

# Backbone Leadership and River Recreation Corridors: The Mon River Valley Coalition

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Public leadership has emerged as a critical component of regional protected area management and sustainable tourism (Ansell & Gash, 2008). The skills of bringing diverse stakeholders to the table as well as sustaining interest and participation requires the intervention of a multi-faceted person or organization. This paper will explore the deeper meanings and applications of leadership as it has emerged in a collaborative, regional initiative known as the Mon River Valley Coalition (MRVC). The MRVC is a regional and community-based economic revitalization program that promotes economic and environmental sustainability by capitalizing on the outdoor recreation and nature-based tourism potential of the Monongahela River (Baxter & Malik, 2013). Results from this research will be informative to protected area managers and tourism planners engaged in collaborative, regional initiatives.

Leadership within the MRVC will be examined through the conceptual lens of recent scholarship on collaborative governance, collective impact, and backbone leadership emerging from the environmental management, public administration, philanthropy, and public health disciplines. A synthesized draft model of backbone leadership will be drawn from this literature emphasizing backbone leadership roles/tasks as well as capabilities/resources. Essentially, what backbone leaders do and what they bring to the table. The following research questions are addressed through this research study. How important has backbone leadership been to the success of the coalition? What roles or tasks have the backbone leaders taken on? What type of capabilities or resources do backbone leaders bring to the coalition? How would a change in leadership affect the coalition?

This research employed an embedded case study approach recommended by several tourism researchers (Dredge, Hales, & Jamal, 2013; Wray, 2015). The author was familiar with the Mon River Valley Coalition having served as a program coordinator with the Monongahela River Town Program for two years. After stepping down from the program coordinator position, the author was able to use personal knowledge, social networks, and accumulated program material to conduct this embedded case study research design (Yin, 2009).

## Methods

The case study research used a multiple-methods approach to address the research objectives. Data collection included stakeholder interviews, document analysis, and personal observation. Documents analyzed included MRVC meeting minutes, agendas, and website; newspaper articles; and MRVC reports and publications. Using a criterion-based and snowball sampling methodology, community and regional leaders of the MRVC were interviewed as well as several independent regional leaders familiar with the MRVC. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were completed during the spring and summer of 2015 with study respondents, averaging 45 minutes

in length. In total, 10 MRVC action-team leaders were interviewed. Interviews were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim. Data was hand-coded and sorted into meaning analytic units using NVivo 10.

## Results

Study results will be presented at the MMV8 conference under four integrated themes: Importance of backbone leadership, backbone leadership roles and tasks, backbone leadership capabilities and resources, and achieving collective impact. An emergent model of backbone leadership will be specified.

Backbone leadership, in the case of the MRVC, has been indispensable. Backbone leaders fill key capacity-building and alignment roles in this regional initiative with a number of low capacity communities. Backbone leadership is essential for many regional protected area management and sustainable tourism initiatives. Future research should incorporate social network analysis and multiple case study designs to more deeply understand backbone leadership in a protected area management and sustainable tourism context.



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