NGO and Corporate Collaboration

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Abstract
Collaborations between Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) or non-profit organizations and corporate entities can offer benefits to both types of organizations. Organizations interested in realizing the benefits need also consider the trade-offs or downsides. Smaller non-profit organizations or for profit companies exploring potential NGO and corporate collaboration will be able to gain some insight from this project based on a synthesis of key literature as well as the knowledge imparted from interview results from NGO and corporate executives. This project will explore whether NGOs have “sold out” or have acquired benefits from the arrangements, and if so, what sorts of benefits have been realized? What about the corporations partnering with NGOs; what has been their primary motivation and have they been interested in public relations benefits or increased profit only, or something more? This project will offer a centralized location to gain insight into these types of collaborations to act as guidance for smaller non-profits seeking to enter into a collaborative effort with a corporate entity as well as a smaller corporate entity considering an NGO collaboration. By reviewing available literature and interviewing executives from the organizations in the case study profiled in this paper, conclusions regarding the important points and lessons will be offered to a suggested audience of organizations that are potentially exploring a collaboration between an NGO and a corporation. Among other important points derived from this research applicable to both NGO and corporate partners include the need for transparency, complementary goals, managed expectations and the willingness to shift business practices. Among other findings, a goal specific to the corporation includes seeking the skills, abilities and content expertise that the corporation does not possess in house and cannot readily obtain by other means, while a specific goal for the NGO is to seek collaboration with a corporation amenable to change on an operations level for the most impact.

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NGO AND CORPORATE COLLABORATIONS

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Environmental Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

NGO AND CORPORATE COLLABORATIONS

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Nancy English, PhD

Collaborations between Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) or non-profit organizations and corporate entities can offer benefits to both types of organizations. Organizations interested in realizing the benefits need also consider the trade-offs or downsides. Smaller non-profit organizations or for-profit companies exploring potential NGO and corporate collaboration will be able to gain some insight from this project based on a synthesis of key literature as well as the knowledge imparted from interview results from NGO and corporate executives. This project will explore whether NGOs have “sold out” or have acquired benefits from the arrangements, and if so, what sorts of benefits have been realized? What about the corporations partnering with NGOs; what has been their primary motivation and have they been interested in public relations benefits or increased profit only, or something more? This project will offer a centralized location to gain insight into these types of collaborations to act as guidance for smaller non-profits seeking to enter into a collaborative effort with a corporate entity as well as a smaller corporate entity considering an NGO collaboration. By reviewing available literature and interviewing executives from the organizations in the case study profiled in this paper, conclusions regarding the important points and lessons will be offered to a suggested audience of organizations that are potentially exploring a collaboration between an NGO and a corporation. Among other important points derived from this research applicable to both NGO and corporate partners include the need for transparency, complementary goals, managed expectations and the willingness to shift business practices. Among other findings, a goal specific to the corporation includes seeking the skills, abilities and content expertise that the corporation does not possess in house and cannot readily obtain by other means, while a specific goal for the NGO is to seek collaboration with a corporation amenable to change on an operations level for the most impact.
Introduction:

In collaboration between sectors for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, there are multiple examples of large environmental and deforestation organizations partnering with multi-national corporations in an effort to address many issues. Problems such as water quality, deforestation, unsustainable farming techniques, and quality of treatment of farmers are some examples of issues attempted to be addressed by partnerships which are formed, and by certifications developed NGOs by which the corporations agree to abide. This study will offer background profiling an example of a key project case study between prominent examples of an NGO and a corporate partner; The Nature Conservancy and their partnership with Dow, Inc. It is hoped that the reader will gain a greater understanding about the relative benefits and drawbacks of such collaborations when determining whether to enter into such a relationship.

A review of key points found in the literature review regarding some of the effects of a relationship of collaboration between an NGO or nonprofit entity and a corporate, for profit entity will be offered as a beginning point for this review. Subsequently, a detailed review of the case study representing cross-sector collaborations including the goals of these arrangements will be presented. Finally, a review of the resulting responses from specific interview questions that aimed to discover more about the dynamics and the effects of these relationships will be offered.

Background:

A move toward CSR initiatives have increased the demand for NGO-corporate cross-sector partnerships to establish credentials of responsible corporate citizenship (Baur and Schmitz, 2011). Corporations have increased the level of partnering with NGOs. For example, certification and labeling programs have been developed that are sponsored and sanctioned by the visibility of the NGO’s name and icon on a package of a product produced by a corporation. It is important that the framework for such collaborations is agreed upon as to how it will work in the beginning of the process for both the participating NGO and the corporation (Baur and Schmitz, 2011).

Although NGO and corporate collaborations predate the writing, notably in the 2012 journal article “What is Conservation Science?,” a debate on the conflicting nature of the goals of conservation was laid out by Peter Kareiva, then of The Nature Conservancy, and his co-author Michelle Marvier. The authors advocate for a need to update the idea of conservation biology to what they term “conservation science,” which has as a key goal the improvement of human well-being through the management of the environment in order to jointly maximize benefits to humans and to biodiversity (Kareiva and Marvier, 2012, p.962). Their argument was that, unlike theories in the past, modern times called for a more integrative approach emphasizing human involvement and a multi-disciplinary framework not solely relying on biology but also such fields as social sciences and economics (Kareiva and Marvier, 2012, p.963). The article offered several principles of conservation science, and offered practical statements of what conservation must do to succeed. The authors explicitly maintain in one of their statements that conservationists must work with corporations (Kareiva and Marvier, 2012,
They argue that a few large multi-national corporations have a huge impact on mining, energy, land, and consumer choices, and through the resources they use and the waste they generate. The authors argue that these corporations drive so much of what impacts a vast amount of land and of water resources, that the solution is to work with corporations to help improve their practices, rather than to vilify corporations and their behavior (Kareiva and Marvier, 2012, p.967). Later in this paper, one of the executives interviewed offers a substantially similar assessment of the importance of the scale of the impact an NGO can have when impacting a large corporation on an operations level.

Given that a for-profit corporation and an NGO exist as fundamentally different entities and act on alternate agendas, it is evident from a review of literature in exploration of these collaborations that such a relationship may be experienced differently by each. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, corporation is defined as a “a body formed and authorized by law to act as a single person although constituted by one or more persons and legally endowed with various rights and duties including the capacity of succession” (“Corporation”, n.d.). In this study, a corporation will also be regarded as an institution that exists primarily to earn a profit.

As a matter of background, an NGO can exist for several different reasons depending upon its agenda, but the conditions for the NGO to form include recognition of a problem that general consensus agrees existing avenues have been ineffective to resolve, along with the necessary social and political will (Yaziji and Doh, 2009, pp.16-18). An NGO formed for a social purpose, for example, can be understood as a private, not-for-profit organization aiming to serve particular societal interests by focusing advocacy or operational efforts on social, political and economic goals, including equity, education, health, environmental protection and human rights (Yaziji and Doh, 2009, p.5).

Other-benefiting and self-benefiting NGOs differentiate the other types of NGOs that exist. Self-benefiting may consist of members working toward their own good, as exemplified by a labor organization or church group. Other-benefiting NGOs could include those dedicated to environmental issues (Yaziji and Doh, 2009). These types of NGOs can benefit from a higher moral purpose as regarded by the general public (Yaziji and Doh, 2009, pp.6-7). This project will profile an other-benefiting NGO which focuses on environmental issues for the collaboration studied within the scope of this project.

