Partnerships on Every Forest
Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Partnership Assessment

Compiled by the National Forest Foundation and the U.S. Forest Service National Partnership Office

March 2024

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Executive Summary

This report presents the results of a Partnerships on Every Forest (PEF) assessment completed by staff at the National Forest Foundation and National Partnership Office with the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area (CRGNSA) from January 2023 to March 2024. The goal of this assessment was to help the CRGNSA understand the strengths, challenges, and opportunities of their partnership program and develop an effective partnership strategy. To achieve this goal, PEF staff conducted interviews with 29 existing and potential partners to get first-hand knowledge of their experiences and investigate how the Forest Service can better incorporate their needs and values into the management of public lands. The assessment with the CRGNSA focused on understanding how the Forest Service can more effectively engage underrepresented groups and identify novel partners, especially those representing marginalized communities.

PEF staff used qualitative coding to draw out themes from interview notes and analyzed the results to create suggestions for the CRGNSA to respond to what their partners and staff shared. Participants noted many positive aspects of the CRGNSA partnership program including engagement of partners through clear, frequent communication; positive relationships built on mutual respect and trust that give partners independence to complete projects; and the large volume of partnership opportunities available that allow communities to engage with the Forest in a meaningful way. Participants also noted challenges to partnering with the CRGNSA including capacity of the CRGNSA and partners to maintain current partnerships, build new partnerships, and move projects forward; staff turnover that makes maintaining relationships difficult and results in loss of institutional knowledge; navigating Forest Service policy and bureaucracy; and lack of public transportation and insufficient parking for visitation that the CRGNSA receives.

Participants also had many suggestions for ways the CRGNSA could improve partnerships including a reassessment of Forest goals and priorities; communicating goals with partners to identify opportunities for engagement; identifying and connecting groups with complementary goals to create a partnership network; and providing accessible sources of information such as signage that in multiple languages and graphical formats.

To support Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB), an area of focus identified by the Forest Leadership Team and staff for this report, the CRGNSA could focus outreach towards Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), immigrants, people with disabilities, and accessible transportation partners; be mindful of the historical context of underrepresented communities in public lands; and empower underrepresented communities by providing resources and co-creating project goals.

By outlining these key findings, this report offers valuable insights and recommendations for fostering sustainable partnerships for mutual benefit and adding capacity to the management of the CRGNSA.

Land Acknowledgement

This land acknowledgment was provided by Forest Service staff at the CRGNSA.

We acknowledge and honor that the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area is located within the ancestral territories of Indigenous peoples who have protected these lands and waters since time immemorial.

We also honor the sovereignty and role of the four Columbia River Treaty Tribes in taking care of these lands and waters today—the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, and the Nez Perce Tribe. These bands and tribes include the Wasco, Warm Springs, Paiute, Cayuse, Umatilla, Walla Walla, Kah-milt-pah, Klickitat, Klinquit, Knowwas-say-ee, Li-ay-was, Oche-chotes, Palouse, Pisquose, Se-ap-cat, Shyiks, Skinpah, Wah-lal-la, Wenatshapam, Wishxam, Yakama, and Nimiipuu peoples. We are committed to working together with tribal governments through government-to-government partnerships and people-to-people relationships.

It is important to acknowledge these original inhabitants of the land we are utilizing today and recognize that we are here because of land displacement, cultural erasure, and other sacrifices that were forced upon them. We also remind ourselves that we are guests of this land and must do our best to honor the original peoples through authentic cultural narratives and continued caring of and giving to, the air, water, plants, animals, and the ecosystems that make up this land community. To follow this acknowledgment with action, we will pursue impactful partnerships with Indigenous people, Tribes and their sovereign governments, and inter-tribal organizations.

It is important for us to recognize the original inhabitants of this place. Thank you for taking a moment to reflect on these intentions.

Program Overview

Partnerships are an integral part of National Forest System management. They add capacity and integrate local communities' needs, interests, and values into public land management. Within the Forest Service, partnerships are broadly defined as voluntary relationships with mutual benefits between people, organizations, agencies, and communities that work together and share interests. Partnerships may be formalized through an agreement or contract or may be informal. Partners may include but are not limited to community groups, nonprofit organizations, local governments, state and federal agencies, Tribes, local businesses, academic institutions, and recreation groups.

The [Partnerships on Every Forest (PEF)](#) program is jointly managed by the U.S. Forest Service National Partnership Office (NPO) and the National Forest Foundation (NFF). The NPO works to augment the Forest Service's relationships with citizens, communities, non-governmental organizations, and others to add capacity and engage the public in managing National Forest System lands. These relationships are built through training and education, forest-level stakeholder engagement, and agency-wide support for partnerships through the PEF program. PEF supports the growth of the agency's partnership program and provides insight and tools to improve and develop partner relationships at the forest and agency levels.

