Assessment of a Regional Community and Conservation Collaborative: The AP3C

by

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Abstract

The Albemarle-Pamlico region of North Carolina has a unique environmental and social history with vast natural resources. In 2006, several conservation and community groups formed the Albemarle-Pamlico Conservation and Communities Collaborative (AP3C) to protect the region’s natural resources while providing economic opportunities. Since its formation, the group has struggled to create an organizational structure and many members are dissatisfied with its lack of progress. Using individual interviews, this report identifies strengths of the group and region the AP3C can use to achieve its vision, challenges the group must address, and a common vision of the Albemarle-Pamlico region and of the AP3C. From this information, I identified three strategic questions for the steering committee to undertake: 1. What is the AP3C’s mission? 2. Who should be on the Steering Committee? 3. How can the AP3C market itself to potential participants, stakeholders, and members? I recommend using a consensus-based approach to answer these questions.
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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to identify the challenges facing the Albemarle-Pamlico Conservation and Communities Collaborative (AP3C) and give recommendations to improve the organization’s structure and strategy. The AP3C, formed in 2006, is a collaboration of conservation and community groups that are working together to bring economic development to the Albemarle-Pamlico region while conserving the area’s natural resources. There is currently a steering committee composed of both conservation and community groups, with more representation from conservation organizations. Conservation groups include the National Audubon Society, The Conservation Fund, and Environmental Defense Fund. Community representatives include the Black Family Land Trust, the mayor of Plymouth, and an individual hog farmer. Besides the core group of involved individuals and organizations represented on the steering committee, the group has engaged a broader base of conservation and community organizations through four large meetings and a series public listening sessions conducted in 2008. However, the AP3C has been meeting for several years and has struggled to gain momentum. This report identifies group and regional strengths the AP3C can leverage to achieve its vision, challenges the group must tackle, and a common vision of the Albemarle-Pamlico region and of the AP3C.

I completed foundational aspects of a strategic planning process: a SWOT Analysis, Visioning, and identifying strategic questions. The SWOT, or Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats, Analysis, surveys the internal and external environmental
factors that may contribute to or hinder the AP3C’s success in reaching its goals. The Visioning combines vision statements made by steering committee members to identify their common goals. The first two analyses informed the identification of strategic questions that I recommend the steering committee undertake. These products, in conjunction with the steering committee’s own activities, such as the organizational history created by Dannette Sharpley and Chris Canfield in August 2009, lay the path for the AP3C to act more strategically. To provide the context of the AP3C, I next describe the Albemarle-Pamlico region’s and the AP3C’s history.

**Albemarle-Pamlico Region**

The Albemarle-Pamlico (A-P) region is unique both socially and environmentally. The A-P region, as it pertains to the AP3C is vast, encompassing many different ecosystems. The area includes the low hills of the Piedmont, stretches of the Coastal Plain, and the thin islands of the Outer Banks. These different ecosystems total to a drainage area of 30,000 square miles, including over 9,000 miles of rivers and streams (Study 1994). The water is drained into the Albemarle, Pamlico and 5 other sounds, creating the largest estuarine system on the East Coast of the United States, second only to the Chesapeake Bay (Korfmacher 2002). The diverse ecosystems support a wide range of wildlife. The Albemarle-Pamlico region is home to 9 of North Carolina’s 10 National Wildlife Refuges. Another environmental distinction it holds is belonging to the National Estuary Program. It was among the first estuaries to be nationally recognized for its unique ecosystem through EPA’s National Estuary Program ([http://www.apnep.org/pages/who.html](http://www.apnep.org/pages/who.html)). The huge area encompasses 36 counties in North Carolina and 16 counties and independent cities in Virginia (Study 1994).
The natural environment plays a key role in the region’s economy. Many industries, such as commercial fishing, tourism, recreation, mining, forestry, and agriculture, all depend on the region’s natural resources (Study 1994). However, the region as a whole struggles economically. Drawing the line for the A-P region at Durham County in the West and Onslow County in the South, 36 counties are included. Of those 36, 20 are classified as Tier One by the NC Department of Commerce. (NC Dept. of Commerce, 2009). Tier One counties are the 40 most economically distressed counties in the state. There are some pockets of prosperity, such as Carteret and Wake Counties which are classified as Tier Three, or among the 20 least distressed (NC Dept. of Commerce, 2009). The average unemployment rate in 2009 for the A-P region was 10.2%, ten percent greater than the statewide average of 9.2% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Once again, though, there is variability in the region. Unemployment rates for 2009 ranged from a low of 7.0% in Currituck County and a high of 16.1% in Edgecombe County. However, 26 of the 36 counties were above the state average, once again indicating the region’s economic distress.

