize that big efforts take a long time.

We had superb support from a group of funders who also understood that this type of effort takes a long time.

***RV: What happens after the coffer dam is breached?***

**SB:** Kennebec Coalition was formed with one specific purpose: to restore anadromous fish with the removal of the Edwards Dam. Because it looks as though we'll have success this summer, the efforts of many of those involved individuals will turn to other similar projects.

In Maine, there's an enormous groundswell of interest in habitat restoration. There are multiple parties anxious to become involved and develop new strategies for our waters.

***RV: Do you have any final advice to offer activists?***

**SB:** Work with your government agencies. My experience is that these agencies are overwhelmed with their workload. When people come to them with good ideas, they are less than enthusiastic about adding to

their workload. Our approach was not to add to their workload but to SUPPORT their workload; to be their eyes and ears, talk with them regularly, let them do their job best by providing them with the information that they don't have. The agency people are not the problem; they are regulators and can be the solution.

In retrospect, it seems that there was a lot of luck in timing. But rather than thinking in those terms, you have to be prepared to make the best use of events as they evolve. Luck is something you make; take advantage of situations as they evolve to create a benefit for the resource. ➡



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*Anglers fishing below Edwards Dam at the Kennebec Valley Trout Unlimited One Fly Tournament during the fall "alewife" hatch.*

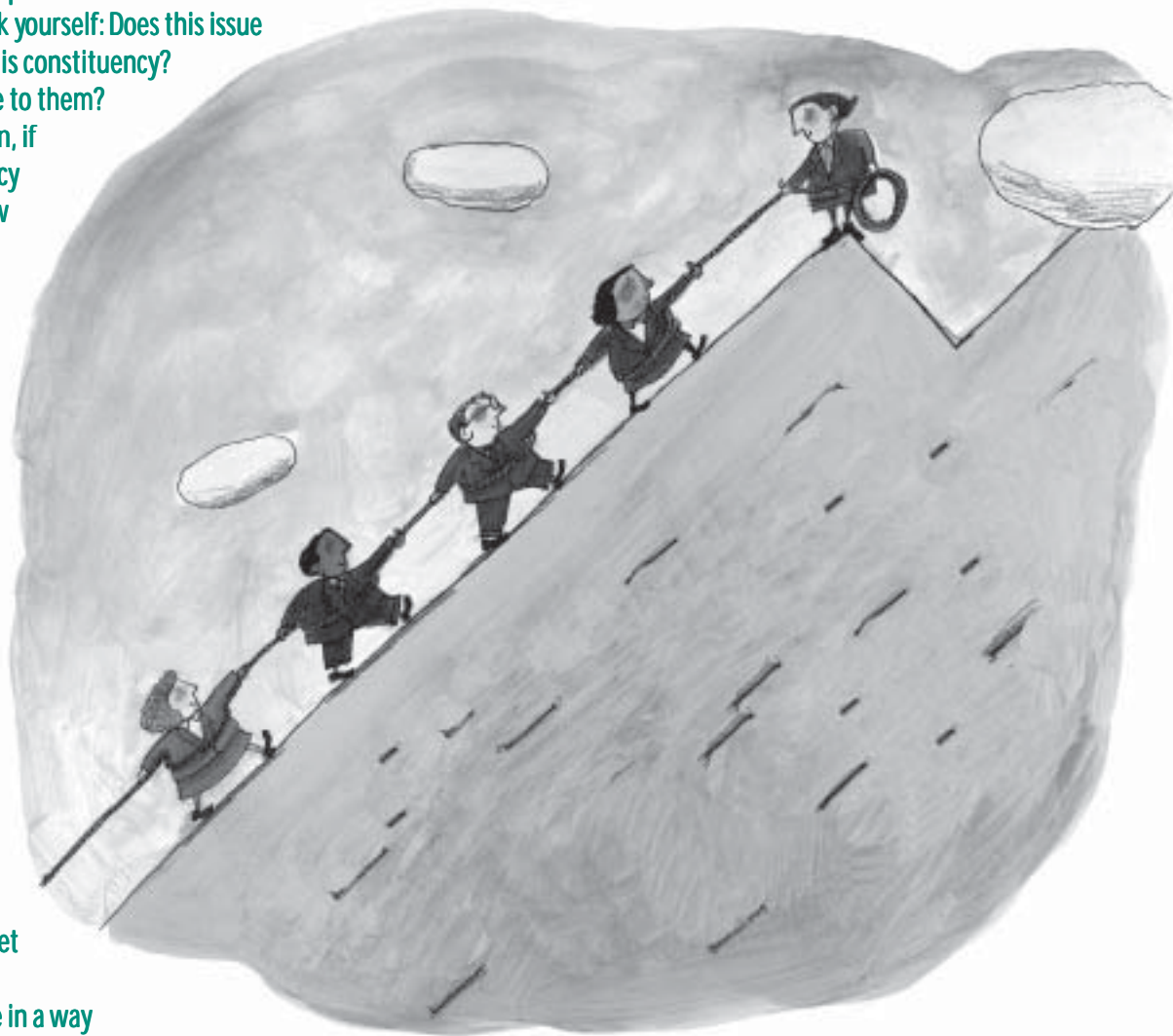
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# Finding Allies

