



# **Partnerships on Every Forest Coconino National Forest Partnership Assessment**

**Compiled by the National Forest Foundation  
and  
USDA Forest Service National Partnership Office**

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## Research Statement

The research described in this report was conducted in 2024 and reflects the goals of the Forest Service at that time. All information and recommendations contained in this report are products of the National Forest Foundation and can be used and adapted by the Forest Service to meet the needs of their changing goals and priorities.

## Executive Summary

This report presents the results of a Partnerships on Every Forest (PEF) assessment completed by the National Forest Foundation and National Partnership Office with the Coconino National Forest (Coconino or Forest) from May to December 2024. The goals of this assessment were to:

1. Understand opportunities to enhance and/or expand Coconino partnerships and incorporate this into the Forest's Sustainable and Strategic Partnership Plan.
2. Understand how the Forest can more effectively identify and engage underrepresented groups including Tribes, rural communities, and local groups that do not have an existing relationship with the Forest.
3. Understand how to better leverage partner support to increase implementation, monitoring, and develop strategies to accomplish these objectives.
4. Find ways to support sustainable recreation and lands programs to protect priority watersheds and riparian landscapes.

To achieve these goals, PEF staff conducted interviews with 30 existing partners and Forest staff to gain first-hand knowledge of their experiences and investigate how the Forest can strengthen and expand their partnership program. Results were analyzed to generate suggestions and recommendations to incorporate into the strategic and sustainable partnership plan.

Participants noted many positive aspects of the Forest's partnership program, including the Forest staff's commitment to cultivating and maintaining long-term partnerships, supporting partnership work by attending meetings and providing resources, and implementation of timber and watershed restoration projects. Challenges included limited staff capacity and turnover, engagement with Tribes and rural and underrepresented communities, and lack of management priorities.

Based on interviews and a Forest visit conducted in September 2024, the PEF team identified the following key recommendations for Forest leaders and staff.

- Facilitate partner-to-partner networks by organizing annual or semi-annual partner forums (*Goal #1*).
- Increase engagement in Tribal, rural, and underrepresented communities by regularly attending Chapter meetings, town council meetings, or other events that provide communities opportunities to connect with and build trust in Forest staff (*Goal #2*).
- Prioritize funding to develop education and stewardship programs for Tribal and underrepresented youth (*Goal #2*).
- Identify monitoring priorities and work with relevant partners to develop monitoring plans, including establishing a central databank for partners to submit data (*Goal #3*).
- Identify areas to improve outreach and education efforts in high-demand areas like Sedona and Oak Creek Canyon around sustainable recreation and watershed health (*Goal #4*).
- Establish priority projects to minimize impact to riparian areas sensitive to OHV impacts (*Goal #4*).

By outlining key findings, this report offers valuable insights and recommendations for fostering sustainable, mutually beneficial partnerships and adding capacity to Forest management.

