

Rocky Mountain Youth Corps Partnership

Erin Higby & Julia M. Wondolleck

Ecosystem Management Initiative
School of Natural Resources and Environment
The University of Michigan
430 E. University
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1115

www.snre.umich.edu/emi/cases/rocky_mountain

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Background

The Rocky Mountain Youth Corps (RMYC) was founded in 1995 to develop service projects for youth in the communities of New Mexico. The organization is located in Taos, New Mexico, and its crews, comprised of youth ages 16-25, travel to areas throughout the state to work on service projects. In 1997, the RMYC entered into a formal partnership with the Carson National Forest to contribute to restoration and maintenance projects on the forest during the summer months. These crews are supervised by Rocky Mountain Youth Corps staff under a detailed operating agreement with the Forest Service that contains regular reporting structures between the two partners.

Benjamin Romero, Forest Service Public Affairs Officer on the Carson National Forest, describes the partnership as “a win-win situation for both sides because the youth learn land ethics, they help us with the projects and we write that project off [our list of things that need to be done] once it has been accomplished.” The Forest Service develops projects that can be accomplished during one season such as fence maintenance, thinning, brush piling, riparian exposures, barrier construction, and other projects related to watershed restoration. In addition, the crews are educated about the forest ecosystem and land stewardship ethics.

This partnership was initiated by the RMYC and then immediately seized upon by the Forest Service. As Romero recalls, “we jumped on this opportunity.” In 1995, the RMYC contacted the Carson National Forest Supervisor because they were looking to form local partnerships with organizations that had possibilities for public service-oriented work. The Corps follows a model that mobilizes crews of young people to complete projects with the purpose of creating a stronger environment in the communities where they operate. The Forest Service was a natural partner because of the proximity of RMYC and the Carson National Forest in Taos, and because the agency manages a tremendous natural resource base.

The partnership was formalized through a Memorandum of Understanding and a formal Participating Agreement between RMYC and the Forest Service. They have a five-year participating agreement that can be extended after the initial five years.

What made this partnership possible?

While a simple partnership in many respects, there are several factors that smoothed the way for its success. First, the RMYC took time at the outset to clearly convey the

purpose of their organization and its mission, objectives and accomplishments to Forest Service employees on the Carson National Forest. Carl Colonius, Executive Director and co-founder of the RMYC, explains, "...and then it was taking baby steps and identifying projects and being a responsive organization so that when feedback or suggestions were made we were able to incorporate those into our implementation." Doing their homework on the Forest Service, and having specific ideas for how RMYC and the Forest Service could work together in ways that were beneficial to both partners, was helpful to the quick establishment of the partnership.

Colonius describes that for the RMYC "it was a matter of convincing folks that we are not a high school club or a fly-by-night operation, that we have a professional atmosphere that provides for technical project completion above and beyond expectations, that the power and skill set of our young people is certainly something to be respected and not taken lightly, and that is a relationship that has built up over time." For the Forest Service, it was making sure they have good projects on the table for the RMYC, in every district, and that the crew understood the program objectives. Because the crews are comprised of youth they need more guidance than more experienced contractors. According to Romero, the RMYC does a great job supervising the crews, ensuring a professional job is completed that satisfies both RMYC and USFS objectives.

What are some of the challenges faced by the partnership?

Colonius describes the partnership as requiring "significant energy and attention" and the need to "make the commitment as an organization to be responsive to input and address concerns rather than brushing them off. We have regular reporting structures to solicit input from Carson National Forest personnel, project by project as well as at program and organizational levels. It has changed and developed in intensity over time, but it was always our commitment to make sure that project sponsors had a voice in how our organization responded to their needs. If the customer is not satisfied then your relationship is short term."

Consistent, predictable funding, as with many partnerships, is a lingering challenge. Under the cost-share agreement, the Forest Service is responsible for paying the RMYC for their service, so the challenge has been making sure that the funding exists to uphold this agreement. They are currently looking into finding a way to make the partnership long-term, where it is automatically a part of their budget each year rather than annually renewing the 5-year agreement.

What lessons have been learned?

For both partners, *consistent communication* through a close working relationship has engendered success. Establishing rapport and respect have also been possible because they are located in a small community where it is possible to develop multiple formal and informal relationships.

This partnership has become a model for other forests in New Mexico that have contacted the Carson National Forest to ask how the program works. Romero suggests that others interested in starting a partnership, “Make sure that what you are after is within the lines of the Forest Service’s management goals.” Every project that the RMYC accomplishes is a project that the Forest Service would need to complete at some point, but this partnership enables the projects to go forward in a more timely fashion. He also recommends that the partners develop a detailed agreement about how the work will get done so that sufficient direction is provided and responsibilities and expectations on all sides are clear. He stresses the importance of creating projects that the RMYC crews can accomplish.

Colonus explains that it is important to look into the systems and structures that the Forest Service is working under such as their fiscal year appropriations and annual budget as reflected in their management plan, as well as other guidelines they may be operating under such as NEPA processes and clearances for projects. “Being cognizant of where those processes stand provides insight into what would be good or better timing.”

Recognizing that both partners – RMYC and Forest Service in this case – operate within different organizations with different procedures, structures, needs and expectations has helped both partners be patient and accommodating as needed. It was important for both to ask questions of each other in order to learn about these differences and clarify what each would need to do internally within their own organizations as well as together in order to make the partnership work. Regular reporting schedules were a critical element of the formal partnership structure. At the outset of the partnership, Colonus says he would, “ask more questions of the structures within the Forest Service regarding cooperative agreements.” They are learning the Forest Service’s systems and structures all the time and how to position themselves effectively into their management plan.

For Further Information

Benjamin Romero

Forest Service Public Affairs Officer, Carson National Forest
Taos, New Mexico
505-758-6211
bromero@fs.fed.us

Carl Colonius

Executive Director and Co-Founder, Rocky Mountain Youth Corps
505-751-1420 ext 22
Taos, New Mexico
colonius@youthcorps.org
www.youthcorps.org