by Si Kahn

Start by looking at all the possible constituencies that might join a coalition. Ask yourself: Does this issue affect the members of this constituency? What benefit would it be to them? What kind of organization, if any, does this constituency have to represent it? How are decisions made in that organization? What kinds of power can the organization bring to this fight? What problems might it bring? Would its reputation be an asset or problem to us? Does it have a past history that would create problems if it was one of the groups working on this issue?

One of the ways of approaching groups to get them to participate in an issue is defining the issue in a way that appeals to their organizational self-interests. Sometimes this is referred to in organizing talk as “cutting an issue.”



(Excerpted from *Organizing: A Guide for Grassroots Leaders* with permission of author Si Kahn.)

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# SHORT-TERM COALITIONS

by Sally Bethea

**“...always be on the lookout for new organizations with whom to develop partnerships, and reach out to those beyond the usual borders of the conservation community.”**

Short-term coalitions, in my experience, are almost always formed around a single issue, and it is that issue which defines the coalition, in terms of its appropriate membership.

Imagine this scenario: A critical vote on stormwater regulations is expected to reach the natural resources board in your state in less than two weeks. Your organization has researched the issue, compiled all the statistical information, framed the legal arguments, and crafted a strong public message in support of the regulations. But you are a relatively small nonprofit group, and in order to influence this powerful state board you need the firepower and political clout that only a coalition representing thousands of concerned citizens can bring.

Time is short and you want to get half a dozen of your sister environmental organizations to sign on to your position statement. Some of these groups have been following the stormwater issue, but others know very little about the subject.

So, what are you going to do? Can you pull together, and adequately inform, a short-term coalition? Is it worth the effort?

Answering the last question first, it is my strong belief that there is sig-

nificant strength in numbers, particularly if those numbers represent a broad range of environmental and public interest organizations. It can be easy for decision-makers, like a state natural resources board, to discount one group's position, but it becomes much more difficult to do so when there is a ringing endorsement of a position by half a dozen organizations.

For most organizations, the willingness to join a coalition on a particular issue is driven by two key factors:

(1) the existence of a long-standing relationship with your organization and/or its leaders—in other words, trust of individuals and work product: or

(2) the desire of a group to build a relationship with your organization through a particular initiative.

There are a number of common sense, but often overlooked, actions that you and your organization can take in order to develop strong connections with other groups. Understanding the mission of other groups, the advocacy and education tools they use, and their preferred style of interaction is critical. It is also very important to develop personal relationships with the staff and directors of these other groups. Simply said, it is much easier to do business with people you know.

