

## **CHAPTER 7: SEEKING PUBLIC INPUT AND MAINTAINING PARTNERSHIPS**

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### **The Initial Stages: Focus Groups and Public Meetings (2005)**

From the beginning of the SWAP effort, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) and the planning team sought to realize successful partnerships and public involvement in the development of the Action Plan. 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 non-governmental. In July 2003, a Neighboring States meeting was held in association with our regional Federal Assistance coordinators to discuss issues common to all as well as to develop an outline and format for our Action Plans. Participating states included Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Alabama. The model created was one of two used by the US Fish and Wildlife Service as an example for the rest of the nation to emulate.

The SCDNR retained the Clemson Institute for Economic and Community Development (CIECD) to manage and conduct the Public Participation Process with planning beginning in January 2004. The team used a parallel participation process (focus groups and public meetings) to ensure that both the professional and general public concerns and comments were separately heard and acknowledged.

For the very first iteration of the SWAP (the 2005 CWCS), the team identified the issues of most prominent concern for wildlife conservation from both the perspective of agency staff and that of individuals and groups outside of the SCDNR. First, focus groups were developed in order to determine the wildlife conservation priorities of the 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 across the State in 2004 and were facilitated by our partners at Clemson Extension. Participants were invited via email and phone calls. 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 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; investigating and verifying the decline of species)
- Water quality - (better water quality management programs; wetland protection)
- Agency collaboration - (inter- and intra-agency collaboration; public-private cooperation; collaborating with neighboring states; enforcing existing regulations)
- Landowner incentives - (landowner incentives improved; ecological restoration on private lands; cost-sharing programs)

After the focus group meetings, the 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. Announcements for the meetings were advertised in newspapers, mentioned on local television news reports, and an interview with the SWAP (CWCS) Coordinator was conducted by ETV radio. The information obtained through the focus groups allowed the SCDNR to be better prepared to answer questions that might arise during these public meetings. Public meetings were attended by representatives of groups similar to those present at the 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 2005 planning process, and continued into the present (with additions), is included in Appendix 3.

### **Native American Tribes (2005, 2013)**

Late in the 2005 planning process, a representative of the Catawba Indian Nation was briefed on the SWAP (then CWCS) to explore partnership opportunities. The Catawbas, located in York County near Rock Hill, SC, are the only federally recognized tribe in South Carolina. According to the SC Commission for Minority Affairs, state recognized tribes in South Carolina include the Beaver Creek Indians, Edisto Natchez-Kusso Tribe, Pee Dee Indian Nation of Upper SC, Pee Dee Indian Tribe of SC, Santee Indian Organization, Waccamaw Indian People, and the Wassamasaw Tribe of Varnertown Indians. There are five other state-recognized groups and 15 non-recognized entities.

Potential actions identified for future discussion with the Catawba Nation are based on four broad goals. (1) 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 the SCDNR. (2) Similarly, the SCDNR could help Reservation land managers develop biological resource inventories and site-specific management plans for priority species. (3) The Catawba Nation could also support expanding outreach to other Native American bands and groups. (4) In return, the SCDNR could assist in developing new and

existing cooperative conservation projects with neighboring landowners where objectives cross the Reservation boundaries. These ideas are still being considered.

In 2013, a list of priority species that would be in the revised SWAP was mailed to Catawba Nation representatives. This list only contained those species relevant to the Nation's land holdings—those that were known or suspected to occur on site. Updated lists will be sent as needed.

### **Adding to Our Knowledge Base: Climate Change Workshops (2012)**

Since 2005, discussions about climate change have increased, leading the Agency to once again gain public input into a topic that greatly affects priority species in SC. As suggested by the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' Best Practices for State Wildlife Action Plans (2012), the number and types of public participants solicited was at a scale that would make efficient use of agency resources and glean the type of information we desired.

The South Carolina State Climatology Office produced "The Climate Connection Workshop Series: Climate Variability and Impacts to South Carolina's Natural Resources" which was held three times in three different locations across the State and attracted 151 total participants representing federal, state, and local governments; scientists; land and water resource managers; utility representatives; NGOs; the media; private companies; and other interested stakeholders. The purpose of these workshops was to increase awareness and utilization of climate knowledge to improve natural resource management. There exists a genuine need for new approaches and partnerships to cope more effectively with climate variability. The series was advertised to the general public on the State Climatology Office's website, but also invitations were sent to ~350 select individuals / organizations that had attended like conferences and workshops in the past.

As with the 2005 focus groups and public meetings, workshops were strategically located across the State. The first climate workshop was held in Charleston, SC in September 2012 and was attended by 68 people. The second workshop was held in Columbia, SC in October 2012 with an attendance of 48. The final workshop was held in Greenville, SC in December 2012 and was attended by 35 people.

The workshops began with a series of presentations on climate science and impacts to natural resources. Over 26 speakers participated. A PowerPoint presentation on the State Wildlife Grants program and SC's State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) was presented at each workshop. An interactive session came next in which Turning Technology (a polling process) was utilized to elicit responses from all members of the audience for guaranteed feedback on topics presented. Twelve questions regarding climate issues, impacts, actions, and perceived needs and challenges were asked and responses were gathered and displayed anonymously. In addition to the SWAP, other discussions included: SC climate trends for the past 109 years; an analysis of 60 years of water temperature data; aquifer water level trends; how climate affects estuarine fauna, shrimp abundance, and other wildlife and plant species; climate variability and forest health; fire regimes; urban growth's impacts during changing times; salinity intrusion into freshwater areas; the National Integrated Drought Information System; and partnership needs in data gathering and

analysis. Responses were graphed and analyzed for the final report which can be viewed at <http://www.dnr.sc.gov/ccworkshops/reports.html>.

