

CHAPTER 6: PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The Initial Stages: Drawing Plans

From the beginning of the CWCS effort, SCDNR and the planning team sought to realize successful partnerships and public involvement in the development of the strategy. It is understood that successful conservation is furthered by the existence of a strong collaborative involvement between all resource stakeholders, private or public, governmental or nongovernmental.

Early in the process, the team identified the issues of most prominent concern for wildlife conservation both from the perspective of agency staff and that of individuals and groups outside of SCDNR. First, focus groups were developed in order to determine the wildlife conservation priorities of SCDNR's partners. Representatives from partner groups were invited to share their ideas with the planning team. These partner organizations included federal and state agencies such as the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the US Forest Service, Clemson University and the SC Forestry Commission. Likewise, non-governmental organizations like The Nature Conservancy, Katawba Valley Land Trust, SC Sporting Protection League, SC Native Plant Society and Safari Club International were also involved. To ensure that SCDNR received input from partners with more diverse interests in wildlife conservation, other non-governmental organizations also participated in the focus groups including developers, local and county planners, professional foresters and representatives from the agricultural community.

Five focus group meetings were held throughout the state. The goal of these meetings was to identify general actions that would protect priority species in South Carolina. After discussing current wildlife conservation methods in the state and the factors contributing to wildlife and wildlife habitat decline, the participants determined that three broad general actions should be considered high priority by the SCDNR in conserving priority species; these three actions are:

- Public education
- Land use planning
- Habitat acquisition and protection

In addition, the following four actions were given slightly less priority but were mentioned at all focus group meetings:

- Greater research and monitoring - (population and species monitoring; exotic/invasive species management; investigate and verify the decline of species)
- Water quality - (better water quality management programs; wetland protection)
- Agency collaboration - (Inter- and intra-agency collaboration; public-private cooperation; collaborate with neighboring states; enforce existing regulations)
- Land owner incentives_- (land owner incentives; improved; ecological restoration on private lands; cost-sharing programs)

After the focus group meetings, SCDNR conducted four public meetings throughout South Carolina in order to allow all segments of the population to provide their opinions on priorities

for wildlife conservation in the state. The information obtained through the focus groups allowed SCDNR to be better prepared to answer questions that might arise during public meetings. Public meetings were held at four locations around the state and were attended by representatives of groups similar to those present at that focus group meetings as well as members of the general public. The public meetings brought together a wider array of people and concerns. However, the dominant actions were similar to those stated in the focus groups: public education, land use planning and habitat acquisition and protection.

A complete list of partners established throughout the planning process, including those identified through the initial public and partner involvement process, is included in Appendix 5: Nonexhaustive List of SCDNR Partnerships and Existing Collaborative Agreements.

Planning the Strategies: Building Bridges

Partnerships and collaborations were essential to the development of this plan. Not only were partners identified and sought for technical advice in creating the extensive compilation of species and habitat background accounts, but also further connections were built in the process of defining threats to SCDNR's priority species and developing conservation recommendations and strategies for abating these threats.

The development of the South Carolina Priority Species List as well as the accounts for listed species was a broad collaborative effort that involved partners from all over the southeastern United States and from every facet of natural history background. The taxa teams responsible for creating the species lists were seated by agency staff as well as individuals from state universities and other agencies. Taxa leaders often sought input from taxa experts from all over the country. Lists were also reviewed extensively both inside the agency as well as outside. Over 100 individuals were contacted in the creation and review of the bird priority list alone. The varying approaches to taxa priority list creations reflected the varying degree of expertise available and the efforts necessary to employ their help.

The habitat characterization of the state helped to identify potential partners well beyond the doors of research institutions. Concerned individuals from myriad groups were also given opportunities to provide input for defining the key habitats, threats to their continued health, and potential conservation actions. Additionally, as the coordination team worked to develop the South Carolina Comprehensive Natural Resources Data Initiative, technical assistance was pursued to create a proper vegetative classification and develop mapping capabilities.

Conservation recommendations provided by species account contributors and taxa groups were refined in a process of identifying concrete strategies, plausible actions to carry out those strategies and potential partners for proposed measures. As conservation strategies were developed for each species, it became evident that they could be separated into eight categories, which we have designated as Conservation Action Areas (CAAs). These CAAs are presented in Box 6-1.

