

Practicing collaborative leadership:

Demonstrating value through evidence of partnership impact

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Abstract

The 21st century's dynamic natural and social landscapes include increased wildfire fire intensity, unpredictable weather patterns, and demands for equity and justice. The very scale of these challenges requires new and creative approaches to land protection and stewardship; therefore, many conservation leaders and practitioners are exploring new ways to restore and care for the environment as integrated and interconnected landscapes. Landscape stewardship partnerships and networks have significantly grown over the past two decades to collaborate, innovate, and undertake collective action at varying scales. These adaptive cross-boundary partnerships and networks connect local communities, land- and water-managing agencies, private landowners, scientists, tribes, the non-profit sector, and many others to tackle the challenges we face. Because collaboration requires considerable trust and investment, stakeholders are seeking tools to understand its value and methods for measuring and monitoring its impact. However, there is a shortage of research-based frameworks to evaluate the impact of landscape stewardship partnerships practicing collaborative leadership. In this article, the Partnership Impact Model (a trademark of the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy) is introduced as a promising impact assessment

framework, with highlights from partnerships and networks that have used it. Readers are encouraged to consider this model to both monitor partnership health and to demonstrate its impact.

Introduction

Although cross-boundary partnerships with a commitment to strategic, long-term, collaborative, landscape-level land management and stewardship are still not widespread, they are gaining traction across the nation as the benefits of working in this way demonstrate value over time. These partnerships range dramatically in identity, scope, capacity, governance structure, and scale—spanning from fewer than 10,000 acres to nearly 500 million acres (McKinney and Johnson 2013).

Typically comprising of diverse stakeholders from multiple sectors focused on a specific landscape or type of geography, landscape-scale partnerships address a range of related issues such as climate resilience, community well-being, and economic growth. With the growing complexity and scale of

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environmental, social, and economic challenges facing the long-term stewardship of public and private lands in the United States, place-based collaborative partnerships and networks are highly promising mechanisms to keep pace with and meet these challenges (Goldberg 2018).

More and more regional partnerships and networks are emerging across other environmental sectors as well, including those focused on local climate change (Institute for Sustainable Communities 2019) and fire resilience. For example, Regional Climate Collaboratives are harnessing the power of networks to build resilience to local climate change impacts and, in some cases, to reduce the emissions driving them. Similarly, the California Department of Conservation created a Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program to improve forest health and fire resilience in response to the increasing intensity and frequency of the state's wildfires. This program gave rise to the Watershed Research and Training Center's technical fire and forest capacity building and peer networking programs to improve coordination and the dissemination of best practices.

For many, it has become increasingly clear that our challenges, and our opportunities, are bigger than our boundaries and that the scale and pace of our work need to meet those of our problems. In order to make lands and waters more resilient to climate change, we need landscape-scale stewardship through unconventional and innovative partnerships. Stewardship beyond boundaries, however, requires deep levels of collaboration, an ongoing commitment to turning stumbling blocks into stepping stones, and essential skill sets and resources.

Collaborative leadership is one effective approach to landscape stewardship in multi-stakeholder partnerships (Plieninger and Bieling 2017; Mickel 2021). Collaborative leadership is a natural fit for partnerships because it is a process involving shared or joint power—no one person or group is in charge (e.g., Chrislip and Larson 1994). Lisa Brush, executive director of The Stewardship Network, emphasizes

that “landscape stewardship networks are fueled by collaborative leadership skills, and strengthened through the sharing of best practices, peer learning, and complex reciprocity” (personal communication, January 6, 2021).

Collaborative leadership also requires considerable trust and investment. Consequently, partnership stakeholders (e.g., partner executives and board members, community groups, funders, donors, and policymakers) want to understand its value and see evidence of its positive impact. Demonstrating these benefits can also strengthen and deepen partner investment and resource sharing, increase credibility with funders, and bolster commitment to the collaborative leadership process. It can also help secure and maintain the continued partner engagement and capacity building that are essential for sustaining landscape stewardship work.

The need for evaluative frameworks

Mickel and Goldberg (2018) define *partnership impact* as:

the collection of qualitative and quantitative changes that are generated incrementally over time related to or directly resulting from the intentional scaling up of foundational, operational, and outcome impacts by a group of partners (54).

There is a shortage of research-based frameworks to evaluate the impact of partnerships practicing collaborative leadership; moving forward, the field would benefit from tools designed to do that. A recent analysis of cross-sector partnerships for parks conducted by Columbia University (2020) recommended that partnerships share impact indicators across the different participants.

As there is no shared definition of success metrics, there are no mechanisms and structures within the actors to share data and information they may have that could be useful in evaluating their own impact. Once they determine common

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impact indicators and a platform to constantly measure them, the partnership will be able to evaluate [its] performance towards [its] medium- and long-term goals and allocate capital efficiently (Carruthers et al. 2020: 27).

The Institute for Sustainable Communities' 2019 report had a similar finding.

In the future, we envision a common evaluative framework tool, broadly embraced, that allows collaboratives to gauge what impact their efforts to foster cross-jurisdictional work have created, through indicators that can be compared and shared across collaboratives (Institute for Sustainable Communities 2019: 31).

This article introduces the Partnership Impact Model (Mickel and Goldberg 2018, 2019) as a promising framework for partnerships and networks practicing collaborative leadership that want to demonstrate their value through evidence of impact. Kevin Wright, government affairs manager for Marin County Parks and policy committee co-chair and steering committee member of the [California Landscape Stewardship Network](#), suggests that this framework can serve as a valuable guide and road map to relationship building and culture change.

