



NATIONAL WILDERNESS
STEWARDSHIP
ALLIANCE

How to Start a Stewardship Group

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About The National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance

The mission of the National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance is to develop a growing network of volunteer-based organizations to provide stewardship for America's enduring resource of wilderness.

Our vision is to see each wilderness area within the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) adopted by a wilderness stewardship organization dedicated to protect and nurture the area's wilderness. We envision effective partnerships between community-based, non-profit wilderness stewardship organizations and all government agencies charged with the management of our national wilderness areas.

NWSA works to improve wilderness stewardship and create an allied constituency for wilderness by connecting stewardship organizations with each other, linking our efforts and experiences, directing groups to resources, and fostering new organizations.

Several of our objectives relate to your efforts to revitalize your group:

- Share knowledge, experience and expertise
- Provide new groups with start-up models of different structures, help them anticipate the questions that typically arise as groups form, and connect them with people who have built successful organizations, Sometimes helping a new group can breathe new life into an established one.
- Sponsor national and regional gatherings of stewardship groups.

If we aren't involved already, please ask us for help! We can offer some direct resources. But more important, we can put you in touch with local volunteer stewards in your area and across the country — volunteers like yourself, but who have already walked this trail and know the way.

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Introduction

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” -- Margaret Mead

This guide is written for people who plan to start a volunteer-based, boots-on-the-ground stewardship organization. You can use it as a guide for a quick-start workshop, or as a step-by-step manual.

Groups start with a core of interested potential volunteers, or with agency staff who would like to see a stewardship group form, or (much the best) agency staff and volunteers who share a vision. Every start-up is unique — No two begin from the same conditions, so this is not a "group in a can" approach. But every new group needs to address all these areas, in a way that fits their local situation.

Starting a new group is easier than it looks. There are a lot of steps, a lot to do. But it isn't that hard if you just take the first steps and then keep walking. And you have friends and allies across the country.

This guide offers five big Steps to Stewardship, each with many smaller steps:

Sketch in Your Goals

Briefly Identify Your Partners

Build Your Starting Organization

Move from Steering Committee to Formal Organization

Move to Maturity.

We've organized the steps to form a new group sequentially. There are some necessary sequences — this has to happen before that. But most groups feel like "It all has to happen at once" or "No matter how we try to control it, the next need drives our next action." It does often feel that way. The good news is, if your team divides the effort, working together, but each on clearly defined individual parts, it feels less like riding out an avalanche, and you may well get done quicker!

Sketch in Your Goals

Why do you want to form an organization? What's the need?

What do you hope to accomplish? Roughly identify the scope of your goals – “create volunteer stewardship opportunities to serve the XYZ Wilderness, educate the public about the need to protect XYZ Wilderness, etc.” What areas do you plan to work in? What kinds of work do you imagine you'll do?

Briefly Identify Your Partners

Who will be the players as you start work? You can't have too many partners. Who are yours? Every new organization has starters. Who are the starters here, and where do they come from? Agency? Community? Both?

ID Core Volunteers.

Who are you? One person? A handful? Start there and build! Is there an obvious existing organization that can provide guiding structure (such as an advocacy group that worked to obtain wilderness status)?

ID Your Agency Partners.

Identify agency employees who currently manage XYZ Wilderness. Do you know them? If not, who can introduce you? Can you already identify your likely key contact person?

ID Other Supporters.

Have you asked NWSA for support? Do you know of local or regional volunteer steward groups near you that can mentor, offer advice, etc.? Is the agency currently supervising volunteers? Is there some other volunteer group already involved? Are there known “citizen stewards” (people who are working on trails, or on behalf of XYZ Wilderness on their own)?

Build Your Starting Organization

Here's a big picture to start with: The River Network, one of the great national stewardship organizations, identifies four key elements to build a strong group:

- A compelling, exciting action plan.
- A strong fundraising plan
- A strategy for recruiting and retaining volunteers
- A carefully thought-out public relations campaign.