How do you determine what drives another organization? Become a member and read their literature. Attend their meetings and fundraisers. Offer to speak to their membership or board about your organization's work and opportunities for joint projects. Ask them how your work can help support their goals and objectives. Encourage your staff to be available to provide help and advice on projects similar to yours. Involve other groups in your fundraisers by giving them exposure through information booths or exhibits, the sale of special merchandise, auction donations, and demonstrations (e.g., Trout Unlimited does great fly-tying demonstrations).

Once you have established good organizational relationships, remember to continue to nurture them. When other groups help you, make sure to give them credit—not just in a thank you letter, but in your newsletter where their value to your program is clearly articulated to your members and, yes, even to your funders. When the media calls you about an issue, don't hog all the quotes. Provide the reporter with the names and phone numbers of knowledgeable representatives of other groups. Your generosity will be returned to you "by the bushel-full," as the leader of Georgia's largest conservation organization advised me years ago.

Finally, always be on the lookout for new organizations with whom to de-



velop partnerships, and reach out to those beyond the usual borders of the conservation community. Too often, we (environmentalists) do not think broadly enough to include garden clubs, professional groups of architects, engineers, and land designers, civic associations, academic institutions, and even local governments. I believe that one of the primary reasons that Upper Chattahoochee Riverkeeper won its federal lawsuit against the city of Atlanta, both in the legal arena and the "court" of public opinion, was the diversity of the plaintiffs' coalition. Made up of three counties, three cities, two landowners, one

home-owners association, one Chamber of Commerce and two environmental organizations, this coalition was united in a common desire to stop the city from polluting the Chattahoochee River.

Returning to the original scenario regarding proposed stormwater regulations... in reality, this was a true story. Several months ago, Riverkeeper was faced with the challenge of creating a short-term coalition to support the proposed regulations in a letter to Georgia's new governor and to the Board of the state Department of Natural Resources. Because we had strong, long-standing relationships with other groups and because there were several new groups that wanted to work with us, we were able to put an impressive coalition together quickly. It included the following organizations, to whom Riverkeeper owes a great deal of thanks: Sierra Club-Georgia Chapter, Georgia Wildlife Federation, The Georgia Conservancy, Southern Environmental Law Center-Deep South Office, Georgia Council of Trout Unlimited, A.I.A.-Georgia, The Coastal Environmental Organization of Georgia, and The Garden Club of Georgia. ■



*Sally Bethea is the executive director of the Upper Chattahoochee Riverkeeper Fund in Atlanta, Georgia and a member of River Network's Board of Trustees.*

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# Advantages and Disadvantages of Working in Coalitions

## Advantages

- 👍 Win what couldn't be won alone. Many issues require large numbers of people and many resources to win. Coalitions can pool people and resources to win important victories.
- 👍 Build an ongoing power base.
- 👍 Increase the impact of individual organization's efforts. Not only does your involvement help win, but you make the work you do undertake more effective.
- 👍 Develop new leaders. Experienced leaders can be asked to take on coalition leadership roles, thus opening up slots for new leaders.
- 👍 Increase resources. If the coalition's issue is central to your organization, you may directly benefit from additional staff and money.
- 👍 Broaden scope. A coalition may provide the opportunity for your group to work on state or national issues, making the scope of your work more exciting and important.



## Disadvantages

- 👎 Distracts from other work. If the coalition issue is not your main agenda item, it can divert your time and resources.
- 👎 Weak members can't deliver. Organizations providing leadership and resources may get impatient with some of the weaker groups' inexperience and inability to deliver on commitments.
- 👎 Too many compromises. To keep the coalition together, it is often necessary to play to the least-common denominator, especially on tactics.
- 👎 Inequality of power. The range of experience, resources and power can create internal problems. One group, one vote does not work for groups with wide ranges of power and resources.
- 👎 Individual organizations may not get credit. If all activities are done in the name of the coalition, groups that contribute a lot often feel they do not get enough credit.
- 👎 Dull tactics. Groups that like more confrontational, highly visible tactics may feel that the more subdued tactics of a coalition are not exciting enough to activate their members.

(Excerpted from *Organizing for Social Change: A Manual for Activists in the 1990's* by Kim Bobo, Jackie Kendall and Steve Max.)