Yaziji and Doh identify different stages of collaboration within these cross-sector collaborations. The philanthropic stage is a more traditional model whereby a corporation gives money to the NGO. The transactional is a two way value exchange where each offers the other expertise, and the integrative stage in a growing number of such collaborations combines values, missions and strategies (Yaziji and Doh, 2009, p. 124). Selsky and Parker argue that there are two main “platforms” characterizing management and organization research on these cross-sectoral partnerships: resource dependence and social issues, as well as the third platform they add, referred to as the societal sector (Yaziji and Doh, 2009, p.124).
There are a variety of effects that can be considered drawbacks that may result from an NGO participating in an alliance with a corporation. Developing a working partnership with a corporate entity may take away from the NGO’s focus on the pursuit of their traditional mission. The NGO may be less likely to engage in strategies such as protest when it is engaged with a corporate entity, as the fear of upsetting the corporation may preclude participation in activities in which the NGO might normally choose to participate (Baur and Schmitz, 2011). According to Baur and Schmitz, with NGOs increasingly adding corporations to the list of stakeholders to which they are accountable, along with the pre-existing donors who were already a dominant focus, the intended beneficiaries of an NGO’s work and mission may become even more remote of a priority (Baur and Schmitz, 2011).

Baur and Schmitz find that these multiple areas of accountability to which the NGO must report can result in fostering co-optation. According to Baur and Schmitz, an NGO being accountable to an accounting entity such as Guidestar offers many opportunities for NGOs to improve their operations, but most remain passive and respond defensively to those demands. NGO watchdog groups, or the corporate partners of those who enter into such partnerships, may as a result become the driving force and become responsible for setting the agenda for NGOs, rather than the NGO taking charge in order to adhere to its mission. This situation ought to be one noted by the corporate partners with whom the NGO collaborates because such independence is crucial for the partnership to remain credible on a long-term basis as well as providing a possible competitive advantage (Baur and Schmitz, 2011). One risk a corporation may be said to face in an NGO collaboration is the public’s view of the collaboration as being less than favorable if this perceived lack of credibility exists. Baur and Schmitz maintain that these partnerships with non-profits should strengthen "downward accountability" and should also work actively against dependence on donors.

NGOs rarely enter into corporate collaborations with a full understanding of the possible ramifications and possible costs involved (Baur and Schmitz, 2011). As these authors assert, there is an inherent risk that such cross-sector partnerships enhance the existing imbalance of power in favor of the corporations, as corporations often engage with NGOs starting with a deliberate strategy of risk control. Some NGOs may want to have more direct access to decision makers in hopes of affecting corporate behavior from the inside. Other NGOs may be less challenged by concerns for effectiveness and more by the constant struggle for organization (Baur and Schmitz, 2011, p.12). NGOs also risk the potential unauthorized use of their name to "certify" corporate practices or products (Rondinelli and London, 2003, p.67). These NGO certifications of products risk becoming less stringent over time, with less integrity and credibility within the certification process.

With increasing pressure on companies from stakeholders to take action with regard to impacts that their operations have on the environment, a corporation can benefit in collaboration from the content expertise of an NGO that they may not otherwise be able to gain (Rondinelli
and London, 2003, p.62). Partnerships can provide skills, competencies, levels of expertise and capabilities supporting a corporation’s CSR efforts from NGOs that may otherwise be inaccessible by the corporation. These “combinative” capabilities potentially provide both partners with discernable benefits (Yaziji and Doh, 2009, p.123). If not all solutions to social problems are based on market-driven decisions, then NGOs can provide important insight in providing corporations with needed information and policy options that might contribute not only to the solution of a perceived environmental or social problem, but also to the corporation’s long-term sustainability and to the expansion of their business (Baur and Schmitz, 2011, p.18). Corporations who enter into cross-sector partnerships may need to take the risk of entering an agreement which may not readily earn the company a profit and may include costs for the set-up and maintenance of the agreement (Baur and Schmitz, 2011, p.18). Corporations also face a risk by sharing their internal practices and exposing operational activities to an NGO partner, who could then potentially use this information to launch a strong advocacy attack against them if the alliance breaks down (Rondinelli and London, 2003, p.67).

**NGO and Corporate Collaboration: A Case Study**  
**Partnership between NGO, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and Corporation, Dow, Inc. (Dow)**

According to their website, TNC is a global environmental non-profit organization, working to create a world where people and nature can thrive. Founded at a grassroots’ level in the United States in 1951, TNC has more than 1,000,000 members and more than 400 scientists, involved with impacting conservation in 79 countries and territories across six continents (About Us, Who We Are, n.d.). Dow, Inc. is an American commodity chemical company. In 2019 it was spun off of DowDuPont, becoming a public company, and was added to the Dow Jones Industrial Average. The company is headquartered in Midland, Michigan (Wikipedia, n.d.).

The partnership between TNC and Dow began in 2011 with the goal of “demonstrating that building nature’s value into business strategy could lead to better outcomes for companies and conservation” (Who We Are, How We Work, n.d.). Available on Dow’s website are the 2025 Dow Sustainability goals. These include seven distinct ambitions: Leading the Blueprint; Safe Materials for a Sustainable Planet; Delivering Breakthrough Innovations; Engaging for Impact: Communities, Employees, Customers; Advancing a Circular Economy; World-Leading Operations Performance; and Valuing Nature (2025 Dow Sustainability Goals, n.d.). For the purposes of this study, the focus centers on their Valuing Nature sustainability goal as this is the focus of the collaboration with TNC.

According to their sustainability communications, Dow applies a business-decision process that values nature, with a goal by 2025 of delivering business value quantified as $1,000,000,000, and natural capital value through projects that are good for Dow and better for ecosystems (Redefining the Role of Business in Society, n.d.). Dow’s website states that it considers nature in strategic decisions as nature is often taken for granted, providing valuable services like clean air and water, because it is the right thing to do for people, planet and
business. The Nature Values Goal is to apply a business-decision process that values nature. As of the information available on their website, in 2020, their goal was for all capital, real estate, new business development and new product development projects at Dow to be screened for nature value, using tools developed with TNC to measure the value of ecosystem services.

The partnership between TNC and Dow contributes to research showing that forests could be used to reduce air pollution and that natural solutions could help protect business assets from storm damage and mitigate risks associated with water shortages. The partnership also developed The Ecosystem Services Identification & Inventory Tool, or the ESII Tool. According to its website, the ESII Tool is an iPad app and web interface allowing an understanding of the benefits that nature provides and incorporating the value of nature into decision-making (Ecosystem Services Identification & Inventory, 2020). The tool is designed to help decision makers from corporate, government, and other organizations have a method to quickly assess the value of nature and ecosystem services to a business or community.

According to the 2017 TNC-Dow collaboration report, investing in nature will lead to conservation and business benefits, a belief based in “Dow’s commitment to leading on sustainability and The Nature Conservancy’s desire to accelerate the private sector’s adoption of nature-based solutions” (The Nature Conservancy, 2018, p.5). The authors of the annual report indicate that the partnership shows how organizations from different sectors can demonstrate the ability to work together to further business and conservation outcomes. In 2017, the collaboration effort shifted from building the knowledge base of nature’s value to showcasing the success of the effort with the goal of increasing adoption of nature-based solutions as best practices and industry standards throughout individual corporations (The Nature Conservancy, 2018).