Enlist Stewardship Mentors

Others have been down this same trail. Ask them to come along with you every step of the way. NWSA, nearby stewardship groups, groups with similar functions — who can team with you?

Form a steering committee

Start formalizing a structure of key players. People most passionate about volunteer stewardship are good steering committee candidates. A steering committee is an informal group -- workers. At some point you need a formal Board, but that can wait.

Right now, you need at least one person who

- has experience getting people and tasks organized
- has good contact with local media
- maintains rich contacts at many levels in your community
- is familiar with the wilderness area(s) you want to support
- is highly motivated to help conserve them (Everyone on the steering committee!)

Chris Brown, a guiding star as NWSA formed, says: "You need two to three people who wake up each morning thinking about your organization. How are we doing? What next?"

Divide up tasks. Build some informal teams. Count up the tasks and divide by three people. Now divide the same list by nine people. Which sounds more doable? Who is taking on too much? Who else should step up?

Connect with the Agency Which Manages Your Wilderness

Every designated wilderness area in the US is part of the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). Four federal agencies are charged to manage our wilderness areas. Every designated wilderness is managed by one or more of those agencies. Be clear from the start: It's your wilderness. If wilderness can be owned, then it is in the joint ownership of every US citizen. But your agency has been given the charge to manage it, not you. We all "own" it. Your agency manages it. So right at the start, start talking: What work does the agency want to see done? How do they see volunteers in general and your group in particular fitting into their job? How can you work together?

Are you an agency person looking to see a group started? If it's helpful, NWSA can put you in touch with people in your agency who have worked successfully with volunteer organizations. We speak in this guide to potential volunteers. But we hope it's generally easy to see how you can work the same tasks from the agency side. But please do ask for help from staff who have been down this trail: How you start your relationship to volunteers can give you much better — or worse — chances of success.

You must work cooperatively with the agency charged to manage the wilderness area(s) you intend to steward.

You must

Work cooperatively

With the agency.

Some NWSA organizations started their relationship with "their" agency via lawsuits, and slowly grew to work together. On the other hand, some formed explicitly to support their local agency branch. But your relationship with your agency has to be or become cooperative and trusting. It will have its ups and downs, like any good relationship. But without a decent relationship, you will fail, the agency will fail, and wilderness will suffer.

Did the initiative to form start from the agency? That doesn't mean you are their employees! You are, or will work to become, a partner — cooperative, but an independent entity. Did the initiative come from local citizens? That doesn't mean you get to tell the agency what to do. We work together or it doesn't work.

Start that good relationship now. Involve the agency charged to manage your wilderness from the start. Ask them to come to your meetings. Keep them up to date on your ideas, and listen to their opinions. We'll all protect wilderness better if we always remember "We're on the same side." And we'll all do a better job with a truly balanced partnership.

There are some tough questions to ask, and it will be hard to ask them and get clear answers before there is some trust.

- * Is the agency ready to accept your help?
- * Are you confident that your group does not have any hidden agendas that may conflict with agency policy or procedures?
- * Are you confident you can reach mutual agreement as to what the new group will do and how it will be organized?
- * How will you work with the agency manager to decide on what such a group will do and how it will be organized?

To paraphrase JFK: Ask not what your agency can do for you. Ask what you can do for your agency.

Work really hard at this one: Ask for a single go-to contact at your local level — a liaison — *your* liaison.

Right now, all the federal agencies of the NWPS are strapped for operating funds. They need our help more than ever. But we aren't there to help cash-strapped agencies. We are there because this wilderness is ours. It's our responsibility and our legacy to our grandkids' grandkids.

Decide on a Name

Your name defines you in a few words. Look at the list of NWSA members. What do you like / dislike? What have groups aimed for with their names? Review web domains and do Google searches before you pick your name.