# One People, One System: The MRBA Builds A Powerful Alliance

by Kathy Luscher and Thalia Zepatos



## MRBA

The Purpose of the Mississippi River Basin Alliance is to “protect and restore the ecological, economic, cultural, historic and recreational resources in the basin; and to eliminate barriers of race, class and economic status that divide us in the quest to achieve these purposes.”

The Coordinating Council serves as the Alliance’s Board of Directors. Diversity is insured in the bylaws, which require balanced representation of all 3 geographic regions of the Mississippi (upper, middle and lower) as well as guidelines for cultural, racial and gender objectives. The current 16-member Council includes 5 African-Americans, 2 Native Americans, a 17 year-old high school student, and has close to gender equity.

The Mississippi River is over 2,350 miles in length and drains two-thirds of the United States in the world’s second-largest watershed basin. Over 18 million people rely on the Mississippi and its tributaries for their daily water supply; the watershed includes 33 states and two Canadian provinces and covers 1.2 million square miles.

Now imagine trying to pull together a huge citizens coalition—a single organization that would attempt to represent the many diverse interests along the Mississippi. Your task is to bring together farmers from the Upper Basin, fishers from the Lower Basin, environmental justice groups and traditional conservationists. Talk about an organizing challenge! That is the job of the Mississippi River Basin Alliance.

### Initial Organizing Effort

Tim Sullivan, Executive Director of MRBA, explains how it all initially came together, “The original plan goes back some seven or eight years in its origins. A number of people were coming to grips with the problems of the Mississippi; at the time I represented sustainable agriculture groups, and the Midwest had

all the strength. It was clear the South was left out of almost all power and resources.”

“People up and down the river began to get together and talk. And a vision emerged of leveraging power with the understanding that the WHOLE of the river— ecologically, socially and culturally— was essential to solving the local problems.”

Dianne Russell of the Institute for Conservation Leadership (ICL) played a key role in facilitating a series of meetings that took place over two years’ time.

**“it was smart to  
‘go slow in order  
to go fast.’”**

“The leaders who had the first vision for the network were very wise. Folks like Bill Redding, of the Sierra Club’s Midwest Office, and others clearly had a sense that it was smart to ‘go slow in order to go fast.’ And, they clearly understood the difficulty of

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building a shared vision among people and groups who had such fundamentally different views of the River.”

Tim Sullivan points out that in working to bring diverse interests together, “basic cultural issues will arise around the sensitivity of race and community. Region and geography can be as profoundly separating as race. There are many social barriers to overcome when you try to bring communities together, and that only happens with shared experience. When divisions are deep and complex, you have to be ready to invest up front, a couple of years, of just getting to know each other.”

The Institute worked very hard to create a shared ‘buy-in’ of the many leaders who joined together to explore the options for this new alliance. Russell of ICL explains, “Some of our shared work focused on basic education about the River’s issues and different perspectives about how to solve its problems. Some of the discussions helped to identify the common ground shared by everyone. And, some of our work was to really sit back and envision what we wanted the River to be in the future.”

### Formation and Structure

Trust was developed over time and in February of 1992, representatives from 31 local, state and national organizations met in St. Louis, Missouri and decided to form the Mississippi River Basin Alliance. Three



*Teaching by the flooded Mississippi River.*

regional meetings were held later that year (in Baton Rouge, LA, Alton, IL and Minneapolis, MN) to reaffirm the consensus of the February meeting and to recruit other individuals and organizations to the Alliance. At those meetings, representatives were chosen for an interim Steering Committee, comprising over 60 persons.

The interim Steering Committee adopted a purpose statement (see sidebar on previous page) and formed subcommittees to guide its work. From the beginning, the operating principles reflected a commitment to inclusion and openness, with the goal of closing the gap between those with the least power

and those constituencies with more power.