As indicated earlier, the ESII tool has been developed as a direct result of the TNC-Dow partnership. The tool differentiates itself by its ease of use in modeling of multiple ecosystem services on a site scale, allowing for outputs in both relative percent performance and engineering units, and in user-friendly training to utilize the tool (The Nature Conservancy, 2018). The gathering of data in standard data units allows evaluation in both absolute value terms as well as translating them from engineering units to dollars so that businesses can incorporate the information into financial models for decision-making. EcoMetrix Solutions Group (ESG), the ESII tool’s developer, is a collection of natural resource specialists and decision support tool designers employing a multidisciplinary approach to managing natural resources, siting and designing facilities, and maximizing conservation investments from the use of non-traditional angles and customized solutions (Meet the Team, n.d.). ESG and TNC have worked to grow the ESII tool’s user base (The Nature Conservancy, 2018). As one example, Praxair, one of the largest industrial gas companies, had reached out to Dow regarding their nature goals to learn more about how to incorporate such similar measures within the scope of their work. The companies held a full day meeting in 2017 to review and educate Praxair about the Nature Goal at Dow (The Nature Conservancy, 2018).
In terms of challenges, Dow was also contemporaneously managing through one of the largest corporate mergers in history which affected the redefinition of the scope of the Nature Goal as the company split off into three separate entities. The Collaboration team also worked to reform the scorecard so that a “Nature project” is clearly defined and differentiated in how it differs from a sustainability or efficiency project (The Nature Conservancy, 2018). The Collaboration team also planned to ramp up the ability to quantify objectives and more readily tie them to Dow’s internal metrics as well as increase communication regarding how the engagement helps both TNC and Dow. As of the last available set of goals for 2018, the Collaboration team planned to increase the Dow sites that it visits and involves in the Nature Goal around the country and internationally. The team plans to develop scientifically-defensible yet efficient ways to introduce the Nature Goal into Dow’s innovation process and continue to build on the ecosystem services model to inform new product development (The Nature Conservancy, 2018). The collaboration team also continues to keep in mind avenues that will showcase the effort to other groups who could benefit from similar models such as TNC Business Council Working Group on Natural Infrastructure, representing seven companies who work with TNC to understand and quantify the benefits of natural infrastructure in a variety of implementations (The Nature Conservancy, 2018).

According to the Dow 2019 Annual Sustainability Report, the “Valuing Nature” 2025 Sustainability goal achieved $157,400,000 mostly in avoided costs in business value through projects (Dow, 2020, p.24). At the end of 2018 the goal had been 25% realized toward its end goal of $1,000,000,000. It was felt that 2018 was the first year in which earlier goals were already realized and a sense of having nature as an ingrained value had started to be achieved (Dow, 2019, p.26).

Another goal was to incorporate nature into business decisions as a way to manage the operations footprint. By 2018, the Nature Screen was fully integrated into their capital allocation process (Dow, 2019, p.26). Dow published a paper detailing a case study to provide more detail about their process that has been developed with TNC: the nature valuation methodology framework, a three-step process that engages Dow project managers at multiple stages in the project design and capital allocation process, and the creation of wetlands from an ash pond near the Midland, Michigan Dow headquarters, accomplished due to the implementation of this framework (Dow, 2019, p.26). By 2019, Dow had mandated the Valuing Nature Screen tool as a mandatory component of capital project planning (Dow, 2020).

Dow uses the term Engineered Natural Technologies or ENT to refer to incorporating nature into operations or “engineered systems that use or mimic natural processes and are able to deliver the same design functionality as a man-made solution while affording benefits to the triple bottom line” (Guertin et al., 2018, p.420). The Nature Team developed the nature value methodology as the framework and methodology to help Dow employees in defining towards the beginning of projects and product design, and opportunities for driving business value associated
with the benefits obtained from nature's ecosystem services (Guertin et al., 2018, p.420). The Nature Team’s members include a project manager and engineers within the Global Environmental Technology Center and Engineering Solutions Group at Dow, the Corporate Engagement team, as well as TNC Center for Sustainability Science; the team reports in to leaders and executive sponsors at Dow (Guertin et al., 2018, p.420). The methodology is meant to give Dow employees, who typically do not have background knowledge of environmental impacts and ecosystem service benefits, the tools to be able to assess and incorporate nature into decisions.

Ecosystem services is meant here as referring to the tangible benefits that humans (and businesses) obtain from ecosystems; the definition used by the authors of the ash pond example comes from the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment definition, “a dynamic complex of plant, animal, and microorganism communities and the nonliving environment interacting as a functional unit” (Guertin et al., 2018). Clean air, clean water and healthy soil are the three ecosystems on which the framework focuses, in addition to metrics related to local ecosystem biodiversity. The three steps in the valuing nature methodology framework are screen and identify, analyze and evaluate, and consider and compare (Guertin et al., 2018, p.420).

As the first step, screen and identify takes the employee investigating a potential project through a five step inquiry process designed to determine what environmental impacts as well as potential beneficial methods of completing a project might be realized. In addition to the aforementioned three ecosystem services and whether they will suffer any adverse impact, as well as considering the impact on local biodiversity, the screen asks the user to consider if there are natural methods or engineered natural technologies that could be employed within the project. An affirmative answer to any of these five screening questions moves the user on to step two.

The analyze and evaluate step two requires the gathering of quantitative data to further analyze anticipated environmental impact. The user would likely use the ESII tool described earlier to gather the data needed to evaluate proposed changes to the natural environment. The ESII Tool uses a lens of measuring impact through eight specific ecosystem services which have been decided upon and determined through extensive teamwork, choosing services most directly linked to Dow’s business value. The eight services are: water provisioning, air quality control (nitrogen and particulate removal), climate regulation (carbon uptake and localized air temperature regulation), erosion regulation, water quality control (nitrogen and filtration), water temperature regulation, water quantity control, and aesthetics (noise and visual) (Guertin et al., 2018, p.421). Drilling down from these ecosystem services, there are then 13 measured components such as carbon uptake, erosion regulation and nitrogen removal, generating a data point (relative to the highest possible performance for that measured component) in order to add to the data being used to assess potential impacts. This comparison of ecosystem relative performance assists also in comparing the ability of a site to perform one service better than another; for example, a particular potential site may be better at carbon uptake than at water
filtration. Twenty different engineering units are also offered by the ESII tool in order to provide engineering-based metrics for ecosystem services, with the goal of representing data able to be interpreted easily by different types of employees at Dow. A baseline scenario, representing how a project would normally go forward in a status quo manner, is compared to different scenarios, with the goal of maximizing each ecosystem service, and comparing financial metrics, deciding upon a path forward with the best business value to Dow (Guertin et al., 2018, p.422).

As the final step, consider and compare compares the final study results and financial implications taking into account the return on investment of upfront costs and expected benefits through the life of the project in order to determine the feasibility of going in a particular direction based on the different scenarios developed with the information gathered (most likely using the ESII tool). Local biodiversity and community benefits of a given project are also factored in as values to be considered in the final assessment (Guertin et al., 2018, p.422).

The remediation of the ash pond in Midland, MI was the first project in which the collaboration between Dow and TNC used the nature value methodology in what could be considered a pilot project for this methodology (Guertin et al., 2018, p.422). When the collaboration team looked into turning the ash pond into a standard brownfield renovation project, an important finding gleaned from the information made available by the ESII tool was that the existing ecosystem services at baseline (the way the project stood prior to any remediation efforts) would actually be lowered. Ultimately after going through the decision-making process using the ESII tool techniques in order to evaluate methods, Dow created a wetland area to resolve the ash pond, which may well have been handled differently had the ESII tool not been available to provide information.

**Criticisms:**

While the above case study gives detailed information regarding the NGO and corporation working together on given projects, it also is appropriate to give a sample of some critiques that exist regarding other work of the two organizations profiled in the collaboration case study with the recognition that they represent just a few points and that many more could be offered.

