



Our Nation's Wildlife Habitat System: Framing Solutions for a More Strategic Approach

Recommendations

by conservation leaders at a national dialogue:

"Building an Intelligent U.S. Habitat System in a Changing World"

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In November 2011, 60 leaders from the conservation community met to discuss the potential for substantially and strategically improving the nation's system of wildlife habitats. Research findings and recommendations from the six-year Wildlife Habitat Policy Research Program (www.WHPRP.org), sponsored by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, have pointed to an overarching need to expand on the existing network of public and private lands and waters that provide important fish and wildlife habitat and other important ecological values. Such an approach would build on the strengths of the existing system while addressing key weaknesses in what lands and resources are represented in the system, the roles of the public and private sectors in protection and stewardship, and the public policies that support or undermine this process.

The workshop aimed to identify action items needed to move forward with this vision. By describing the benefits of a more comprehensive and strategic habitat system, identifying key threats and opportunities, and describing a series of steps needed to achieve those benefits, participants succeeded in framing a discrete, manageable set of actions to address some of the important challenges that face habitat conservation today. The summary below describes five broad categories of solutions identified by workshop presenters and participants, each of which includes a number of more specific action items.

As the WHPRP program committee noted in their final synthesis document:

An effective wildlife habitat system for the nation must be based on an approach to protecting, managing, and restoring habitats that is not overseen by a single entity... The challenge is bigger than any single agency or organization – it must engage the energy, resources, and commitment of people from public and private sectors on many scales... It will require collaboration across many disciplines, agencies, and land ownerships.

The program committee invited interested groups from the non-profit, government, academic, and private sectors to examine these ideas and consider taking a leading role in implementing one or more of them. Each of these actions represents a meaningful contribution to developing the vision of an intelligent U.S. habitat system and making it a reality.

Solution 1: Create and communicate a clear message on the goal and benefits of a more intelligent wildlife habitat system.

Building broad support for the idea of a wildlife habitat system for the nation will require more clarity – and better consensus – on the desired outcome and rationale for the system, as well as a strategy for identifying and mobilizing potential partners both inside and outside of the conservation community.

Action 1.1. Host a series of dialogues to more clearly define the goal and benefits of a U.S. wildlife habitat system:

The Wildlife Habitat Policy Research Program’s summary document, “Completing a Wildlife Habitat System for the Nation” outlines a vision for this system, but workshop participants identified a number of issues that need be more clearly described. For example:

- How would the system visualized build on existing protected areas? What is needed that is not represented in the current system?
- What will success in building the system look like over shorter and longer timeframes? How do we measure progress?
- Is the system intended primarily to provide fish and wildlife habitat values, or should it be designed to encompass a wider range of values?
- How will the system contribute to meeting ecological goals in a time of rapid climate change?
- How will aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems be addressed in an integrated way?
- How will private lands, working landscapes, and urban areas be addressed?
- How will the system account for regional variation in priorities, planning, and implementation?

A primary goal of this process should be to create a clear message that will help build a broader constituency. It should therefore include and provide opportunities for meaningful input from those outside the “usual suspects” in the conservation community, including local planners, county commissioners, tribes, industry, private landowners, minority communities, and others whose primary focus is not necessarily on wildlife or habitat conservation but whose interests and priorities are likely to be supported by an improved habitat system. Dialogues should take place at multiples scales to ensure that local, state, regional, and federal perspectives are represented.

Action 1.2. Develop and implement a communications strategy for the concept:

Once the habitat system concept is well defined, a communications and outreach strategy is needed to develop and disseminate a clear message around the concept, its rationale, and its benefits. The strategy should define key audiences at different scales and identify the most effective individuals or groups to develop and deliver the message and build support for the intended outcome. Because this

concept is familiar to most in the conservation community, we have developed shorthand ways of describing it that will not be useful in communicating with other audiences. As a result, we need to craft a more accessible way of talking about the habitat system and find the right delivery system for gaining broader interest in the idea. A communications strategy might involve:

