

Blackbird-Millington Corridor Conservation Area Plan

Community-Based Planning

Integrating, to the greatest extent possible, community values with conservation values is critical to developing a conservation plan that can be successfully implemented. This recognition was a driving force behind conservation planning efforts for the Corridor. To successfully integrate the two required providing multiple means for community involvement, each with the opportunity for residents to provide input and the opportunity for them to learn more about scientist's views on the Corridor. These included the following elements, described below in order of occurrence.

Community Participation in Teams

Early in the process, a group of local landowners was identified and approached by Judy Hopkins to serve on the Outreach Advisory Team. This team was formally convened twice in the spring to go over project goals and to address any questions about the project. Team members were thereafter consulted periodically for input and enlisted to spread the word about upcoming activities. In addition, one member of the Outreach team was selected to serve on, and was a reliable asset to, the Project Advisory Team. All Outreach team members were invited to participate in technical team meetings and workshops to provide a local landowner perspective in developing conservation strategies. Only one accepted this invitation, but he was a very active participant and a great asset to the group at the June Technical Team Strategy Development workshop. Outreach team members were welcomed at any Corridor team meeting or workshop in which they expressed an interest -- one with a Biology background participated in the Core science team meeting to establish measures for key ecological attributes. Through this participation, and the participation of Judy Hopkins in team meetings, a diversity of expert perspectives that included local landowners/residents was made possible.

Community Workshops: Round One

The first round of community workshops, held in mid-March, was designed to introduce residents to The Nature Conservancy and the Corridor planning process, and to identify community values and concerns. Workshops were held at three different places and dates/times in the Corridor study area to make them accessible to residents in different locations and with different schedules:

- Tuesday, March 9, 2004 from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. at the Blackbird Community Center on Blackbird Forest Road in Townsend, Delaware;
- Wednesday, March 10, 2004 from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. at the Blackbird State Forest Office on Blackbird Forest Road in Smyrna, Delaware, and;
- Wednesday, March 10, 2004 from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. at the Millington Elementary School on Route 313 in Millington, Maryland.

Workshops were advertised via announcements to local newspapers, (including the *Middletown Transcript*, *Smyrna Sun Times*, *The News Journal*, and the *Kent County News*) and posted on local bulletin boards and businesses. In addition, a letter of invitation was mailed to a list of roughly 500 Corridor study area residents compiled from mailing lists for the area provided by the Blackbird State Forest, the Delaware DNREC Division of Fish and Wildlife Natural Heritage Program, the Delaware

Agricultural Lands Preservation Program, and The Nature Conservancy's membership. (Later, a list of mailing addresses for landowners was obtained and compiled from county tax records.)

The invitation to the first round of workshops is provided in Appendix IV. The two evening workshops were well-attended (47 and 22 people respectively) but attendance at the afternoon workshop was low (7), leading to the decision to eliminate the third workshop time/format for community meetings. Almost half (46%) of workshop participants completed evaluation forms that provided additional information on values, as well as numerous suggestions for future workshops. Requests for field trips to better acquaint local residents with conservation targets led to the scheduling of three events to highlight coastal plain ponds, mixed hardwood forests and riparian corridors. Most attendees were long-term residents of the Corridor study area, with a lesser number of relative newcomers (5 years or less) and several attendees who have spent their entire lives in the Corridor study area. A significant number of farmers were in attendance at each evening meeting, but these folks were a minority to folks working outside the Corridor study at the Blackbird meeting Millington (not so at the Millington meeting).

A compilation of the results of evaluation forms and meeting notes (from flip charts) is provided in Appendix V. A summary of what was learned from the meetings and the responses to some questions/concerns presented there was prepared to provide as follow-up to residents (Appendix VI). The strongest messages from the workshop were concern over property values and the desire not to be regulated (especially the farming community), concerns over hunting access (pro and con), and the desire to keep the Corridor rural.

