

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

A. Conservation and Management of Wildlife and Fisheries Resources in Louisiana

In Louisiana, the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) is the government agency vested with conservation and management of the wildlife in the state, including aquatic life, and is authorized to execute the laws enacted for the control and supervision of programs relating to the management, protection, conservation, and replenishment of wildlife, fish, and aquatic life, and the regulation of the shipping of wildlife, fish, furs, and skins. LDWF is organized into four appropriated budget offices: Secretary, Management and Finance, Wildlife, and Fisheries. Within the Office of Wildlife are the Wildlife Division and the Fur and Refuge Division. The Louisiana Natural Heritage Program (LNHP) is located within the Fur and Refuge Division. Within the Office of Fisheries are the Inland Fisheries Division and the Marine Fisheries Division.

1. Mission Statement:

LDWF's mission is to manage, conserve, and promote wise utilization of Louisiana's renewable fish and wildlife resources and their supporting habitats through replenishment, protection, enhancement, research, development, and education for the social and economic benefit of current and future generations; to provide opportunities for knowledge of and use and enjoyment of these resources; and to promote a safe and healthy environment for the users of the resources.

2. Five-Year Plan 2006-2010:

LDWF's latest five-year strategic plan (2006-2010) listed several goals relative to the threats posed to non-game fish and wildlife species. Some of the objectives in reaching these goals include:

- Developing plans for the recovery of five rare, threatened, or endangered species (RTE) and for the management of other non-game species. Strategies for accomplishing this objective include conducting biological surveys, concentrating on populations and ranges of RTEs and native plants, and determining management options for identified species.
- Development of recovery plans for all species of threatened and endangered fish. Strategies for accomplishing this objective include the development of a list of threatened and endangered fish species in Louisiana, gathering information on historical accounts of RTE species, and the development of recovery plans for RTE species.

The strategic plan is currently undergoing a revision and it is anticipated that many of the recommendations of the CWCS will be incorporated into the revision.

B. Problem and Need for a Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy

1. Background:

Early in the twentieth century, many of America's once numerous game fish and wildlife species were on the verge of becoming forever lost. In the 1930s, this situation began to change as harvests were better regulated, wildlife management areas and refuges were created, and game species populations were augmented or restored with translocated animals. Much of these efforts were funded by sportsmen through the sale of hunting and fishing licenses and by excise taxes placed on hunting and fishing equipment under the Pittman-Robertson Act (Wildlife Restoration Program) and later the Wallop-Breaux/Dingle-Johnson Acts (Sport Fish Restoration Program).

However, despite these successes, very little attention was given to species that were not hunted or fished. In time, these numerous non-game species were recognized as being in serious decline, some were on the verge of becoming extinct, and a few had been driven to extinction. In 1973 the Endangered Species Act (ESA) was enacted by bipartisan majorities in Congress and signed into law by President Richard Nixon. Upon signing the ESA, President Nixon stated that, "Nothing is more priceless and more worthy of preservation than the rich array of animal life with which our country has been blessed."

Today there are more than 1000 species federally-listed as endangered or threatened with 28 species occurring in Louisiana or its adjacent waters. While conservation efforts have had success in bringing some species back from the brink of extinction, most of these efforts have been very costly, opportunistic, and crisis-driven and have created an atmosphere of mistrust between private landowners and government. The lack of a strategic approach to species and habitat conservation has created the need for a complementary source of funding to support the conservation, protection, and restoration of all the wildlife species in our country.

2. Congressional Mandate and Guidance:

Over the last four years, Congress has appropriated roughly \$325 million towards two federal programs that are specifically designed to take a proactive approach to fish and wildlife species management and address the continuing decline of wildlife species in all fifty States, the District of Columbia, and five U.S. Territories. These two programs, the Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program (WCRP) and the State Wildlife Grants Program (SWG), were created as a compromise to the defeat of the Conservation and Reinvestment Act of 2000 (CARA) and are designed to provide annual allocations of funding for the development and implementation of on-the-ground efforts to benefit wildlife species and their habitats. This funding is intended to supplement, not duplicate, existing fish and wildlife programs by targeting species in greatest need of conservation,

species indicative of the diversity and health of the states' wildlife resources, and species with low and declining populations, as deemed appropriate by the states' fish and wildlife agencies. In creating these new funding measures, Congress also required each state and territory to develop a Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (CWCS) by October 1, 2005.