MRBA’s first Executive Director, Suzi Wikins was hired in March, 1994. Reflecting on the process, she recalls the work required to facilitate dialogue among members. “In its first three years, the MRBA set up communications mechanisms to ensure continued trust among all its member organizations and other constituents. We developed a web page, a quarterly newsletter and a directory of basin-wide organizations. We helped member groups secure computers to allow them better access to information and interaction. We held an annual conference that allowed folks to gather

to share their perspectives and concerns and to come to consensus on how best to address the basin's problems. By adopting several issue statements and developing a strategic plan for the organization, we laid the framework for the future of the MRBA.”

### The MRBA Today

The Mississippi River Basin Alliance was recently hailed by Outside magazine as a “rainbow coalition of activist groups.” Membership of MRBA has grown from the original 31 founding groups to 120 groups in 1999. Over 350 people attended this year’s annual conference, which

provided grassroots citizens with opportunities to build skills and discuss issues affecting the Mississippi.



**“It’s absolutely crucial to fully engage the full spectrum of stakeholders to solve any problems.”**

A major current campaign focuses on the Dead Zone, and the links between farmers upriver and fishing communities downstream. A new Youth Leadership Program is also underway.

Originally focused on the mainstem of the Mississippi, the MRBA is now moving out to organize along its tributaries. How does Executive Director Tim Sullivan plan to take on this new organizing challenge? “It’s absolutely crucial to fully engage the full spectrum of stakeholders to solve any problems. We’ll just start on the one-on-one level and reach out.” ➔

## Recipe for a Successful Coalition

- /// **Take 1 part: Shared Vision**
- /// **Mix together with: Common Understanding and Agreement on Goals and Objectives**
- /// **Clarify: Roles and Responsibilities**
- /// **Add: Effective Decision-Making Procedures  
Known Process for Dealing with Conflicts  
Procedures for Changing Members  
Relationships Built on Trust**
- /// **Prepare: Shared and Effective Leadership  
Well Developed Work Plans  
Staff or Others Assigned to Carry Out the Work of the Coalition**
- /// **Blend together with: Good Internal Communication Procedures  
Open and Timely External Communication**
- /// **Finally, check for: Clear Criteria for Evaluation of Activities**

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# COALITIONS AS A JOURNEY

## A Page of Mixed Metaphors



At the 1998 River Network Watershed Leadership Forum, Katie Burdick and Thalia Zepatos presented a session on Coalition Building. Recognizing that building coalitions can at times be a journey into the unknown, they developed this list of mixed metaphors about the trip.

### The Journey

- ▣ Establish the destination—where are we going?
- ▣ Decide the mode of transportation—how do we get there?
- ▣ Buy the ticket—how can we fund it?
- ▣ Pack your bags—what tools are we going to use?
- ▣ Arriving—how do we define victory? How do we know we're there?

### Problems Along the Way

- ▣ Flat tire—a strategy doesn't work as planned.
- ▣ Walking through mud—conflicting/unclear goals or strategies.
- ▣ Running out of gas—burn out of group members.
- ▣ Beware of alligators—key players who sabotage the effort.
- ▣ Getting lost—loss of coherent vision.
- ▣ “Are we there yet?”—impatience and frustration.
- ▣ Changing horses in mid-stream—abandoning the group when the outcome appears unwanted.
- ▣ Lost Luggage—being disenfranchised through unclear goals (“I thought we were going to Zanzibar?”)
- ▣ “But it said each room had a view...”—unmet expectations.
- ▣ Sacrificial offering—“we can get 90% of what we want if we jettison X Group.”
- ▣ Paper tigers—leaders who appear to represent a constituency but actually do not.

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# Resources for Coalition Building

## ***Organizing for Social Change: A Manual for Activists in the 1990's***

by Kim Bobo, Jackie Kendall and Steve Max.

Chapter 9 of this terrific text on organizing explains when, why and how to build coalitions. Discusses temporary versus long term coalitions, advantages and disadvantages to building coalitions, and principles for successful coalitions. It also poses a list of questions for the organizer to think about while building the coalition. 2nd edition, 1996. Available from Seven Locks Press, PO Box 27, Cabin John, MD 20818, (301) 320-2130. \$19.95. 271 pp.