The Nature Conservancy

TNC’s relationships and ties to corporate interests have been questioned regarding activities such as oil and gas drilling and other economic uses of land supposedly being held aside for conservation (Gillis, 2014). In just one such example, the group received criticism of its protection of Attwater’s prairie chicken, a bird known for its characteristic mating dance, once found widely on the Texas coastal prairies. While the Mobil company donated land to TNC to help with the prairie chicken’s conservation in 1995, by 1999 TNC had allowed new drilling for payment to TNC which they hoped to use to help conserve the birds, in a location a half mile from the primary breeding grounds on this land. Terms of the original agreement contained provisions for new drilling in 2007 when this well was no longer viable. The organization sought
a legal opinion and found that the original agreement permitted the new drilling, but some argue that they did not make a strong enough attempt to terminate the agreement to allow the new drilling (Gillis, 2014). TNC was subject to a United States Senate investigation in 2003 based on their involvement in similar activities even as the group is considered a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization not subject to taxes on income the drilling activities generated (Gillis, 2014).

Although a more comprehensive analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, it should also be noted that general opposition can be found to the “new” view of conservation, valuing nature in terms people and corporations can care about and to TNC’s tendency to collaborate with corporate entities (Christie, 2015). Michael Soulé, emeritus professor of environmental studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and co-founder of the Society for Conservation Biology has taken a stance against a new conservation biology like the one put forth by the authors Kareiva and Marvier cited earlier in this paper. He is joined by other prominent leaders such as biologist E.O. Wilson, Duke University ecologist Stuart Pimm, and head of the environmental-funding Weeden Foundation, Don Weeden (Christie, 2015).

As TNC’s board of directors includes former executives from entities like Goldman Sachs and Google, Professor Soulé says these "strong ties to corporations" bring "a very different perspective" (Christie, 2015). As Soule’ says, one can “put a value on nature and say this is the worth of this tree, or this fishery is worth so much if we protect it, but one of the problems of that argument is that people these days are not interested in long-term valuation. They want to know how much money they can make this year” (Christie, 2015).

Professor Pimm maintains TNC’s interest in corporate engagement possesses too much eagerness to please a corporation with which the NGO is collaborating. Pimm says that one “needs to be very careful about how you engage with corporations." Professor Pimm asks, "Are they doing good? Are they using you? What's the correct balance?" (Christie, 2015).

**Dow**

While Dow has engaged with TNC there have been criticisms of Dow and its actions relative to other similar environmental concerns. In 2018, Peter C. Wright was nominated to manage the federal Superfund system (Tabuchi and Adalbjornsson, 2018). Wright to some was considered a controversial nominee due to his years of work managing the clean-up efforts at the corporate headquarters in Midland, Michigan. The work done at the plant there over 100 years included the production of mustard gas, Agent Orange, Saran wrap and Styrofoam. The resulting effluents released into the Tittabawassee River and on to Lake Huron contained levels of dioxins considered harmful (Tabuchi and Adalbjornsson, 2018). Dioxin is defined by Merriam-Webster’s dictionary as “any of several persistent toxic heterocyclic hydrocarbons that occur especially as by-products of various industrial processes (such as pesticide manufacture and papermaking) and waste incineration” (“Dioxin”, n.d.). Wright was quoted in 2007 in an article in a legal journal he authored indicating his assertion that dioxins were highly toxic to animals but not to people. In a Dow newsletter mailed to local residents in 2004 it was alleged that few health effects were associated with dioxin exposure, citing a health study of Dow workers, with which The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) took issue (Tabuchi and Adalbjornsson,
2018). This may be considered an example of why public trust is not always strong with regard to statements Dow makes pertaining to environmentally-related issues.

As of this writing the area of the ongoing clean-up has recently been covered by new reports related to severe flooding near to the site. Flood waters mixed in the containment pools of chemicals being managed in the area; as of this writing preliminary reports by the company suggest the mitigation efforts have held. Christy McGillivray, political and legislative director of the Sierra Club’s Michigan Chapter, suggested that it was difficult to believe Dow’s reassurances as they have “a long and very colorful history of harming public and human health and insisting that they’re not doing anything wrong” (Devereaux, 2020, para. 5). The EPA also said in a writing in 2007 that “Dow has frequently provided information to the public that contradicts agency positions, and generally accepted scientific information” (Tabuchi and Adalbjornsson, 2018, para. 18).

Methods:

Research methods for this project include qualitative measures, one of which is specific interview follow-up questions. Data was sought to assist in gaining a broader perspective regarding the views of both the non-profit and the corporate executive involved with the case study partnership. Once interview questions were finalized, appropriate interviewees were solicited via email and social media in order to set up telephone conversations. A brief email inquiry explaining the project and requesting the participant’s time and expertise with an expected timeframe of no more than twenty minutes was ultimately effective in gaining their response. It should be noted that each interview did last longer than the anticipated timeframe originally suggested.

Qualitative measures have also involved a meta-analysis of key literature available pertaining to studies and critiques of collaborations between NGO and corporate entities. Academic journals provide the majority of this portion of the review. Corporate sustainability and NGO reports regarding the collaboration as well as various other portions of their organizational websites were utilized to learn the background information specific to the case study.

Results:

This section contains the results of the interview questions designed to gain further insight from the executives involved in the two organizational entities chosen for the cross-sector collaboration case study.

The Nature Conservancy questions:

Martha Rogers was interviewed on July 15, 2020 and responded to the below series of questions. According to TNC’s website, Rogers is an economist in TNC’s Center for Sustainability Science. In this role, she serves as the technical lead for TNC’s ongoing
collaboration with Dow working closely with Dow staff to develop tools and processes to implement Dow’s Valuing Nature Goal.

The conversation began recounting the stages of collaboration in which NGOs with corporations may be identified: philanthropic (more traditional model whereby corporation gives money to NGO), transactional (a two way value exchange), and the integrative stage (small but growing portion seeing the collaboration combining values, missions and strategies) (Yaziji and Doh, 2009, p. 124). Rogers was asked in which stage she believed the TNC-Dow partnership to be. She explained that each Dow as well as TNC have their own goals, as well as those that they are working on as shared goals. As an example, sustainability is a goal Dow is increasingly focused on, and this coincides with TNC putting emphasis on sustainability as well. TNC’s mission-wide goal around water coincides with Dow’s recent focus on water quality and quantity issues. In this way, when goals align the collaboration could be seen as integrative; however, the collaboration could also be seen as transactional in the sense that it brings value to both parties and they both benefit. Rogers stated that there are aspects of both transactional and integrative strategies. Rogers explained that large scale environmental concerns are the goal of TNC being involved with the collaboration with Dow, while Dow’s goal with the collaboration is the business-value oriented with being involved; the qualities of value may be different to both parties.

Rogers next discussed some key criteria of corporate partners sought when an organization like TNC decides whether to embark on a partnership with a corporation. Rogers stated that a basic primary criteria in evaluating a partner is to look at whether there are ways practices can be engaged, beyond what might be found in a philanthropic model where, for example, a corporation may donate land to TNC for conversation. She stated that on a basic level TNC is interested in providing more public value than private. As Rogers indicated, while hypothetically a goal could be of interest to Dow if it increases public value, this is not their primary goal and objective of being involved in a collaboration, while TNC is specifically looking for those opportunities to demonstrate more public value.

The partnership with Dow is TNC’s first big collaboration of this sort and its longest-standing collaboration, according to Rogers. She maintained that open dialogue between the members of the partnership is absolutely key. Rogers also pointed to the value piece where different forms of value are important to each member of the partnership; that is, the environmental, versus more of a business-focused, manufacturing lens. Rogers pointed to the importance to both the NGO and corporate partnership members of facilitating learning and being able to be vulnerable, as well as learning from and listening to the perspective of others, if the endeavor is to be successful.