## Program Overview

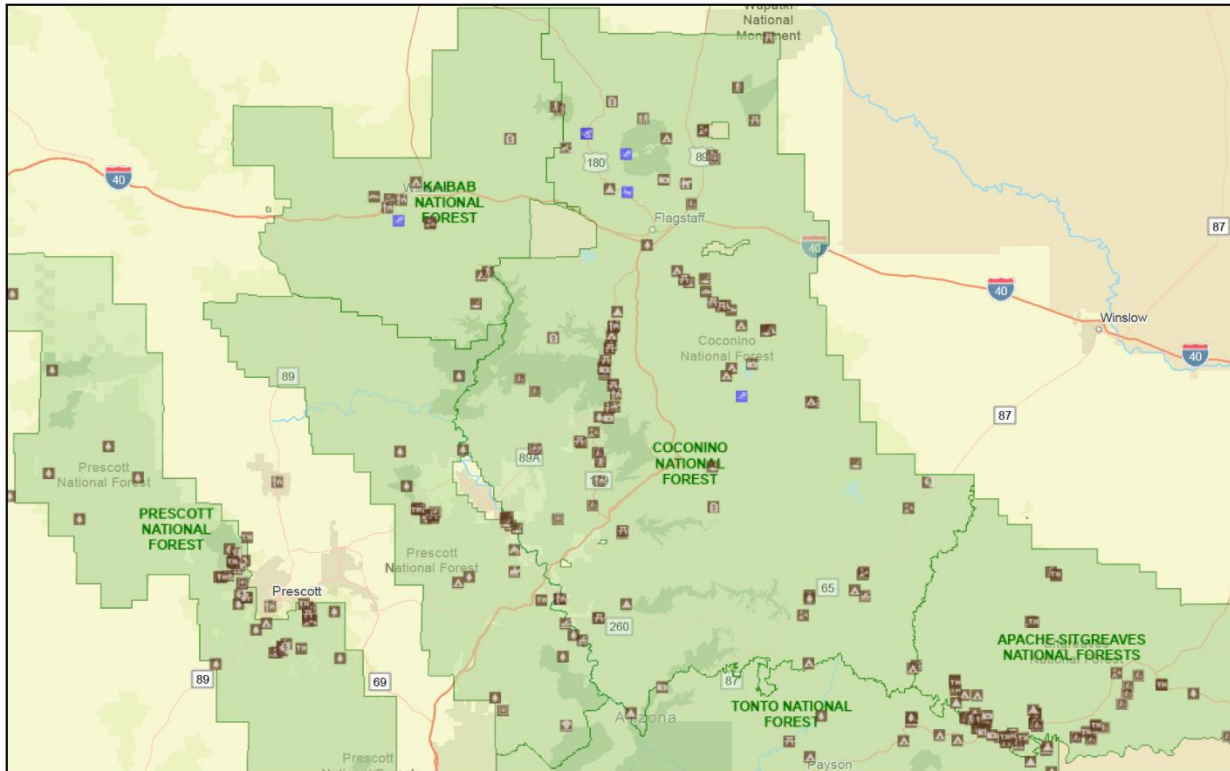
Partnerships are an integral part of National Forest System management. They add capacity and integrate local communities' needs, interests, and values into public land management. Within the Forest Service, partnerships are broadly defined as voluntary relationships with mutual benefits between people, 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 USDA Forest Service National Partnership Office (NPO) and the National Forest Foundation (NFF). The NPO augments 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. PEF supports the growth of Forest Service partnerships and provides insight and tools to improve and develop partner relationships across the agency.

The NFF is a Congressionally chartered organization established in 1992 that works across the United States as 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, and works with Forest Service units to address assessment findings by developing partnership strategies that support the Forest's and partner's desired outcomes. The assessment process and findings are documented and shared on the NFF website to provide insight into partnerships nationally and to create tools that can be used to assess and improve partnerships across different Forests and Regions.

## Coconino National Forest

The Coconino National Forest is an ecologically diverse landscape that comprises 1.9 million acres in Northern Arizona with elevations ranging from 2,600 feet to 12,633 feet on Humphrey's Peak, the highest point in Arizona. The Forest encompasses a variety of landscapes including deserts, ponderosa pine forests, mesas, alpine tundra, and ancient volcanic peaks stretched across three districts including the Flagstaff, Mogollon Rim, and Red Rock Ranger Districts. The Forest is also home to historic guard stations, archeological sites, fire lookouts, developed campgrounds, and over 1200 miles of trails. It includes all or parts of ten Wilderness areas, borders four other National Forests, and surrounds the towns of Flagstaff and Sedona. Encompassing an area rich in cultural heritage, the Forest consults with 13 Federally Recognized Native American Tribes, Nations, and Pueblos, the largest of which is the Navajo Nation.



**Figure 1.** Map of the Coconino National Forest in central Arizona. Phoenix is the closest major city to the south and the Forest surrounds the cities of Flagstaff and Sedona. The Forest borders four other national forests including the Kaibab, Prescott, Tonto and Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests. Map from USDA Forest Service.

The Forest sees approximately 5.5 million annual visitors, a number that has been steadily rising. The three districts are varied in landscape features and recreation, providing opportunities for hiking, backpacking, horseback riding, biking, fishing, hunting, sightseeing and more, with summer drawing many to escape the heat in Oak Creek Canyon, Fossil Creek, and the Verde River. The unique and diverse landscape, coupled with its proximity to the growing Phoenix metro area, makes it a sought-after destination year-round, which has led to increased impacts on watersheds, riparian areas, and other valuable resources. The Forest also prioritizes timber and fire management to restore resilient ecosystems and mitigate post-wildfire flooding.

To guide this assessment, the PEF staff worked with the Partnership Coordinator and Forest Leadership Team to develop four primary goals:

**Goal #1:** Understand opportunities to enhance and/or expand Coconino partnerships and incorporate this into the Forest's Sustainable and Strategic Partnership Plan.