Community Workshops: Round Two

A second round of community workshops, held in late-April, was designed to raise community awareness about: 1) the trade-offs involved with different approaches to conservation and 2) the important species and habitats in the Corridor. Two guest speakers were invited to help achieve these objectives: Bill McGowan from the University of Delaware Cooperative Extension Service in Georgetown, facilitated a discussion of conservation approaches and Jim White, expert and author of *Amphibians of Delmarva*, from the Delaware Nature Society, presented a slideshow on Corridor amphibians and the importance of forest and coastal plain pond habitats to them. Once again, workshops were held in two different places and on different dates in the Corridor to make them accessible to residents:

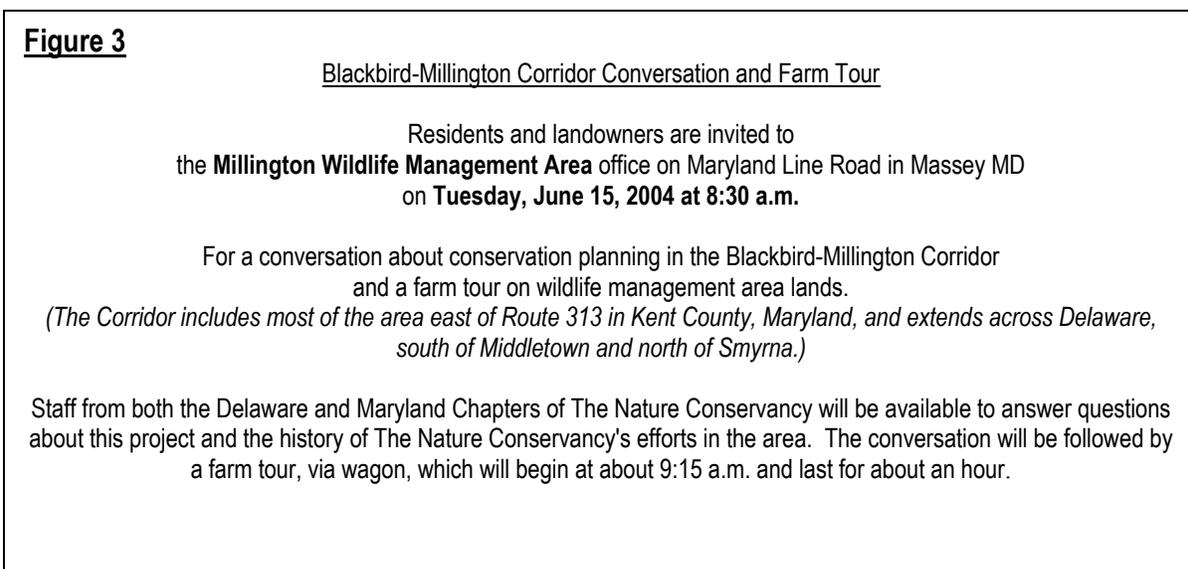
- Monday, April 26, 2004 from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. at the Millington Elementary School on Route 313 in Millington, Maryland.
- Wednesday, April 28, 2004 from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. at the Blackbird Community Center on Blackbird Forest Road in Townsend, Delaware.

Workshops were advertised via announcements to local farm service agency newsletters as well as local newspapers, and bulletin board/business postings. A letter of invitation was mailed to a list of roughly 600 Corridor study area residents, compiled from the prior mailing list, past workshop attendees and large landowners (100+ acres) from county tax records. An insert summarizing the March workshop results and questions/answers was included in this mailing to help stimulate new and renewed interest.

Every effort was made to take into account comments from the first round of workshops to improve the second round, which was also well received and successful. With between 25 and 30 participants at each workshop, attendance in Blackbird fell from the first round, while attendance in Millington rose. A total of 22 people completed evaluation forms, a summary of which is included in Appendix VII. The workshops were successful at getting residents to recognize and think about the trade-offs of conservation, such as balancing private landowner rights with the need to protect important resources for all. As expected, there was some heated discussion around these issues (especially in Millington), but most participants agreed that balancing conservation with other needs is important. Participants enjoyed Jim White's presentation and learning more about the fascinating characteristics, life cycles, and habitats of amphibians in the Corridor.

Field Trips/Tours

In an effort to provide residents with more direct exposure to Corridor habitats and to keep them involved during the time between the second and third rounds of workshops, three field trips/tours were held. All three events included an informal mini-presentation on the planning process and the importance of conservation in the Corridor, followed by a tour led by a local host.