**AP3C Group History**

The AP3C faces unique challenges and opportunities in the Albemarle-Pamlico region, but it also meets some of the same struggles as many community-based environmental management groups. It also has the distinction of being a *regional* community-based effort, with significant influence from groups in the Triangle area. Lane and McDonald (2005) lay out the typical stages for community-based environmental management groups as:
• “Initial mobilization and group formation: In this initial stage, with key issues of membership, leadership, familiarization, the development of group protocols and other resources occurs.

• Early developmental learning and implementation: In this stage, the group begins to act, and the crucial work of capacity building of members and client groups, mostly through learning by doing, occurs before the gradual emergence of tactical planning and strategic action.

• Functional maturity: In this next stage, the group clarifies its purpose and possible feasible means of achieving them, conducts some experimental activities and begins to understand their resource and financial requirements.

• Persistence: In the final stage, the organization seeks to sustain its efficacy so as to maintain the interests of its participants, obtain sufficient financial and other support to operate and to be adaptable to changing circumstances.”

The AP3C has been meeting for about three and a half years, but is still struggling to complete some of the activities of the first stage, Initial mobilization and group formation, such as developing group protocols and resources. The group has also taken some steps in the second stage, Early developmental learning and implementation. The AP3C convened four meetings with 90 to 150 participants from the Albemarle-Pamlico region. The AP3C was also involved in conducting listening sessions on the topic of sea-level rise with the Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Program (APNEP). These two examples illustrate the AP3C learning by doing. This report takes the next step in the second stage, identifying strategic action. Some of the strategic action includes returning to items from the first stage to clarify membership.
Initial conversations with AP3C participants revealed tensions between different groups within the larger group. According to Lee (1999), it can be helpful to determine whether the disagreement within an organization is about a preference of outcomes, means, or both. By interviewing the steering committee members and other individuals close to the AP3C, I identify the sources of potential conflict and prescribe processes to resolve them.

**Methods**

**Interviews**

I interviewed 12 members on the Steering Committee of the AP3C. They represent organizations with a mission focused on conservation, community, or both (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Organizations represented by Steering Committee interviewees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Program (APNEP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audubon Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Family Land Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Defense Fund (2 people)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Contractor A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Contractor B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Farmer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NC Cooperative Extension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Conservation Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town of Plymouth, NC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 after obtaining Institutional Review Board certification and exemption
The semi-structured interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours and were conducted mostly in-person. I tape recorded each in-person interview to be later transcribed and took handwritten notes. For phone interviews, I only took notes. Interview topics were:

- Introductions and goals of the interview
- Motivation to participate in the AP3C
- Strengths and challenges of the AP3C
- Vision of the AP3C and the Albemarle-Pamlico region.

I asked several questions on each topic and asked follow-up and clarification questions when appropriate. A more in-depth description of the interview questions and the reasoning behind each question is found in Table 2.
Table 2. Interview questions for Steering Committee members and reasoning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question/Statement</th>
<th>Reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part I. Introduction and Goals</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe my background and interest in both environmental studies and community work.</td>
<td>To position myself as neutral as possible in terms of “conservation or community”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your background?</td>
<td>To understand their perspective and the interests they may represent (community, conservation, both)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part II. Motivation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why are you a member of the AP3C?</td>
<td>To get background information, elicit preferences about outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you consider the most important issues facing the A-P region?</td>
<td>To elicit preferences about outcomes and beliefs about causation of problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think motivates other people in the group to participate in the AP3C?</td>
<td>To estimate levels of trust with the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part III. Strengths and Challenges of AP3C</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you consider the top 3 to 5 strengths of the AP3C?</td>
<td>To find common-ground or areas of disagreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you consider the top 3 to 5 challenges of the AP3C?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part IV. Visioning</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What would a functioning AP3C group look like in 1 year? 5 years?</td>
<td>To elicit preferences about outcomes, describe possible next steps, recommend structure of the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If the AP3C is successful, what will the A-P region look like in 5 years? 20 years?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you define success for the AP3C?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After speaking with the Steering Committee members, I contacted six individuals who had previously been involved with the AP3C through the larger community meetings but have since ceased participating. Three responded and agreed to interviews. The purpose of these interviews was to identify the reasons for discontinuing their participation and ways to re-engage them. These were less extensive interviews lasting no more than 30 minutes because of the individuals’ lack of knowledge of the AP3C. Interview topics included:
• Introductions and goals of the interview
• Familiarity with the AP3C
• A-P Region questions
• Strengths and challenges of the AP3C
• Vision of the AP3C.