**Goal #2:** Understand how the Forest can more effectively identify and engage underrepresented groups and partners including Tribes, rural communities, and local groups that do not have an existing relationship with the Forest Service.

**Goal #3:** Understand how to better leverage partner support to increase implementation, monitoring, and develop strategies to accomplish these objectives.

**Goal #4:** Find ways to support sustainable recreation and lands programs to protect priority watersheds and riparian landscapes.

These goals were used to develop an interview protocol for partners. The assessment goals, interview results, and a Forest visit conducted by PEF and Coconino staff inform the results and recommendations of this report.

## 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 conversations with leadership and partnership staff 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, and support from their Forest Leadership Team. The 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 Coconino National Forest 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 or organization. This report includes broad themes heard in interviews, not individual answers. Names of participants and the organizations they represent are listed upon participant approval; the list for the Coconino National Forest 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 including 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 the nature of 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 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.

## **Results**

In total, 30 interviews were conducted with representatives from 29 partner organizations, including thirteen representatives from nonprofit organizations, seven Coconino National Forest staff, three local government organizations, two Tribal representatives, two educational institutions, one from private industry, one from public utilities, and one from a state agency (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 frequent to least frequent answers. The number in parentheses signifies the number of times each response was mentioned throughout the interview process.



## Values

Understanding the values that partners and Forest Service staff associate with the Forest 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.

*Recreation (12)* Partners expressed recreation is a value of the Forest, both in terms of the diverse recreation options available and in the Forest's commitment to managing recreation. One respondent called the Coconino a 'high recreation forest', while others pointed out how recreation is becoming one of the biggest interests among forest users, particularly on the Red Rock District. Others voiced appreciation for the ability to find solitude on backcountry trails.

*Diverse ecosystems (9)* Respondents identified the diverse landscape ecology, and waterways like Oak Creek and Fossil Creek that support species that are not found elsewhere. A few respondents referenced the ecosystems that provide habitat for many species including elk and ponderosa and one respondent called the forest a source of life for people throughout history.

*Public lands (7)* Respondents value the accessibility of the Forest as well as the Forest infrastructure including trails, signage, maps, parking, and restrooms. A few respondents mentioned the value of public lands and their appreciation for the community they connect with on public lands.

*Stewardship (6)* Many respondents considered the stewardship efforts of the Forest staff to be a value. This includes efforts to restore ecosystems with a healthy, historical range of fire and disturbance regimes; fire prevention and management; and respecting and balancing users and heritage on the Forest.

*Resources (5)* Respondents pointed to the variety of resources the Forest provides including timber, municipal water supplies, and Snowbowl Ski Area.

*Unique beauty (3)* One respondent pointed to the diverse landscape that enables users to move from high elevation desert to alpine tundra in a two-hour walk, while another called out the beautiful, serene areas, ponderosa pine forests, and aspen groves as elements they value in the forest.

*Cultural significance (3)* Some participants referenced the traditional lifestyles of Tribes the Forest has supported and how important the landscape was for Indigenous ancestors and culture. One respondent pointed to the value of the San Francisco Peaks area to Indigenous people and how the peaks are a point of orientation and boundary for the Navajo Nation.

## Strengths

Strengths show what Forest staff are doing well and provide positive feedback and reinforcement from partners.

*"Government agencies sometimes have a bad reputation but [at the Coconino] there are genuine people with integrity in what they do and say. When they tell us they will do something they do it."* -Anonymous participant

*Communication and partner engagement (31)* Regular engagement between Forest staff and partners repeatedly came up as a contributor to partnership success. This includes regularly scheduled meetings with Forest staff, staff attending partner meetings to provide project updates or share needs, general

Forest staff responsiveness to phone calls and emails, and approachability of staff across all units. Partners also cited the Forest staffs' ability to effectively communicate and engage with the public on stewardship projects and management decisions like Forest closures and by organizing events like trash clean ups, community trail days, and educational programs.

*Building and maintaining partnerships (29)* Many participants referred to the efforts by Forest staff to build and maintain partnerships as being key contributors to their success in working with the Forest. Respondents said they enjoy working with the Forest staff, with some referring to staff members' passion for their work, helpfulness, follow-through, and genuineness as important characteristics that have led to trusting and long-lasting partnerships. Participants voiced feeling like Coconino staff were invested in partner success.