Rogers gave an example that provided an inside look into those times when TNC has the ability of wanting to assess from a scientific standpoint, figuring out what will be good for the environment, while such science-based assessment takes time. As Rogers maintained, Dow does want to include natural infrastructure for a solution to an issue they are managing, but from a
business standpoint cannot afford to wait two years for the science to become available from an assessment. In this example, TNC may need to shift the way they do the assessment in order to gain the participation of a partner like Dow. According to Rogers, Dow must make a similar shift in return when paying attention to profit margins, budgets and being financially motivated, to be willing to incorporate nature more so in natural infrastructure with its projects. The ESII tool exports ways of looking at broader engineering of projects the collaboration is managing with regard to the impacts on and value of ecosystem services.

Rogers then spoke about the criteria that would preclude going forth to decide to work with a corporate partner. She explained that if an NGO approached a corporation but that corporation was unwilling to look at some of their main environmental footprint issues and to have that discussion be a part of the conversation, such as water usage or carbon emissions if that was a main issue with their footprint, that would likely be a company with whom a collaboration would not move forward.

Rogers was asked why Dow seemed like the best partner with whom to enter into a partnership and to devise the ESII tool and framework. According to Rogers, with Dow, the generation of the ESII tool was more of an organic process coming out of the partnership. TNC was interested in how to shift business practices, and the ESII tool developed from there, rather than the partnership directly setting out to devise a tool per se. Valuing nature as a concept did not come into play until 2015 in Dow’s Valuing Nature sustainability goal, while the first four to five years of the collaboration were answering the question as to whether there were projects that could work with nature as a part of the focus; the first three years showed such projects could exist. According to Rogers, the Valuing Nature framework helped drive the success of the Valuing Nature goal and impacted the standard way of business as usual beyond Dow. Other companies could then do similar assessments and possible business practice shifts on their own using the ESII tool.

The conversation with Martha Rogers then turned to how the collaboration is viewed internally; whether there is support and a positive regard for the initiatives of the TNC/Dow collaboration at high levels of the organization both at Dow and TNC, and whether TNC members are regarded as equals within the collaboration group to its corporate members from Dow. Rogers maintained that she feels the TNC members and all of the partnership members are generally supported. This is in part because they speak with people at all levels of Dow, and the CEOs at both organizations speak as well. Rogers explained that the current Chief Sustainability Officer had been involved with the Valuing Nature goal as her first job within Dow and moved to the sustainability role and so has the background to understand and support the work of the collaboration. Rogers cited evidence for support of the partnership in that the new phase of the work in the collaboration started in 2019. Both organizational partners elected to sign on for three more years, as well as the fact that they are beginning to work on new branches of goals with trusted supporters. She feels the members of TNC are on equal footing with Dow, as the team members have worked together for a long period of time. With a group primarily consisting
of six people who work together, three in each TNC and Dow, it helps facilitate relationships that branch out from there.

Rogers was questioned about whether the Dow partnership has any elements of the appearance of engaging in “greenwashing”, and what she could suggest as ways to prevent such an appearance. The reader will note that the term greenwashing in this paper is defined by Merriam-Webster as “expressions of environmentalist concerns especially as a cover for products, policies, or activities” (“Greenwashing”, n.d.). Rogers acknowledged that greenwashing is something the organizations “need to be careful with” and that TNC is very aware of not wanting to be a part of initiatives resembling greenwashing. To avoid this, Rogers maintained that there need to be agreements around when to use the TNC logo, as well as agreements upon how and when to talk about the collaboration. Rogers noted that there are different sensitivities, and different people consider different things to be greenwashing. The message Rogers has received is that there is a lot of support for these collaborations. One of the points Ms. Rogers stressed several times in the interview that these types of collaborations as with Dow offer a lot more opportunity to help shift business practices as the scale of the opportunity of this type of an impact is a lot bigger than philanthropic opportunities. The scale of conservation is that much larger when showing companies how to manage their own land as opposed to, for example, benefitting from putting conserved land aside. Another way Rogers suggests to avoid greenwashing is to “make sure you are working with a company committed to conservation impact.”

When asked with the benefit of hindsight, what some of the changes she would have made in working with Dow to increase the effectiveness of the partnership or to safeguard the ability to stay on track with TNC’s mission, one point that Rogers made that did not necessarily have to do with hindsight was that working with these collaborations requires patience and persistence. She likened the collaboration to “trying to turn the titanic.” She stressed the importance of consistently being there, talking to the right people all along to see change. Rogers had not worked with such large entities in previous positions and learned that it takes time to convince the actors. She maintained that Dow employees “care a lot about conservation but it has never been a central focus,” and the partnership provides the opportunity to allow conservation to be a part of their jobs. Rogers pointed out that there are roughly 30,000 people at Dow that 4,000 TNC staff are trying to work with to shift what they are doing and to pay attention to the impacts their work has.

The conversation turned to how the Dow collaboration may have affected public trust of TNC and whether there has been reputational risk/ damage associated with this corporate partnership, or conversely, whether the collaboration has been particularly advantageous in terms of the public’s view of the organization. Rogers indicated that “there are both sides of the fence and it depends on whom you ask.” Culture change can be seen in both organizations in Dow-where it is empowering to think about conservation and in TNC- where there is support from the top and the increased level of the scale of conservation through corporate engagement. As
Rogers indicated, many corporations are big emitters, and if “we don’t engage with them, we can only do so much.” Rogers’s assessment here mirrors that of Kareiva and Marvier referenced earlier. Rogers also indicates the partnership members have worked hard on being transparent, talking about the partnership within and outside of TNC.

Pertaining to suggestions she has for other less prominent organizations, who may be exploring becoming involved in similar collaborations, and what some pitfalls may be for them to avoid, Rogers again stressed that “strong open communication is really critical.” Rogers says if there is not open, honest two way communication the collaboration will not be truthful for both parties. “An integrative collaborative work stream that ties in both missions and creates the right incentive to actually work, one in which both are excited to see value and not view the partnership as a waste of time” are all important to seek out, according to Rogers.

Regarding whether work with a corporate entity like Dow changes the intended focus of TNC’s work to the direction in which the corporate entity chooses, and some of the ways in which one must work to ensure the NGO does not deviate too much from its core mission while satisfying corporate desires, Rogers indicated that one of the things that really shifted business practices is the Valuing Nature goal. This drove the partnership to see how they could create tools that can be imbedded in how Dow does business beyond the collaboration team. “Just getting Dow to use a tool that quantifies ecosystem services was huge for TNC” to have the investment in the ESII tool, according to Rogers.

Rogers was asked if the ESII tool has beneficially impacted projects in ways that would not have been realized without it. Rogers asserted that in the management of the ash pond, profiled earlier in the case study, Dow has had traditional ways of management such as “cap, fill and plant grass.” The different ways of deciding how to deal with mitigation efforts quantifies the benefits relative to traditional restorative opportunity capability. Rogers was asked if the results have been satisfying from her perspective as a member of the collaboration with the ways in which final project decisions have played out in the use of the ESII tool, once a company has all of the increased information available to make project decisions using the information gained from its use. Rogers lauded the use of the tool in “not doing cookie cutter approaches” to manage environmental efforts. The ESII tool has proven to show non-traditional restoration methods, allowing information to support advocating for approval for alternate design.

Rogers asserts that “there is always going to be a tension” with the type of work associated with quantifying the value of the ecosystem services. One important point Rogers makes is there is tension when the most beneficial alternative to the environment is “not always the cheapest option, when the company has the information on the effects it could have taking that route, it still may elect a less expensive option even with the ecosystem value knowledge at hand.” Thus, even as the tool makes the knowledge of the ecosystem services known as may not have been the case without its use, the corporation may still ultimately make the decision that the nature-based solution is not the most beneficial from an economic standpoint.
Rogers offers that the members of the collaboration share knowledge at conferences, and continue to talk about the tool with as many external engagements as they can. She stated there are project specific uses of ESII in particular that have value in adoptions outside of corporate work as well.

