What a very unlikely relationship taught me about finding common ground

Maurice Williamson, a consulting forester, pictured here, "knew and cursed my name in the 1980s," Mitch Friedman writes in "Conservation Confidential." Eventually, the two found a way to work together and earn each other's... (Bobby Whitaker)

By Mitch Friedman
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Following is an excerpt from the book "Conservation Confidential: A Wild Path to a Less Polarizing and More Effective Activism" (Latah Books, 2025) by Mitch Friedman. In the memoir, Friedman recounts his journey from Earth First! activist to founder of the Seattle-based Conservation Northwest, where he is executive director. In this chapter, he describes how he found common ground with a skeptical member of the timber community.
This is part of our ongoing Between Us series, examining the factors that contribute to polarization and prevent good governance, good citizenship and good relationships — and presenting solutions.

Maurice Williamson was a crusty old codger, and he wouldn't have minded me saying so. He passed away in March of 2024 in Colville, Washington, where he had raised his family during a career as a consulting forester. Colville is the largest small city in northeastern Washington, ninety minutes northwest of Spokane. That part of the state aligns more with the conservative politics of Idaho than with western Washington, and Maurice was proud to fit in. He knew and cursed my name in the 1980s. When I was organizing protests and dishing out provocative and polarizing soundbites, Maurice was advising private parties— from families with a few acres to corporate timber barons — on logging practices. He wasn't on my radar until 2004.

Our worlds converged in the Northeast Washington Forest Coalition, or NEWFC. When CNW began working in the area, this collaborative had just been established to explore and actualize new common ground between timber and conservation interests in the Colville National Forest, which spans much of northeast Washington. This common ground was unique in occurring at the scales of both the forest stand and the larger landscape. Northeast Washington is a mix of dry lowlands with ponderosa pine forests that require frequent fire to remove competing undergrowth, and higher elevations with wetter mixed-conifer forests. There was broad agreement by this time that dry forests of northeast Washington, like those across the interior West, needed careful active management. Such management often includes removing small trees and using fire to clean up the brush, seedlings, and twigs, restoring a structure of fewer large pine trees with lots of space and not much fuel underneath. Dry forests have suffered badly from a century of mismanagement in which managers cut down the big trees and left behind small ones while also suppressing wildfire. The resulting crowded stands of smaller trees are subject to water stress, disease, and uncharacteristically hot and large fires, especially in today's warmer climate. These are among the reasons why Indians set fire to these forests for the past ten thousand years, as I will discuss in detail later.

Fortunately, today we have technology to produce wood products from small trees, allowing logging to focus on removing those but leaving the bigger ones. Over time, with help from low-intensity fire (natural or managed) every few years, this can restore dry forests toward pre-colonial conditions of ecological health. It's harder than it may seem, as roads built for logging access can impact wildlife and especially the condition of streams and fish. Logging that is too aggressive or not followed with controlled fire can perpetuate the fuel problems that elevate wildfire risk. Some of Washington's worst recent wildfires burned heavily through private and tribal industrial timberland, which is consistent with findings from research. Sage-steppe grassland ecosystems are also burning heavily of late, highlighting the warmer and drier climate. Careful logging and cattle grazing (if focused on seasonal consumption of invasive cheatgrass) can improve the situation, while poor practices worsen it. Lastly, homes now pockmark the woods, constraining the use of fire as a management tool. We will never be able to resume the carefree Indian practice of letting fires rip, though we should get as close to that as is practical.

At the landscape level, higher elevations in the mountain ranges of northeast Washington are largely roadless and therefore protected from roadbuilding and most

logging under the Roadless Area Protection Policy adopted by President Clinton at the end of his second term. But unlike western Washington, with its three large national parks and millions of acres of designated wilderness, eastern Washington has very little permanently protected land. The founders of NEWFC all agreed with a general principle offered by Duane Vaagen, the second-generation leader of a family-owned Colville-based timber company: Roughly a third of the Colville National Forest should be managed in each of these conditions: (1) protected as wild, (2) actively restored to healthy forests to be maintained by fire rather than logging, and (3) actively and indefinitely managed for timber production using excellent forestry. NEWFC continues to collaboratively pursue a version of this formula today, with CNW staff still fully engaged.