The National Forest Foundation (NFF) is the USDA Forest Service's Congressionally chartered nonprofit partner. The NFF is an experienced convener of stakeholders and acts as a neutral entity that serves as a bridge between nonprofit and community partners and the Forest Service. The NPO and NFF are collaborating to build partnership strategies that increase land management and stewardship capacity. The PEF program identifies challenges and opportunities faced by partners, potential partners, and participating Forests. The NPO and NFF will work with Forest Service units to address findings by developing partnership strategies that support the Forest's and partner's desired outcomes. The assessment process and findings are documented to share insight into partnerships nationally and to create tools that can be used to assess and improve partnerships across different Forests and Regions.

Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area

Figure 1. Map of the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic area, with Portland to the west, Gifford Pinchot National Forest and Washington to the north, and Mt. Hood National Forest and Oregon to the south. The CRGNSA spans six counties. Map from the Forest Service's National Interactive Visitor Map.

The Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area (CRGNSA) is just 20 minutes from Portland, Oregon. It receives over 4 million visitors per year as one of the most visited Forest Service units in the country. In addition to its proximity to a large metropolitan area, the CRGNSA crosses state and county lines, lending itself to various community groups and agencies interested in partnering with the CRGNSA. The NFF began meeting with CRGNSA staff in January 2023 to identify partnership priorities and develop the interview process. Priorities included engaging historically underrepresented and marginalized communities, including immigrant communities, People of Color, Indigenous communities, low-income communities, and people with disabilities. The CRGNSA, NFF, and NPO staff worked together to review the outcomes of the interviews and develop a partnership strategy. The NFF and the NPO will have additional report-out conversations with Forest Service staff and host a partner round table to review the findings with staff and partners and create a space for dialogue.

Methods

A partnership assessment is a qualitative approach to identifying and understanding the perspectives of individuals and organizations that have a vested interest in a Forest. The methodology used in these assessments is similar to that of a stakeholder analysis described in the literature (Bendtsen et al., 2021). Authentically including partners in public lands management supports the Forest Service in achieving its mission and ensures accountability, transparency, and inclusion (Reed, 2008; Quick & Bryson, 2016). See Appendix A for more background on our methodology.

Partnership assessments are conducted using the following steps:
1. Application process
2. Focus group conversations to identify desired outcomes and clarify expectations
3. Semi-structured interviews and snowball sampling
4. Qualitative interview coding
5. Finalize partnership strategy
6. Shared learning

1. Application Process (~2 Months)

Any Forest Service unit in the country can apply to participate in the PEF program. The NPO and the NFF conduct outreach to ensure that all units are aware of the program with sufficient time to apply. Criteria that make a forest a strong candidate for PEF include established partnership staff with the capacity to engage in the planning and execution of the assessment, clear goals and desired outcomes, support from their Forest Leadership Team, and a commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. PEF assessments are best suited for forests that have specific goals and ideas for how they would like to expand their partnership program.

2. Focus Groups (~2 Months)

After a forest is selected, PEF staff meet with the Forest Leadership Team (FLT) and partnership staff to identify specific goals of the assessment and develop interview questions. Together, they develop a work plan which identifies the project tasks, timeline, and capacity needs. This process includes the development of interview questions, which are specific to each unit. The questions used for the CRGNSA assessment can be found in Appendix B.

3. Semi-Structured Interviews and Snowball Sampling (~3 Months)

The Forest provides an initial list of internal staff and external partners to be interviewed. This list is expanded as PEF staff ask each interview participant who else should be included, known as snow-ball sampling. PEF staff conduct interviews and meet with forest staff ~bi-weekly to check in regarding interview and assessment progress. All interview responses are confidential, and no specific responses are attributed to an individual. This report includes broad themes heard in interviews, not individual answers. Names of participants and the organizations they represent are listed upon individual approval; the list for the CRGNSA can be found in Appendix C.

The goal of PEF assessments is to be inclusive of all interests that exist within a Forest Service unit. This includes but is not limited to ecological, recreational, social, cultural, and economic interests. However, certain groups may be intentionally included or excluded to meet the individual goals of each PEF assessment. Snowball sampling and focus groups are approaches to identifying these interests and individuals that can represent them. However, there are limitations in this work that result in the exclusion of some perspectives.