As in the first round of interviews, I asked several questions on each topic and asked follow-up and clarification questions when appropriate. A more in-depth description of the interview questions and the reasoning behind each question is found in Table 3.
Table 3. Interview questions for former participants and reasoning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question/Statement</th>
<th>Reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part I. Introduction and Goals</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe my background and interest in both environmental studies and community work.</td>
<td>To position myself as neutral as possible in terms of “conservation or community”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your background?</td>
<td>To understand their perspective and the interests they may represent (community, conservation, both)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part II. Familiarity with AP3C</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you know about the AP3C?</td>
<td>To gauge level of familiarity with AP3C and its mission, to estimate how well AP3C communicates its message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think is the mission of the AP3C?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The AP3C is a group of conservation plus community organizations working together to find solutions to the region’s problems including economic and environmental challenges.</td>
<td>If interviewee did not have an answer or felt very unsure about previous question, I provided this generic description of the AP3C to assist with further questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you participated in any AP3C activities? If so, what were they?</td>
<td>To gauge level of familiarity with the AP3C’s activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you still participate in AP3C activities? Why or why not?</td>
<td>To elicit reasons for discontinuing participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part III. Albemarle-Pamlico Region Questions</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you consider the top 3 strengths of the A-P region?</td>
<td>To learn about strengths of the A-P region not mentioned by Steering Committee members, to estimate areas of agreement with Steering Committee members/AP3C’s mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you consider to be the most important issues facing the A-P region?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part IV. Strengths and Challenges of AP3C- optional.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the strengths of the AP3C steering committee?</td>
<td>To garner suggestions of strengths to build upon and challenges to address</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the challenges of the AP3C steering committee?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part V. Visioning</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What would a functioning AP3C group look like in 1 year? 5 years?</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you define success for the AP3C?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analysis

I transcribed all tape-recorded interviews. For the interviews I conducted over the phone, I used my notes for analysis. Next, I coded the transcripts and notes according to a SWOT framework and visioning statements using the content analysis software NVivo. When coding using the SWOT framework, I first focused on responses to the questions in Part III.

**Strengths and Challenges of AP3C** (Table 2). Then I moved on to the rest of the transcript for any other comments that fit the SWOT framework. SWOT represents Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. Strengths and opportunities are helpful to the group while weaknesses and threats are harmful (Table 4). Strengths and weaknesses are internal to the AP3C while opportunities and threats are external. For example, helpful characteristics of the A-P region, such as its natural resources, were classified as opportunities. The lines between the categories can be fuzzy and sometimes an item might fall into two opposing categories. For example, the current regional economy can be both a threat and an opportunity. I coded phrases, sentences, or paragraphs according to if they were referenced to internal or external items and if they were positive or negative. When a single response fell into multiple categories, it was coded to all appropriate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internal</td>
<td><strong>Strengths</strong></td>
<td><strong>Weaknesses</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External</td>
<td><strong>Opportunities</strong></td>
<td><strong>Threats</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To gather visioning statements, I first examined responses to the questions in Part IV.

**Visioning** (Table 2). Then I surveyed the rest of the transcript or notes for comments that
described a future scenario for the A-P region or the AP3C. Visioning statements were divided into Vision of Albemarle-Pamlico Region or Vision of AP3C.

After coding, I read through the results of each category, distilling all of the statements into key words or phrases. I tallied how many times a key word or phrase was mentioned. If an individual made the same point multiple times, it was only recorded once in order to give each participant’s input equal weight. I created diagrams of the key words and phrases in order to show relationships among the ideas. Graphically displaying the information highlights connections between responses and opportunities for leveraging multiple ideas or resources.