Back to Maurice, who engaged deeply in NEWFC for the many years that his health and vitality allowed. He was at first openly disdainful and skeptical of my staff and our agenda. He had his perceptions about me and perhaps conservationists in general, informed by painful experiences of the ’80s and ’90s. The direction I give staff in these collaborations is to engage honorably. We rely on applying the best available science to negotiate and implement the best practices. In instances where science is unclear, we are transparent about that and try to learn together by both engaging experts and trying small-scale field experiments. Our strictest rule is to *never move the goalposts*. We are to negotiate aggressively using our best arguments and tactics, but then stand by whatever agreement is struck. Behaving honorably builds trust and reciprocation.

Special interests often shift their goalposts. Once one concession is won, they demand a new one. Politicians do it, as do business interests. None pains me more than watching peer conservation groups do so. Groups will sue to block a shift in legal status for a rebounded species, to apply a new rule to an old plan, or to force another question to be answered within the tome of an environmental study. Biological arguments can always be found, often with much legitimacy. But there is a cost. Our leverage stems from the support of the public and respect of partners. If we don’t stand by our agreements, why would anyone spend effort to dialogue with and accommodate us?

Maurice had to see it to believe it. Like my staff, Maurice negotiated hard, representing his views and knowledge from a life dedicated to his profession. It did not surprise him that we would, for instance, push for protection of big trees and streamside buffers, citing scientific research. He would gruffly push back, citing contrary research and experience. That is how the work is done, by arguing, listening, and reaching accommodation. The poison was that Maurice assumed we would look for ways to later exit or modify those accommodations when it suited us. When he instead observed my staff, most notably the diligent and earnest David Heflick, sadly now deceased, honorably standing by agreements, his posture changed.

There was a particular day when Maurice smiled and pulled out a bottle of whiskey, probably Old Crow, his favorite brand. We had won his respect. Over time, he became a friend, each of us enduring playful insults from the other.

The NEWFC collaboration fostered a period of great productivity in the Colville National Forest. The forest had excellent leadership who appreciated the cues the collaborative sent regarding what projects were of greatest benefit and least concern, and also which did not measure up and needed specific modification. Working together to produce only projects featuring excellent forestry for restorative objectives, the forest moved from a national laggard to a national leader in timber output. Almost twenty years on now, we have seen good days and bad, opportunities and challenges. The secret sauce of collaboration is quality relationships built on trust. Not just among the collaborative group, but also with public agency leaders. The Forest Service has a policy of shifting its leaders around the country, which imposes turnover and disruption in those relationships. There are also internal incentives within the agency that create headwinds, such as performance reviews that reward personnel for hitting timber targets instead of ecological ones. On the whole, collaboration requires hard work, patience, and persistence. Its greatest allure is that it stands in contrast to the polarizing alternative.

Like my relationship with collaboration as a tactic, my one with Maurice was a long journey. Looking back, I would not change a thing about it. While we succeeded in finding common ground and getting a lot done together, we didn't change Maurice's core values, and he didn't change mine. The last time I saw him, he was watching a rant on a conservative news channel. He called it "the truth." Still, the benefits of that relationship and others like it include thousands of acres of forests that have been restored toward a more natural and ecologically healthy condition. They also include less political polarization, as we now better understand and appreciate one another and speak up in our communities to counter caricatures now referred to as "othering of out-groups." We also learn from one another.

Mark Twain said, "It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so." We live in a complex world that doesn't always fit into our mental models. The best elixir is a strong dose of other viewpoints, especially those formed through careful study and long experience. I value what I've heard from foresters, ranchers, farmers, hunters, and Indians. I often learn from their viewpoints irrespective of whether I agree with them. It gives me a more complete view of the world and a healthy skepticism of any doctrine, including whatever I'm supposed to believe as an urban liberal environmentalist.