Whether seeking to create stronger working relationships between departments, encouraging more collaborative partnerships between government and community organizations, or seeking culture change through diversity and inclusion work, the Partnership Impact Model can act as an important guide for where to start, and where to expect relationships to grow and unfold (Wright, personal communication, January 7, 2021).

What is the Partnership Impact Model?

The Partnership Impact Model emerged from the findings of a [four-year longitudinal study](#) designed to identify and assess the complex elements of partnership impact. The focus of the research was One Tam, a landscape-scale, multi-stakeholder partnership committed to stewarding the lands on

and adjacent to Mount Tamalpais located north of San Francisco. Guided by Sharon Farrell from the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy and funded by the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, Amy E. Mickel designed this study and worked with Leigh Goldberg to complete the research.

A multi-method approach was employed: surveys, interviews, and field observations were used to collect data, and statistical, content, and social network analyses were used to analyze these data. This research culminated in two reports, [Generating, Scaling Up, and Sustaining Partnership Impact: One Tam's First Four Years](#) (Mickel and Goldberg 2018) and [Partnership Impact Evaluation Guide](#) (Mickel and Goldberg 2019), where the Partnership Impact Model is introduced and explained.

Instead of using a single approach (e.g., social network analysis), the Partnership Impact Model treats partnership value as a system of multiple interdependent and scalable impacts, not just simply as partnership satisfaction. The Partnership Impact Model includes:

- Eleven examples of positive impacts that were identified through research from the first four years of the One Tam partnership;
- A companion graphic that illustrates how these 11 impacts can be scaled up to realize other positive outcomes;
- Seven steps for evaluating partnership impact; and
- A partnership impact roadmap: a set of questions that groups can ask themselves to determine what type of impacts they might want to assess.

The 11 partnership impacts (see Figure 1)¹ can be used to help identify what positive impacts might look like for landscape stewardship partnerships. A companion graphic (see Figure 2) illustrates scaling up impact as a dynamic and interdependent process throughout the three phases—start-up, building, and maintaining and sustaining—of a partnership's lifecycle. Lastly, the seven steps of partnership impact evaluation (Figure 3) and partnership impact roadmap (Figure 4) provide guidance on how to identify, define, and measure various impact indicators. To optimize and scale up partnership impact, Mickel and Goldberg (2018, 2019) suggest these resources be used together.

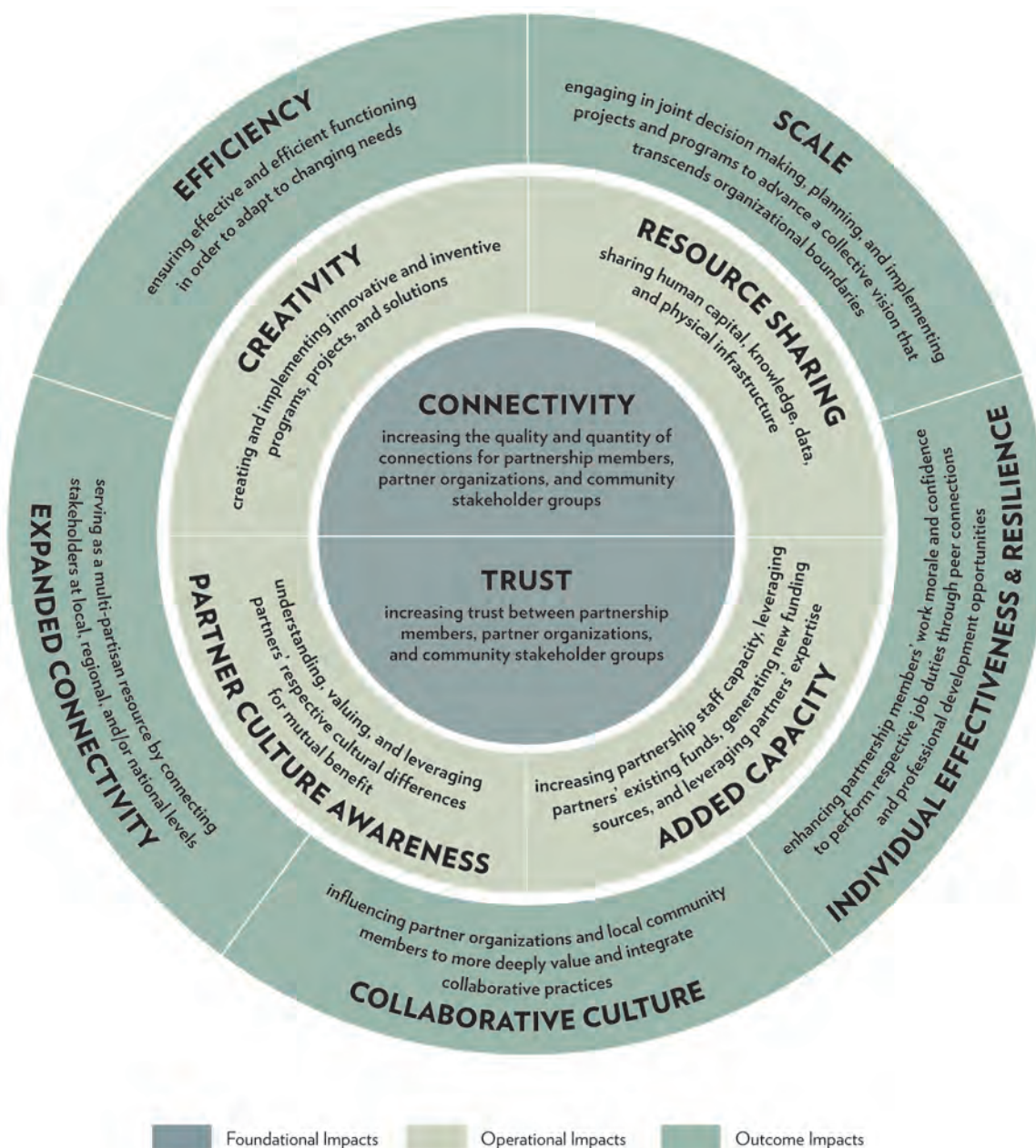
This model has already proven useful for a number of landscape stewardship partnerships and networks wanting to more accurately capture, assess, and communicate their value, including [One Tam](#), [The Stewardship Network](#), and the [Roundtable on the Crown of the Continent](#). Reflections and learnings from these networks and others are described throughout this article. The *eleven partnership impacts* and *scaling up partnership impact* sections below emphasize what positive impact can look like for a partnership, and the *seven steps of partnership impact*