## ***Organizing: A Guide for Grassroots Leaders***

by veteran organizer Si Kahn.

Looks at the differences between short and long term coalitions. Discusses ways to determine which groups to include, and not include, in your coalition. Talks about the challenges of forming coalitions. 1991. Available from National Association of Social Workers Press, 7981 Eastern Ave., Silver Spring, MD 20910. \$22.95. 342 pp.



*Northern Sun Organize logo*

## ***The Activist's Handbook: A Primer for the 1990's and Beyond***

by Randy Shaw.

Randy Shaw believes coalition building is the best way to accomplish anything in the political arena. In Chapter 3 he provides lengthy examples of coalitions that have been successful, and he discusses how seemingly polar-opposite groups can be very effective coalition partners. 1996. Available from University of California Press, Berkeley, CA 94720. \$17.95. 299 pp.

## ***Not in Our Backyards! Community Action for Health and the Environment***

by Nicholas Freudenberg.

Gives examples of coalitions that are working with labor unions, people of color, women, peace groups and Third World groups. Also discusses the approaches to working with each type of group. 1984. Available from Monthly

Review Press, 155 West 23rd Street, New York, NY 10011. \$26.00. 304 pp.

## ***Dying from Dioxin***

by Lois Marie Gibbs and the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste.

Chapter 13 discusses how building coalitions with people different from you is what legitimizes the issue and highlights its importance in the community. Looks at the pros and cons of coalition building, and gives some great examples of coalitions in action. Also discusses how to recruit different types of organizations to join your coalition. Gibbs provides a sample coalition structure at the end of the chapter which is very informative. 1995. Available from South End Press, 116 Saint Botolph Street, Boston, MA 02115. \$20.00. 361 pp.

## ***Strange Bedfellows are Natural Allies***

(The Planet. April 1998, v4n3). Sierra Club Lone Star Chapter, the NRA and the Houston Safari Club team up to save Katy Prairie Wetland. Shows how uncommon coalition partners can be very effective. <[www.sierraclub.org/planet/199804/](http://www.sierraclub.org/planet/199804/)>.

# THANK YOU RIVER NETWORK PARTNERS

(continued from back cover)

Redwood Community Action Agency, CA  
Riverfront Commission, CA  
Santa Barbara SEA, CA  
Sierra Nevada Alliance, CA  
South Fork Trinity River Land Conservancy, CA  
South Yuba River Citizens League, CA  
Truckee River Habitat Restoration Group, CA  
Tuolumne River Preservation Trust, CA  
Upper Sacramento River Exchange, CA  
Urban Creeks Council - Santa Barbara Chapter, CA  
Watershed Advisors, CA  
Friends of the Animas River, CO  
North Fork River Improvement Association, CO  
Urban Edges Inc., CO  
Water Watch Partnership, CO  
Rivers Alliance of Connecticut, Inc., CT  
Coalition for Natural Stream Valleys, Inc., DE  
Stewards of the St. Johns River, FL  
American Canoe Association - Dixie Division, GA  
Chattahoochee Riverkeeper, The, GA  
Henry's Fork Foundation, ID  
Idaho Rivers United, ID  
Idaho Watersheds Project, ID  
Palouse-Clearwater Environmental Institute, ID  
Tri-State Implementation Council, ID  
DuPage River Coalition, IL  
Friends of the Chicago River, IL  
Lake Michigan Federation, IL  
Prairie Rivers Network, IL  
Friends of the White River, IN  
Indy Parks Greenways, IN  
Know Your Watershed, IN  
Kentucky Resources Council Inc., KY  
Kentucky Waterways Alliance, KY  
River Fields Inc., KY  
Chicopee River Watershed Council, MA  
Connecticut River Watershed Council, MA  
Deerfield River Watershed Association, MA  
Friends of the Mystic River, MA  
Massachusetts Watershed Coalition, MA  
Merrimack River Watershed Council, MA  
Nashua River Watershed Association, MA  
Neponset River Watershed Association, MA  
New England FLOW, MA  
Parker River Clean Water Association, MA  
American Whitewater, MD  
Friends of Mount Aventine, Inc., MD  
Southeast Watershed Forum, MD  
Friends of the Royal River, ME  
Maine Council/Atlantic Salmon Federation, ME  
Riverfront Commission, ME  
Forum for Kalamazoo County, MI  
Friends of the Crystal River, MI  
Friends of the Jordan River Watershed, Inc., MI  
Huron River Watershed Council, MI  
Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council, MI  
West Michigan Environmental Action Council, MI  
Cannon River Watershed Partnership, MN  
Mississippi River Basin Alliance, MN