Join the National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance

We offer a lot for a little. One of our most basic decisions when we started up was to make partner membership just as inexpensive as we possibly could. Your membership benefits us, no matter how small you are now. And we benefit you — our membership includes many groups, many individuals whose combined expertise is quite simply unsurpassed. We have the ears of all the agencies, and can help you work better with them. We have connections to critical NGOs from national to regional levels. Our conference offers networking beyond belief — ask anyone who has been at one!

NWSA will help you build from the first glimmer. But as soon as you have a name, sign up!

Draft Mission and Case Statements

Someone will ask you, "What's the difference Why both?" Good questions.

Someone may say you don't really need them. True in a way; they aren't legal requirements. But everything you do will depend on a clear vision, on language that can tell others what you are up to, and what you've done so far.

The River Network says "Your mission statement is your organization's reason for existing; it is the single, consistent message that you... will use to gather public support and attract funders."

Your mission statement is a short paragraph at most. You can explain it to someone while you slip on your pack at the trailhead.

"The mission of the National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance is to develop a growing network of volunteer-based organizations to provide stewardship for America's enduring resource of wilderness."

"The mission of the Poudre Wilderness Volunteers (PWV) is to assist the Canyon Lakes Ranger District of the United States Forest Service in managing and protecting wilderness and backcountry areas within its jurisdiction."

"The mission of the SBFC is to connect citizens and communities to assist in the stewardship of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, and surrounding wildlands."

Take your time, keep discussing and tweaking, go with drafts, work back and forth between a committee and the board...

Keep your Mission Statement short, but use it to imagine and shape your organization's future. What will you do? What services will you provide? How will you protect your wilderness? How will you fulfill the mission? What kind of volunteers will be recruited and what will they be asked to do; what training will they require; what kind of support will they need from the organization and the agency? It would be wise to consult with agency managers as the mission statement is developed to assure that it reflects the needs of the areas to be supported and establishes a framework for harmonious cooperation between the agency and the organization.

Your Case Statement makes the case for who you are and what you do. What are your immediate goals? What have you done so far? Who is on your Board? Who is supporting you? Your Case Statement, handsomely formatted, will eventually fill one or two sides of a sheet of paper.

You could say your mission while you slipped on your pack at the trailhead, but your case statement would take up several minutes as you started up the trail.

Your hope is to write a Mission Statement broad enough that it will hold up across your organization's life. Your Case Statement will guide you, but it isn't written in stone — it will be guided and reshaped as you gradually figure out who you are and what you do. You'll revise it for each year's annual reports.

Brainstorm Strategies / Dream

Time now to take a break and refocus. Have you been meeting in a conference room, or a school room — someplace institutional? Move for one session to a home, a restaurant, a park. Stretch a bit and kick around some big questions you'll need to answer now.

How will you solicit volunteers?

Do you want to be agency volunteers or independent? Can you be agency volunteers? What is the current relationship with the agency?

Who will be your funding sources?

Who does your group need on your first Board?

Are there local volunteer groups that might not be wilderness focused, but may be supportive if you invite them in?

Who is the team who will get the work done?

Prioritize, because you will want to do more than you are able to.

Move from Steering Committee to Formal Organization

"Create a Board of Directors" or "Draft Bylaws" first? The two go around together. We'd suggest you create a Board, set to work simultaneously on Bylaws, and don't elect Officers until your Bylaws are ready to say what officers you'll need.

Create a Board of Directors

Ideally, you want six to a dozen people to serve as a founding Board of Directors. If your community is small, you may need to begin with fewer. But be mindful that there is a lot of time-consuming work to be done to build a strong foundation for the organization. Ideally, the new board will include persons who have managerial experience, have a substantial network of

contacts in the local community, know how to organize volunteer training, and are adept at using all appropriate forms of media to attract members and contributors.

Who will build the Board? How will you select? How will you describe the job? How will you ask for commitment?

The first two motions made by the Board:

"We resolve to have fun."

"We resolve to cooperate, even when we differ."