evaluation and the partnership impact roadmap section provides a high-level overview of how to assess impact. For more detailed information about what impact may look like and how to assess it, please read [Mickel and Goldberg's 2018 and 2019 reports](#).

Eleven partnership impacts

The 11 impacts³ comprise a system of interdependent, scalable benefits and are grouped into three classifications: *foundational*, *operational*, and *outcome* (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Eleven partnership impacts.



> The shared language, metrics, and framework that the Partnership Impact Model puts forth as an evaluative tool can be integrated into assessing partnership health.

Travis Anklam, a researcher at the University of Montana supporting the Roundtable on the Crown of the Continent,³ describes how the 11 Partnership Impacts served as a useful guide to help evaluate and tell the story of the Roundtable's impacts.

Although the One Tam partnership is in many ways different than the Roundtable, the 11 Partnership Impacts provided a starting point to describe and consider the Roundtable's impacts and what makes the network unique. It also served as an important tool to identify what impacts are key to the Roundtable's efforts, develop methods to measure them, and create a reflective space for the Roundtable's leadership team to consider together what their collective impact has been (Anklam, personal communication, December 31, 2020).

Foundational impacts are connectivity and trust. One Tam found that they were able to increase both the quality and quantity of connections and trust between individual members, between and within partners' organizations, and with stakeholders and community members. These foundational impacts are so essential for a highly functioning partnership that Mickel and Goldberg (2018) suggest that the other impacts described below would not be optimized or sustained without them.

Several landscape stewardship network leaders, such as Lisa Brush, who has been facilitating collaborative leadership development in stewardship and conversation for several decades, value the shared language, metrics, and framework that the Partnership Impact Model puts forth as an evaluative tool that can be integrated into assessing partnership health.

I've talked about trust and relationship building as foundational to sustaining our work, and the Partnership Impact Model diagram provides a tangible and digestible way for people to understand this. We can clearly describe and represent the changes in connectivity and trust through attributes that we can measure. For the Stewardship Network, it has created tools for us to connect and share the power of these

collaborative conservation communities (Brush, personal communication, January 6, 2021).

Similarly, Max Korten, director of Marin County Parks and executive team member of the One Tam partnership, is applying the methodology and learnings of his work with using the Partnership Impact Model more broadly to Marin County's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our team members have brought the same approach we used, measured, and adapted under the Partnership Impact Model as a part of the four-year One Tam study for working across jurisdictions to meet social impact and collective public health needs, as well as achieving landscape level goals. Just like with One Tam, our early work with new partners in reducing COVID-19 risk has been listening, connecting, and building trust with all of the affected individuals, organizations, and agencies. This intentional approach, where we focus on building and achieving foundational impacts, and then make them operational, has led to many efficiencies and increased effectiveness of the County's response to COVID-19 over the long term (Korten, personal communication, January 8, 2021).

Korten also notes that the pandemic served as an opportunity to strengthen his work within the One Tam partnership and other regional networks.

Having the foundation of collaborative leadership as a principle for approaching collective interests, plus having shared language, adaptability, high connectivity, and deep trust, enabled the partnership's executives to quickly transition from meeting quarterly to weekly and then rapidly identify regional needs and priorities, plus share information and best practices (Korten, personal communication, January 8, 2021).

Operational impacts are described as those benefiting partner organizations and the partnership itself. Evidence of operational impacts include reported increases in: (a) creative and innovative programs, projects, and solutions; (b) sharing among partners' resources such as human capital, data, and

equipment; (c) adding capacity by leveraging partners' funds, staff, and expertise; and (d) enhanced understanding and valuing of partners' culture (i.e., partner culture awareness). See the specific examples from One Tam provided in Box 1.

Lisa Brush believes that the collective positive impact brought by conservation networks, whether increased efficiencies or resource sharing, can be readily measured through the Partnership Impact Model to help funders value the critical capacity building and operational impacts that networks can provide. Measuring the change and growth in these impact areas expand discussions well beyond typical and more transactional conversation outcomes such as acres of land restored.