*Implementation and Monitoring (14)* Participants expressed that the Forest is good at getting things done. Examples of successful implementation include: projects to reduce recreation impacts on the Red Rock District such as hardening popular trails and permitting a trailhead shuttle system in Sedona to help relieve parking issues in neighborhoods adjacent to trailheads; reestablishing Emory Oak groves which provide the staple acorns for Yavapai Apache members; restoring alluvial fan watershed flows to mitigate post-wildfire flooding; and collaborating with partners to identify forest treatment priorities in the Coconino County Flood Control District. Implementing forest thinning treatment plans and supporting monitoring efforts on forest projects were also identified as successes.

*Working with Tribes (14)* Participants commended the Forest for successful efforts to cultivate Tribal relationships particularly with projects that impact Tribes like the Fossil Creek Coordinated Resource Management Plan, the Wood for Life Partnership, and the restoration of Emory Oak Groves. The Emory Oak Grove restoration was cited as a good example of incorporating Tribal principles and prescriptions into forest management. Having a designated Tribal liaison and archeologist were also cited as contributors to successful Tribal engagement.

*Sustainable recreation and watershed management (13)* Participants identified several examples of sustainable recreation and watershed management particularly in response to increasing recreation demands. The Oak Creek watershed social trail rehabilitation efforts were pointed out as a major success that will have long term benefits in the watershed. Other recreation management projects like hardening popular trails to meet recreation demands and building and maintaining trails in the Dry Lake region were mentioned, as well as grasslands restoration projects. Participants also noted that the hiring of watershed staff speaks to the Forest's commitment to watershed management.

*Providing funding and resources for partner success (13)* Participants linked funding resources to project success, particularly Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funds, Inflation Reduction Act funds, and an agreement with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. Forest funding for partner work was credited with providing conservation and education programming and supporting riparian restoration efforts. Participants voiced appreciation for how the Forest provides tools, vehicles, equipment, and access when partners need to implement projects.

*Forest management (4)* Participants said the Forest does well with forest management efforts based on conservation and stewardship resources including maintaining trails, balancing use by multiple users, and serving as a Four Forest Restoration Initiative (4FRI) Forest.

## Challenges

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

*"We hoped the Forest Service could use this information to build a solid plan. They were appreciative and receptive, but with staffing and funding issues, the answer we keep getting back is we don't have funding or staff for this. It gets tiring to hear they don't have enough people or resources."* -Anonymous participant

*Staff capacity and turnover (39)* Limited staff capacity was frequently cited as a reason that projects lose momentum or "get pushed down the road" and participants voiced that it gets tiring to hear that the Forest lacks staff or resources to pursue a project. Partners also pointed to the challenges brought by changing personnel and staff turnover, including that partners aren't always notified when a person is leaving and someone new is coming in, which leads partners to having to start over with new staff members thereby hindering relationships and large projects.

*Engaging with Tribes and rural and underrepresented groups (22)* The Forest's history of Tribal relations was identified as a barrier to cultivating partnerships with Tribal groups. The management decisions around Snowbowl Ski Area came up repeatedly as something that "colors partnership potential with Tribes". Other challenges include a white-centric history of conservation that contributes to limited engagement with underrepresented groups, difficulties with communication, and limited success in engaging Tribal youth in Forest projects.

*Management priorities (19)* Participants cited the growing number and diversity of users on the Forest as an important challenge related to management priorities, specifically related to lack of enforcement around recreational use in Oak Creek Canyon, prioritization of fire restoration that doesn't adequately consider wildlife management, and overlooked need for livestock management. Participants also pointed to unclear internal priorities that allow for decisions to be made according to funding rather than established Forest needs.

*Prioritizing partnerships (15)* While many participants recognized the value of partnerships, some voiced concern that the Coconino may have too many partners to effectively utilize and that a greater emphasis on working with the strongest partners would lead to more effective outcomes and reduce burden on Forest staff. Other participants felt like Forest staff could improve communication with partners by convening big picture meetings with a variety of partners rather than focusing on individual meetings.

*Administrative burden (13)* Participants voiced that the Forest is limited in what it can accomplish due to funding uncertainty; disconnects between local, regional and Washington D.C. based staff; and procedural obligations like NEPA that slow down the Forest's ability to sign off on projects in a timely manner.

*Monitoring and implementation (9)* Participants considered the Forest's monitoring efforts to be lacking. They pointed specifically to limited planning processes, and when monitoring is done, information gathered is not disseminated, understood and applied to management. Participants pointed out that there

is a limited number of Forest personnel dedicated to monitoring and suggested that partners could be better utilized to support these efforts. One participant cautioned that monitoring shouldn't be done for the sake of it and that monitoring plans should be intentional with clear paths for how the data will be used.