The first event was a **tour of the Millington Wildlife Management Area (MWMA)** farmland hosted by MWMA manager, Bill Martin, and local farmer and neighboring landowner Henry Dierker, who farms MWMA fields under contract. Figure 3 is the post card that was sent to Corridor study area landowners of ten acres or more in Maryland (from county tax parcel data) announcing the event. This event was also organized and scheduled to allow staff from the Maryland Chapter of The Nature Conservancy to discuss past conservation activities in the area -- a direct request from second-round workshop participants in Millington. Attendance was not high (about 6 people) but participation among attendees was enthusiastic, and the farm tour was a valuable learning experience on wildlife management techniques and coastal plain ponds for everyone involved.

The second event was a similar conversation and **tour of the new education center and adjacent forestland and coastal plain pond at the Blackbird State Forest** on August 10th. A similar post card mailing was used to announce this event. Information about the tour was also provided in a newsletter mailed to Corridor study area landowners in July (Appendix VIII.) Once again attendance was low (four people) but the experience was valuable. Low attendance provided the opportunity to spend more time discussing conservation ideas for the Corridor, and allowed Forest Manager Jim Dobson to more personally address questions about the facility and local forests. The tour included not only the inside of the new building, but also the forested area in the local vicinity where trails will be created/improved for education purposes.



The third and final field trip event was a **canoe trip on the Blackbird Creek**. This trip was hosted by Mark Delvecchio and Dave Carter of the Delaware National Estuarine Research Reserve (DNERR) and Delaware Coastal Management Program, which provided the landing site, transportation to the landing site, and the canoes and equipment. The event was originally scheduled for Saturday, September 18th, but had to be postponed to Friday, October 15th due to inclement weather. There was relatively good attendance on October 15th, given the postponement and questionable weather. There were six participants in the canoe trip, all of whom are landowners in the

Corridor study area and were very receptive to conservation efforts.

Landowner Contact and Focus Groups

To get more specific input from landowners, one-on-one landowner meetings and focus groups were utilized. Key parcels were identified (based largely on size) from tax parcel information, and those landowners were contacted to personally invite their participation and input. TNC outreach coordinator Judy Hopkins conducted over 150 visits and phone calls to Corridor study area landowners beginning in June and continuing through the planning process.

Focus groups were developed as a way to get more specific feedback from Corridor study area landowners who were willing to put substantial time into reviewing and discussing strategies. Focus group members came from the original Outreach team, through individual landowner contact, and through evaluation responses at community meetings. A list of draft strategies for the Corridor was disseminated to a group of five landowners in late summer for their review and comments. The focus group met on September 13th and September 27th to discuss the strategies and their comments or suggestions. The input provided on specific strategies and on their presentation to the community proved extremely valuable, and was taken into account in presenting strategies at the final round of community meetings.

Learning as We Go

In an effort to increase exposure to the project among landowners, a series of "newsletters" was planned, but only partially implemented. The first of three newsletters was crafted and mailed to Corridor landowners in June, seeking feedback (in the form of a tear-off) on the approaches presented in the April community workshops.

It was later decided that meaningful feedback from residents could be most effectively provided by a focus group. However, before this decision was made, a second newsletter was crafted and later used as a handout on forests and coastal plain ponds, and how they can be protected. (See Appendix IX)

Community Workshops: Round Three

A third and final round of community workshops, held in mid-November, was designed to present the results of planning efforts so far and to get community feedback on the draft strategies developed by teams. The core presentation summarizing planning efforts and results was made by the TNC project manager¹, but the assistance of various partner agencies/organizations was enlisted to help present strategies to residents in an open-house fashion. Strategy "stations" were set up for the five different types of strategies: 1) Protection, 2) Economic and Compatible Development, 3) Restoration and Management, 4) Communication and Education, and 5) Research. Two people staffed each station, where they reviewed the draft strategies, talked about individual organization/agency roles in implementing one or more of those strategies, and answered questions about the strategies. Once again, workshops were held in different places and on different dates in the Corridor study area to make them accessible to residents:

- Monday, November 15, 2004 from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. at the Millington Elementary School on Route 313 in Millington, Maryland
- Tuesday, November 16, 2004 from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. at the Blackbird Community Center on Blackbird Forest Road in Townsend, Delaware

Workshops were advertised in local newspapers, farm service agencies, and by local bulletin board/business postings and a brochure invitation was mailed to a list of over 700 Corridor study area residents, compiled from county tax records (10 acres or more) and past participants.