Additionally, SCDNR recognized that there are overarching conservation strategies that are likely to assist in protecting wildlife and habitats statewide. Therefore, SCDNR determined that

formation of Conservation Action Committees around each of the CAAs identified would assist in determining these overarching strategies. Conservation Action Committees would provide an excellent opportunity to work with partners to develop comprehensive statewide strategies for South Carolina that were not tied specifically to a single species or habitat. The strong partnerships between SCDNR and other state and federal agencies, organizations, academic institutions and industries within the state demonstrate dedication to overcoming challenges inherent in implementing conservation strategies. Two Conservation Action Committees, those for Education and Outreach and Urban and Developing Lands, were convened prior to completion of the CWCS; additional committee meetings will be held for the remaining CAAs as the CWCS is being implemented; resulting conservation strategies will be included in future revisions of the South Carolina CWCS.

BOX 6-1: EIGHT CONSERVATION ACTION AREAS

- Education and Outreach
- Habitat Protection
- Invasive and Non-native Species
- Private Land Cooperation
- Public Land Management
- Regulatory Actions
- Survey and Research Needs
- Urban and Developing Lands

The two Conservation Action Committees that were convened were facilitated by planning team members but attendees were otherwise allowed to discuss the technical process and elaborate as a group. Typical information derived from these working groups included not only specific identification of interested parties and stakeholders but also histories of related actions and leads for further partnering efforts. Perhaps most exciting were the instances where working groups reached consensus on issues and began brainstorming innovative solutions. Additional discussion of the fruits of the working groups efforts is included within each CAA discussion in Chapter 4: Statewide Conservation Strategies.

Late in the planning process, a representative of the Catawba Indian Nation was briefed on the CWCS to explore partnership opportunities. Potential actions identified for future discussion are based on four broad goals. Support for aquatic resource conservation, education and recreation activities where the Catawba reservation borders the Catawba River could be broadened through financial and technical assistance from SCDNR. Similarly, SCDNR could help Reservation land managers develop biological resource inventories and site-specific management plans for priority species. The Catawba Nation could also support expanding outreach to other Native American bands and groups. In return, SCDNR could assist in developing new and existing cooperative conservation projects with neighboring landowners where objectives cross the Reservation boundaries.

Implementation: Shaking Hands and Cutting Ribbons

With the collaborative foundations built during the initial stakeholder input and the planning stages of the project, the focus now turns to the future and the potential to continue these efforts. As the plan moves into implementation stages, partnering will become even more important in

reaching successful outcomes. Financially, the ability to collaborate can only improve the efficiency of all partner efforts.

As implementation begins and planning for future revisions continues, the CWCS coordinating team will be tasked with maintaining the network of partnerships. The team plans to put in place streamlined measures including a Wildlife Initiative newsletter with listserv capabilities, continued use of web-based contacts and media, presentations and popular news media publications. *South Carolina Wildlife*, the SCDNR magazine publication, will release a supplemental issue concurrent with the submission of this plan to the USFWS. The supplement details the background and fundamentals of the development of the CWCS. The magazine has over 52,000 subscribers; SCDNR research indicates that each issue is read by three to four individuals, resulting in the supplement having an audience of well over 150,000 individuals. Additionally, 10,000 copies of the supplement will be available to serve as an informational tool as the team begins developing liaisons to coordinate partnerships throughout the state.

Finally, as the development of data tools to support the CWCS continues, the team will continue soliciting involvement and interest from partners throughout the state and region, in creating a dynamic user interface for collaborative input on projects, species and habitat information and demographics and, ultimately, future CWCS iterations. A novel approach to information collection, the collaborative interface will allow field biologists access to the SCDNR's information storehouse in an effort to make data updates fluid and almost instant. This open information gathering, while closely moderated for technical accuracy, will allow planners and managers to actively adapt their land use decisions with the most current knowledge of species needs and threat characterizations.

The mission of the SCDNR defines our role as one of stewards of the state's natural resources. Essentially, that role depends on the support and involvement of those groups and individuals with vested interests in the continued health and wealth of South Carolina's natural heritage. Public and partner involvement must and will continue to be a focus of the Strategy as the program strives to meet the needs of present and future interests.