4. Qualitative Interview Coding

After the interview process is complete, PEF staff code interview notes to provide structure to the observations and allow for interpretation and organization. By systematically categorizing excerpts from interviews, themes and patterns can be identified, which makes analysis more systematic by accurately representing participants, increasing validity, and decreasing bias. There are many different processes and approaches to coding qualitative data; further details regarding the coding process can be found in Appendix D.

5. Finalize Partnership Strategy

PEF staff share the results of the interviews with Forest Service staff and discuss how to incorporate them into the partnership strategy. This includes facilitating conversations about the

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results with relevant Forest Service staff and working together to identify approaches to strengthen their partnership program.

6. Shared learning
PEF staff will hold meetings with all partners involved with the assessment to share results, ensure that voices are accurately captured, and communicate the work accomplished. This meeting will be an opportunity for continued discussion between partners and Forest staff.

<u>Results</u>
In total, 29 interviews were conducted, including nine representatives from conservation organizations, eight from recreation groups (three of which focused on accessibility in the outdoors), seven from education organizations, four Forest Service staff at the CRGNSA, two in economic development groups, two community-focused organizations, and one from Tribal government (see Appendix C for a complete list of interview participants).

Through qualitative coding, PEF staff categorized interview results into values, strengths, challenges, gaps, and opportunities. The results are described below by category, listed in order of most common answers. The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of times each response was recorded in the coding process.

Values
Understanding the values that partners and Forest Service staff associate with the CRGNSA helps PEF staff understand what is important about the Forest to those who live and work in the area, as well as the motivations for partnering with the Forest. Identifying shared values and goals is critical to a successful, mutually beneficial partnership.

Environmental stewardship and connection (26)– Partners at the CRGNSA are dedicated to environmental stewardship and collaboration with local organizations and agencies. Environmental stewardship is a way to connect to the land and community and is a creative outlet to develop and implement innovative projects.

Nature and beauty (25)– The CRGNSA was highlighted for its nature and beauty. Partners described the Gorge as an awe-inspiring landscape rich with life and beautiful scenery. The Sandy River Delta, waterfalls, wildflowers, Angel's Rest, Beacon Rock, and Cape Horn were explicitly mentioned as areas and features of appreciation. Six partners particularly valued the biodiversity in landscapes, flora, and fauna across the Gorge from the mountains, through the valley and temperate rainforests into the high desert. The CRGNSA is home to over 800 species of native wildflowers and flowering shrubs, 15 of which are endemic.

Personal well-being and fulfillment (10)– The CRGNSA provides a space for people to connect to nature, spend time with family, and "engage with the land as a way to learn what it means to be human."

Recreation (8)– Partners valued the variety of recreation opportunities in the CRGNSA. Specifically, hiking, scenic driving, mountain biking, fishing, windsurfing, kayaking, and dog-walking were mentioned. In addition, the variety of trail difficulties across trail conditions, grade, elevation gain, mileage, and natural barriers provide varied experiences and promote access.

Indigenous People and Culture (5)– The lands that are today the CRGNSA include the traditional territories of the Tenino, Wasco, Wisham, Yakama, Cascades, Stl'pulmsh (Cowlitz), Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla people. These Indigenous Peoples have stewarded this land since time immemorial. Their connection to the land continues through several federally recognized Tribal Governments, including the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde, Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, Nez Perce Tribe, Cowlitz Indian Tribe, and the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz Indians. Partners acknowledged the value of Indigenous culture and treaty rights of all Tribes with history in the Gorge, which includes the traditional gathering and use of First Foods by Indigenous peoples.

Natural resources (3)– Though partners emphasized the recreation and conservation focus of the CRGNSA, natural resources, particularly water, were mentioned as a value. Water is known as the "lifeblood" of the Columbia River Gorge.

Strengths
Strengths show what the Forest Service staff is doing well and provide positive feedback and reinforcement from partners.

Communication and outreach (13)– Partners felt that clear, frequent communication kept them engaged and made them feel appreciated. When partners felt engaged, they could work with the Forest Service to give back to the community and make public lands more accessible. Partners felt staff developed collaboration and communication skills to work with various partners, including traditional NGOs, federal and state agencies, and youth. These partnerships add capacity to the Forest Service and create potential career pathways for youth and other community members to pursue careers in public lands management.

Positive relationships (10)– Partners shared that their relationships with Forest Service staff were built upon mutual respect, trust, and appreciation. These positive relationships are critical to carrying out projects effectively. Ten interviewees conveyed how Forest Service staff have helped pull together resources and remove barriers to move projects forward. Eight interviewees explained that the trust that Forest Service staff gave in delegating tasks allowed organizations to take the lead while receiving oversight and support from staff. Partners said staff are open and candid about Forest priorities and share opportunities to collaborate on projects. Furthermore, partners said that Forest staff are committed to mutually beneficial partnerships and support partner goals. Partners noted that CRGNSA staff are resourceful, innovative, and invested in connecting with all visitors.