¹ The PowerPoint presentation used by the project manager is provided in Appendix XI.

Every effort was made to take into account comments from the previous workshops, events, and focus group meetings in developing the presentation. Attendance at the Millington workshop was disappointingly low, but all 6 people in attendance were extremely receptive to the presentation and were diligent about visiting each strategy station, understanding the strategies, and providing feedback. Attendance at the Blackbird Meeting was much better 26 people attended and participant involvement and enthusiasm for conservation in the Corridor and the strategies themselves was high. A total of 18 strategy feedback forms were received from both workshops, a summary of which is included in Appendix X. The workshops were successful at building resident understanding and getting their feedback on draft strategies, but perhaps more impressive was the overall tone of community cooperation at both workshops. Participants seemed to be at much greater ease with the concept of conservation in the Corridor than at any of the prior workshops, and they openly discussed the possibilities for conservation on their own properties.

Developing and Assessing Conservation Targets

Four ecological systems, or conservation targets, that were identified by scientists as critical for conservation in the Corridor and a fifth target that was developed to capture additional community values: 1) Mixed Hardwood Coastal Matrix Forest, 2) Tidal Wetlands, 3) Coastal Plain Pond Complexes, 4) Riparian Corridors, and 5) Rural Amenities and Ecological Services. Map N displays the four ecologically-based targets together geographically. Each includes a variety of nested targets within it – species, communities, or elements that are important for conservation. Each was analyzed to determine those nested targets, to assess target viability and to assess the stresses and sources of stress that threaten long-term viability.

Developing a community-based conservation “target” based on spring workshop results was a way to capture any community values not specifically provided for in ecologically-based targets and incorporate them in planning and in the application of 5-S principals and tools. The result was a fifth, composite target entitled Rural Amenities and Ecological Services, based largely on the information collected on community values from the first two rounds of community workshops. The values identified as important to the community serve as both the key attributes and nested targets. They include: Open space and the privacy it provides, clean air and water, access to nature at home and nearby, support for agriculture, and community connections. Efforts were made to integrate these community values into the 5-S planning process, identifying indicators by which we might measure these attributes and evaluating the stresses and sources of stress to these attributes. However, target viability analysis and stress analysis were completed using a different methodology than what is described below for ecologically-based targets. (See Rural Amenities and Ecological Services section for information on this analysis.)

Analyzing each target to determine its viability was a major undertaking and a substantial part of the planning process, especially for the Core Science team. Viability analysis involves determining the current status of the target and setting goals for maintaining its health over time. The Core Science Team, aided by reviews of scientific literature and consultations with experts in the field, identified a set of key attributes for each target, and developed a set of indicators that could be used to measure the health of these attributes over time. Whenever possible, a set of thresholds was developed that allowed the current status of the target to be ranked and goals to be set for future status, based on selected

indicators. In some cases, the data or information does not currently exist to establish such thresholds and/or a current or future ranking for the indicator. As long as the indicators were deemed relevant, they were kept with the expectation that additional research and analysis might allow them to be used at some point in the future. Viability analysis for all targets is summarized in Figure 4.

With the help of science and technical team members, each conservation target was also evaluated to determine the greatest threats to its health and sustainability over time. The process of evaluation involved first identifying and rating (High, Medium or Low) the stresses that impact key attributes. Then, the key sources of these stressors were identified and rated as well. Results were then entered into a threats analysis table created to calculate the overall importance of individual sources of stress on each target, and to combine individual target results to identify and rank threats across all targets.

Figure 5 shows the results of this analysis across all five Corridor targets. It was no surprise to find that residential/commercial development and road construction/upgrades come out as the top sources of stress across all Corridor targets. An explanation of the methods/calculations used to rank and compile threats using The Nature Conservancy's threats assessment worksheet can be found in Appendix XIII.

Each of the five targets is described, and the results of viability analysis and threats assessment for each is presented in a separate section, by target. Unless otherwise indicated, target viability analysis was completed for the Corridor study area, which is referred to in following sections of this report as simply "the Corridor."