Raise Start-up Money

How much do you need to get underway? \$1,000? Will Board members donate, or will you go to the wider community? How will you manage and keep track of your start-up money informally until you have a bank account and a Treasurer?

Settle Your Basic Organizational Structure

Will you be a board-driven organization, with Board members doing most of the work required to operate? Will committee chairs be on the Board? How will you recruit member volunteers to help out?

Will you be all volunteer, or do you aim for paid staff? Will anyone in the organization be paid for any organization activity? (If so, you'll need your Conflict of Interest policy in place.)

Do you have "Members" or "Volunteers," or both? Will there be a membership fee? What are the expectations of member / volunteers? Will all volunteers be expected to provide boots-on-the-ground service to wilderness? Will you have volunteers who patrol with stock? How will you identify yourselves to visitors? Shirts? Hats? Insignia?

Draft Bylaws

Make this one easy. Don't reinvent the wheel. Find someone's bylaws, in electronic form, which pretty much work for you. Replace their name with yours. Say "I bet these will work fine with no changes." Only then, make whatever changes you feel you absolutely have to make now. Bylaws can be changed as you go along — a quick vote and you can modify, delete, or add.

Draft Articles of Incorporation

This one sounds like a big deal, but it's usually easy. Incorporation is a state-level function. Does your state have a website where you can incorporate? In most states, this is a rather simple task. Instructions can usually be found on the web, probably at the Secretary of State's website. There is usually an incorporation fee payable to the state.

Open a bank account

Wait until your incorporation is approved. You'll have a Treasurer, and hopefully someone has some simple record keeping software, like QuickBooks.

Set Up Needed Committees

While you are researching other groups' bylaws, keep an eye out for committee structures. But start with only the essential committees, and add them as you grow and see the real need.

One essential: However you structure other officers in your bylaws, you will have a Treasurer. Legally, and for your Treasurer's protection, you need a committee which exercises oversight of your financial accounts, The whole Board can do it for starters, but that's inefficient, and a nuisance.

Other committees to consider — if they are truly needed: Fundraising, Board Nominations, Policy, Membership, Training, Website, Newsletter, Programs, Social...

Design a logo / Establish your Identity

Your logo doesn't have to take shape right away. Many groups find they'd like to settle into themselves a bit, feel out who they really are going to be, then think about the visual expression of that identity.

Do you have a designer or an artist in your group? Someone in marketing? Can they speak to each other without fisticuffs? That's only partly a joke. Artistically, your logo needs to look good. But it also needs to express your mission. We're happy with our NWSA logo — check it out on our website. Don't ask how many hours, how many emails, how many sketches it took to get to it! Final design of our logo was done through a crowdsourcing website — good work at a good price.

Investigate Liability Coverage

Your individual Volunteer Agreements with your agency will protect your individual volunteers in many situations. But most organizations also investigate liability coverage for their Board, other managers, and their volunteers above and beyond agency coverage.

Get Structures Set Up for Your Volunteers

Who manages volunteers? The Board? A committee? Where does your authority and the authority of your partner agency divide?

How will you attract and screen your volunteers? What expectations will you have of your volunteers? Training requirements? Patrol expectations?

You will certainly need individual volunteer agreements signed with your agency. The agency will have a standard form.

How will you train your volunteers? Will you teach LNT to visitors? Use the Authority of the Resource technique?

How will you schedule volunteers and get them to the right places at the right times? How will you keep records to document your organization's in-kind contribution to wilderness and to your agency, to show funders, and to support your agency?

Develop ways to recognize and reward your volunteers. Never underrate the importance of this! We're all volunteers, and we work for praise, recognition, and comradeship. Many of us have silly little tokens we received decades ago, that we look at once a year and smile and recommit. We're here mostly because of our love of wilderness and our passion to protect it. But an annual party sure helps!

Get Out There!

You, the organization's starters, and all the people who want to join with you, will be motivated and sustained better, the sooner you get to work. Start small: Find a project you can tackle now! Start simple: Don't go for something that needs long training or complex certification, just go out and greet some visitors and practice telling them who you are!