Stewardship networks are fundamentally human-powered. Quantifying and measuring operational impacts through administering surveys and creating tools such as social network models helps us focus on some of the essential roles networks play—data and resource sharing, capacity building, and broadening cultural awareness of

the differences each partner brings—and helps us to better understand and discuss these impacts (Brush, personal communication, January 6, 2021).

Practitioners and social scientists are also seeing a broader application of the Partnership Impact Model beyond landscape stewardship partnerships. For example, Christopher Jadallah, a PhD student at the University of California, Davis, is preparing to collect ethnographic data to study how social capital might emerge from citizen science, and what elements of program design support its development. Jadallah is using the findings from the Partnership Impact Model—specifically the model's identification of impact metrics that can be used to describe capacity building and culture-forming dimensions of partnerships—alongside other sources in conceptualizing a framework for the study.

The Partnership Impact Model helps create a common culture for practitioners by emphasizing the salience of the “behind-the-scenes” work in conservation. Or in other words, it reminds us

Box 1. One Tam's reported increases in operational impacts

Over the four-year longitudinal study using a multi-method approach (see Mickel and Goldberg 2018 for methods), One Tam's **operational** impacts included increases in:

Creativity

- Leading with creative vision and being willing to take risks
- Creating and implementing inventive programs, projects, and solutions
- Approaching existing problems, programs, and projects with innovative ideas and solutions

Resource sharing

- Sharing partners' staff and volunteers and their specialized expertise, knowledge, and skills
- Exchanging data and information across partners
- Making use of partners' equipment and space

Capacity

- Hiring new partnership staff
- Generating new funding sources
- Leveraging partners' existing funds and specialized expertise, knowledge, and skills

Partner culture awareness

- Understanding partners' respective cultures and challenges
- Respecting and communicating differences between cultures and valuing and leveraging those differences

that the processes through which we collaborate and work together makes a difference in the ultimate success of our landscape stewardship efforts (Jadallah, personal communication, January 6, 2021).

Outcome impacts include ones both anticipated (e.g., efficiency and scale) and unanticipated (e.g., individual effectiveness and resilience, collaborative culture, and expanded connectivity). Indicators of efficiency include adaptable, effective, and efficient functioning of the partnership. Indicators of

scale encompass joint decision making, planning, and programming to advance a collective vision. Enhanced work morale and confidence in performing respective job duties among partnership members indicate increases in individual effectiveness and resilience. Indicators of collaborative culture include a partnership's capacity to influence other organizations and communities to value and embrace collaborative approaches. Connecting other stakeholders at local, regional, and national levels demonstrate expanded connectivity as an impact. See the specific examples from One Tam in Box 2.

Box 2. One Tam's reported increases in outcome impacts

Efficiency

- Building and leveraging a formal governance structure with guiding documents, principles, and processes
- Regularly assessing the “health” of the partnership
- Remaining flexible to quickly adapt and respond to unexpected needs, situations, and issues
- Becoming a centralized resource for the community to learn about and share landscape-wide information

Scale

- Creating a collective, unified vision for a cross-jurisdictional landscape
- Engaging in joint decisionmaking and planning for activities that transcend boundaries
- Implementing natural and cultural resource projects that have broad-reaching benefits
- Delivering science and stewardship programs through community engagement and education to all governmental jurisdictions on Mount Tamalpais

Individual member effectiveness and resilience

- Increasing work morale and confidence
- Enhancing feelings of being supported professionally and personally through an expanded network of peers
- Increasing exposure to other disciplines, development opportunities, resources, tools, and new skills

Collaborative culture

- Influencing partner organizations to integrate a collaborative mindset
- Influencing the community to understand, value, and adopt collaborative practices

Connectivity

- Streamlining non-partnership-related communication and coordination through the partnership's formal and informal networks
- Maximizing opportunities for employees to “go above and beyond” their job duties, which creates positive connections with stakeholders on the employer's behalf
- Serving as a resource that connects diverse community stakeholders and helps advance local issues and opportunities
- Acting as an information resource to other partnership efforts and facilitating peer connections at the regional, state, and national levels*

* See related article in this issue about the power of peer exchange in land stewardship partnerships, “Putting collaborative leadership into practice: The role of peer learning” (Navalkha et al.)

Kevin Wright emphasizes that the Partnership Impact Model correlates well with professional collaboration-focused models commonly used in other sectors, including results-based accountability and collective impact.

It provides a model that can support every level of effort from the smallest project team to large-scale multi-state and international efforts. It also aligns traditional transactional outcomes with transformational outcomes and impacts that increase both collective impact and the durability of the network and the individual relationships (Wright, personal communication, January 7, 2021).

Scaling up partnership impact

When taken collectively, Mickel and Goldberg (2018) found that foundational, operational, and outcome impacts generate individual and cumulative impacts in a dynamic, iterative process that is accomplished throughout the three phases of a partnership's lifecycle: start-up, building, and maintaining and sustaining (Figure 2).