Dow questions:

Eunice Heath was interviewed on July 8, 2020 and responded to the below series of questions. Eunice Heath is Global Environment, Health, Safety and Sustainability Director for Consumer Solutions at Dow. Ms. Heath has been with Dow for 29 years and has been working in corporate sustainability for the last seven years. She is an engineer, holds a Master’s of Business Administration, and has also served on the commercial side of the corporation.

Heath asserted that Dow sees sustainability as “a business opportunity rather than merely risk management.” According to Heath, now is an important time to recognize ESG (environmental, social and corporate governance) versus sustainability, and the collaboration with TNC represents a unique opportunity for business model challenges in seeking a “win/win” situation for all involved. As Heath explained, the 2025 Valuing Nature goal within the sustainability goals represents a retraining, rethinking and imagining that nature and business manufacturing can exist together, as two organizations come together and see each other’s sides.

Heath stated that the beginning of the collaboration saw Dow taking TNC participants to large manufacturing sites like Freeport and the Netherlands to talk to engineers about considering nature in solutions. Situations such as watershed management and key water stress site locations were considered, and moving forward, climate change site stress locations are moving to the next phase of priorities. Heath indicated that Dow’s customers are also interested in these solutions.

Heath was asked in which stage of collaboration the partnership currently falls; which may be identified as the aforementioned philanthropic, transactional, and integrative stages (Yaziji and Doh, 2009, p.124). Heath was asked in which stage she believed the TNC-Dow partnership to be. Heath maintained that the collaboration is in the integrative stage at this point. She indicated that one year ago she would have said it was in the transactional stage, but that at this point the collaboration is transitioning and launching new targets requiring collaboration members to think differently about solutions from innovation to operations, such as a shift to look at climate change targets.

Heath was asked about the current state of the 2025 Valuing Nature goal and whether such goals were able to be more top of mind and on track after the company’s activities as a result of the corporate merger in which they were engaged were more settled. One goal had called for Dow to screen all capital and real estate projects, business development and new products for potential benefit and impacts through this Valuing Nature lens, which in the 2019
The sustainability report, was indicated to have fallen short of meeting the original 2020 goal. Heath indicated the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 had impacted the realization of these goals but that they were instead on target to be realized in 2021.

Heath discussed the criteria that Dow is seeking in an NGO partner and why TNC was the best partner for this collaboration. As Heath indicated, “as Dow continued forward on its sustainability journey, they began to think about the issue of ecosystems around manufacturing plants.” These were the early forays of biodiversity, management and stewardship. In this sense Dow knew they needed to “elevate their game” according to Heath who said they needed a partner of whom “that was their speak.” According to Heath, different organizations were considered, and TNC was found to be the best choice.

Heath was asked whether Dow has increased the utilization of the ESII tool in more locations and with more types of projects, whether there had been a trend in the types of projects where ESII tends to be more successful, and if the tool of valuing nature had been introduced in companies who do not recognize such a value within their culture and are reluctant or resistant to do so. Heath indicated that the ESII tool is not owned by Dow but they are happy to have the tool out for the use of different entities. Heath made the point that this is how change happens, and that you can’t hold such a tool proprietary in house as this is how benefits can help nature; as she says, “clean air and clean water belongs to all of us.”

Heath was questioned as to whether Dow and TNC are considered equally successful in bringing on new users to the ESII tool or why one arm of the collaboration would seem more credible than the other. Heath explained that although the tool itself is maintained by a third party rather than TNC or Dow, the partnership does allow for TNC to take the lead and will bring Dow in as a case study. Heath maintains it can be impressive that a well-known corporation like Dow uses the tool and can be a credible example for those considering the tool, but TNC as the content expert leads the initiative to champion the tool to other companies.

Heath was then questioned about whether she feels there is support, credibility and a positive regard for the initiatives of the collaboration at high levels of the organization at Dow, and whether TNC members are “heard” and receive equal footing within the collaboration group to its members from Dow. Heath believes the highest levels of organizational leadership at Dow absolutely support the effort. She indicated the Senior Vice President of Manufacturing and Engineering, Sustainability, Chief Executive Officer and executive sponsors are very well-versed with regard to the relationship.

The conversation turned to whether Heath believed working with some of the NGO partners like TNC have any elements of the appearance of engaging in “greenwashing” and what she might suggest to prevent that appearance. Heath indicated she does not believe or recall she or other leaders have been approached with regard to an appearance of greenwashing related to the collaboration, and that she believes the corporation and the individuals within the
collaboration are transparent as to what the intent is, what they are trying to accomplish and the execution of business strategy. She believes with regard to these goals that Dow and TNC are both transparent, and stresses that “transparency has to be there” to prevent greenwashing outcomes. She indicated that some of Dow’s other collaborations are ramping up as coalitions are formed, such as the CEO alliance on plastic waste, and are in the process of getting on the same page. As Heath indicated, “in a one on one collaboration such as that with TNC, there is no reason not to be transparent.” Heath maintained the most difficult or challenging aspect in such a cross-sector collaboration as the TNC-Dow partnership is “finding the win/win.” Finding what is common for both organizations in order for progress to happen and solutions to be created, for both sides to see there is another side, and to find the mutual “win/win” space involves proactive listening and communication so the common mission does not go astray. As Heath explained, as some aspects of the mission may run counter to this collaboration, it is important to understand what those are and that this is an ongoing dialogue. Heath indicated that she meets once monthly with portions of the collaboration, some of whom are global. Heath stated that the collaboration and communication is similar to a “big family”. She maintained that executive alignment is important, as well as communication, and empowerment. In terms of the ways Dow has had to compromise, Dow recognizes they do not have all the answers, and as Heath said that “they know what they know” with such issues.

Heath was then questioned as to whether the TNC partnership is viewed by Dow as worth the investment, in what ways Dow sometimes needs to compromise in order to work with an organization with a purpose-driven agenda, what some of the difficult choices TNC may have had to make that may stray from their mission in order to be a part of this collaboration, and what advice she would give to an organization who is deciding whether to enter into a similar collaboration, even if on a smaller scale. Heath would argue that both TNC and Dow are purpose-driven organizations. She indicated that to get to the goals for 2050, that Dow needs partners who have expertise such as TNC. As Heath maintained, it is “important to know that corporation’s core values are its word. When a non-profit decides to work with a corporation it needs to look hard at core values, and the purpose.” As Heath said, it is important to discover if the goals and the core values are in line, and if that is not the case it is important to understand why, and to understand that there are many reasons why the corporation may not deliver on its core values. Heath suggested this could indicate the corporation “may need to change their game” by having a partner which could be the opening for an NGO for this type of a collaboration. Heath suggests an NGO should not shy away from working with a public company, and that “the planet needs both” types of organizations.

Heath was questioned about a New Yorker magazine article regarding TNC in 2012, as of that writing’s most recent EPA data, Dow’s Freeport plant remained the ninth-highest emitter of bromine, the eighth-highest emitter of chlorine, the fifth-highest of cumene, and the sixth-highest of hexachloroethane, which causes cancer in mice. She was asked how she believes some of these realities exist even as the TNC collaboration project proceeds in which the goal is to value nature, and whether Dow is trying to look at more of their work within this goal and concept. Heath stated she does not believe anything about the Dow sustainability goals is related
to “making up” for some of the corporation’s past, and indicates that these issues are dealt with within a separate group managing risk. The sustainability perspective stays as the focus as future initiatives are designed.

