

Evaluating Conservation Efforts

Lessons from the Canadian Boreal Initiative



“Context is everything for evaluation. It is not simply an activity done at the end of a grant, but a process with roots in the earliest stages of undertaking a philanthropic investment.”

From Returning Results, Planning and Evaluation at the Pew Charitable Trusts

Context

- Canadian boreal forests emerged as an internationally significant conservation opportunity in the late 1990s
 - One of largest intact areas on the planet
 - Globally significant ecological services (rivaling the Amazon)
 - Stable western democracy
- Canadian Boreal Initiative established as a result of funder-initiated strategy led by Pew Charitable Trusts
- Upfront planning and evaluation core element of approach from beginning

Overview

- Design Phase – 2000/01
- Mid-Point Evaluation – 2006
- Moving Forward – 2007 and beyond
- Lessons Learned

Planning and Design Phase

2000/01

- Year-long design phase preceded initiation of funding
- Three-person design team travelling extensively in the region to:
 - Confirm the opportunity for philanthropic investment
 - Develop an initial theory of change and overall strategy
 - Establish benchmarks for measuring progress over time
- Recognition throughout that context could and would change
 - Focus was on developing ‘best educated guess’ with flexibility to adjust over time
 - Evaluation planned at 5 year mark to allow for course corrections

Theory of Change

- Create and promote a conservation plan to protect the entire boreal
 - Became expressed as the Boreal Framework
- Secure buy-in to Framework principles from a broad cross-section of interests
 - First Nations, industry leaders, conservation NGOs
 - Governments
- Implement through local Land Use Planning
 - Take advantage of short-term opportunities for land protection across the country
 - Secure commitments to planning where none existed

Overall Strategy

Years One to Five

Years Five to Ten

Track 1: Create context
for longer-term gains
(i.e. Framework)

Track 2: Maximize
Short-Term
Protection Gains

Implementation of
Vision by many
players

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graph LR; T1[Track 1: Create context for longer-term gains (i.e. Framework)] --> I[Implementation of Vision by many players]; T2[Track 2: Maximize Short-Term Protection Gains] --> I;
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Role of CBI

- Established to catalyze and coordinate conservation efforts towards the Framework vision
 - Also key role in tracking overall progress in the region
- Ultimately accountable to funders for progress achieved towards benchmarks
- At same time, many program activities delivered through partnerships with local groups
 - Created some challenges in terms of accountability, performance measurement

Benchmark Approach Adopted

- Detailed benchmarks developed to guide annual work planning
 - Intent was to measure both concrete environmental outcomes and changing context for decision-making
- Overarching measure of success = acres protected on the ground
- Other key benchmarks included:
 - Certification of industrial practices
 - Endorsements of Framework vision
 - Media coverage
 - Government commitments to land use planning

2006 Mid-term Evaluation

- Conducted by PCT as part of a cluster evaluation of Canadian conservation efforts
- Objectives included:
 - Identifying/validating overall progress;
 - Understanding grantee contributions to progress achieved;
 - Understanding relevant internal and external causes where progress had lagged; and
 - Identifying additional actions that could help ensure effective implementation of the strategy.
- Methodology involved document review, interviews and in-depth case studies

Evaluating Impact

- Evaluation considered whether CBI-led efforts were:
 - **decisive** (i.e. the outcome would not have been achieved without the grantees' efforts),
 - **important** (i.e., multiple actors contributed to the outcome and the grantees were principal contributors), or
 - **inconsequential** (i.e., the grantees' efforts played little or no part in the outcome, implying that the outcome would have occurred without the grantees' involvement)
- Role of external forces also considered

Preparing for Evaluation

- Significant effort by CBI to generate relevant performance information
 - Database of protected area gains developed in conjunction with partner groups
 - Internal assessment of degree of impact
 - Acres 'discounted' depending on level of influence
 - Systems established to track media coverage, partnerships, other progress indicators

Evaluation Outcomes

- Confirmation of overall campaign strategy and role of grantees
 - Theory of change still valid and relevant
 - Clear role in securing meaningful acres on the ground and laying the foundation for longer-term gains
- Series of ‘course corrections’ suggested
 - Greater concentration of effort to maximize gains
 - Greater integration and coordination of international boreal grants
 - Enhanced role in direct delivery in some core areas (e.g. communications)

Lessons Learned for CBI

- Commitment to upfront evaluation planning was time-consuming but invaluable
 - Provided high degree of clarity and focus
 - All activities considered through lens of overall strategy, benchmarks
 - Provided robust framework for annual work planning and performance tracking
- CBI's organizational and funding structure contributed to success of this approach
 - Able to dedicate staff resources to planning and tracking
 - More difficult in context of multiple funders, projects
- Partnership-based nature of regional delivery created challenges in terms of accountability, performance tracking

Other Lessons Learned

- Evaluation of both environmental outcomes and strategies for achieving them can be invaluable for NGOs
- Evaluation particularly challenging for multi-group, multi-strategy campaigns or initiatives
 - Attribution of impact can be controversial
 - Clear accountability at outset crucial
 - Also requires agreement on strategy, goals, indicators
- Selection of performance indicators critical
 - Measuring social change is challenging
 - Mix of tangible and intangibles essential
- Evaluation practices relatively new to NGOs
 - Requires shift from reactive to proactive planning
 - Also requires a cultural shift
- Coordinated approaches between funders can help build success