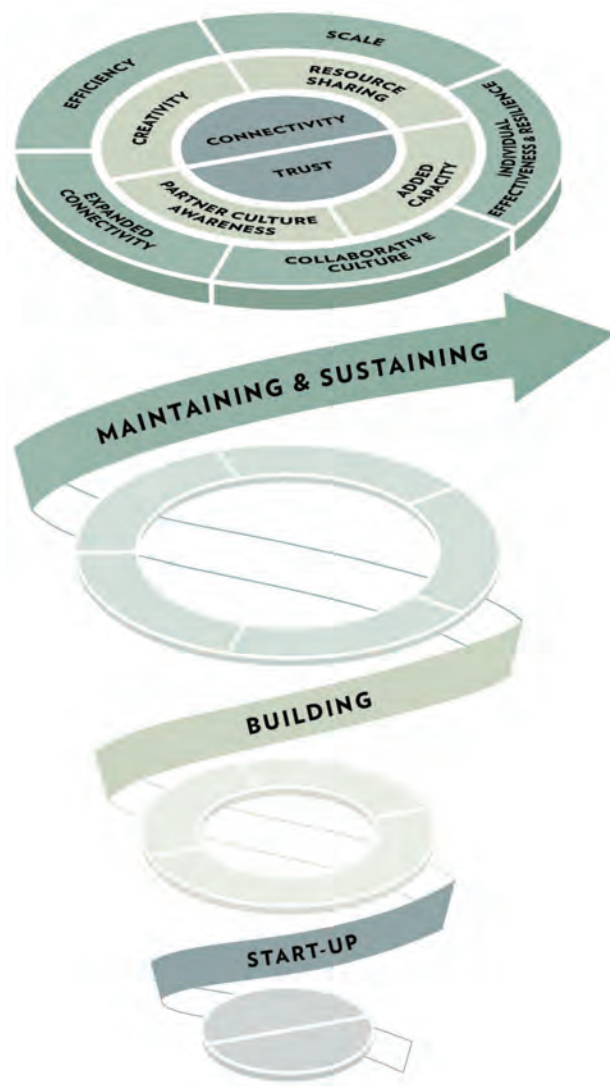
A regional vegetation mapping project envisioned and coordinated by One Tam illustrates the dynamic, iterative nature of the scaling-up process. The high level of trust (*foundational impact*) across One Tam's partners enabled data- and fund-sharing (*operational impact*) and commitment to completing a regional fine-scale vegetation map and database project (*outcome impact*). The successful completion of this project further inspired donors' confidence in the partnership, which led to enhanced trust (*foundational impact*) and leveraging of partner investment to meet capacity needs (*operational impact*). One Tam's regional vegetation mapping project and associated funding strategy has become the model for the Santa Cruz Mountains Stewardship Network and other San Francisco Bay Area efforts, illustrating what can be achieved when embracing a collaborative culture (*outcome impact*).

Seven steps of partnership impact evaluation and the partnership impact roadmap

Adopting a culture of evaluation (i.e., conducting assessments and evaluations becomes an accepted and valued practice) has the added benefit of providing a mechanism to assess partnership health, allowing for opportunities to have candid

conversations about uncomfortable topics such as disparate pacing expectations, transparency, and concerns about equity and inclusion (Mickel and Goldberg 2019). Moreover, it increases opportunities for sharing evidence of incremental progress towards achieving impacts with key audiences. Evaluation is also vital to demonstrating value through evidence of impact, which in turn has implications for partnership commitment, stakeholder engagement, and securing necessary resources.

Figure 2. Scaling up partnership impact. This graphic illustrates the dynamic, interdependent nature of scaling up impact throughout the three phases of a partnership's life cycle. The process starts with up-front investments in *foundational impacts* and *operational impacts*. As a partnership moves into its building phase, *operational impacts* and *outcome impacts* will begin to materialize. By leveraging *foundational impacts* and *operational impacts* and adding ample, incremental investments, *outcome impacts* can be fully realized over time for exponential benefits during a partnership's maintaining and sustaining phase.



Findings from a recent study further support the benefits of adopting a culture of evaluation.

The majority of respondents who track and quantify their progress report that efforts to evaluate their collaborative have helped them to accomplish their goals. In addition, evaluating progress allows them to address many of the challenges that are common in collaborative conservation. We found that evaluating progress has and can help collaboratives by securing funding, and sustaining and increasing engagement (Partnerscapes 2020: 10).

The [Partnership Impact Evaluation Guide](#) (Mickel

and Goldberg 2019) is a resource that can help partnerships through this dynamic process. It guides partnerships and networks undertaking long-term, systems-level collaboration on *how* to identify, define, and measure various indicators of impact (see Figure 3). A partnership might want to consider using the 11 partnership impacts and the partnership impact roadmap (see Figure 4) as starting points for the first two steps which emphasize the importance of conceptualizing, defining, and prioritizing impacts.

The Roundtable on the Crown of the Continent is a partnership in the early stages of assessing its impact and has used these resources to identify which impacts to assess and how to measure them.

Figure 3. Seven steps of partnership impact evaluation. This figure illustrates the dynamic, recursive process of partnership impact evaluation throughout the duration of the chosen evaluation time frame. Steps 1, 2, 3, and 7 are each conducted one time during the chosen evaluation time frame. Steps 4, 5, and 6 recur multiple times throughout the evaluation time frame. This seven-step process should be repeated throughout a partnership’s life cycle.

