

1. Introduction

1.1. Purpose, Goal and Guiding Principles

1.1.1. Purpose

Delaware has a long and successful history of wildlife management. Starting in the early 1900s, the forerunner of the Division of Fish and Wildlife (“DFW”) began applying a combination of State and Federal funds first for the management of game animals and sport fish, and then for endangered species - and the habitats that sustain all of them. Animals as diverse as white-tailed deer, striped bass and bald eagle have been restored to prominence after nearly disappearing from our forests, rivers and skies.

As successful as this work has been, it is obviously no longer sufficient. The growing list of declining wildlife, the escalating pace of land development, the emergence of new threats like invasive species and climate change – all point to the urgent need to expand the scope of wildlife management. We now must work to conserve a variety of habitats across the landscape, rather than focusing on individual species. This will result in “keeping common things common” at the same time it continues to protect those species that are rare.

In recognition of this need, the Federal government has begun providing new funding to the states for truly comprehensive wildlife management. As a condition of this funding, each state must prepare a “Wildlife Action Plan” to describe its efforts to conserve “species in greatest need of conservation” while addressing the “full array of wildlife” and wildlife-related issues.

Eight elements are required in the Wildlife Action Plans, and these are covered in various parts of this plan. See Section 1.2, Road Map to the Eight Elements, for a guide to their location.

1.1.2. Goal and Guiding Principles for Conservation Actions

The goal of the Delaware Wildlife Action Plan is to provide strategic direction, and an information and logistical framework, for conserving Delaware’s native wildlife and habitats as vital components of the state’s natural resources. It is based on the following principles:

Conservation of Species vs. Habitats – Target the preservation or restoration of SGCN, but emphasize the management of ecological structure and function of key habitats over management of individual species.

Management of wildlife species in Delaware has traditionally focused on game animals and sport fish, leaving the great majority of Delaware’s wildlife entirely unmanaged. The belief that many non-game species benefit from management for game species is a largely untested assumption, and should not be substituted for direct management of SGCN and their habitats.

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DEWAP is ultimately a plan for “keeping common things common” and therefore avoiding further costly listings of wildlife species as threatened or endangered. This can only be accomplished by managing for a diversity of habitat types. Single-species management should be limited to those with unique life requirements and those requiring targeted action because they are at risk of extirpation.

Management on Conservation Lands – Direct management in state wildlife areas – and state parks and state forests in keeping with their primary missions – towards key habitats and SGCN in the Green Infrastructure Natural Resources Focus Area, in order to protect and restore habitats and species, and to abate the impacts of conservation issues. Encourage Federal and NGO land managers to focus on this same objective.

Many SGCN – and other wildlife species – are “area-sensitive,” requiring relatively large areas of mostly unbroken habitat to ensure their viability. Delaware’s Green Infrastructure Natural Resources Focus Area provides such an interconnected network of forests, uplands and wetlands. State, federal and NGO conservation lands, which generally constitute the largest parcels in this network, are particularly critical for meeting the needs of area-sensitive species. Landscape-level planning among all these agencies and organizations will be necessary to implement Green Infrastructure.

Management on Private Lands – Direct private lands management toward buffering and connecting conservation lands in the Green Infrastructure Natural Resources Focus Area, and towards protecting outlying small patch habitats and SGCN.

Private landowners can often play a role in wildlife diversity conservation, although Delaware’s highly fragmented landscape somewhat limits the scope of this contribution (the state contains more than 300,000 privately owned parcels that are often burdened by structures, roads, utilities and other habitat-fragmenting features, thus making it difficult to manage these lands for area-sensitive SGCN). Therefore, management of wildlife and habitats on private lands can often best be used to buffer and connect public and NGO conservation lands. For some wildlife species that require specialized habitat in small patches, though, most opportunities for conservation may occur on private lands.

Measuring Success – Inventory, Monitoring, Research and Adaptive Management – Establish performance indicators to measure the success of conservation actions and plan implementation. Inventory and monitor species, habitats and impacts of conservation issues, and conduct applied research, so as to facilitate adaptive management.

Too often, conservation planning and resource management suffer from a lack of measurable outcomes and the absence of a feedback loop that incorporates knowledge from earlier successes and failures. Inventory, monitoring, research and adaptive management are the components of a larger effort to measure the success of DEWAP and provide accountability for its implementation.