While many participants gave positive feedback about the Forest's ability to implement projects, one participant considered that the Forest is good at making plans and lofty agreements but less proficient at following through on those plans and agreements.

*Recreation management (6)* Participants recognized a need to update the Forest's travel management plan, particularly in response to damages caused by increasing OHV use and rising recreation demands.

*Engaging with rural and underrepresented communities (4)* Participants identified several challenges to engaging with rural and underrepresented communities including mistrust of federal agencies and the fragile nature of smaller rural partner groups that may contribute to them not lasting very long. One participant reflected that calls for engagement in rural communities often go unanswered and that although people like to tell grievances and concerns, that doesn't always translate to engagement and showing up to help or volunteer. There are also challenges specific to underrepresented communities and Tribes including transportation, cultural differences, and socioeconomic circumstances that may prevent them from being able to engage.

## Gaps

One goal of this assessment was 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 partnership opportunities the Coconino could capitalize on. This can also help identify groups that would benefit from more targeted engagement. Many participants said they did not know of gaps in partnerships due to being unaware of who else the Forest is partnering with. Others said the Coconino is engaged with all relevant partners. The responses below suggest groups that would benefit from more targeted outreach and engagement.

*Recreation organizations (4)* Given the rise in OHV recreation on the Forest, a few participants suggested the Forest could partner with local clubs and OHV vendors and distributors to increase education about the impact of OHV riders. The Greater Sedona Collaborative was named specifically as a potential partner in this area. One participant suggested more partnerships around trail development and maintenance for other forms of recreation.

*Wildlife organizations (3)* Participants voiced the Forest is good at bringing in a variety of partners on the forestry side but could bring in more wildlife related partners like the Arizona Game and Fish Department.

*Industry and utilities (2)* One participant suggested there were opportunities for partnerships in the utilities space like telecommunications networks and Southwest Gas. Another suggested the Forest could partner with timber processors or mill owners.

The following groups were mentioned once as gaps in who the Forest engages with:

*Corporate entities (1)* Larger corporations with interest in issues around Forest management may be able to bring funding and support for projects.

*Rural communities (1)* Local communities in the Mogollon Rim Ranger District were cited as a missed opportunity for partner work.

*Tribal communities (1)* Tribes adjacent to the Forest were cited as a missed opportunity for partner work.

*Education groups (1)* One participant suggested that expanding to other education centers like the Museum of Arizona could open partner opportunities in the education space.

## Opportunities

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

*"With rural communities, you have to go to meet them where they are at. Going to the county store, being there and being present and having boots on the ground to answer questions and develop relationships."*

*-Anonymous participant*

*"Tribes have need for income and cultural heritage connections. Focusing on projects and local chapters will help improve the relationship." - Anonymous participant*

*Commit to engaging and building relationships with Tribes (26)* Participants suggested the Forest have dedicated staff to spend time in-person with Tribal communities by attending Chapter meetings and events to build relationships with Tribal presidents, vice presidents, and managers. The frequency of attendance could be designated with an MOU to increase accountability. It was also stressed that as the steward of the land, the onus is on the Forest to develop effective communication strategies with Tribes by learning how to ask and listen first before inserting expertise or service to assist.

When working with Tribes, participants suggested bringing Tribes in during the early stages of projects, not as an afterthought. Lastly, participants pointed out that Tribes have need for income and cultural heritage connections and that the Forest could involve Tribal members through projects that bring them into the landscape and help them to learn about their heritage, which could help improve relationships.

*Expand outreach and education efforts (24)* Participants identified increased communication needs around fire restrictions and it can be helpful to explain what the Forest is doing and why. More effectively communicating outdoor ethics and Leave No Trace, particularly for visitors from urban areas like Phoenix, will also be helpful. In high demand areas like Oak Creek Canyon, education efforts which focus on responsible recreation for long term health of watersheds and longevity of trail systems would be helpful.

The Forest can support more environmental education programming. Facebook and other social media were identified as the most effective avenue to reach diverse audiences, particularly in rural areas. Partners suggested that although some information needs to be simplified for a wide range of audiences, making communications too basic can be harmful.