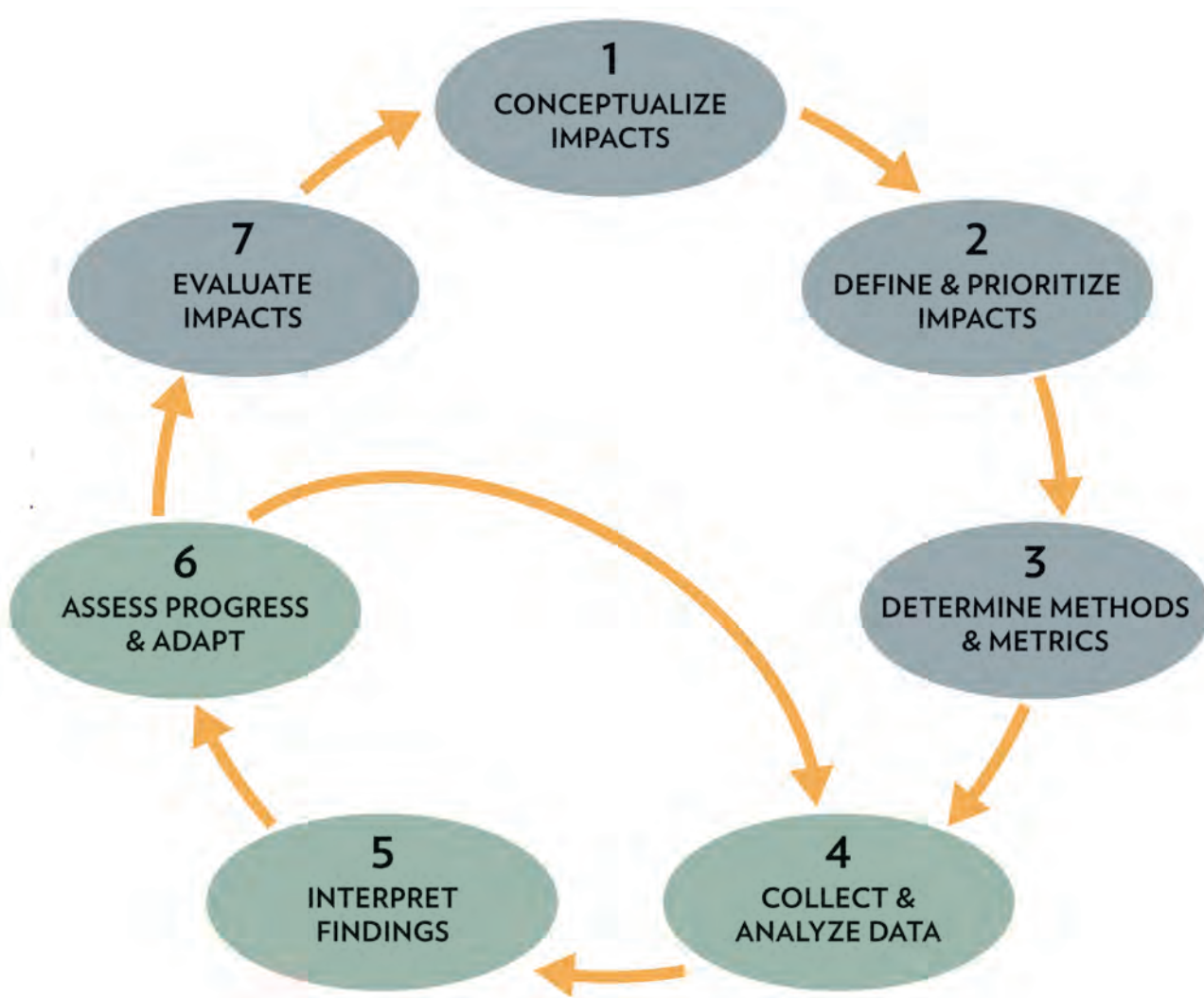


Figure 4. Partnership impact roadmap.