The following 8 required elements are to be addressed in the CWCS:

1. Information on the distribution and abundance of species of wildlife, including low and declining populations as the State fish and wildlife agency deems appropriate, that are indicative of the diversity and health of the State's wildlife.
2. Descriptions of locations and relative condition of key habitats and community types essential to conservation of species identified in (1).
3. Descriptions of problems which may adversely affect species identified in (1) or their habitats, and priority research and survey efforts needed to identify factors which may assist in restoration and improved conservation of these species and habitats.
4. Descriptions of conservation actions determined to be necessary to conserve the identified species and habitats and priorities for implementing such actions.
5. Proposed plans for monitoring species identified in (1) and their habitats, for monitoring the effectiveness of the conservation actions proposed in (4), and for adapting these conservation actions to respond appropriately to new information or changing conditions.
6. Descriptions of procedures to review the strategy at intervals not to exceed ten years.
7. Plans for coordinating, to the extent feasible, the development, implementation, review, and revision of the strategy with federal, State and local agencies and Indian tribes that manage significant land and water areas within the State or administer programs that significantly affect the conservation of identified species and habitats.
8. Documentation of broad-based public participation during the development and implementation of the strategy.

C. The CWCS in Louisiana

1. Purpose:

The purpose of this CWCS is to develop a blueprint for guiding LDWF in the development of management actions for Louisiana's fish and wildlife species with emphasis on species of conservation concern and associated habitats they depend upon.

2. Need:

- Perform a comprehensive review of the status of all fish and wildlife species in Louisiana
- Provide a clear directive for the future management of these species in Louisiana
- Ensure that their management is consistent with federal, state, and parish plans as well as national and local environmental organization plans and recommendations
- Ensure that all species are protected from the threat of extinction and available for the enjoyment of the citizens of Louisiana

3. Goals and Objectives:

The goals and objectives presented below are the initial ideas in response to the issues, concerns, and needs expressed by the core committee, species technical committees, stakeholders, and the public. These goals and objectives reflect LDWF's commitment to achieve the mandates of the SWG program and the mission of LDWF to serve as the steward of the wildlife resources of Louisiana.

Goal 1: Species Conservation

Provide the habitat and ecosystem functions that support healthy and viable populations of all species, avoiding the need to list additional species under the Endangered Species Act.

Objective 1

Conduct a comprehensive review of the current status of all wildlife in Louisiana with a focus on species of conservation concern.

Objective 2

Develop concrete management strategies which focus on species of conservation concern and their associated habitats identified in the CWCS.

Objective 3

Formulate partnerships with federal and state agencies, national and local non-governmental organizations, universities, businesses, and the public in the development and implementation of these strategies.

Goal 2: Habitat Conservation

Identify, conserve, manage, and restore terrestrial and aquatic habitats which are a priority for the continued survival of species of conservation concern.

Objective 1

Utilize the LNHP database to identify habitat types which are important to the conservation of species of concern, and continually evaluate and update the status of these habitats to direct conservation and restoration efforts.

Objective 2

Monitor threats to terrestrial and aquatic habitats of priority concern.

Objective 3

Promote and support terrestrial and aquatic habitat protection efforts.

Objective 4

Develop and implement terrestrial and aquatic habitat conservation and management recommendations.

Objective 5

Monitor the distribution and impacts of invasive/alien species, and develop and implement management strategies to abate this threat.

Objective 6

Promote the reintroduction and the continued use of prescribed fire in fire-dependent habitats.

Goal 3: Public Outreach and Education

Support educational efforts to improve the understanding by the general public and conservation stakeholders regarding species of conservation concern and related habitats.

Objective 1

Provide educational information using various media types.

Objective 2

Increase direct interactions between biologists and public and private stakeholders regarding species of concern and associated habitats.

Objective 3

Enhance the user's educational experience on WMAs and refuges.

Goal 4: Partnerships

Improve existing partnerships and develop new partnerships between LDWF and State and Federal natural resource agencies, non-governmental organizations and environmental groups, private industry, and academia.

Objective 1

Improve cooperative efforts to achieve common goals, improve efficiency, and prevent duplication of efforts.

Objective 2

Improve data collection, data management, and the dissemination of information between conservation partners.