Heath was also asked about an incident from May 2020, flood waters seeped into containment ponds at the Dow Chemical complex in Midland, MI, setting off concerns that further incursions could send toxic chemicals washing downstream, and the fear was that that episode could end up unraveling years of environmental cleanup in a single day (Erb and House, 2020). Heath was asked about the status of the situation in relation to the collaboration and had no comment other than indicating this is an area unrelated to the TNC collaboration.

Finally, Heath was asked about the effect on the collaboration of some staffing changes at TNC with the President and the CEO stepping down (Colman, 2019). Heath was asked if she would foresee any changes to the work that has been ongoing between TNC and DOW in their absence now that new leadership is in place. Heath believes if anything this change in leadership has intensified the collaboration with new leadership, and this can take the collaboration to the next level as they move into climate change related target goals.

**Conclusions:**

In reviewing the insights gained from the targeted interviews with executives directly involved with the NGO and corporate collaboration case study, as well as the findings of some key literature, it became evident that there were some common themes from which an organization interested in exploring a potential cross-sector collaboration could learn.

When exploring a collaboration, relative to how to determine and select the most appropriate partner, the interview findings suggest an important starting point in this evaluation is to ensure an understanding of the goal, or what the prospective partner truly might wish to obtain from a collaboration, in order to determine which potential partner would best help to ensure that goal is met. Complementary goals emerge as essential to seek among the members of a potential collaboration. According to Rogers it is important to seek an “integrative collaborative work stream that ties in both missions and creates the right incentive to actually work, one in which both are excited to see value and not view the partnership as a waste of time.” As Heath indicated, looking for the “win/win” was another component important to keep in view as a framework for two organizations with fundamentally disparate agendas to move forward. Heath suggested executive alignment, communication, and empowerment are all to be sought in order to create and maintain a successful collaboration effort.

As an example from the NGO perspective, when selecting a corporate partner, an important consideration in choosing a partner was the ability to impact practices of the corporation and help shift business practices. As Rogers had stressed, the scale of the opportunity of this type of an impact and the scale of conservation is that much larger when showing companies how to manage their own land as opposed to, for example, a company donating a
piece of land for conservation. Once identified, the willingness of the corporation to have honest conversations and to take a look at their impact, as in the example Rogers indicates of a corporation with the willingness to pay attention to large contributors of their environmental footprint, should be present in order to be considered as a real potential partner. As Heath indicates, the NGO should also make sure to be familiar with the corporation’s values which will “show you what they care about.” Heath says it is important to discover if the goals and the core values are in line, and that if they are not being met, that it is possible to obtain a better understanding about why; that understanding may provide the opening for a collaboration in which the NGO could create an opportunity to offer value by using its expertise to help fix what may be impacting the ability of the corporation to meet desired expectations.

In seeking a partner from the corporation’s perspective, as Heath indicates Dow sees sustainability as “a business opportunity” as well as desiring to show they are addressing an issue in which consumers are interested; this suggests a corporation would want to similarly look for an NGO partner with the expertise and capability of understanding their business model and how to help impact those practices which take the company to a more sustainable model while continuing to accomplish necessary business activities. When Dow took a look at changing business practices, they sought a partner who provided content expertise in the areas needing to be addressed, which ultimately led to the choice of TNC as a collaborator.

From both the NGO and the corporation’s perspective, as findings from Baur and Schmitz support, another important point is to avoid an association which promotes a co-opted NGO and to seek an autonomous organization both to allow the NGO to adhere to its mission as closely as possible as well as to seek credibility for the collaboration from the public’s perspective. If an NGO is co-opted, a corporation also may not receive an authentic partner who fearlessly brings their own expertise to the collaboration, which presumably is the value brought by the NGO that the corporation seeks.

The importance of an open dialogue between core collaboration members as well as transparency among members, both within the effort as well as those wishing to learn about the collaboration’s goals, were found within the results of the executives interviewed to be key elements of a successful partnership important for both the NGO and the corporate entity. It is evident that transparency is important to maintain legitimacy and trust for the members of both collaborating teams. As Rogers had commented, unless there is open, honest two way communication the collaboration will not be equally truthful for both parties.

Organizations would do well to evaluate potential partners based in part on an assessment of how strongly they believe the relationships seem poised to evolve, and whether sufficient time, other resources, and senior leadership support are evident. As Rogers indicates, the collaboration team members work with one another for a long period of time establishing groundwork for these collaborations to effect change, and she stressed the importance of “consistently being there.” The quality of the relationship between the members of the two
entities within the collaboration was one of the keys to success in the effort. Patience and perseverance were other important points; the ability to push a corporation to start doing some aspects of their work differently can be work that will need a commitment for an extensive period of time, as trying to effect change can be like “trying to turn the titanic” as Rogers noted. It stands to reason that either an NGO or a corporate entity interested in joining in a cross-sector collaboration should not expect success to happen quickly and should assess whether the organization has the time and resources to devote if they would like to maximize the results of what they are trying to achieve.

Having support from the right people within the organizations also emerged as a related important point in the interview findings. An effort could be well-meaning but without those senior leaders within both groups to sponsor and champion the work, it seems it could be seen, as Rogers points out, as “a waste of time” or busywork not connected either to the central mission or business model. By keeping connected with leadership, it likely is also motivating for the members of the collaboration if their work appears to be followed, recognized and valued by the appropriate members of organizational leadership and to set the tone for the view of the collaboration from the rest of the corporation or NGO.

Managing expectations might be considered another point for organizations to keep in mind when exploring whether to engage in a collaboration and what that collaboration might accomplish. Indicated from the interview with TNC’s Rogers is the reality of an NGO being obliged to accept when a collaboration comes to a different decision than an NGO might desire, even while information is available to inform a corporation with the facts to do otherwise. The example was given regarding the Valuing Nature goal and the use of the ESII tool to give information about the value of ecosystem services to inform alternative strategies of mitigation. Rogers indicated that, even though a corporation such as Dow will be equipped with the knowledge and information about potential alternatives they would not have had prior to the relationship in the collaboration, at times the corporation may opt to go the same, least environmentally-sound route, that they may have decided upon had the collaboration and its discoveries not existed. Rogers indicated that the tension with the type of work that they do is “always going to be there.” The tension relates to the model of the environmentally-sound option as not always the cheapest, and the corporation may elect the cheaper option in terms of a strategy to mitigate an impact. An organization, particularly in this case an NGO, who is exploring a collaboration ought to give consideration to how they would handle a similar situation and how well they would envision continuing to work with the collaboration when their own preferred agenda is not being met.

Related to the management of expectations is a willingness to shift the way each organization does business. The example given by TNC’s Rogers was the preference of TNC to do a scientific assessment while from a business standpoint Dow cannot wait for two years, in her example, for the science to be revealed. TNC must be able and willing to shift the way it may otherwise complete an assessment to gain participation from Dow, while Dow must also be
willing to shift its typical methods by consistently considering nature’s value and ecosystem services quantified by the ESII tool, to allow such consideration to become its new routine.