Sierra Club - St. Croix Valley Interstate Group, MN  
St. Croix Watershed Network, MN  
Missouri River Communities Network, MO  
StreamTeach, Inc., MO  
Flathead Lakers, MT  
Medicine River Canoe Club, MT  
Montana River Action Network, MT  
Riverfront Commission, MT  
Cape Fear River Watch, NC  
National Committee for the New River, NC  
New River Foundation, NC  
North Carolina Watershed Coalition, Inc., NC  
Pamlico-Tar River Foundation, NC  
River Keepers, ND  
Green Mountain Conservation Group, NH  
New Hampshire Rivers Council, NH  
Delaware & Raritan Greenway, Inc., NJ  
Hackensack Riverkeeper, Inc., NJ  
Passaic River Coalition, NJ  
Pequannock River Coalition, NJ  
Amigos Bravos, NM  
Rio Grande Restoration, NM  
Ruidoso River Association, Inc., NM  
Upper Gila Watershed Alliance, NM  
Truckee River Yacht Club, NV  
New York Rivers United, NY  
Nine Mile Creek Conservation Council, NY  
Chagrin River Land Conservancy, OH  
Oxbow River & Stream Restoration, OH  
Association of Northwest Steelheaders, OR  
Friends of Buford Park & Mt. Pisgah, OR  
Friends of Elk River, OR  
Greenbelt Land Trust, OR  
Johnson Creek Watershed Council, OR  
Oregon Adopt-A-River, OR  
Pacific Rivers Council, OR  
Riverfront Commission, OR  
Sandy River Basin Watershed Council, OR  
Trout Unlimited - Oregon Council, OR  
Tualatin Riverkeepers, OR  
Willamette Kayak & Canoe Club, Inc., OR  
Willamette Riverkeeper, OR  
Chesapeake Bay Foundation - Juniata Project, PA  
Delaware Riverkeeper Network - Main Office, PA  
Lackawanna River Corridor Association, PA  
Perkiomen Watershed Conservancy, PA  
Grey Owl Nature Trust, Quebec  
Partners For the Saskatchewan River Basin, SK  
Cumberland River Compact, TN  
Wolf River Conservancy, TN  
Bayou Preservation Association, TX  
Rio Grande/Rio Bravo Basin Coalition, TX  
San Jacinto River Association, TX  
Save Barton Creek Association, TX  
Buckingham Citizen Action League, VA  
Elizabeth River Project, VA  
St. Croix Environmental Association, VI  
Chumstick Watershed Association, WA  
Columbia River United, WA  
River Farm Land Trust, WA

Rivers Council of Washington, WA  
Fox-Wolf Basin 2000, WI  
Kinnickinnic River Land Trust, Inc., WI  
River Alliance of Wisconsin, WI  
Cacapon Institute, WV  
Friends of the Cheat, WV  
Friends of the Lower Greenbrier River, WV  
Harpers Ferry Conservancy, WV  
Riverfront Commission, WV  
West Virginia Rivers Coalition, WV  
Wyoming Outdoor Council, WY

