



PRACTITIONER-RESEARCHER PARTNERSHIPS: PERSPECTIVES FROM TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

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If we start from the premise that good restoration is strengthened by good research, and that good research relies on high quality data and benefits from real world experience, then practitioners and researchers represent two sides of the same coin. But how often do we manage to flip the coin to see the other side, learn from each other, and work towards common goals? Not often enough seems to be the answer.

Researchers and practitioners still mostly work in isolation from each other, with one side of the coin focused on generating the scientific knowledge that the other side then tries to apply. But in this age of restoration urgency, we can't afford to maintain this default setting when partnering could bring us a better chance of generating more impactful results on the ground.

IF WE CAN, WE SHOULD: A PRACTITIONER'S PERSPECTIVE

Opportunities for restoration practitioners to engage with the research community can take many forms, from sharing project data on portals hosted and used by the research community (such as [ISRIC](#), [SEOSAW](#), [2ndFOR](#), [ForestPlots.net](#), etc.) to developing more formal research partnerships. The level of engagement and which form it takes will depend on the priorities of the restoration organization and the resources available. But if we can engage, we should.

At [WeForest](#)—an organization carrying out forest and landscape restoration projects across the tropics—we see engagement with the research community as a way to strengthen our restoration strategies. These partnerships help us better understand the socio-environmental systems we operate in and how

our restoration work can impact those systems (and vice versa). We also see partnering with researchers as a way to contribute to the wider restoration community, by facilitating research that can improve restoration knowledge and practice.

In addition, as practitioners, we are now engaging with a new wave of restoration funders who are better informed and interested in the science behind the projects they wish to finance. This is a testament to the efforts of the research community to make their work more relevant in addressing global challenges and more accessible to non-researchers. Demonstrating a commitment to the advancement of restoration science is a unique value proposition, and one that increasingly speaks to funding organizations.

FLIPPING THE COIN: THE RESEARCHER'S PERSPECTIVE

WeForest and KU Leuven, a Belgian University, launched a research agreement in 2019 to study the ecology and restoration potential of dryland forest ecosystems in Africa, with WeForest's restoration sites in Ethiopia and Zambia providing the study areas for this ongoing research. But what are some of the benefits and the challenges of working alongside a restoration organization to carry out research?

For researchers, working with a restoration organization helps in better understanding the local setting. This is essential for arranging the logistic aspects of fieldwork, and is even more important for understanding the types of land use, governance, forest disturbances, and challenges faced by communities and restoration practitioners. Having the opportunity to learn from and



Fieldwork with community partners. Photo credit: Sybryn Maes.

exchange knowledge with practitioners and the local communities they work with can help refine research hypotheses and objectives. An example of this is a new research project led by KU Leuven at WeForest’s sites in Zambia investigating the links between “resilience” and restoration success. Early-stage engagement with the WeForest team and local community partners shifted our concept of resilience, from considering resilience solely in terms of the biophysical (ecological resilience), to encompass a broader definition focusing on “socio-ecological” resilience. This will make the project more complex, with implications for how the research questions and objectives are defined, how and what data is collected, and how the results are interpreted. But ultimately, it should increase the impact of our work and produce outcomes that are of more practical use and relevance for the restoration projects and the local communities.

Partnering with a local restoration organization also makes it easier to involve local communities in the research project because the groundwork of building trust and communication already exists. In Zambia, community members involved in WeForest’s restoration projects shared their knowledge of local land-use history, allowing us to identify a network of study sites representing forest recovery post-

disturbance. Beyond project scale, being affiliated with an organization like WeForest helped us establish new contacts and collaborations (e.g., with local universities & researchers) and to not be viewed as “[helicopter researchers](#)” who just arrive, collect some data, and then leave. Research projects are often relatively short term (e.g., a few years) so establishing these local links can help extend the “life” of the project and lead to new opportunities for longer-term research.

Another big benefit of partnering is undoubtedly the potential to access a large amount of data, which a single researcher would not be able to generate by themselves. It’s critical to understand and agree on how this data will be used in the research project and to allow practitioners to contribute to joint publications that result from its use. Joint publications are vital for knowledge sharing among restoration organizations, researchers, and practitioners worldwide and co-authorship provides visibility to both researchers and practitioners involved in the project.

A key challenge that researchers can encounter in partnering with restoration organizations is that practitioners’ time and resources are often stretched thin. Practitioners’ main priorities are

operational, not research-related; therefore, their input or resources (e.g., vehicles) won't always be available immediately. As a researcher, it's important to factor this into planning and allow extra time to get the input needed. For the WeForest-KU Leuven partnership in Zambia, it was important for us to provide a detailed estimate of the support needed for the duration of the research project, which allowed for a realistic discussion of what could be provided and allowed the project teams to plan ahead.

FORGING A PARTNERSHIP

There is certainly no shortage of research opportunities out there, and, increasingly, a demand for practitioner involvement. Research funding is often contingent upon researchers demonstrating the value of their work to stakeholders, including practitioners, policy makers, and private sector partners. But how can practitioners and researchers forge links that go beyond a one-directional sharing of data to become a true partnership?

Through existing contacts within the research community, WeForest has built some long-lasting partnerships with key researchers and institutions like KU Leuven. In turn, these connections have opened up new opportunities with more research partners.

Even without pre-existing contacts it is possible to build new practitioner-researcher partnerships. It can be as simple as contacting a researcher whose work is of interest and discussing ways to collaborate and contribute to each other's work.

In negotiating our partnerships, we have learned some valuable lessons along the way that may help other practitioners and researchers to strike up mutually beneficial and equitable partnerships. Some of our top tips for building successful partnerships are as follows:

Early input is best. Research agendas are still largely driven by researchers, with practitioner consultation or involvement coming later. Both sides of the coin should be more proactive in approaching each other with research ideas that can be co-developed, opening the door for joint funding and mutually beneficial outcomes. As an example, early discussion of ideas between WeForest and KU Leuven resulted in the inclusion, as part of a PhD project, of research on forest-water relationships at WeForest's Desa'a Forest project in Ethiopia.

Define the shared objectives, roles, and responsibilities. Practitioners and researchers have different priorities so it's important to define common goals and how to work together to achieve them. **Be clear about each other's expectations.** It's important to be realistic about what each party can offer the other and about what can be achieved through the partnership.

Agree on what is useful. Journal publications (the most common research output) are not always the best way to communicate results to practitioner organizations, communities, and other stakeholders. This does not mean that practitioners are disinterested in contributing to peer reviewed publications; quite the contrary (see our earlier point about ensuring practitioners can contribute to



Photo credit: Sybryn Maes.

publications). It simply means that practitioners and researchers should communicate during the early stages of the partnership on what other specific outputs are needed and feasible to produce to meet practitioner and stakeholder needs.

Establish clear and regular communication. The course of research or restoration “never did run smooth,” so it’s important to keep each other updated on progress and any challenges that arise within the partnership. Regular update meetings serve to remind both partners of shared objectives and expectations.

Restoration practitioners and researchers have a lot to gain by working together. Fundamentally, we share the common purpose of trying to address the most pressing challenges facing our planet today. As two sides of the same coin, we have complementary skill sets and the potential to pool our resources and amplify the impact of each other’s work. So, what are we waiting for?

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