All participants selected drought as the primary climate-related issue affecting the State, probably since South Carolina has had frequent drought episodes within the last 15 years. Other concerns included sea level rise (especially among coastal participants), temperature extremes, and severe weather. Water quantity was likewise a concern for its impact on natural resources. Ecosystem integrity, water quality, and shoreline change were also important. The responses revealed that research, survey, education, and outreach are the main actions perceived being undertaken to address climate-related issues. Needs and challenges identified regarding climate-related work included tracking local data on effects and impacts, creating a centralized information area to store it, and obtaining monetary and staff resources to improve management related to climate variability. Other tools suggested included the need for predictive impact modeling, legislation, standardized climate modeling, and standardized data and methods. These needs then translated into action items that are listed in Chapter 5: Statewide Conservation Strategies. The workshop website can be accessed at <http://www.dnr.sc.gov/ccworkshops/>.

## **Building Consensus on the Issues**

Partnerships and collaborations were essential to the development of the first Action Plan and this iteration. 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 implementation of the SWAP has brought in new partners and volunteers to help with research, survey, and habitat enhancement work.

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 selected 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 and out. For example, in 2005, 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, 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 by 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). A ninth—climate change—was added in 2013. These CAAs and their associated specific implementation strategies are presented in Chapter 5 and repeated here in Box 7-1.

#### **BOX 7-1: NINE 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
- Climate Change [NEW]

Additionally, the SCDNR recognized that there are overarching conservation strategies that are likely to assist in protecting wildlife and habitats statewide. Therefore, the 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 the 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 2005 SWAP (then CWCS); additional committee meetings will be held as needed for the remaining CAAs as the SWAP continues to be implemented. Resulting conservation strategies will be included in future revisions of the South Carolina SWAP.

The two Conservation Action Committees that were convened in 2005 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 5.

### **Public Review and Comment (2014)**

As the time approached to review and revise the Plan, the public was kept informed of the process and encouraged to participate. Articles in *South Carolina Wildlife* magazine and other publications described the process. Completed species lists were sent to conservation partners in-state and in neighboring states for peer review and comment. Social media has become a highly effective way to distribute timely information to the public. A Pew Research (2013) report shows that over 64% of American adults use Facebook and half of these use it as a source of news. From 2007 to 2014, the SCDNR's website has seen an increase in requests for specific pages by 57% (P. Epley, pers. comm.) Therefore, when it was time for the draft of the 2015 SWAP to

undergo public review, it was posted online at the SCDNR website for 35 days during the summer of 2014. An announcement was sent in an email blast to all partners, staff, and other interested individuals with a request to forward. In addition, posts were made on SCDNR's Facebook page and Twitter account. Comments were compiled and archived by the State Wildlife Grants Coordinator and relevant comments incorporated into appropriate chapters of the Plan. Suggestions given were in regards to education/outreach opportunities, measures of success for programs implemented, and grammatical/typographical error corrections. A direct result of a request for more citizen science opportunities using a web-based approach was a new page on the SWAP website with links to participation opportunities by species, habitat, or miscellaneous data gathering needs. The public did not suggest the addition of any species for inclusion on the SWAP priority species list but did question the inclusion of game species since they are regularly hunted. Therefore, an explanation was added in Chapter 2: SC's Priority Species.

### **Bringing the Message to Partners and the Public**

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 newest revision of the SWAP drives the implementation stage, 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 continues and planning for future revisions is on the horizon, the State Wildlife Grants (SWG) Coordinator will be tasked with maintaining the network of partnerships. Web-based contacts and media, presentations, and popular publications will continue to be utilized in this endeavor. *South Carolina Wildlife*, the SCDNR magazine publication, will continue to release updates on the SWAP and related SWG-funded research. The magazine has over 52,000 subscribers with research indicating that each issue is read by three to four individuals. In 2005, SCDNR planned to create a Wildlife Initiative Newsletter so that partners and the public could follow the successes of the SWAP. Instead, the magazine plans to include a section highlighting one or two species of need in each issue. Challenges and successes will be discussed, and a section on how the public can help support conservation efforts will be a key component. The vast readership of the magazine makes this route a better alternative to the previously proposed newsletter and cuts down on printing and distribution costs.

In addition, a SWAP display was created for use at various workshops, educational facilities, and outdoor programs to inform the citizens of South Carolina about our species of greatest conservation need, where they live, and the challenges they face. An accompanying handout provides information on simple actions people can take to be environmentally conscience and help implement the SWAP.

Finally, as the development of data tools to support the SWAP continues, the SWG Coordinator will continue soliciting involvement and interest from partners throughout the State and region, to create a dynamic user interface for collaborative input on projects, species and habitat information, as well as demographics and, ultimately, future SWAP iterations. A novel approach to information collection, the collaborative data interface described in Chapter 6 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 SWAP will be placed on the World Wide Web through a SCDNR link on our homepage. Web-enabling the SWAP will make searching it easier, and interactive maps are being considered to accompany the document.

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 SWAP as the program strives to meet the needs of present and future interests.