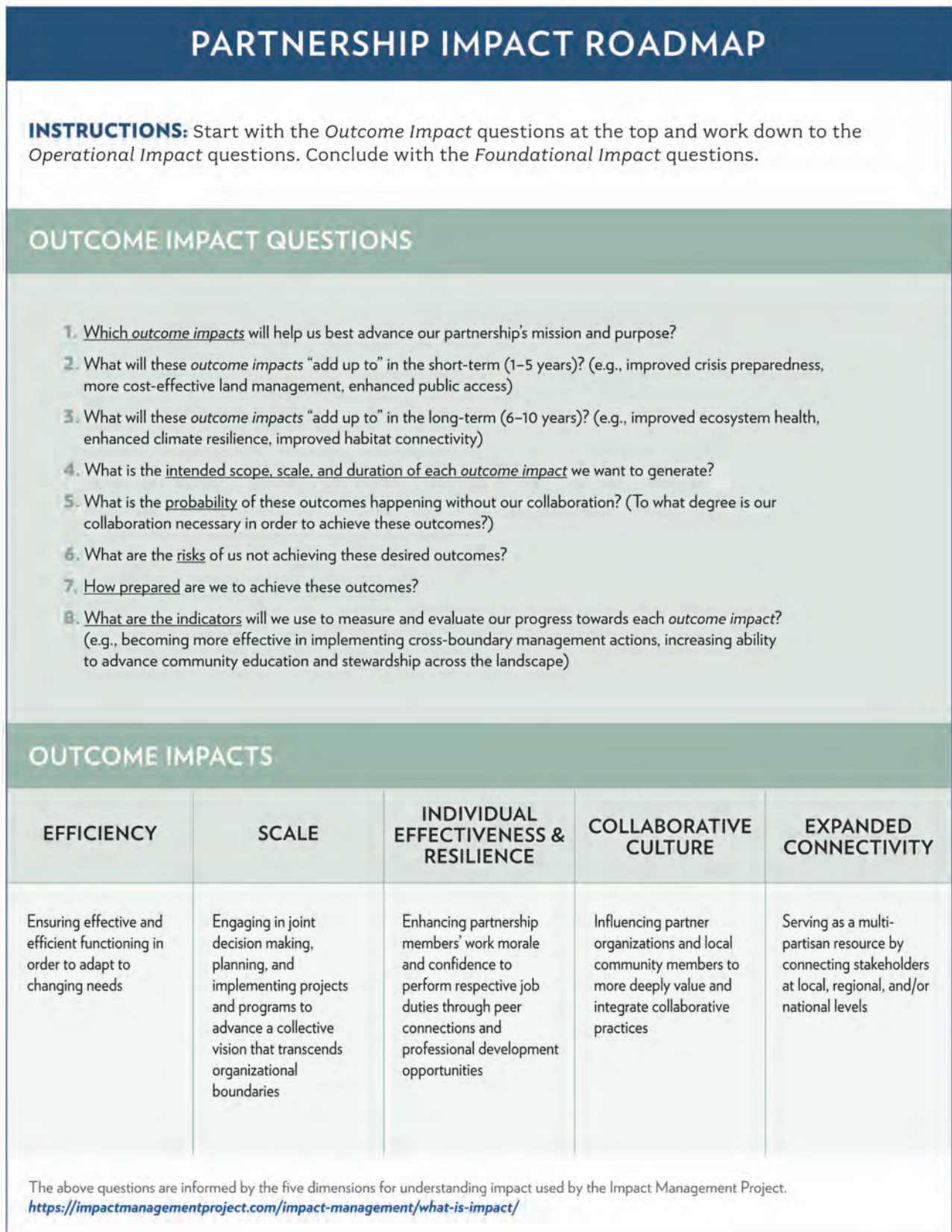
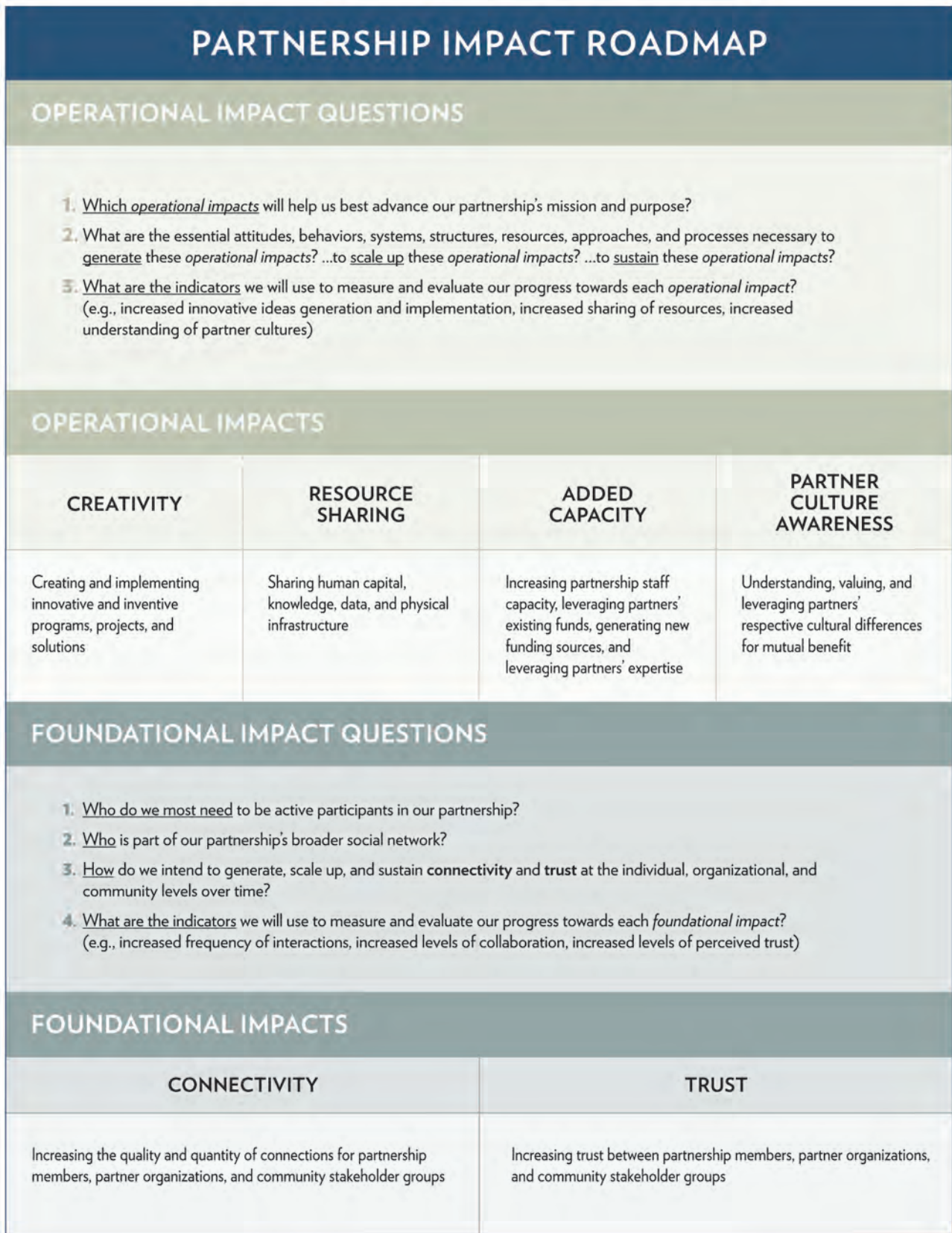


Figure 4 (cont'd). Partnership impact roadmap.