*Foster engagement with rural and underrepresented communities (22)* Participants suggested increased engagement with rural and underrepresented communities including frequent in-person interactions with community members and forming relationships that gain trust and break down misconceptions about federal agency approaches to management. One idea presented was a Forest representative can go to

communities and invite them to ask questions at a community center, local restaurant or church where community members feel heard, and share issues the Forest might not know about or understand.

The Forest could also pursue opportunities for small scale partnerships to do work like trash pickups and trail monitoring and can make clear communication channels in a newsletter or website where communities far from district offices can be apprised of what is going on.

*Provide partners with more opportunities for involvement (21)* Some partners felt underutilized by the Forest and there were needs on the Forest they could support particularly in watershed restoration, OHV use, monitoring and implementation, wildlife research, responsible recreation messaging, and general forest management.

*Support partner-to-partner engagement and relationship building (12)* Participants identified opportunities to build relationships including bringing together partners with mission overlap and increasing the diversity of partners including small groups and partners associated with less priority areas like range management.

Forest staff could enhance efforts to build partnerships by facilitating more individual partner meetings; convening partner-wide meetings so different groups can share what they are working on; including select partners at district level meetings; and increasing transparency at the beginning of projects so partners have a clear understanding of what to expect from the Forest.

*Utilizing partners to fill monitoring gaps and needs (12)* Participants voiced a willingness to fill in gaps in areas of water quality, recreation impacts, wildlife, vegetation, and rangeland restoration. Several partners said they currently conduct monitoring or could begin to if the Forest provided direction on monitoring needs and a central digital platform where partners and the Forest could catalogue and track different monitoring efforts.

*Enhance planning efficacy (11)* Participants expressed opportunities to incorporate wildlife into wildfire management projects, managing increasing recreation impacts, and use technology to the Forest's advantage in planning and managing projects. Participants also thought partners and Forest staff could establish priorities, funding sources, and project plans at annual or semiannual meetings, rather than reacting to needs and funding and planning occurring at the last minute.

*Enhance watershed restoration and recreation management (10)* Participants identified several opportunities to educate users in Oak Creek Canyon about erosion from social trails and water contamination from dog waste and litter and make clearer connections between water restoration and climate resilience on the Forest. Participants also suggested increased water quality monitoring in addition to habitat monitoring for species like trout and beaver, and native versus invasive plant species in watersheds.

It was also pointed out that although the Forest says watershed health is a priority, insufficient appropriated funds go toward it and there is an opportunity to further prioritize watershed health through funding. On the recreation front, the Forest could identify and track where damage is occurring from OHV use and communicate with relevant partners to develop strategies to mitigate impacts.

*Expand Tribal involvement (10)* Participants suggested avenues such as hiring more Tribal youth, prioritizing conservation corps that have positive relationships with Tribes, and choosing partners who have effective experience working with Tribes. It was suggested that Forest staff consider projects as bridges, not necessarily the highest priority, because it helps facilitate a positive relationship and meet the goals of Tribes. Another opportunity to engage Tribes was exploring community science opportunities to engage Tribal members and incorporate Tribal knowledge in fire management and integrate Tribes in decision making processes on Forest lands.

*Communicate more effectively with Tribes (7)* Communication was cited as a clear opportunity to engage with Tribes more effectively by: sending out a quarterly mailing list to inform Tribes of upcoming projects; being clear and intentional about who is brought onto Forest staff to engage with Tribes. More frequent conversation and understanding of how Tribes view the landscape and where management is headed would also be helpful.

One respondent cautioned that sometimes a Tribe won't respond officially to Forest or partner communications because they aren't sure what will happen if they do. Making clear the purpose of the communications, what's being asked of Tribal members and the implications of their response could help to alleviate this.

*Facilitate partner communication and collaboration (6)* Some participants thought that the Forest was well positioned to help facilitate partner-to-partner relationships and collaboration so partners could see where their interests overlap and how they can support each other's efforts. One participant suggested that the Forest host a partnership forum where partners can connect with one another and share what they are working on, timelines, lessons learned, successes, and see where there is overlap and opportunities to support each other.

## Discussion

The results of this report demonstrate the complex nature of National Forest management. The experience of each partner is unique and, in many cases, depends on their individual relationships with staff at the Coconino National Forest. However, we can draw on common themes outlined in this report to support recommendations for how the Coconino National Forest can incorporate these results into their partnership work. To do so, the results will be integrated into the assessment goals identified in the beginning of this report:

1. Understand opportunities to enhance and/or expand Coconino partnerships and incorporate this into the Forest's sustainable and strategic partnership plan.
2. Understand how the Forest can more effectively identify and engage underrepresented groups and partners.
3. Understand how to better leverage partner support to increase implementation, monitoring, and develop strategies to accomplish these objectives.
4. Find ways to support sustainable recreation and lands programs to protect priority watersheds and riparian landscapes.

