

Case study: Project team changes

During the second year of their *Sustaining Coastal Landscapes and Community Benefits* project, a team based at the Wells reserve suffered the tragic loss of the lead science investigator. This individual had served as the reserve's research coordinator for many years and possessed a deep reservoir of scientific knowledge about the local ecosystems upon which the project was focused.

SUSTAINING COASTAL LANDSCAPES AND COMMUNITY BENEFITS IN MAINE

In addition to the intense emotional impact, the loss of a respected researcher and team member posed a significant challenge to the project. With her passing, there was a loss of knowledge about the scope and overarching structure of ecological research and how this science connected to the larger interdisciplinary goals of the project.

Project team's strategy

In an effort to develop a shared understanding of how to move ahead, the applied science team held group discussions to capture processes and methodologies during the transition period. They also worked with the project coordinator to carefully document the project's methodologies and lessons learned.

Lessons learned and analysis

When the reserve's new research coordinator joined the team one year later, the methods documented by the team became a starting point for her to understand the applied science component of the project. Because of this documentation and the fact that the new researcher had experience with, and respect for, integrated, collaborative work, her transition into the project went smoothly.

The loss of their team member led the team to the following **important lessons**:

- While interdisciplinary teams integrate their knowledge on collaborative research projects, it is too much to ask a team member of one discipline to fill research gaps when a lead team member of another discipline leaves the project.
- Documenting methodologies at the outset of the project, as well as any changes made during project implementation, provides a way to reduce the gaps in knowledge if a team member leaves the project.
- Comprehensive minutes of conference calls, meetings, and working groups are a critical resource when a team member must be replaced.
- Finding a replacement team member who has experience with collaborative projects can make for a smooth transition and help to ensure that the new member is prepared for the challenges that collaborative, stakeholder-driven work entails. Without that knowledge or experience, a highly capable researcher may have difficulty accomplishing the work and adapting to challenges posed by



stakeholder-driven projects.

At Wells, careful consideration, discussion, and documentation of research methods and the role of applied science in informing the entire project allowed researchers to have a general and consistent understanding of the project's components and ensured that knowledge of methodologies and processes was archived and would not be lost if there were other changes in team personnel.

Key advice

In planning your project, build in time at the beginning to document methods and processes for each component of the project. At regular intervals, reevaluate these as part of your formative evaluation process and document changes. This record will be useful if a team member leaves the project and as a “lessons learned” document to inform future projects.

To learn more about this project that was initiated in 2010, visit their [Project Page](#).

To access other case studies and resources for conducting collaborative science projects, visit: [A Guide to Collaborative Science](#).

This case study was developed in 2015 by the NERRS Science Collaborative team when the program was hosted by the University of New Hampshire. This case study was originally featured as part of the Collaborative Project Toolkit.

