

NCSE WILDLIFE HABITAT POLICY RESEARCH PROGRAM
Project Overview
Research Project 3B

The Next Generation of Mitigation: Linking Current and Future Mitigation Programs with State Wildlife Action Plans and Other State and Regional Plans,

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Over the four decades since the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) was enacted, a generally accepted protocol has been developed for mitigating environmental damage in the United States. It is based on three principles: avoid, minimize, compensate.

Key Issue

In the coming years, the United States will experience significant loss of natural wildlife habitats due to population growth, infrastructure development, energy development and climate change. We need a next generation of mitigation—a more effective decision-making framework for applying the mitigation protocol.

Project Objective

The investigators set out to define and describe a next generation of mitigation that entails:

- applying the mitigation protocol more comprehensively in regulatory processes
- using state wildlife action plans and other plans to create an effective decision-making framework for applying the mitigation protocol
- allocating compensatory funds derived from mitigation to support lasting, large-scale ecological results.

The overall objective was to:

- use appropriate species and habitat plans to avoid and minimize impacts on the most sensitive environmental resources
- guide cumulative analysis of environmental impacts
- use compensatory mitigation funding to restore and protect larger natural systems that will be resilient to increasing environmental threats.

Approach

To be eligible to receive funds from the State Wildlife Grants Program created by Congress in 2000, every U.S. state and territory was required to develop a comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy, also known as a state wildlife action plan (SWAP). The project investigators' primary approach was to use the SWAPs to shape a mitigation protocol for existing, expanded and future authorities that regulate impacts to habitat and species. When detail was lacking or other federally recognized or regional plans provided important information on key habitat and species distribution, these plans were consulted as well.

Key Findings

We need a more comprehensive approach to mitigation to sustain systems of interconnected and resilient natural habitats. In addition to providing plant and animal habitats, such systems support services that contribute to human well-being, such as water quality and quantity, crop pollination, natural hazard mitigation and recreational opportunities. Ensuring these benefits for future generations will require:

- improvements in large-scale planning on the landscape and watershed levels
- more rigorous use of available ecological information
- greater consistency and coordination in applying mitigation strategies.

Significant opportunities exist for improving the current mitigation framework to meet the nation's conservation and development priorities more effectively. Mitigation can be important in restoring and conserving large ecosystems that will be resilient to climate change and other environmental pressures.

The next generation of mitigation can move beyond a piecemeal response to a more integrated, consistent and proactive approach guided by landscape- and watershed-level planning. Such an approach will be more effective in conserving wildlife, natural landscapes and ecosystem services to human communities. It also will help business by improving the basis for project planning, increasing mitigation efficiency, and reducing uncertainty and risks.

Deliverables

A white paper produced by this project is available online at:

<http://www.ncseonline.org/WHPRP/cms.cfm?id=2524>

and

http://www.elistore.org/reports_detail.asp?ID=11359