***Goal #1: Understand opportunities to enhance and/or expand Coconino partnerships and incorporate this into the Forest's sustainable and strategic partnership plan.***

Participants generally considered their partnerships with the Coconino to be productive and fruitful, which many credited to Coconino staff's genuine investment in partner success. A few opportunities were identified for the Forest to enhance its partnership work, including being more transparent and communicative about staff transitions. To streamline staff transitions and abrupt turnover, Forest staff can consider referencing the [Partnerships on Every Forest Resource Guide](#), "Adapting to Staffing Transitions," and the USFS [Handover Memo](#), which offer useful tools.

Participants also voiced a desire to deepen their partner-to-partner networks so they can know who is working on what projects and where there may be areas of overlap or opportunities for collaboration. To do this, the Forest could devise a partner organization chart that partners can access online that includes partner organization names, contacts, areas of interest or expertise, and projects underway. It was also suggested that the Forest facilitate annual or semi-annual partner forums that bring together multiple partners working in different areas so folks can share what they are working on, project success and challenges, timelines, and other information to support partner success.

***Goal #2: Understand how the Forest can more effectively identify and engage underrepresented groups and partners.***

Making concerted efforts to meet Tribes, rural and underrepresented communities in person was identified as one of the most effective ways to increase engagement in these communities. Forest staff could take steps to have an established contact, regularly attend town meetings and Chapter meetings, and develop formal agreements with rural communities and Tribal councils that dictate how frequently meetings will be attended. To mitigate stigma around federal agency management, participants voiced that it's crucial to spend time cultivating relationships and to identify contacts in rural and underrepresented communities that can be a champion for Forest work. In addition to meeting communities on the ground, the Forest can consider what kind of communication is best suited for the intended audience. In rural communities, Facebook and other forms of social media can be utilized as effective mediums to communicate forest closures and important projects and timelines that impact communities.

The Forest's position as a steward of ancestral Tribal land coupled with conservation's legacy of primarily white, privileged users call for the Forest to be particularly mindful of historical contexts when seeking to engage with these communities. For area Tribes, especially for the Navajo, management decisions around Snowbowl Ski Area have left a lasting impact on Tribal members' ability to trust that the Forest will make decisions that value Tribal interests. Rebuilding that trust will require active, on the ground, long-term engagement with Tribes that incorporates their interests in management decisions. The Forest can also illustrate its interest in involving Tribes in Forest management by prioritizing funding to develop education and stewardship programs for Tribal and underrepresented youth.

***Goal #3: Understand how to better leverage partner support to increase implementation, monitoring, and develop strategies to accomplish these objectives.***

Participants pointed out limitations in the Forest's approach to monitoring across the forest, and some partners offered they could help to fill monitoring gaps. The Forest could work to identify priority areas in need of monitoring and communicate needs for monitoring with relevant partners. Areas where partners



identified monitoring needs include watershed biodiversity and select species, recreation impacts on trails and OHV areas, and timber efforts. Participants also suggested the Forest develop a user-friendly, digital location to submit monitoring data that partners could contribute to directly and the Forest could use to support management planning and decision making.

***Goal #4: Find ways to support sustainable recreation and lands programs to protect priority watersheds and riparian landscapes.***

Rising recreation demands across the Forest call for prioritizing recreation management to protect priority watersheds and riparian areas. Participants pointed to the Oak Creek watershed restoration project and trail hardening projects in the Red Rock Ranger District incorporating trail design principles from the National Park Service as successful efforts to mitigate recreation impacts in high demand areas. Other opportunities to enhance sustainable recreation programming include increased user education in and enforcement in Oak Creek Canyon.

Greater attention can be paid to rising OHV use across the forest, particularly in the Mogollon Rim District which has seen an increase in damage and impacts from OHVs. Updating the Forest's Recreation Management Plan is one step, as is working with partners to establish priority projects to minimize impact to riparian areas sensitive to OHV impacts. Along with increased management efforts, the Forest could consider education campaigns about where OHVs should be used and long-term consequences if taken to sensitive areas where they aren't permitted.