Partnership opportunities (8)– The CRGNSA is located 20 minutes from Portland, OR, which provides significant partnership opportunities. There are many nonprofits and community groups with diverse focus areas that can build capacity across the Forest. Because Forest staff do not micro-manage these organizations and trust them to lead projects, partners feel appreciated in this recognition for their expertise and ability to work efficiently.

Common goals (4)– When the Forest Service engages partners early in the process, partners and the Forest Service develop a mutual understanding of priorities. Clearly establishing objectives and expectations throughout a project facilitates an effective working relationship.

Economic Development (3)– Partners appreciated that the CRGNSA brings economic development into the area through summer youth employment, providing volunteer opportunities that can transition into work with the Forest Service and managing the Gorge to ensure the area's economic health.

Resourceful and innovative (3)– Partners felt that the CRGNSA has intentionally invested in interpretive staff to connect with diverse visitors. Despite a lack of staff capacity, the CRGNSA can leverage resources and partners to accomplish extensive on-the-ground work.

Personal fulfillment (3)– Interviewees expressed that partnering with the CRGNSA has been a worthwhile and productive partnership. Partners can carry out successful projects effectively and efficiently, bringing personal fulfillment.

Challenges
Challenges can highlight obstacles that partners face in working with the CRGNSA and help Forest staff understand how to create stronger relationships with their partners.

Forest Service staff turnover and capacity (23)– Partners shared that maintaining relationships and moving projects forward can be challenging when their points of contact at the CRGNSA leave their positions. Staff turnover results in a loss of institutional knowledge and staff capacity, which is a frustrating experience for partners. The CRGNSA is understaffed, creating barriers to accomplishing on-the-ground work, especially maintenance projects. While there are opportunities for hiring and vacant positions, the difficulty of finding housing in the area and the lack of employee housing introduces barriers to potential staff. Furthermore, CRGNSA staff lack the capacity to fully engage with partners and approve projects that are ready to hit the ground. Two interviewees specifically mentioned the lack of staff to carry out maintenance work.

Bureaucracy (17)– Navigating Forest Service policies and timelines can be a significant barrier to organizations that lack capacity and experience working with Federal Agencies. Interviewees expressed that projects and agreement renewals can take a long time to move forward. Partners said they had to follow up with multiple staff members to receive the answers needed to move forward with projects, especially with technical details related to agreements and funding. Partners experienced project proposals being met with resistance due to possible liabilities and

the need to communicate with supervisory staff. Partners must adhere to Forest Service project and funding timelines, which can often be challenging.

Transportation and parking (12)– Partners expressed growing concerns about the CRGNSA becoming overcrowded, with a lack of parking and public transportation infrastructure that would increase accessibility. Recreation in the CRGNSA is concentrated, causing trailheads to be overcrowded, which can diminish the outdoor recreation experience.

Grant funding (7)– Partners can struggle to find funding to complete projects. Alignment and timing are difficult when funding cycles and commitments differ across government and partner organizations.

Partner Capacity (5)– Nonprofits, especially smaller and newer organizations, lack the capacity and expertise to build relationships with the Forest Service or engage in projects.

Planning (5)–Partners expressed that Forest Service timelines can be difficult to adhere to. While some partners mentioned that having the Forest plan events and meetings further in advance would allow them to engage with the Forest more, another partner said that with the nature of their work, it can be difficult to plan and make commitments far in advance.

Lack of volunteer coordination (4)– Some partners expressed that knowing how to get involved with the CRGNSA can be difficult. Volunteer coordination often falls onto partners who might lack the capacity to manage volunteers in accordance with Forest Service requirements.

Conflicting priorities (4)– The Forest Service is mandated to manage the land for multiple uses, which can lead to confusion and frustration. Staff often need to check in with their supervisors or the Forest Leadership Team before proceeding with a project, which can introduce delays and mixed messages.

Government Mistrust (4)– Especially in marginalized communities, there is a lack of a sense of belonging and mistrust of the government. Interviewees expressed that some efforts toward diversity don't seem authentic, and those efforts are not being led by underrepresented organizations that support marginalized communities. Partners representing marginalized communities expressed that despite being invited to participate in discussions, they are not leaders, leaving their work and expertise unacknowledged.

Crime (3)– Car break-ins and the houseless population have increased in the CRGNSA, introducing safety and environmental concerns that make the area less accessible.