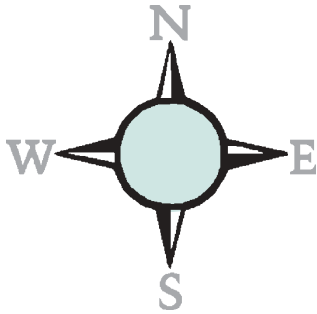
## New/Renewed Individuals

Susie Wilkerson, AL  
Andy Robinson, AZ  
Kerri Timmer, CA  
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Jim Decker, CA  
Paul G. Hawken, CA  
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Nancy C. Jacques, CO  
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## New & Renewed Agency Partners

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County of El Dorado Parks & Recreation, CA  
Colorado Division of Wildlife, CO  
National Park Service - Rivers, Trails & Conservation Assistance, DC  
Southwestern Illinois Resource Conservation & Development, IL  
Grand Traverse Conservation District, MI  
Watershed Programs for Public Works, NC  
Oklahoma Scenic Rivers Commission, OK  
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Clallam Conservation District, WA  
BEAR Project, Inc., WY

# Join the River Network Partnership, and we can help you navigate your river work.



Since 1988, River Network has helped hundreds of river and watershed conservationists. Our vision is to have vigilant and effective citizen watershed organizations in each of America's 2,000 major watersheds. Helping river and watershed organizations through the Partnership is one strategy for making our vision a reality. Let us give you the tools you need to be effective in your watershed.

*"Virginia Save Our Streams appreciates the interest, enthusiasm, cooperation and advice that River Network has bestowed upon us. River Network has been a great contributor to the VA SOS Program and we honestly feel that our dues have come back to us many times over."*

Jay Gilliam, Virginia Save Our Streams  
A Project of the VA Division of The Isaak Walton League of America

## Here's some feedback from River Network Partners:

*"Everything we have received from River Network—the Fundraising Alert, the special publications—have been extremely helpful, providing practical information we badly need."*

Kevin Bixby  
SW Environmental Center, NM

*"River Network has been the most useful tool I have. You guys really know what is important to small grassroots river organizations everywhere. Thank you!"*

Jeff Crane  
North Fork River Improvement Association, CO

## RIVER NETWORK PARTNERSHIP

Joining the River Network Partnership is one of the best investments you can make in protecting your river and its watershed. You'll receive valuable publications (a \$122 value), plus one-on-one advice and the opportunity to network with hundreds of like-minded river and watershed conservationists from across the country.



### YES, we would like to be a River Network Partner

Annual Partner Dues: \$60.00

#### Benefits include:

- Annual subscription to *River Voices* and the *River Fundraising Alert*
- A complimentary copy of *Directory of Funding Sources for Grassroots River and Watershed Conservation Organizations*
- Your choice (check one):  *How to Save a River*  
 *Starting Up: A Handbook for New River and Watershed Organizations*
- Other publications at discounted rates
- One-on-one assistance via our 1-800 hotline, and much, much more.

#### Please check one:

- Organizational
- Agency
- Individual
- Our check, payable to River Network, is enclosed.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Organization/Agency \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_ Phone (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_



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*Gila Monster Watershed Council, AZ*  
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*BC Spaces for Nature, BC*  
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*West River Watershed Association, CT*  
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*Iowa Watersheds, IA*  
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*Southern Appalachian Biodiversity Project, NC*  
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*The Great Egg Harbor Watershed Association, NJ*  
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*Illinois Valley Family Coalition/River Celebration, OR*  
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*ClearWater Conservancy, PA*  
*Pennsylvania Environmental Council, PA*  
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*Missouri River Corridor Partnership, SD*  
*America Outdoors, TN*  
*Dagger Canoe, TN*  
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*Izaak Walton League - Virginia SOS Program, VA*  
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*Windham Regional Commission, VT*  
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*Concerned River Valley Citizens, WI*  
*Friends of St. Croix, WI*  
*Root River Stewardship Council - Franklin, WI*  
*Trout Unlimited National, WI*  
*Wisconsin Wetlands Association, WI*  
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*Water For The Dries, WV*

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*Friends of the Tuolumne, CA*  
*Kern River Alliance, CA*  
*Matrix of Change, CA*  
*Mill Creek Conservancy, CA*  
*Mono Lake Committee, CA*

(continued on page 22)