Results

SWOT Analysis

A key aspect of strategic planning is a SWOT analysis. By assessing the outside environment and internal strengths and weaknesses, the group can capitalize on its strengths, mitigate against its weakness, seize opportunities and prepare for threats (Bryson, 1995). In the following diagrams, I used the same color throughout to represent similar ideas and some abbreviations. Because of the depth of information I gathered and a desire to be inclusive of everyone’s ideas, I present the information with first an overview diagram followed by more detailed depictions.
Strengths
The three main groups of strengths identified were People, Vision, and Potential (Figure 1). These three items are connected by member’s desire to talk to figure out how to improve the region and the large scope of the group. Below, each of the main groups is discussed in further detail with examples and quotes from steering committee members.

Strengths Overview

Strengths
The people and partner organizations are an important strength of the AP3C (Figure 2). The enthusiasm, diversity, investment, and interest of the people and organizations represented at the table provide value for the group. Specifically, many people mentioned the diversity of the

Color code:
- People, social = Pink
- Environment = Green
- Blue is used for several themes

Abbreviations:
- Conserv. = Conservation
- Gov’t = government
- Org. = Organization
- ECSU = Elizabeth City State University

Figure 1. Strengths Overview

Figure 2. Strengths: People
group in several forms as a driver to participate in the group. The different forms of diversity identified include racial, cultural, organizational (non-traditional partners working together), diversity in interests and backgrounds. As one community leader stated, “Number one strength is that it is a diverse group.”

When asked, “Why do you participate in the AP3C?” four of the twelve steering committee members began their answer with another group member’s name. Personal relationships have helped to draw people to the table. These personal relationships should continue to be valued and strengthened as the group moves forward. Also, individual names were mentioned for their enthusiasm and personal contribution to the groups.

Interviewees also frequently named strengths related to the group’s vision(Figure 3). Several people mentioned a desire to “do things differently,” which included conducting business in a way unlike past conservation collaboratives by connecting with non-

![Figure 3. Strengths: Vision](image-url)
traditional partners. One member described past conservation collaborations as conservation groups first convening, deciding the priorities of the project, and then engaging community in a predetermined manner. The important distinction for the AP3C is having community represented from the beginning to help form the priorities of the group. Another member noted that conservationists may be tired of calling on the same supporters for environmental legislation and projects and the AP3C is a way to engage different, or non-traditional partners. As one community/conservation representative stated:

...I think definitely in terms of [conservation groups’] inspiration and motivation, I think some of them are having a realization that if they want to have a different kind of impact and really connect more broadly and diversely and deeply with communities in the state and in the region, then they need to try a different tack.

Doing things differently, in various forms, was mentioned as a strength 7 separate times. People are ready to challenge the status quo and deviate from the traditional form of environmental collaboration. This commitment to a new way has drawn people to the group and has challenged the group. Four people voiced uncertainty about exactly how the “new way” will work or what it should look like. The group is committed to doing things differently, but has not yet found consensus on that new way.

Whatever the new model develops into, many people expressed hope that the AP3C would act as a model for other groups. This demonstrates a vision beyond the AP3C and an understanding of the collaborative’s exceptionality and power.
The desire to be a national model relates to another theme of the responses: potential. Five steering committee members discussed a desire and the possibility of becoming a national model for community and conservation collaboratives. In particular, assisting similar regions, such as the Florida Everglades and the Mississippi Delta, were mentioned because of their risk of flooding due to low elevations. As one conservation/community representative stated: “...I really do think it could be a national model. Best case scenario, the Mississippi Delta and Florida Everglades are paying AP3C money to come down and tell them how to get it done.” Participants believe strongly that AP3C has great potential to create transformational change. The group’s potential has drawn and kept many participants at the table.

**Weaknesses**

Many of the identified weaknesses related to the people at or missing from the table: assembling the “right” people, differences between action and process oriented people, and some people’s need for concrete action (Figure 5). Additionally, the
organizational structure and details, such as finding meeting locations and time to participate, were identified as weaknesses.

Figure 6. Weaknesses: Right people at the table

While the people and organizations involved with the AP3C were cited as a strength, they are also a weakness. The power dynamics of the people present and missing from the table was a concern for some. Certain groups need to be further engaged (e.g., community and grassroots groups). According to one conservationist, “...[The AP3C] can’t craft a solution for the region without involvement of people in the region to get buy-in.” Steering Committee members identifies the need to work with local people seven times. Other groups need to be re-engaged (e.g., conservation groups who dropped participation). According to another conservationist:
...another challenge is right now that we have not kept our hard core conservation core... they’re not all gone, but I’ve noticed a significant number of them are not at the table with the same enthusiasm and we need to figure out a way to bring them back without losing all the great community based organizations we’ve brought in.