Being educated as a scientist, I believe passionately in the scientific method for its deliberate, controlled search for truth. Modern life would not be possible without what society has learned this way. But the universe hides its truths from even our best queries. For instance, medical science has the benefit that its studies can involve millions of human subjects whose behavior can be somewhat controlled. Yet we now find that even in many of the best epidemiological studies, the results cannot be replicated in subsequent research. The decongestant drug phenylephrine, for example, is now considered ineffective after years of being widely used. If medical science, with all its money and motivation, is still in early days, consider how much more there is to learn about forest ecology and management. We seem to know enough to confidently

say, as I did above, that in dry forests we need to protect and reestablish big old trees while reintroducing fire and, where necessary, removing (by chainsaw) small trees to restore more fire-resilient stands. But some forests are drier than others. On north-facing slopes and middle elevations, the forests are of mixed types that confound simple or confident prescriptions. Restoring a whole landscape of drier forest types involves deliberately returning it to a mosaic of forest ages and openings so that the habitat is varied and wildfire is less likely to blow up to megafire proportions. The challenge and complexity of that undertaking is massive. It is hard enough to get predictable returns in a backyard veggie garden, so of course we must be humble about what we think and do over millions of acres of forest knocked off-kilter by fire exclusion and reckless logging. The open and trusting relationships with Maurice and others at the NEWFC table allow for modest trial-and-error learning to advance on this monumental challenge together. Some of the projects that we at NEWFC have agreed to are opposed and even litigated by other conservation groups. In general, they are more rigid in what they think science indicates, more polar in their views of interests embodied in the collaborative, and less trusting of the Forest Service. Some of their arguments have merit in isolation; others I think are misinformed. But on the whole, I see them as shortsighted, as I will explain in due course.

The success of forest collaboratives like NEWFC in opening dialogue, building trust, and advancing restoration projects caused them to spread rapidly across the western U.S., with mixed results.

As challenging as the landscape ecology of dry forests is, there at least was a body of science in place to build from. There was less clarity on how to move forward on the wetter west side of the region. Our national forests contain hundreds of thousands of acres of forest regrown after clearcut logging up through the 1980s. Research supports thinning these stands to accelerate growth of the remaining trees and expedite stands attaining old-growth characteristics. Research was also clear that we could help fish through measures like removing some roads and stabilizing stream banks. But little attention had been given to how to prioritize work for the greatest return on investment.

In 2014, Jen Watkins saw this need and stepped forward.

Jen and Dave Werntz invited leading ecologists and foresters from the U.S. Forest Service, Washington Department of Natural Resources, University of Washington, and elsewhere. This group, which included Jerry Franklin, the luminary forest ecologist who led the design of the Northwest Forest Plan, met until they produced a protocol for restoring westside forest landscapes. The Forest Service has since applied this protocol to a large and exceptional restoration project just northwest of Mount Rainier.
The lessons we are learning from this project can be applied across the wet forests of the Northwest, improving forest habitat and watersheds while providing wood products and jobs for struggling rural communities.

The skills, trust, and reputation gained from our collaborative work on federal lands in southwest and northeast Washington led to another opportunity. In 2006, I got a call

from Doug Sutherland, the Republican who was then serving as Washington's Commissioner of Public Lands. He asked if I would serve on a panel of stakeholders to resolve a decade of controversy regarding the forests of Blanchard Mountain. This is a treasured state forest in northwest Washington, where the Cascade Mountains meet the waters of Puget Sound. I signed up.

The forests of Blanchard Mountain are not old-growth, but they are ecologically significant and prized for recreation, being just off Interstate 5 only twenty minutes from Bellingham and an hour from Seattle. The forest had been logged heavily in the early twentieth century, like almost all privately owned forest in the lowlands of western Washington. The land reverted to the county when its owners cut and run, leaving taxes unpaid. The state later agreed to take over reforesting and managing such lands for the benefit of counties. Eight decades on, the now stately forest was wrapped with tranquil trails leading to high points offering stunning views of Puget Sound and the San Juan Islands. Summer weekends find these trails crowded with hikers, equestrians, and mountain bikers. In the late '90s, the Department of Natural Resources kicked a hornet's nest by proposing clearcuts within the heart of Blanchard Mountain. We launched grassroots resistance, with CNW's Lisa McShane catalyzing formation of a local group, Friends of Blanchard Mountain. A political stalemate ensued that lasted several years, leading to that call from Commissioner Sutherland.

