

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 charged with the conservation and management of fish and wildlife resources in the state, including aquatic and terrestrial vertebrate and invertebrate species. LDWF 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. In addition, LDWF regulates the shipping of wildlife, fish, furs, and skins. LDWF is organized into four appropriated budget offices: Secretary, Management and Finance, Wildlife, and Fisheries.

1. Mission Statement:

The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries is charged with the conservation and management of Louisiana's natural resources, including both aquatic and terrestrial species and habitats. LDWF's mission is to manage, conserve, and promote wise utilization of Louisiana's renewable fish and wildlife resources and their supporting habitats for the social and economic benefit of current and future generations; to provide opportunities for study, utilization, and enjoyment of these resources; and to promote a safe and healthy environment for the users of the resources.

B. Problem and Need for a Wildlife Action Plan

1. Background:

Early in the twentieth century, many once numerous fish and wildlife species of the United States were on the verge of extinction. 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. Many 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 Dingell-Johnson and Wallop-Breaux Acts (Sport Fish Restoration Program).

Despite these successes, very little attention was given to species that were not hunted or fished. By the time many nongame species were recognized as being in serious decline, some were already on the brink, and others had been driven to extinction. In 1973, the Endangered Species Act (ESA) was enacted by bipartisan majorities in the U.S. 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 1,500 species federally-listed as endangered or threatened, 43 of which occur 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 in nature, and crisis-driven. 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 and help prevent future ESA listings.

2. Congressional Mandate and Guidance:

The State Wildlife Grants Program (SWG) was created as a compromise to the defeat of the Conservation and Reinvestment Act of 2000 (CARA) and was 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 this new funding source, Congress also required each state and territory to develop a Wildlife Action Plan (WAP) by October 1, 2005. States are required to review and, if necessary, revise their WAP by October 1, 2015. This document represents the 1st comprehensive review and revision of the Louisiana WAP since the approval of the 2005 WAP.

The following 8 required elements are addressed in the WAP:

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 WAP in Louisiana

1. Purpose:

The purpose of this WAP is to develop a blueprint for guiding LDWF and conservation partners in the development and implementation of management actions for Louisiana's fish and wildlife species with emphasis on Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) and associated habitats they depend upon. The WAP has now been in place for 10 years, and much progress has been made, which necessitated a comprehensive review and update of the 2005 WAP. For more information about accomplishments of the WAP and SWG in Louisiana since 2005, please refer to Appendix A for a list of projects funded through SWG to date (abstracts and final reports available upon request). Additionally, conservation needs and priorities are fluid, and many data gaps, research needs, and conservation opportunities have emerged since the WAP was approved in 2005. The focus of the WAP is SGCN and the natural communities utilized by SGCN. More information on SGCN and their habitats can be found in Chapters 4 and 5, respectively.

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 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.

3. WAP Goals and Objectives:

The goals and objectives presented below are the ideas developed 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 ESA while insuring that commonly occurring species do not experience declines.

Objective 1

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

Objective 2

Develop management actions which focus on SGCN and their associated habitats as identified in the WAP.

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 actions.

Goal 2: Habitat Conservation

Identify, conserve, manage, and restore terrestrial and aquatic habitats which are vital for the continued survival of SGCN.

Objective 1

Utilize the Louisiana Natural Heritage Program (LNHP) database to identify habitat types which are important to the conservation of SGCN, and continually evaluate and update the status of these habitats to direct conservation and restoration efforts.

Objective 2

Determine and monitor threats to terrestrial and aquatic habitats utilized by SGCN.

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

Develop and implement management actions to abate the threat of invasive species to SGCN and their habitats.

Objective 6

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

Goal 3: Public Outreach and Education

Support educational efforts to improve the understanding of the general public and conservation stakeholders regarding SGCN 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 SGCN and associated habitats.

Objective 3

Enhance the user's educational experience on Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) and refuges to promote an understanding and appreciation for wildlife, including SGCN.

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, academia and the general public.

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.

4. Expected Results and Benefits:

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

- Provide updated public information on the current status of SGCN in the state.
- Provide updated public information on the current amount of available habitat for SGCN.
- Serve as a means to readily identify the threats/stressors to the habitats these species depend upon and ways of addressing 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 actions and monitoring the results, this WAP 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 WAP is written with a 10-year implementation cycle in mind. This process will allow for continual assessment of the effectiveness of the WAP, and allow for modifications that may be necessary to reach the goal of halting species declines in Louisiana. 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 WAP is working as a planning resource and guidance document. By using both qualitative and quantitative success criteria, we will evaluate the success of the WAP and respond to the diverse nature, scope, and scale of the actions presented herein.

When the 2025 WAP revision occurs, the Technical Committees will meet and the status of all SGCN will be reevaluated. It will be critical to identify criteria to guide the 10-year review, review the major elements of the WAP with those criteria, and identify areas needing revision and the nature of the needed 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 WAP Coordinator for placing the revisions into the WAP. External review is especially important during the revision, both for transparency and an outside perspective.