Although a need to add people to the group was mentioned, one member said the steering committee was too large. Leadership of the group is also necessary. To include the groups that were identified as missing (such as grassroots and conservation groups) requires active recruiting. To maintain the diversity of thought, background, and ethnicity at the table, members need to seek out new members rather than passively receive them. However, some people mentioned the challenges of a diverse collaborative. For example, when talking to people of different backgrounds, each group has its own shorthand. It takes time to explain jargon to different groups, slowing down the conversation. Also, each organization represented may bring its own institutional barriers to doing business in a new, different way, presenting another challenge.

![Weaknesses: Balance between action- & process-oriented people](Image)

Part of the challenge of collecting the right people at the table is finding the right mix of process-oriented versus action-oriented people (Figure 7). While each type, process- and action-oriented, brings it strengths, there can be conflict between the types. A conservation/community representative clearly described the conflict:

I would frame it...as a challenge. We’re perpetually confronting the dilemma of folks who are those kind of action- and result-oriented go-getters who want to see demonstration projects on the ground, let’s put the pedal to the metal and see what can happen versus the
folks who are more oriented around our process and our intention and our vision and our clarity of purpose. Not what we do, but how we do it. Those folks who challenge, do we have the right folks at the table to be making these decisions? Are we asking the right questions as we frame these challenges and look for solutions? Should we be really, especially given that we’re not based in the region and we’re trying to do something relatively new, shouldn’t we be taking our time to do it right?

Process people ensure the methods meet the group’s goals of being inclusive and diverse, but can frustrate action-oriented individuals who perceive them as slowing down the group. Action-oriented people help to achieve the group’s goals by implementing projects or taking concrete steps, but can frustrate process people who perceive them as moving too quickly and ignoring the methods. Working through this conflict requires time, patience, skills to work collaboratively, and a commitment to overcome differences. As one conservationist stated, “...And so there’s going to have to be a balance moving forward that there’s a good balance of process and product.”

Very closely related to the above conflict is another weakness cited by four interviewees: lack of concrete action. The lack of action leads to feelings of going nowhere and a loss of momentum. One interviewee described the group as “too timid.” Rather than waiting for the perfect step to take, he recommended taking a step and adjusting as the group moves forward.
Finally, the structure of the organization and other organizational details were cited as an internal problem. In particular, the lack of clearly defined roles, decision making model, and paid staff and limited time for steering committee members to participate were identified as problems. One conservationist noted, “I can’t hire staff yet that’s dedicated to this...But I’m fully aware that without dedicated staff who can really dive deep into it, my attention is sporadic.”

**Opportunities**

Two main categories of helpful external factors were listed by interviewees: People and Environment (Figure 10). People in this category refers to people living in the A-P Region rather than AP3C members. People coming to the region for tourism offers the opportunity to create eco-tourism, providing an economic base while valuing the environment. One community representative mentioned the “incredible, unique history here.” Another community representative commented that the people who came to the larger AP3C meetings were asking “big questions” and looking for “big answers.” That attitude provides an open door for the AP3C to incorporate its new vision for the region, which is discussed in a later section. Another positive attribute of the local people was named by a conservationist, “I think the people having a tie to the land, this is not a transient population that comes and goes, but they do at least share common values that
are consistent with conservation.” These qualities of the region’s people present assets upon which the AP3C can realize its vision.

Opportunities

![Figure 10. Opportunities](image)

The Environment was mentioned as an asset by four different interviewees. Specific assets include the sounds, fisheries, and the many wildlife refuges. The uniqueness of the A-P region’s environment was highlighted by one community leader:

Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge is an incredible refuge for these black bears. So that’s where most of the black bears are....That’s a uniqueness. The Albemarle-Pamlico is the only place in the entire God’s given universe where there are red wolves in the wild.

Another opportunity did not fit into a particular category: lack of organizational model. A conservationist described this opportunity as: “I think the other strength is the region itself. That it’s such a mixed region. There’s plenty of opportunity for progress because it hasn’t already been organized under some other model, let me put it that way.” Other
opportunities named are potential access to significant funding and an overall movement of conservation toward a model that embraces agriculture and forestry in rural communities.