Gaps
Forest Leadership wanted to identify groups that were lacking engagement. Asking about gaps, or who the Forest is not partnering with that should be included, provides a critical analysis of who is not included in the management of the CRGNSA. This can help identify groups that would benefit from more targeted engagement. Many participants said they did not know of gaps in partnership

due to being unaware of who else the CRGNSA is partnering with. The responses below suggest groups that would benefit from more targeted outreach and engagement.

People of Color (5)– Black, Indigenous, and People of Color are underrepresented in the Forest Service and partner organizations. The Forest Service could work on outreach to these communities.

Tribal engagement (3)– Partners thought that the Forest Service should do more Tribal engagement beyond required consultation. Partners expressed that they would like more opportunities to harvest First Foods beyond the Sandy River Delta. The CRGNSA engages in government-to-government relationships with sovereign Tribal groups, which are unique from interactions with other partners. Staff should be trained on Treaties in the area to understand and effectively navigate these relationships.

Immigrants (2)– Many immigrant agricultural workers live in and around the CRGNSA. Partners said that these communities should be more engaged, specifically by providing resources for non-English speaking people.

Disabilities community (2)– The Forest Service could improve information on its website so people of all abilities can decide for themselves if a park or trail meets their needs and desired experience before they arrive. The Forest Service could provide specific information on the conditions of all trails to accommodate the various levels of "accessibility" that are sought to better engage with people of all abilities. [see: Trail Accessibility and Safety, pages 14/15]

Transportation (2)– The Forest Service could engage more transportation planning partners and consider long term transportation planning.

The following groups were mentioned once as gaps in who the CRGNSA engages with: schools and universities, water recreationists, mountain bikers, and the city of Stevenson. Partners also suggested that the Forest Service do more outreach to the general public (beyond regulation and permitting), provide social services (such as public education, transportation, and assistance obtaining employment), work towards environmental and social justice, identify a group to fill the gap of the Sandy River Watershed Council that is going defunct, and promote activities such as art and writing beyond traditional recreation such as hiking.

Opportunities
Opportunities are suggestions for the CRGNSA to address challenges and improve their partnership program; PEF staff work to identify actionable strategies.

The Forest should clearly communicate its goals and priorities for partners (11)– Partners are confused about who to contact at the CRGNSA, Forest Service priorities, and how their organizations can contribute. Navigating agreements and understanding what nonprofits can do on Forest Service land is difficult.

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The Forest should manage partners and volunteers (6)– Many people in the Portland area are interested in volunteering but need direction on how to engage. The CRGNSA could identify and connect groups with aligned or shared goals and complementary strengths to better leverage partners to build capacity. CRGNSA staff can help manage partner networks instead of individual partners. Furthermore, the CRGNSA could integrate partnership requests and priorities into planning, including training staff to develop the skills and knowledge to work with various partners.

The Forest should provide bilingual services (4)– Interview participants expressed that it can be difficult for non-English speaking communities to find information regarding CRGNSA access, which can contribute to an eroded sense of belonging. If the Forest Service creates bilingual programming and signs with graphics, it will contribute to a more inclusive space.

The Forest should conduct intentional outreach to organizations serving underrepresented communities (4)– Smaller organizations said they lack the capacity to initiate relationships with the CRGNSA. If the Forest Service intentionally includes individuals and groups from marginalized communities, it can build engagement and trust while making public lands more accessible.

Forest leadership should lead intentionally and create a partnership strategy (2)– Partners felt that the CRGNSA could more effectively engage partners at the leadership level. The Forest Leadership Team could clarify priorities and a strategy to build intentional partnerships and engage partners in long-term planning. Effective partnership requires engagement from all levels within the CRGNSA. At the ground level, staff work directly with partners and have frequent conversations. At the administrative level, staff create agreements and annual reports and gather data. Forest leadership is responsible for creating a shared vision and long-term plan to keep partners engaged.

Discussion
Drawing on interviewee responses, PEF staff identified the following strategies to strengthen and build partnerships for mutual benefit at the CRGNSA.

Navigating Forest Service Administrative Policy
Most challenges discussed in interviews were around navigating bureaucracy, especially in the face of frequent staff turnover and lack of capacity. To alleviate the burdens of turnover, the Forest Service staff could incorporate transition planning. Transition planning can help maintain relationships between the Forest Service and partners when the Forest Service point of contact leaves their position—ensuring that the partner is aware of their new point of contact and that there is an internal system in place for relationship management to alleviate challenges associated with staff turnover within the agency. One approach would be setting up an automatic email reply as part of the off-boarding process that communicates their absence and provides contact information for the new point of contact. For more information on transition planning, see page 17 of the NFF's [Partnerships on Every Forest Resource Guide](#), "Adapting to Staffing Transitions," and the USFS [Handover Memo](#). At a national level, the Forest Service is beginning to level out in hiring and shifting to a culture of promoting in place, which will increase staff retention.

