

# Lessons Learned from Participation in the Great Lakes Regional NAFWS Conference

Submitted by Ally Scott and Jenny Washam

The Wisconsin Chapter of The Wildlife Society ([WCTWS](#)) and Wisconsin's Green Fire ([WGF](#)) are two non-profit organizations seeking greater communication, collaboration, and partnerships with professional colleagues who work in tribal fish and wildlife conservation. In September 2022, the Native American Fish and Wildlife Society ([NAFWS](#)), a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting tribal fish and wildlife conservation, held its Great Lakes Regional Conference in Hayward, WI. WCTWS and WGF sent small delegations to attend the meeting, learn from the various sessions and presentations, and hold informational vendor booths. We also worked with leadership at NAFWS to host an hour-long roundtable discussion entitled "Building cross-cultural partnerships for conservation."

We were grateful that 16 conference participants attended the session to learn more about our organizations and share their insights about cross-cultural work. Ken Pemble, WCTWS President-Elect, and Fred Clark, WGF Executive Director, provided brief overviews of the missions and activities of their non-profits. The session attendees then discussed two broad questions: (1) what are some challenges and opportunities to cross-cultural communication, collaboration, and partnerships for conservation among organizations in the Great Lakes Region, and (2) what are some ideas for specific action steps organizations can take to better pursue cross-cultural communication, collaboration, and partnerships?

## Challenges to Collaboration

The discussion revealed a depth of knowledge and experience that participants generously shared. Participants noted that conflict often arises from the misalignment of goals and worldviews. Professionals educated with a western perspective emphasizing natural resources management for consumptive or domination goals may not understand that tribal professionals generally value relationships with other intrinsically valuable beings and their subsistence use. **Acknowledging differences in these perspectives by adjusting language and priorities at the beginning of collaborations can strengthen efforts to work together.**

Historic and continued injustices serve as barriers to partnerships. Tribal communities are often overstudied in arrangements that lack tangible benefits to Tribes. Outsiders often extract Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), stories, and other information to create their own degrees, books, or other professional products without reciprocating or returning to the community. Paternalism is often present in these interactions, where non-tribal organizations presume the circumstances and needs of tribal communities instead of consulting a community directly to identify shared goals. Communities may respond to these interactions by distancing themselves from offending organizations, especially when extracted information, such as TEK, is used to further objectives that the communities do not support.

Participants highlighted that building relationships and trust takes a long time. **Thus, laying these foundations early and before critical issues arise is essential to success.** All organizations, agencies, and institutions experience turnover; therefore, it is important that

relationship-building and maintenance are incorporated into strategic plans so that connections persist after key individuals leave. Relationship-building is fundamentally a person-to-person process resulting from continuous, respectful, honest, and sincere communication, which should not be overlooked or overcomplicated. Beyond person-to-person relationships, transparency and integrity at all levels of an institution are noticed and create a reputation that persists beyond administration changes. Thus, organizations inherit the legacy of their leaders and influential actors regardless of whether current members self-identify with those predecessors. Participants emphasized that this impact on integrity underscores the need for professionals to confront unjust or unethical leadership in their organizations instead of distancing themselves from it and biding time until a change in leadership.

Additionally, many participants expressed concern about the lack of communication between tribal and non-tribal organizations. There is a gap in communication between organizations focused on similar topics, such as wildlife conservation, and a lack of effective information-sharing between organizations working towards similar goals. For example, members of WCTWS shared that they were not aware of the NAFWS conference in Hayward until two weeks before the conference, even though both societies are in the network of professional wildlife organizations.

There was further conversation around the challenges of engaging youth in the conservation field, and about the flooded pool of wildlife and conservation professionals looking for employment. Further, there is a significant lack of funding for early-career professionals in conservation, with many entry-level jobs offering little to no pay for individuals to gain critical foundational experience.

## **Action Steps**

Several recommendations for specific actions steps emerged:

- Representatives from WCTWS and WGF could continue to attend Great Lakes regional NAFWS meetings in the future and seek greater involvement from their members. These three organizations could share information about each other's meetings and events across their memberships.
- Leadership from WCTWS and WGF could attend the regular meetings of the Wisconsin Tribal Conservation Advisory Council ([WTCAC](#)) to learn about opportunities for collaboration, meet potential partners, and better understand the goals of associated Tribes.
- WCTWS and WGF could collaborate with Tribes to influence decision-makers on shared goals and issues that impact co-managed territories, such as by writing op-eds or comments.
- WCTWS could consider ways to engage with the Native Peoples' Wildlife Management Working Group at the national level of TWS for resources and guidance.

- WCTWS and WGF could provide education, training, and resources to their members to better prepare them for effective cross-cultural work in their various professional roles and increase their awareness. Topics could include:
  - The specific mechanisms through which tribal and non-tribal organizations, institutions, and agencies work together.
  - Perspectives and values in tribal fish and wildlife conservation, including TEK.
  - The benefits of working with Tribes as equal partners in conservation, including alternative perspectives and approaches, specific skillsets, access to funding, and geographic land bases.
- WCTWS and WGF could collaborate with Tribes to help educate non-tribal agency staff, elected officials, and decision makers around tribal treaty rights and obligations, and on best practices for maintaining effective, respectful, and co-equal relations with tribal communities.
- WCTWS and the Great Lakes region of NAFWS could contact their national parent societies to request the development and distribution of educational trainings on these topics at a national scale.
- State and federal agencies could partner with NGOs and nonprofit organizations to secure additional funding for entry-level positions.
- WCTWS could consider creating a directory of wildlife-focused organizations in the Great Lakes region and updating it regularly online. Participants specifically mentioned involving sportsmen/women-based organizations in these directories.
- All organizations (government, nonprofit, academic, etc.) in the Great Lakes region could increase their use of various communication channels to share information, including collaborating with other similar organizations to advertise events and other opportunities. Participants cited the Great Lakes Information Network ([GLIN](#)) as an example of an existing information sharing resource.
- WCTWS could continue its programs that reduce membership costs to students and young professionals to decrease barriers to entry. WCTWS could also consider diversifying membership expertise and broadening professional requirements to include other disciplines (e.g., public health, social sciences).

Discussion participants emphasized the importance of having appropriate people provide training and education. For example, a person of tribal affiliation with appropriate training and experience should provide education on Traditional Ecological Knowledge, and non-tribal organizations should not attempt to provide this education independently. One participant noted that “We can help you guys. We’re equals.” **An attitude of two-way reciprocal relationships is absolutely critical to the success of developing greater partnerships between organizations such as WCTWS, WGF, and NAFWS.**