**Threats**

Individuals in the nonprofit or public sector often list more negative traits than positive ones; the uncertainties of those sectors allow people to focus more easily on threats (Bryson, 1995). The AP3C follows this trend. Interviewees named many threats caused by human interaction with the natural environment (Figure 11)

![Threats Overview](image)

*Figure 11. Threats Overview*
Economic threats related to the AP3C uneven-distribution of wealth, a lack of capacity to apply for funding, and a history of resource extraction (Figure 12). The depressed economy was mentioned by eight of the twelve interviewees, demonstrating that this is a pressing issue on the minds of AP3C members. According to one community representative, “The economy is probably the number one issues right now.” A conservationist identified the region’s economic history as a threat: “In the past it’s been very extraction based and if we can start having discussions with folks about other uses of resources and how those the use and management of those resources can benefit the region.”

Although many aspects of the environment were identified as opportunities, many were also listed as threats (Figure 13). General concerns about the environment were mentioned by three people, but specific environmental threats were named by many. Six people cited sea level rise, five people mentioned climate change, and three people mentioned water quality concerns. Likewise, the lack of solutions to some environmental problems and region-specific climate modeling were noted. In particular, human response to climate change worries one conservationist: “Climate change will be devastating no matter what we do, but I’m more worried about the human response to climate change in
the near term than I am to the climate change results itself.” In addition, individuals listed wetland loss, open space, rural-urban interface and biodiversity loss as threats to the AP3C.

**Threats**

![Diagram showing various environmental threats](image)

**Figure 13.** Threats: Environment
Threats

The Social category contains different attributes of human society, especially as pertaining to the A-P region, that may hinder the AP3C’s ability to reach its mission (Figure 14). It includes interactions between groups (e.g., power dynamics), social institutions (e.g., state government), and societal norms (e.g., locals’ values). Illustrating the power dynamics among the conservation and community groups, one conservation/community representative noted:

When I came to [my organization]... I was learning about how...the conservation organizations and all these folks who really have the resources to support limited resource and diverse communities but have not prioritized that historically and at the same time I was sitting at the table with these very accomplished, well-respected conservation organizations who would speak very casually about these multimillion dollar land projects and grants that they were getting a hold of and corporate partners and all this kind of stuff that just said to me there’s a tremendous...
gap between these well-resourced, well-heeled expert agencies and organizations and these land rich and in many other ways, many other assets poor communities could benefit.

Another aspect of power dynamics, mentioned by 3 people, is racism in the region. The diversity of the AP3C was named as a strength, but the group needs to be aware of the history of racism and to assertively address the problem. A related issue is environmental justice, ensuring that underrepresented groups do not bare a disproportionate share of environmental burdens. In the case of the A-P region, one conservationist expressed concern that wealthy families will be able to either afford to move or influence lawmakers to provide assistance to move inland when sea levels rise while low-income families will be left underwater.

Five threats relate to the local people's values of the environment and engaging them with the AP3C. As a conservationist stated: “The community people don’t necessarily see the connection between the social issues and the environmental issues. I think that’s the biggest challenge.” However, when the connection is made, one interviewee is concerned about the choices people will make to address environmental issues, specifically in relation to climate change impacts. As one conservationist noted: “But we are [in the A-P region] and we’ve got to figure out what’s our adaption that doesn’t make things worse. How can we prolong our human enjoyment and presence without making things worse. That’s the challenge.” Once the connection is made and people are interested in the environment, it is a challenge to maintain that attention, especially for long-term problems, like climate change and sea level rise, that are facing the A-P region. A conservationist stated, "If it’s a near term reward someone’s looking for, it’s going to be hard to find and they will drift off."
The above diagrams clearly demonstrate the breadth of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the AP3C. The following sections build upon this analysis looking at Visions of the AP Region and the AP3C and Strategic Issues.

**Vision of A-P Region**
I coded for phrases that described a vision of the Albemarle-Pamlico region or of the AP3C. During the interviews, I also asked direct questions about each of those topics. I diagrammed those responses below. The Visions outlined below are compilations of vision statements from all of the interviewees. First presented is the Vision of A-P Region. The main themes discussed in the vision were Mindset, Environment, Green Economy, and Quality of Life (Figure 15). In the Vision of AP3C, I relisted these main themes with descriptions of how the AP3C could contribute to the greater vision of the region. First though, I present a closer look at each theme of the Vision of A-P region.