Partners should feel empowered to engage with the Forest Service, which requires having a consistent point of contact and support in navigating bureaucracy and drafting partnership agreements. The CRGNSA could include an organizational chart and contact information on their website to help make staff more available and help with staffing transparency. Additionally, creating a webpage for partners with information such as how to find the best contact for a specific question or request, and a breakdown of regulations and necessary permits, could be a great resource for new partners. The Forest Service could develop training and hold workshops for partners and potential partners to make working with the Forest Service more accessible. Changing regulatory requirements, such as requiring more paperwork, can introduce barriers, and there needs to be consistent communication with partners to streamline regulatory processes while ensuring safety and reporting requirements are being met. Partners that work on-the-ground and directly with volunteers have specific needs related to regulations including safety conditions and volunteer education and training. These regulations also need to adhere to Forest Service requirements, and Forest staff should be aware that changing policies and processes can complicate these partnerships. Furthermore, the Forest could reevaluate how agreements are drafted and streamline the agreements process to eliminate barriers to partnership.

A major frustration expressed by partners was how the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process can slow down projects. The Forest Service could alleviate this by hiring more planning and NEPA staff and training more Forest staff on NEPA.

Transportation, Parking, and Access
The CRGNSA could work with partners to develop and implement a strategy to improve transportation and parking. This could also provide economic development for surrounding towns by offering public transit and marketing opportunities. Public transportation and educational campaigns to make the public aware of different areas to recreate in the CRGNSA could enhance access while addressing overcrowding by spreading out use.

Grant Funding
Partners expressed appreciation towards the Forest Service for sharing funding opportunities. Continuing to distribute these opportunities along with grant writing resources to partners can help fill funding gaps and give access to opportunities that some partners otherwise might not have been aware of.

Partner Capacity
Partners have varying resources and abilities to engage and maintain communication with the CRGNSA regarding their expectations and needs. The Forest Service can use its knowledge of organizations in the area to connect partners with complementary expertise to support each other in moving projects forward.

Volunteer Coordination, Planning, and Communication
Partners and Forest staff expressed that there was a lack of shared vision or strategy for the partnership program. Partners and staff recommended that forest leadership should work intentionally to provide clear direction regarding forest priorities and a partnership strategy to

increase coordination. Clarifying Forest goals through a vision and strategy could reconcile some of the current confusion surrounding priorities. Another suggestion was to create a partner spotlight on the CRGNSA website to highlight effective partnerships, express appreciation, and share information about how the public can get involved. The Forest could leverage existing partner networks, such as the Gorge Stewardship Network, to help facilitate broader communication and leverage existing relationships and knowledge that less established partners can lean on.

Government Mistrust

To address mistrust of the government by historically excluded communities, the Forest could conduct intentional outreach to BIPOC organizations and host networking events to create space to build trust and relationships. In addition, when Forest Service staff attend events where these groups are present, it creates trust through forming personal relationships with Forest Service staff. Another suggestion was to strengthen Tribal relations by training Forest Service employees at all levels regarding government-to-government relationships and treaties in the area to authentically incorporate them into public lands management.

Crime

The CRGNSA could work with other land management agencies in the area to ensure visitors feel safe, help prevent crime, and alleviate houselessness. The CRGNSA should aim to staff law enforcement at appropriate levels to monitor activity and answer visitor questions.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging

A major goal of this assessment, as identified by the Forest Leadership Team, was to evaluate ways that the CRGNSA could support diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) in their partnership program. Interviewees shared many strategies to increase access and feelings of belonging in the CRGNSA. Most of the partnership and engagement strategies already mentioned, such as administrative training, transportation access, and relationship building, will bolster DEIB efforts. The CRGNSA can work towards developing an actionable strategy towards DEIB that communicates their commitment to the public and gives guidance to staff. Here, we further identify specific strategies to support visitors and partners from underrepresented communities.

Be Mindful of Historical Context
Stewardship and conservation are loaded terms with a complicated history. Limited conceptualizations of conservation and the outdoors have historically excluded Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), disability communities, immigrant communities, and LGBTQIA+ communities and can deter underrepresented groups from engaging. Centering the voices of underrepresented communities through co-creating collaborative project goals is critical for engagement and shifting what conservation and land stewardship look like. For example, CRGNSA staff could invite and support Tribal representatives to co-create interpretive signage to highlight and acknowledge histories around the Yakama War and Tribal communities in the area.