Objective 3

Increase collaboration and communication with local, state, and regional conservation partners.

The approaches LDWF has considered for accomplishing these goals are:

- habitat conservation - conservation initiatives will be devised to preserve those habitats which are a priority to the continued viability of species of concern;
- species conservation - conservation initiatives will be concentrated on individual focal species or groups of species.

Habitat Conservation – Habitat conservation will focus on identifying all the current habitat types in a particular ecoregion, the present threats to these habitats, and ways of abating these threats. By following this approach, we will develop a hierarchical list that allows us to focus our efforts on the habitats of highest importance. The added benefit of this approach is the overall biodiversity conservation of a particular ecoregion.

Species Conservation – Species conservation will focus on identifying those species that are considered to have extremely low population estimates and those for which the status is unknown. These estimates will be derived from state rankings developed by LNHP. Specific threats to these species will be considered, and rankings will be developed to guide LDWF in making the decisions necessary to address population objectives.

Incorporating numerous existing plans already developed for the recovery and conservation of identified species will be a central aspect to this strategy. National plans exist for many species groups although the level of detail for quantitative objectives provided in these plans varies widely. Some national plans are supported by plans for smaller geographic areas, and these plans can serve as sources of population targets and habitat objectives.

To be successful in accomplishing this objective, LDWF will include a diverse array of stakeholders made up of federal, state, and local government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGO's), businesses and industry, and private landowners in the development and implementation of the CWCS.

4. Expected Results and Benefits:

By addressing localized, regional, and statewide concerns across key terrestrial and aquatic habitats, it is expected that this strategy will:

- Provide updated public information on the current status of species of conservation concern in the state
- Provide updated public information on the current amount of available habitat for these species

- Serve as a means to readily identify the threats/stresses to the habitats these species depend upon and ways of abating them
- Initiate the development of new and improved partnerships to conserve biodiversity of the state

By establishing a framework to measure the effectiveness of the proposed conservation strategies and monitoring the results, this strategy not only fulfills the requirements set forth by Congress, it also serves as a blueprint in providing the critical directives and management objectives LDWF will use to conserve the rich biodiversity of Louisiana for future generations.

5. Looking to the Future:

The Louisiana CWCS is written with a 10-year implementation cycle in mind. Although the document will be rewritten every 10 years, LDWF will report annually which conservation actions were attained, and make modifications as appropriate. The process of monitoring its effectiveness will include submission of monthly reports to the CWCS Coordinator by each division within the agency indicating which conservation actions were accomplished. This process will allow for continual assessment of the effectiveness of the CWCS, and allow for modifications that may be necessary in order to reach the goal of halting species declines in Louisiana. Tables 8.7 and 8.8 identify how we will evaluate and report the effectiveness of this iteration of the CWCS. Interim reporting, project evaluations, and reviews during the next 10 years will determine the nature and direction of the next iteration. There will be a need for fairly frequent review by the existing committees to determine how the CWCS is working as a planning resource and guidance document. Some of the questions that must be answered include:

- Are populations of the species of conservation concern declining?
- How helpful was the CWCS in annual project planning?
- How involved were we with out partners?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the CWCS?
- Were species and habitat data gaps filled?
- Were new MOAs completed with partners?
- Were new areas protected for species of conservation concern?
- Were priority habitats protected?
- Were threats identified in the CWCS eliminated or abated?
- Are other species or habitats in need of specific conservation measures?

By using both qualitative and quantitative success criteria, we will evaluate the success of the CWCS and respond to the diverse nature, scope, and scale of the strategies presented herein.

During the next 10 years we will meet at a minimum annually with all of our conservation partners. Within the first year, we will add partner representatives to the

Core Committee, which will be responsible for tracking the success of the CWCS. When a CWCS revision occurs the Technical Committees will meet and the status of all wildlife will be reevaluated, and threats analyses will be completed again to determine those species of conservation concern. It will be critical to identify criteria to guide the 10-year review, review the major elements of the CWCS with those criteria, and identify areas needing revision and the nature of the revisions. Revisions will be reviewed by partners, technical teams, and the public in general and then major revisions will come to the Core Committee, who will make recommendations to the LDWF Secretary for placing the revisions into the CWCS. External views are especially important during the revision to give the LDWF a “reality-check” and an outside perspective.