- Revisiting the words we currently use to describe the system and finding a name that effectively communicates the benefits of the concept and helps alleviate potential concerns;
- Communicating a clear vision of success and indicators of progress toward the long-term vision;
- Identifying and designing messages for key audiences from outside the conservation community, including educational institutions, community leaders, real estate and energy developers, land use planners, and other non-governmental groups;
- Identifying key catalysts to lead in both outreach and modeling implementation;
- Identifying key investors and looking for ways to pool funding from multiple sources for projects that contribute to the habitat system goal;
- Recruiting a nationally-known celebrity or other thought leader to relay a message funded by all of the stakeholder groups; and
- Finding ways to build support among potential advocates at the local, state, and regional scales, including engaging people who are not primarily focused on conservation and helping them see how the habitat system can help them meet their own goals.

Participants identified non-profit conservation groups, Bird Habitat Joint Ventures, Landscape Conservation Cooperatives, and Climate Science Centers as potential leaders on this item.

Action 1.3. Promote the habitat network as a solution to other policy and planning problems:

An improved wildlife habitat system would bring benefits to a wide diversity of policy areas, including climate change adaptation, infrastructure development, risk management, disaster planning, local land use planning, and energy siting and transmission. Advocating for the habitat vision and the principles that underlie it in these diverse settings will help broaden support while opening up new areas for positive policy change.

Solution 2: Identify and map conservation priorities at multiple scales to guide investments in habitat protection, management, and restoration

Action 2.1. Create maps and spatial tool that help visualize the system at the national scale.

Various products already exist that provide a straightforward synthesis of the existing conservation system and the areas identified as conservation priorities in The Nature Conservancy's ecoregional plans, state wildlife action plans, and similar products. The next step is to look at these synthesis products and evaluate whether they accurately reflect widely-shared priorities and adequately support the goals and vision of the national habitat system. This process might involve developing:

- A portal that allows interested parties to bring in data and priorities from a diversity of sources and refine a synthesis map according to an agreed-upon goal for the system;
- An interactive tool that allows users to visualize different alternative futures;

- A process for identifying lands that represent the full diversity of geophysical types, as a way of incorporating climate change adaptation capacity into the planning process;

One of the primary challenges in communicating with the public on this concept is creating a clear visual image of what a national habitat system would look like and how it would improve on the current system of protected lands. Creating a map or an interactive spatial tool would help make the concept more accessible to the conservation community and other potential users and would help in more clearly defining the goal and its benefits. A product that identifies conservation priorities at the national level can help focus the conversation while remaining at a coarse enough scale to avoid looking like a national zoning map.

Participants mentioned the National Center on Ecological Analysis and Synthesis and the Department of the Interior's Landscape Conservation Cooperatives as entities that would be appropriate to pursue this action item.

Action 2.2. Use new and existing planning processes to identify and integrate conservation priorities across different scales and land ownerships:

Action 2.3. Identify mechanisms for funding better coordination and collaboration at larger scales:

While the habitat system is a national-scale goal, much of its planning and implementation is likely to happen at state and smaller scales. Planning is most likely to be useful – and implementable – if occurs at multiple, nested scales, incorporating local, state, regional, and national priorities and multiple sources of information on biodiversity and other ecosystem services. It should also accommodate both coarse- and fine-filter approaches to conservation and better integrate aquatic and terrestrial resources.

Integrating priorities and data from local and state scales into landscape-scale efforts may require new processes and tools for coordination. In some cases, making better use of existing planning processes and institutions through integration at higher levels will be more effective and efficient than creating new processes. In other cases, new alternatives may be needed.

Action 2.4. Recommend a landscape-scale planning component for LCCs: Participants saw the Department of the Interior's Landscape Conservation Cooperatives as a potential leader in this area. LCCs can lead a process to integrate priorities identified at other scales and develop science-based models that weigh criteria such as irreplaceability, vulnerability, and complementarity to identify conservation priorities. The WHPRP Program Committee is working with LCC leadership to host a webinar and engage regional committees in a discussion about how the LCCs can support efforts to create a national network of conservation lands that address species, habitat, and climate change adaptation strategies. Many of the participants at the conference see the LCCs as the most appropriate and likely institution to lead the effort. This effort will be most successful if other agencies and constituencies are engaged more effectively than they have to date, like the conservation community, state natural resource agencies, Forest Service and Army Corps of Engineers.