Empower Underrepresented and Marginalized Communities
Providing resources to and making space for underrepresented organizations is critical to engaging and serving diverse populations. The CRGNSA should work with intention by acknowledging the work of underrepresented groups and inviting them to lead projects. While often invited into working groups, these organizations rarely get the opportunity to lead projects in their realm of expertise that directly impact their communities. To support these partners, the Forest should provide resources by directly funding organizations doing DEIB work and compensating partners for their time in meetings.

Partners with existing connections to underrepresented communities are a resource for the Forest to develop relationships with and engage different communities. It is important to be mindful of the capacity limitation some of these smaller groups serving underrepresented communities might have and offer flexibility in commitment, meeting format, and time (e.g., provide a virtual or after-work hours option). Hosting social opportunities to build trust and relationships, including attending partner events, is critical to understanding partner needs and priorities, enabling the Forest to form mutually beneficial relationships.

The CRGNSA serves diverse populations. Locally, there are two distinct populations, the Portland metro area and rural communities to the east and north of the CRGNSA. Additionally, the CRGNSA receives many international visitors. Rural populations, including agricultural and immigrant communities, seem to lack engagement from the CRGNSA. Community outreach to engage underrepresented communities will foster a sense of belonging and encourage diversity. The CRGNSA can develop programming highlighting outdoor diversity and how conservation efforts support BIPOC communities. Furthermore, the CRGNSA can focus recruitment efforts on diverse communities to diversify staff who bring their perspectives and connections to the community. Finally, the Forest can support the local community by increasing the representation of minority-owned outdoor companies in visitor centers and inviting diverse outfitters and guides into the CRGNSA, fostering a sense of belonging and attracting diverse visitors.

Trail Accessibility and Safety
Outdoor recreation can feel especially daunting to folks with little experience or knowledge and there is a significant barrier to initial engagement. The CRGNSA could provide updated information in bilingual and graphical formats so the public can come to the Forest prepared for existing conditions. For example, including information about the location of restrooms and benches along trails, uploading updated photos of trail conditions, and including details about trail surface, width, and grade on the Forest website will allow the public to get a better sense of trail accessibility.

In prioritizing creating inclusive environments, the CRGNSA can train field staff to address conflicts in the Forest, including microaggressions and other forms of discrimination. Furthermore, Forest leadership should be mindful that certain management strategies can create barriers that limit use such as permitting systems which can disproportionately affect marginalized communities who already face barriers to access. By consulting with partners and keeping diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging as major drivers of land management strategy, the Forest will attract a wider diversity of visitors and partners.

Conclusion

The interviews conducted with existing and potential partners within the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area shed light on the diverse perspectives and experiences related to the strengths, challenges, and opportunities around partnerships. Effective communication, strong relationships, and innovative strategies have contributed significantly to the success of various organizational initiatives. However, challenges related to bureaucratic obstacles and government mistrust pose significant hurdles to engaging diverse partners for effective management; this finding was widespread across Forests participating in PEF. Interviewees expressed the importance of addressing these challenges through enhanced communication, streamlined administrative policies, and improved community outreach.

Furthermore, the study highlights the need for prioritizing diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging to ensure a more inclusive and accessible environment for all visitors and partners. Having a vision for the partnership program that Forest Leadership develops could help staff prioritize their time and add capacity for engagement. Compared to other Forests participating in PEF, the CRGNSA has more partners, increased efforts to organize partners, and many volunteer groups to help facilitate land and community stewardship. By implementing the suggested strategies and recommendations and revisiting their partnership strategy annually to reassess partner needs and priorities, the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area can foster more sustainable and inclusive practices, ensuring the continued success of its land management and community engagement efforts.

To best implement the suggestions from this assessment, PEF staff recommend creating metrics to measure the impacts of partnerships and having a clear plan to share with partners and Forest staff. This report can be revisited in six months and one year to reflect on how the results and suggestions have been incorporated. This report can be used as a benchmark to monitor change and growth in the CRGNSA's partnership program.

If you have any questions about this report or the Partnerships on Every Forest project, please contact:

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Appendix
A: Interview methods
For more background information on different interview methods, please refer to
Reed et al., 2009, which identifies the rational typology and nine methods for stakeholder analysis in the natural resource management realm. One of the primary aims of these partnership assessments is to identify partners, so we focus on Reed's first typology, identifying stakeholders, which is achieved through focus groups, semi-structured interviews and snowball sampling.