You don't have to get to the bottom of this manual before you start to steward your wilderness — far from it! You'll need to coordinate with your agency, but many will agree that you can get your boots on the ground as soon as:

- * There is a defined organization: Board and Bylaws, maybe incorporation.
- * Your local agency administrator is comfortable with your training.
- * There are individually signed volunteer agreements for everyone who goes out.
- * You have some sort of insignia or uniform that satisfies your local agency administrator.

Move to Maturity

Obtain 501(c)(3) Status

This establishes an aura of permanence important for recruiting volunteers and raising operating funds. Assign to someone with legal, accounting or management experience, who also has an

ability to write, the task of preparing the submission to the Internal Revenue Service for tax-exempt status (commonly known as 501(c)(3) but might actually be granted under another IRS code section). Again, templates are available on the web, including the submission NWSA made to the IRS, which was successful in getting us our tax-free status. This is more complicated than it once was and requires much more preparation than the Articles of Incorporation or Bylaws. There is also a substantial fee that needs to be paid to the IRS with the submission.

Establish Sound Fiscal Management

Start building checks/balances early to avoid problems. Who handles the money and what steps are taken to assure money is handled properly?

Launch a Fundraising Campaign

Adjust the campaign to the size of your community. Informally, this campaign should start at the very beginning of formation — word of mouth pays. Get out some lead-up articles, ways to keep people aware of your progress through the steps of formation. You've been raising support and funding from day one. But now that you have your charitable organization status, and can receive donations directly, start formally to build your financial future.

You can't have too much positive publicity. Use the new media (Facebook, website...) Use the old media (coffee with friends, presentations to community organizations, local newspaper and TV...)

Launch a Membership Campaign

In the same way that you've built funding support from the very start, you've been building membership. But now is a good time to go to the public as strongly as you can.

Formalize your relationship with your agency partner

You've been working on your informal relationship with your agency since the very start. Those informal relationships are what matter most. But build a formal relationship as well. Develop MOUs and apply for Challenge Cost-Share agreements.

Get Out There and Have Fun!

The structures are in place, and it's time to step up the pace. There's a lot of work to be done, and getting at it will build your credibility with the agency, increase your membership, inspire your funders to dig deeper, and — sustain you! Paul Spitler of the Wilderness Society had some wise advice at NWSA's first meeting, when we decided to come into existence. He warned that setting up an organization, building a strong, sustainable structure, takes so much of your early effort that it's easy to lose sight of your purpose. Your goal isn't to make an organization. Your goal is to steward wilderness! You've created something great. It will continue to need your mothering. But put what you built to work now — for your grandkids' grandkids.

Acknowledgements

Jarome Wilson of the San Geronio Wilderness Association provided the overall outline and much of the content for this Guide. Jarome said:

Here is a **very** rough outline I would suggest. SGWA was already a well-established volunteer organization when I joined, so many of these suggestions are from stories I've heard around the campfire and things I've read. We were a spin-off of Defenders of the San Geronio Wilderness - the advocacy group that fought to include San Geronio in the original 1964 Act.

Chuck Bell of Poudre Wilderness Volunteers contributed much of the specific text and detail here. His full exposition, "How to Start a Wilderness Stewardship Organization," provides a detailed narrative of one organization's birth, critical decisions, and growth.

Thanks also to *Starting Up: A handbook for new river and watershed organizations* of The River Network

Additional Resources

The National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance website has a number of resources for stewardship groups. Visit us at: www.wildernessalliance.org

Developing Successful Wilderness Stewardship Partnerships, research by Heather Day. She interviewed thirty Wilderness stewardship nonprofit and Agency staff and synthesizes the responses into three keys to successful partnerships.

<http://www.wildernessalliance.org/toolkit/working-with-agencies/142-developing-successful-wilderness-stewardship-partnerships>