Action 2.5. Engage in collaborative partnerships for land conservation and management: Making the habitat system a reality will require cooperation across political boundaries and land-ownership types. The most successful land management partnerships today are those based on true collaboration and long-term involvement. Building on existing partnerships, and developing new ones as needs and opportunities arise, is one of the most promising paths to implementation of the habitat system vision.

Solution 3: Identify and promote policy alternatives to implement the network of lands concept

Participants identified several high-priority policy changes that could help jump-start implementation of the habitat system concept. While these items provide a starting point for groups interested in contributing to the habitat system through policy reform, a process is needed to identify more strategic intervention points. The outcomes of that process could be used to develop a wide variety of communication pieces, including a national policy piece for academic journal as well as messages directed to other key audiences.

Action 3.1. Establish a coordinated mitigation framework that directs development and other impacts away from, and mitigation projects toward, high-priority conservation areas:

Under current policies, there is no consistent, coordinated approach to mitigation for impacts to fish and wildlife habitat on either public or private lands. Impacts are analyzed on a project-by-project basis, so the cumulative results of many smaller impacts are rarely taken into account. Because habitat quality is generally not considered (or may be poorly defined or mapped), impacts to high-priority habitat areas can be mitigated by investing in lower-quality areas. As a result, mitigation programs often fail to maintain important habitat and other ecological values at the landscape scale.

With a clear, rigorous, and coordinated approach, investments in mitigation could play a much more effective role in building and maintaining the habitat system. Mapping habitat conservation priorities will be an important first step in this process, but policies around compensatory mitigation must also be changed to prevent or discourage impacts in high-priority habitat areas and incentivize mitigation projects that create a net benefit for wildlife and habitats.

Action 3.2.: Create incentives for private landowners to contribute more to the habitat system through payments for ecosystem services.

Existing policies provide few incentives – and in some cases, significant disincentives – for private landowners to protect wildlife habitat. A few new market-based approaches are emerging that provide more flexibility in implementing existing regulatory policies, and there may be more opportunities to use markets for regulated resources to improve the social, economic, and ecological outcomes of existing policies. In other cases, there may be opportunities to use public funds to compensate landowners for the habitat and other ecological values their lands support. Workshop participants suggested that an important first step will be to begin to shift some existing incentives programs over to payments for ecosystem services, especially where perverse incentives currently exist.

Action 3.3. Support the transformation of natural resource agencies: Groups that work with natural resource agencies can and should help encourage them to address habitat conservation more effectively by working across boundaries to conserve a broader spectrum of fish and wildlife and to cultivate a broader constituency to support more diversified funding.

Participants suggested several policy alternatives that would encourage agencies to get more involved in habitat conservation:

- Ensure that the next generation of state wildlife action plans help provide a foundation for planning and implementing the habitat system by identifying spatially-explicit conservation priorities, addressing a diversity of ecosystem services, and promoting coordination across agency and state boundaries; and
- Integrate ecosystem services into definitions of “highest and best use” and cost-benefit analyses;
- Clarify the roles, authorities, and responsibilities of natural resource management agencies with respect to habitat protection and to encourage better coordination on habitat issues among agencies with diverse missions;
- Create a long-term, large-scale funding source for development of the habitat system (e.g., climate adaptation fund, fund for revolving loans, long-term bond instruments). Federal legislation could outline the overall goals and direction, and provide financial support for compatible community-based implementation through community-based, cross-agency public-private cooperatives or councils.

Participants were also interested in continuing the workshop’s dialogue on agency transformation by publishing papers in resource management journals and distributing the program’s background paper on agency transformation more broadly throughout the conservation community. There will also be an opportunity to participate in agency transformation workshops at the 2012 North American Wildlife Conference.

For more information on the Wildlife Habitat Policy Research Program’s process, results, reports, conferences and national dialogue, please visit: www.WHPRP.org.