**Vision of A-P Overview**

![Vision of A-P Overview](image)

**Figure 15. Vision of A-P Region Overview**

A frequent topic of the Vision of the A-P region was changing the mindset of the people living there (Figure 15). Most comments were perceptions of the environment and
the AP3C’s goals and considering the environment when making decisions. A conservationist clearly stated this connection between conservation and community:

I will consider the AP3C a success on the day that the vast majority, seventy-five percent of the people who live in the Albemarle-Pamlico region think that doing conservation and getting it right for communities is the same thing. When the people who live there believe that conservation and community work are the same thing, we win.

Another important aspect was regional identity. Five interviewees mentioned regional identity in some form. As one conservationist stated: “Maybe at the end there would be a regional identity and a pride in the fact that we’ve shown the nation, if not the world, how to adapt to these [climatic] changes…” Currently, there is no regional identity and interviewees would like the diverse smaller communities connect to the region while maintaining their own identity.

**Vision of A-P**

![Diagram: Vision of A-P Region: Mindset]

*Figure 16. Vision of A-P Region: Mindset*
Another frequent topic of a vision for the A-P region was a Green Economy, mentioned ten times throughout the interviews. Included in the green economy vision is ECSU, an historically black college located in the region, at the center of a clean energy movement- providing jobs for the youth, a new carbon market, a restored river herring population, and reduced poverty & unemployment rates. One conservationist described his interest in a green economy, “If folks are dependent, are making their living off an ecologically sustaining, sustainable economy, then they’re going to be less inclined to welcome in these types of polluting and extracting sort of industries.” Another conservation/community representative described the vision as, “In five years, you’ll have conservation projects that are also designed and being implemented to create jobs that are sustainable and good for the environment.”

Interviewees would like to see the environment maintained or improved, using a region-specific model to best prepare for climate change by creating new conservation lands. One conservationist envisions, “a AP3C specific climate model
and we will have fine scale predictive capabilities for what’s going to happen with sea level and the sounds.”

Other items in mentioned in visions of the A-P region concerned general quality of life: better education, housing and health care. A community/conservation representative foresees, “In five years...you’ll have affordable housing and job creation...”

Figure 19. Vision of A-P Region: Quality of Life
Vision of AP3C

When discussing a vision of the AP3C, interviewees mentioned items that could address 3 of the 4 themes of the vision for the region: Mindset, Environment, and Green Economy. Ideas for the group did not directly address issues of quality of life. I placed ideas for the vision of the AP3C on a spectrum from operational (structure and function) to Figure 20). In between, I placed “Define AP3C” since that should be the embodiment of the larger vision grounded in the group's activities.

As noted in the previous section, changing mindsets was a frequent topic, with ten separate points, for the vision of the A-P region. Similarly, it was a frequent topic of action or goals for the AP3C with eight ideas named. Four conservationists expressed their vision for a unifying organization, bringing together conservation and community:

- “I do know we’ve got to engage with communities.”
- “AP3C is one of those vehicles we hope to be able to incorporate the local community in conservation actions.”
- “I see AP3C as more of an educational and unifying organization as a way to bring people together to change ideas.”
- “..we should also do things significantly differently in that communities should be involved. That this should be something that benefits local communities.”

These comments highlight a theme found in the Vision of the AP3C: doing things differently. That same aspiration was discussed in the Strengths section. A new approach to conservation and community building can also address some of the threats, such as
traditional power dynamics, history of racism, environmental justice problems, and truly engaging local people.

Steering committee members must consider the inspirational items of the vision when determining the operational aspects of the organization. For example, when implementing projects, the projects should give voice to the underrepresented and engage community and conservation groups. Likewise the structure of the AP3C should reflect the group’s common values as outlined in the inspiration portion of the vision. Some key aspects were named by steering committee members and listed under the structure box, such as including the religious community and having a diverse group.
Figure 20. Vision of AP3C
Strategic Issues

After examining the SWOT analysis, vision diagrams, and interview responses from former participants, I identified three strategic questions for the Steering Committee to tackle. I used the Direct Approach to identification of strategic issues as outline in Bryson (1995). The Direct Approach is best for groups that do not have clear, concrete goals and are not hierarchical, which describes the AP3C. The Direct Approach involves asking three questions of each possible issue:

- “What is the issue?
- What factors (mandates, mission, external and internal influences) make it a strategic issue?
- What are the consequences of failing to address the issue?” (Bryson, 1995)

The three strategic questions I identified are:

1. What is the AP3C’s mission?
2. Who should be on the Steering Committee?
3. How can the AP3C market itself to potential participants, stakeholders, and members?