Finally, awareness of the perception of greenwashing and a few reflections about how to avoid it and indeed how to examine how important it is, is another consideration when determining whether to enter into a collaboration. With the idea that an NGO lends legitimacy to a corporation’s already existing practices, it is again important to stress the significance of transparency, via Heath’s suggestion as to transparency about the collaboration as to what the intent is, what it is trying to accomplish and the planned execution of business strategy. It is also wise to remember that as Rogers maintains there is a need for agreements in advance around when to use an NGO’s logo if that is something that will be part of collaborating, as well as agreements upon how and when to talk about the collaboration. On a related issue, conservation through corporate engagement, Rogers seemed to suggest that the scale of the impact able to be made should carry weight when determining if there is enough perceived public trust regarding a corporate collaboration and preventing a greenwashed appearance. As alluded to earlier, a divergence of opinion exists as to the merits of collaboration between NGOs and corporations with many not believing the “new” trend of conservation involving valuing nature and partnering with corporations represents the best way forward. The risk of a greenwashed appearance does exist, but as so many large corporations are big polluters and the scale of the impact of these large multi-national corporations is so huge, as Rogers said, if we “don’t engage with them, we can only do so much.”
References:

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Appendix:

Interview questions for The Nature Conservancy:

1. Do you agree to allow the use of your name and title in the write-up for the answers to your interview questions in the capstone thesis paper?

2. According to my research, stages of collaboration of NGOs with corporations may be identified as philanthropic (more traditional model whereby corporation gives money to NGO), transactional (which is a two way value exchange), and the integrative stage which is a still small (but growing) portion which sees the collaboration combining values, missions and strategies (p. 124 Doh and Yaziji.2009) Which stage would you put the TNC Dow collaboration in?

3. What are some of the key criteria of corporate partners that you look for when deciding whether to embark on a partnership?

4. What are some issues that come up or criteria that you would consider to be dealbreakers that would preclude going forth to decide to work with a corporate partner?

5. From your perspective at The Nature Conservancy, why did Dow seem like the best partner with whom to enter into this partnership and to devise the ESII tool and framework?

6. Do you feel there is support, credibility and a positive regard for the initiatives of the TNC/Dow collaboration at high levels of the organization at Dow? What about from high levels of TNC management? Do you feel The Nature Conservancy members are “heard” and receive equal footing within the collaboration group as do its members from Dow? Why or why not?

7. As members of a purpose-driven organization, do you feel that most of the members of the management team at The Nature Conservancy are in favor of the corporate partnerships that have developed such as the collaboration with Dow? Why or why not?

8. Do you feel that working with some of your corporate partnerships like Dow have any elements of the appearance of engaging in “greenwashing”? Why or why not, and what are some of the different ways you can suggest to prevent such an appearance?
9. Is there pressure from TNC members, board members or other stakeholders to either increase or decrease the level of cooperation with Dow or other corporate partners and if so why is that?

10. If you could, knowing what you now know with the benefit of hindsight, what are some changes you would have made about working with Dow to increase the effectiveness of the partnership or to safeguard the ability to stay on track with the mission of The Nature Conservancy?

11. How do you believe the Dow collaboration has affected public trust of your organization? Do you feel there has been reputational risk/ damage associated with this or other corporate partnership in which TNC engages, or conversely, has the collaboration been particularly advantageous in terms of the public’s view of the organization? If possible please provide examples as to why you feel it has helped or harmed public trust?

12. What are some suggestions you have for other less prominent non-profit organizations based on your experiences, to become involved in similar corporate collaborations, even if on a smaller scale? What are some pitfalls these non-profits should look out for when considering corporate collaborations?

13. Do you feel that partnering with a corporate entity like Dow changes the intended focus of your organization’s work to the direction in which the corporate entity chooses, or where the money is? What are some of the ways in which you work to ensure the NGO does not deviate too much from its core mission while satisfying corporate desires?

14. I have read that the ESII tool incorporates those eight ecosystem services considered most important to Dow’s business value. In your collaboration with Dow on the ESII tool do you feel The Nature Conservancy was also able to incorporate the values that are part of its mission? Was it necessary to compromise, and in what ways if so?

15. Do you feel the tool has beneficially impacted projects in ways that would not have been realized without it?

16. What to weigh most heavily at the end of the nature value assessment using, the ESSI tool such may be subjective. Have you been satisfied from your perspective as a member of The Nature Conservancy with the ways in which final project decisions have played out in the use of the ESII tool, once a company has all of the increased information available to make project decisions using the information gained from this tool?

17. Have you continued to increase the utilization of ESII in more locations and with more types of projects? If no, why not? Has there been a trend of the types of companies where
ESII tends to be more successful or have the most influence? How do you work to introduce the utilization of the tool of valuing nature in companies who do not recognize such a value within their culture and are reluctant or resistant to do so, how do you “sell” this tool successfully to promote nature as a value?

Interview questions for Dow:

1. According to my research, stages of collaboration of NGOs with corporations may be identified as philanthropic (more traditional model whereby corporation gives money to NGO), transactional (two way value exchange), and the integrative stage which is still small (but growing) and sees the collaboration combining values, missions and strategies (p. 124 Doh and Yaziji 2009) Which stage would you put the Dow collaboration in?

2. I was able to glean a lot from the most recently offered report on the collaboration from 2017 and 2018 Dow Sustainability report and am wondering about an even more current status of the 2025 nature goal. Were these issues able to be more top of mind and on track after the company’s activities as a result of the merger were more settled in? Are the 2025 goals currently on track? What about the goal 2025 Sustainability Goal: Valuing Nature that indicates by 2020, Dow is to screen all capital and real estate project, business development and new products for potential benefit and impacts.

3. What were some of the criteria that Dow was seeking in a NGO partner? Why was TNC the best partner for this collaboration?

4. Have you continued to increase the utilization of ESII in more locations and with more types of projects? If no, why not? Has there been a trend in the types of projects where ESII tends to be more successful? How do you work to introduce the utilization of the tool of valuing nature in companies who do not recognize such a value within their culture and are reluctant or resistant to do so, how do you “sell” this tool successfully to promote nature as a value? In promoting the tool, are Dow and TNC considered equally successful in bringing on new users? Why would one arm of the collaboration seem more credible than the other?

5. Do you feel there is support, credibility and a positive regard for the initiatives of the TNC/Dow collaboration at high levels of the organization at Dow? Do you feel The Nature Conservancy members are “heard” and receive equal footing within the collaboration group as do its members from Dow? Why or why not?

6. Do you feel that working with some of your corporate partnerships like this one have any elements of the appearance of engaging in “greenwashing”? Why or why not? What are some actions you can suggest to prevent that appearance?
7. From your vantage point at Dow what do you believe is the most difficult aspect of such a cross-sector partnership? What would you say is the most difficult aspect for members from TNC?

8. Overall, is the collaboration with The Nature Conservancy viewed as worth the investment from the company’s perspective? In what ways does Dow sometimes need to compromise in order to work with an organization with a purpose-driven agenda? From your viewpoint, what are some difficult choices TNC had to make in order to be a part of this collaboration? As the corporate entity, what advice would you give to a non-profit who is deciding whether to enter into a similar collaboration with a corporate entity, even if on a smaller scale? What are some issues you believe they should consider that they may not be aware of?

9. According to a New Yorker magazine article regarding TNC in 2012, as of that writing’s most recent EPA data, Dow’s Freeport plant remained the ninth-highest emitter of bromine, the eighth-highest emitter of chlorine, the fifth-highest of cumene, and the sixth-highest of hexachloroethane, which causes cancer in mice. How do you believe some of these realities exist with the TNC collaboration projects in which the goal is to value nature, and can you comment on whether Dow is trying to look at more aspects of their work within the framework of this goal and concept?

10. Regarding the incident from May 2020, when flood waters seeped into containment ponds at the Dow Chemical complex in Midland, MI, setting off concerns that further incursions could send toxic chemicals washing downstream: what is the status of this situation in relation to the collaboration?

11. Would you foresee any changes to the work that has been ongoing between TNC and Dow now that new TNC leadership is in place?

12. Do you agree to allow the use of your name and title in the write-up for the answers to your interview questions in this capstone project?