The result was the Blanchard Forest Strategies Group. It had a dozen seats filled by leaders from conservation, recreation, timber industry, Skagit County, and the school district that received revenue from the logging of those lands. The sides were clear, with the environmental caucus wanting all old forest protected, and the timber and revenue interests dug in otherwise. We met monthly for well over a year. It was far into that process before we found enough common ground on which to reach agreement. The breakthrough came when we realized that all parties wanted to prevent encroaching residential development from reducing the private timberland that provides logs, jobs, and better habitat for salmon and wildlife than do houses and paved streets.

With that common interest as lubricant, we narrowly reached consensus on a plan to protect from logging about sixteen hundred acres that included most of the older forest on the mountain. We were to jointly request funding from the legislature to compensate the county and school district for the value of the forest, plus additional funds representing the value of the land on which the forest stood. The DNR was to use the latter to purchase private timberland at risk of residential development and manage it perpetually in forestry.

The agreement moved forward with key legislators on board. Some activists felt the agreement should have protected more acreage or even the entirety of state forest around the mountain, most of the remainder of which was plantations of second- (or third) growth. They sued to block it. CNW intervened on the side of the state, honoring our commitment. The court eventually ruled against the lawsuit, but the uncertainty it caused limited how much funding the legislature would commit during the interim. Then the economy crashed. It would be almost a decade before the full amount was

committed and we could finally celebrate the protected land. During the intervening decade, I organized email campaigns and annual trips to Olympia to lobby for the funds. Those lobby days included the timber leaders and other stakeholders from the Blanchard Forest Strategies Group, all standing by our agreement. All told, the twenty-year effort saved sixteen hundred acres of this scenic, ecological, and recreational gem at a total cost of twelve million dollars.

Might we have done better had we refused to collaborate? Maybe. Maybe not. I am comfortable with, and proud of, the choice I made and its results. But it did get intense. There were heated debates over email listservs on the science and strategic implications of thinning westside plantations. This was fine and appropriate. But a line was crossed in 2007, still the early days of collaboration for forest restoration, when a hardline group leveled a harsh accusation at CNW. They compared our work to the Vichy Regime of France, which collaborated with Nazi Germany. If that comparison were to hold, it would mean that CNW was aiding and abetting the forces of destruction of nature, such as companies that profit by harming public forests. I could not help but give this thoughtful consideration, especially since the organization was one that I had previously allied with and even served on the board of. I then replied with a lengthy letter to the leadership of that group, in which I wrote:

“Can the timber industry be seen as an occupying force on our public land when the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest has sustained logging levels less than ten percent of historic highs for about two decades? A better analogy might be to France *after* liberation, when Winston Churchill himself proposed that reconstruction of Europe needed to start with French-German collaboration.”

I stand by that comparison. I ended that 2007 letter with the following lines. It troubles me how relevant these words remain almost twenty years on:

“Our conservation movement faces a curious paradox. Due to climate change, the prospect of utter ecological disaster has never been more urgent, and cause for general despair never more real. Yet we find greater public and political support—at least here in our state—than perhaps ever before. I believe we can make great gains if we, like Churchill did, build our efforts around a spirit that combines realism, shared sacrifice, and hope. We may see protection of what we value if we promote solutions that build support and momentum, rather than ideals that rally a base but ultimately turn away Americans who have grown weary of polarization.”

I have come to be a bit humble about what I think we know, even from science. Listening with respect to people who have other views, informed by their experience and observation, is worthwhile. Collaboration fosters that opportunity. If nothing else, we can make one another laugh like Maurice and I did.

Mitch Friedman: is the founder and executive director of Conservation Northwest, which works on behalf of wildlife and wild lands in Washington and British Columbia. He holds a zoology degree from the University of Washington and lives in Seattle.