Strategic Issues Connected

Each of these issues is linked, making it difficult to decide where to begin. The mission of the group depends on the people at the table deciding the mission. But who the AP3C can
attract to the table depends on the group’s mission. The mission also determines how and to whom the group markets itself. In turn, marketing will attract potential Steering Committee members. Below I diagram how each strategic questions answers the above three questions.

![Diagram: Strategic Issues]

Figure 22. Strategic Issues: Define Mission

Defining the mission is important to interact with external partners, clarify internal member’s expectations, and is core to the mission of the group. As John Bryson points out, “...it does not matter where you start in strategic planning, you always end up back at your mission - and you often rethink it as a result” (Bryson, 1995). The mission statement will guide the AP3C’s activities to realize the vision Steering Committee members described. Additionally, none of the former participants interviewed were able to clearly answer the question, “What do you think is the mission of the AP3C?” Each did identify the environment as a concern of the AP3C, but did not understand the AP3C’s connection to community. One former participant cited the AP3C’s lack of a clear mission as a reason for discontinuing participation, highlighting how important this issue is.
Determining Steering Committee membership will help to engage some of the many groups in the region. It may also help to achieve parts of the AP3C vision: more government and citizen participation; participation at large meetings reflects region’s demographics; give voice to underrepresented groups; and do things differently.

Depending to whom and how the group markets itself, it can achieve parts of the AP3C vision: conservation movement respects community; re-engage hard core conservation groups; engage community; educate the general public and youth in particular.
Discussion

I recommend for the Steering Committee to undertake the three Strategic Questions outlined above. Those three items can help the organization become more effective at realize its vision for the AP region.

Although some people in the group were frustrated by the lack of tangible progress, the initial steps of meeting, identifying, and next answering these questions is a success for the group. They are key steps in the first stages of community-based environmental management, as discussed in the Introduction. The collaboration of conservation and community groups is one of many incremental changes the AP3C Steering Committee members outlined in their vision for the region. Working together to answer these strategic questions alters the expectation of collaboration between these groups. Institutional change is difficult and can be slow, but “incremental, sequential, and self-transforming” change can lead to the new model for managing the AP region’s human and natural resources (Ostrom, 2008).

Also, group decision-making can be a messy process. As described by Kaner et al. (2007), a “Groan Zone” is common to group decision-making. It is preceded by a period of divergent thinking when people can explore many options. Ideally, the Groan Zone is followed by convergent thinking where people can whittle the broad exchange of ideas into the best answer. While this can be a tiresome process for some people, it is important to complete the process, allowing a wide range of ideas because the best solution may be the least obvious.
The vision described by the Steering Committee members portrays the AP3C as facing contentious topics such as racism and power dynamics while creating a new model for conservation and community work. That is a heavy load, but the group and the A-P region have many assets, as described in Strengths and Opportunities, they can leverage into success. To confront these challenges and answer the strategic questions, the AP3C should use a consensus-based approach (CBA) as described by Susskind and Cruikshank (2006). A CBA aims to reach a near-unanimous agreement through interest-based negotiations rather than deciding by majority rule. Using CBA will allow the AP3C to reach some of its goals by having an inclusive process and giving voice to underrepresented groups.

There are five essential steps to the CBA:

1. Convening
2. Assigning roles and responsibilities
3. Facilitating group problem solving
4. Reaching agreement
5. Holding parties to their commitments (Susskind & Cruikshank, 2006)

The AP3C has begun convening, but should continue to ask if all important stakeholders are represented, and if not, how bring them on board, maintaining the group’s diversity. In a CBA, throughout the AP3C’s activities, members are reminded to check-in with the constituency they represent, upholding the AP3C’s commitment to a fair process while ensuring that once agreement is reached, parties are more likely to follow through. A CBA could well serve the current group dynamics and the AP3C’s vision. There are several
skilled facilitators already participating with the AP3C who could lend their expertise in this realm. However, an outside facilitator may be more effective because she could more easily remain neutral.

**Works Cited**