> By effectively communicating and demonstrating evidence of benefits, the value of the partnership or network will become clearer.

Travis Anklam, who is leading the Roundtable's evaluation effort, reports that discussions of impact have allowed partners to realize and underscore the importance of the social dimension of their landscape stewardship and conservation work, in addition to stimulating lively conversations about the Roundtable's inclusion and engagement of the region's tribes and First Nations. He reflects that partner members are better equipped to talk about the foundational impacts of trust and connectivity and are excited to collect the first round of data to evaluate the impact of the Roundtable's relationship-building efforts.

As an evaluative tool, the Roadmap and Evaluation Guide helped ensure that the approach for evaluation matches the Roundtable's unique context and serves [it] going forward. The model is serving an indispensable role as we work to frame an evaluation that tells an engaging and accessible story of the Roundtable's impact. The model has been a great guide as I work to identify what impacts are key to the Roundtable's efforts, develop methods to measure them, and create a reflection space for the Roundtable's leadership team to consider together what their collective impact has been. Although I'm just gathering data now, I expect that the model will serve as a helpful blueprint for telling the story of the Roundtable's impacts to participants, funders, and the broader community—making it an invaluable tool for anyone trying to tell the story of their collaborative's impact (Anklam, personal communication, December 31, 2020).

Concluding thoughts

While impact development and evaluation require additional time and resources, these investments will likely prove invaluable by enabling partnerships and networks practicing collaborative leadership to identify, assess, and convey the positive impacts of partnerships. By effectively communicating and demonstrating evidence of benefits, the value of the partnership or network will become clearer. Sharing evidence of positive impact with stakeholders can increase trust in the collaborative leadership process and significantly bolster efforts related to fundraising, partner commitment, and community engagement.

In the words of Daniel Student, a strategist with the Potrero Group LLC:

Partnership is all about bringing the best of one sector or industry as a gift to another sector or industry who might not have easy access to that unique perspective. As such, the Partnership Impact Model is a gift to share to inspire others to think differently about who they might turn to for an opportunity for shared impact (Student, personal communication, January 7, 2021).

Endnotes

1. The Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, Amy E. Mickel, and Leigh Goldberg Consulting, LLC hold the copyright to the figures in this paper.
2. It is worth reiterating that these 11 impacts emerged during One Tam's first four years; it is likely One Tam has generated additional impacts in subsequent years. Partnerships are encouraged to consider different types of impacts beyond the 11 presented here.
3. The Roundtable on the Crown of the Continent is a transboundary collaboration that addresses changing land use and climate in one of the largest intact landscapes in North America: the border region around Waterton Lakes National Park (Canada) and Glacier National Park (USA). It was created to bring all stakeholders in the ecosystem together, including tribes, working landowners, business leaders, local officials, conservationists, universities and colleges, and the region's youth.

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Citation for this article

Mickel, Amy E., and Sharon Farrell. 2021. Practicing collaborative leadership: Demonstrating value through evidence of partnership impact. *Parks Stewardship Forum* 37(2): 303–315.

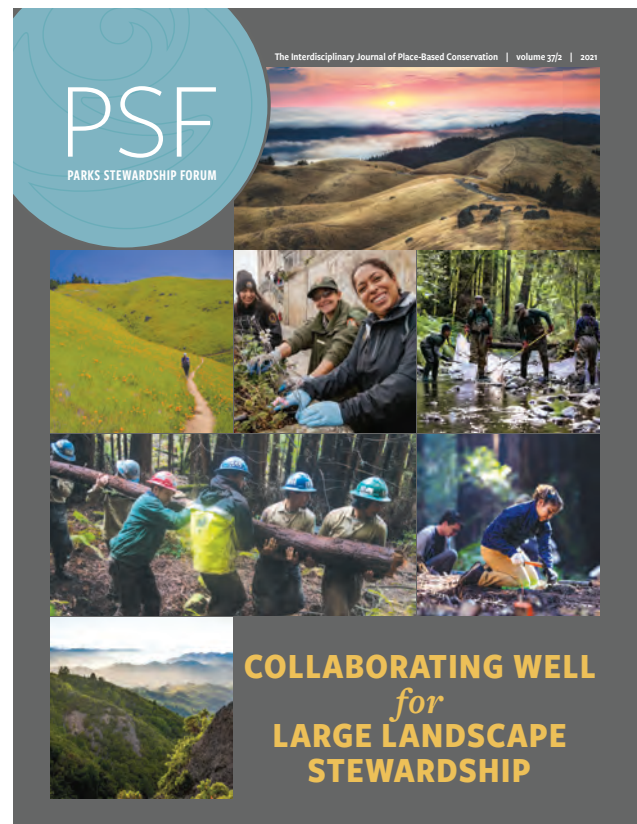
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On the cover of this issue

A montage of images from [One Tam](#), a collaborative partnership to manage the landscape of Mount Tamalpais in California, along with one from Alcatraz Island in Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

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