B: Interview questions
The following questions were asked of all those participating:
1. To start, can you share your position title and your role with your organization/agency?
1. When you think of the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, what are some values that come to mind? What is your favorite thing about the Scenic Area?
2. Does your organization have a formal partnership with the Forest Service? (If yes, continue to question 4. If not, go to question 8).
3. Are there any gaps in who the Scenic Area is working/engaging with? Any groups or stakeholders that you feel should be included that are not currently? If so, who?
4. What opportunities is the Scenic Area missing that could improve engagement with partners and/or expand outreach?
5. Is there anything else you would like to share about the Scenic Area and partnerships, either your own relationship or that of other groups/stakeholders?
6. I am interested in speaking with as many existing and potential partners as possible. Are there any other groups or individuals that you think I should speak with?

These questions were specific to Forest Service staff and individuals participating in an organization with an existing partnership with the Forest:
7. What types of partnership work are you involved with on the Scenic Area? What kinds of projects or agreements do you participate in?
8. What aspects of your partnership with the Scenic Area are working well?
9. What challenges do you face in your partnership with the Scenic Area? Is there anything you are particularly concerned about?
10. What kind of metrics embody a successful partnership program? Where should the focus be?
    a. For example, should the program focus on getting as much work done as possible (i.e., acres restored with native plants or trail miles maintained) or working with a broad spectrum of groups to make public lands feel safer and more relevant?
11. What is your group doing to diversify your outreach and engage with underrepresented populations?

These questions were specific to individuals participating in an organization without an existing partnership with the Forest:
1. Do you have a partnership with the CRGNSA? Are you aware of opportunities to engage with the Scenic Area? Are you familiar with groups that volunteer on the Scenic Area?

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2. Are there any barriers that make working with or engaging with the National Scenic Area a challenge?
3. How could the Scenic Area help your program and community be successful? What would a successful partnership with your program/community look like?

C: Interview Participants
Thank you to all interview participants for their time, insight, and dedication to their communities.

Name	Organization
Andrew Jansky	Northwest Trails Alliance
Amanda Lawrence	The Next Door
Barb Adams	Oregon Equestrian Trails
Beth Kennedy	Forest Service
Bill Weiler	Sandy River Watershed Council, Gorge Ecology Outdoors
Courtney Yilk	Confluence
Cyndi Soliz	Cape Horn Conservancy
Danny Cosgrove	Gorge Ecology Outdoors
Esteban Ortiz	Comunidades
Georgena Moran	Access Recreation
Greg Archuleta	Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde
Heather Howard	The Next Door
Jasmine Brown	Gorge Stewardship Network, Center for the Outdoor Recreation Economy
Jeanine Russell	Pacific Crest Trail Association
Jeffery Schuh	Friends of the Sandy River Delta
Jennifer Wilde	Adventures Without Limits
Jessica Carillo Alatorre	We Are Outgrown
Jorge Guzman	Vive Northwest
Lily Cary	Forest Service
Michelle Yasutake	Friends of Trees
Natalie Ferraro	Trail Keepers of Oregon
Patricia Fink	Columbia Area Transit
Ryan Ojerio	Washington Trails Alliance
Samantha Dumont	Lower Columbia Estuary Partnership
Sandy Haigh	Center for Ecodynamic Restoration
Sarah Skelly	Friends of the Columbia River Gorge
Somer Meade	Forest Youth Success
Stanley Hinatsu	Forest Service
Steve Vanier	Friends of Multnomah Falls
Yesi Castro	Culture Seed

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D: Coding methods

The coding methods for this assessment are adapted from Saldana 2009; Given 2008; and Braun, 2013. These webpages summarize these methods and are readily accessible: "The Essential Guide to Coding Qualitative Data," "Themes Don't Just Emerge — Coding the Qualitative Data," and "Qualitative Data Coding 101".

These methods were evaluated and adopted to meet the goals of this PEF assessment. Process:

1. Develop an initial code set
   a. Read through interviews to develop an idea of what the overall data look like.
   b. Make comments/notes on themes and repeated words to develop a codebook, a reference guide that is created and continuously updated through the coding process. Each assessment will have its own codebook to avoid categorizing responses into predefined categories, which could lead to missing a unique theme or conclusion.
      i. Continue to add new codes, creating and re-organizing categories as needed.
2. Line-By-Line Coding
   c. Look through interview notes closely, coding each interviewee's statement in detail.
3. Categorization
   d. Line-by-line coding will produce an extensive collection of codes. Group similar codes into the same categories that best reflect the analysis.
      ii. Categorizing codes will reveal consistent and overarching themes
      iii. Quantitative results can be pulled from the codes (e.g., 80% of interviewees identified communication as a strength).
4. Identify strengths and barriers
   e. Sort overarching themes into strengths and barriers
      iv. Begin to write, applying categories, codes, and strengths and barriers to the assessment

Works Cited

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Saldana, J. 2009. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.