

In This Together: Building Partnerships for Freshwater Biodiversity

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The Pacific Northwest Research Station is encouraging projects like this that follow the principles of “coproduction” – an approach to research that fosters deeply rewarding partnerships with those who need and use information, so that they can help enhance the accessibility of the work.

Freshwater ecosystems are rich in biodiversity, supporting a third of all vertebrates on the planet. But this richness is at risk. Freshwater biodiversity is declining quickly. Turtles, fish, and amphibians top global lists of threatened and declining species.



Photo credit USDA Forest Service. Whychus Creek in the Deschutes National Forest, Oregon.

[Becky Flitcroft](#) knows that protecting these biologically rich but at-risk habitats requires a flexible approach that incorporates the diverse knowledge and interests of a range of partners. Throughout her career, she has been drawn to integrated, inclusive approaches to studying and managing watersheds, and has a long track record of working with partners. She recently compiled a list of over 70 people she has partnered with on different studies over the years, amounting to 50 different organizations.

“Everything I do is part of a team,” Flitcroft said.

Flitcroft's scientific curiosity and dedication to partnerships led her to co-author a study on [best practices for restoration partnerships](#). "Too often, people think about plantings, riparian improvements, upland habitat, and special places as the essence of practice," the authors found. "For success, practice must also include a social infrastructure that makes possible a vision that incorporates coordinated and collaborative planning for funding, monitoring, and stewardship of individual and watershed-scale projects. A flexible and adaptive social infrastructure is critical for long-term success."

Recently, Flitcroft has been busy addressing a critical information gap for Forest Service planners and land managers in the Pacific Northwest and the South, who need aquatic biodiversity data so that they can revise forest plans and identify emerging threats to native species.

"I have been working for years with Forest Service natural resources staff in the regional office, getting input on what they want to see from research," she said. "The result is that we created a dashboard of native and endangered aquatic-dependent species, from the ecoregion level down to the national forest level. It was developed through collaboration with regional and district level folks so that we could really understand their information needs."

The [dashboard](#) allows users to download data to compare watershed-scale aquatic biodiversity (and species lists) within their forest to other forests. Users can also create range maps of endangered aquatic species with the contiguous United States.

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Flitcroft's research normally focuses on fish. But she broadened her scope to biodiversity for this project because that was what partners needed. "There was no comprehensive dataset," she said. "This national biodiversity project was a natural connection with what national forest managers are interested in."

Providing data and information that was previously unavailable clearly helps fulfill a need. But Flitcroft's relationship-building skills and dedication to partnerships are also key to the positive outcomes of this project. As she found in her own study of restoration best practices, when scientists engage as equal partners rather than authority figures, it increases the chances for success.