## Conclusion

This assessment was focused on helping the Coconino National Forest understand opportunities to expand and enhance partner work on the Forest, engage rural and underrepresented groups, improve monitoring and implementation, and develop sustainable recreation programs to protect priority watersheds and riparian landscapes. The Coconino's commitment to cultivating and maintaining long-term partnerships, support of partnership work, and implementation of timber and watershed restoration projects have contributed to the success of many Forest programs and initiatives. However, challenges related to limited staff capacity and turnover, engagement with Tribes and rural and underrepresented communities, and management priorities were identified as areas of improvement.

This partnership assessment highlights the need for increased attention in the areas of partner communications and networking; building trust and relationships with rural, Tribal, and underrepresented communities; and utilizing partner capacity to meet monitoring needs. The Forest also has an opportunity to meet rising recreation demands by expanding management priorities to OHV and other recreation impacts.

From this assessment, it is clear that partners value working with the Coconino and want to be involved as much as Forest staff have the capacity to work with them. To best implement the suggestions from this assessment, it is recommended that the Forest create metrics to measure the impacts of partnerships and have 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. The report can also be

used as a benchmark to monitor change and growth in the Coconino National Forest's partnership program.

*\*During the final stages of this partnership assessment, the Partnership Coordinator we worked with in developing the assessment and report transitioned into a new position. We hope that this assessment report will serve as a valuable tool during this transition.*

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. Please share your position title and role within your organization.
  - a. What is the mission of your organization?

2. What type of partnership work are you involved with the Coconino National Forest (Forest)?
3. What is your greatest success working with the Forest?
4. When you think of the Coconino National Forest what are some values that come to mind?
5. How can the Forest better connect with your organization and create mutually beneficial outcomes?
6. From your perspective, do gaps exist in who the Forest is partnering with, and which organizations or stakeholders could fill these gaps?
7. Do you have current partnerships with area Tribes?
  - a. What enables you to work successfully with tribes? From your perspective how can the Forest better support Tribal programs, goals, and partnerships?
8. Do you have current partnerships with rural or underrepresented communities?
  - a. What enables you to work successfully with rural or underrepresented communities? From your perspective how can the Forest better support rural or underrepresented community programs, goals, and partnerships?
9. One of the Forest's priorities is to support sustainable recreation and lands programs to protect priority watersheds and riparian landscapes. How can the Forest work with your organization to support these efforts?
10. Does your organization participate in monitoring and implementation on the Forest?
  - a. If yes, how can the Forest better coordinate with your organization to enhance their monitoring and implementation efforts?
11. Is there anything else you would like to share about your relationship with the Forest?
12. Are you comfortable with me listing your name and organization on a list of assessment participants? It will not be tied to any information in the report.
13. We are connecting with as many existing and potential partners as possible for this assessment. Which additional organizations or partners do you recommend we visit with regarding partnerships with the Forest? Would you be willing to share a contact with me and can I mention your name when I reach out to them?

## C: Interview Participants

Thank you to all interview participants for their time, insight, and dedication to their communities.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organization</b>
Alex Schlueter	Coconino National Forest
Annette Spickard	City of Sedona
Brady Vandragt	Coconino National Forest
Chris Coder	Yavapai-Apache Tribe
Chuck Carpenter	National Wild Turkey Federation
Clay Showalter	Arizona Trail
Dan McLendon	American Conservation Experience
Dick Williams	Sedona Red Rock Trail Fund
Elizabeth Munding	Coconino National Forest
Ellen Parish	Diablo Trust
Elvy Barton	Salt River Project
Erik E. Stanfield	Navajo Nation
Jay Smith	Coconino County
Joel Jurgens	The Nature Conservancy

Kate Day	Coconino National Forest
Keean Ruane	American Conservation Experience
Kelsey Whitaker	Oak Creek Watershed Council
Kyle Colavito	Flagstaff Trails Initiative
Lisa Deem	Elden Pueblo
Mark Nabel	Coconino National Forest
Melanie Colavito	Ecological Restoration Institute
Amy Waltz	Ecological Restoration Institute
Mandy Roesch	Coconino National Forest
Melissa Pontikes	Friends of the Forest Sedona
Michelle Ramos	Tread Lightly
Neil Chapman	City of Flagstaff
Ron Tiller	Arizona Department of Environmental Quality
Tabi Bolton	Campbell Global
Tom Mackin	Friends of Northern Arizona Forests
Tom Torres	Arizona Department of Fire and Forest Management
Tracy Stephens	Verde River Coalition

## 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 looks 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-organize 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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