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Division Operations – Reorganize, revise and/or enhance DFW administrative structure, staffing, budgeting, procedures and practices as necessary to facilitate implementation of DEWAP.

DEWAP is intended for use by all conservation agencies and organizations in the state – as appropriate to their authorities and missions – and full implementation will require extensive cooperation among all parties. However, as the lead agency for the conservation of Delaware’s wildlife resources, DFW is ultimately responsible for the success of the DEWAP. It can assure this success by aligning its structure and procedures to best support Plan implementation.

Partnership Development – Strengthen partnerships with other conservation agencies and organizations to link landscapes, tie together complementary approaches, and leverage investments of time, staff and money.

Although DFW has lead responsibility for implementing DEWAP, the scope of the division’s actions is limited by specific legal authorities and finite logistical resources. Incorporating existing programs, strategies and actions of partners – government, NGO and private – into the Strategy, and coordinating new initiatives with them, greatly increases the effectiveness and efficiency of conservation. This will require a concerted effort by DFW to reach out to these partners and embrace truly collaborative management.

Data Collection and Information Management – Collect, manage and analyze data to support wildlife diversity conservation efforts with sound science.

Baseline tabular and spatial data on the abundance and distribution of many Delaware key habitats are lacking, as is data on many SGCN and conservation issues. Field surveys of key habitats, SGCN and conservation issues, and thorough management and rigorous analysis of this information, are needed to guide adaptive management and otherwise inform decision-making.

Education, Outreach and Enforcement – Increase public knowledge of wildlife conservation issues to develop an understanding of habitats, SGCN, and conservation issues and actions; foster a sense of responsibility for personal choices; actively engage citizens in conserving natural resources; and otherwise cultivate support for wildlife diversity conservation. Enforce regulations to promote responsible behavior in interactions with wildlife.

Education, outreach and enforcement efforts should emphasize that conserving a diversity of wildlife and habitats enhances the quality of life by supporting ecological services, supplying economic benefits, and providing recreational opportunities.

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1.2. Road Map to the Eight Elements

The eight elements required in the Wildlife Action Plans are listed below along with the sections in which they are discussed.

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.

Section 3

2. Descriptions of locations and relative condition of key habitats and community types essential to conservation of species identified in (1).

Section 4

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.

Section 5, Section 6

4. Descriptions of conservation actions proposed to conserve the identified species and habitats and priorities for implementing such actions.

Section 5, Section 6, Section 7

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.

Section 8

6. Descriptions of procedures to review the plan at intervals not to exceed ten years.

Section 9

7. Plans for coordinating the development, implementation, review, and revision of the plan 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.

Section 1.3, Section 10

8. Congress also affirmed through this legislation, that broad public participation is an essential element of developing and implementing these plans, the projects that are carried out while these plans are developed, and

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the Species in Greatest Need of Conservation that Congress has indicated such programs and projects are intended to emphasize.

Section 1.3

1.3. Public Involvement, Partnerships and Coordination

Development of the Delaware Wildlife Action Plan was guided by a group of “key partners” that reviewed the Species of Greatest Conservation Need, Key Wildlife Habitats, and Conservation Issues and Actions. The group consisted of representatives from the following organizations and agencies:

- Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge
- Primehook National Wildlife Refuge
- US Fish and Wildlife Service, Delaware Bay Estuary Project
- Delaware Nature Society
- Delaware Wildlands
- The Nature Conservancy, Delaware Chapter
- Center for the Inland Bays
- Delaware Audubon Society
- Delmarva Ornithological Society
- Ducks Unlimited, Great Lakes/Atlantic Region
- National Wild Turkey Federation, Delaware Chapter
- University of Delaware, Department of Entomology and Wildlife Ecology
- Delaware State University, Agriculture and Natural Resources Department
- Delaware Division of Parks and Recreation
- Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife

Separate meetings were also held for several key state agencies: Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control (other than the Division of Fish and Wildlife), Office of State Planning Coordination, Department of Agriculture and Department of Transportation.

Public input was obtained primarily by means of the plan website that was created on DNREC’s home page (<http://www.dnrec.state.de.us/NHP/information/CWCS2.asp>), which provided an opportunity for visitors to review components of the plan as they were completed, and to submit comments. The website was publicized with a display at several large wildlife-related events, and by means of nearly 1000 letters sent to stakeholder and user groups, homeowners associations, civic and service organizations, and individuals who had expressed interest. Approximately 40 comments were received through the website, and suggestions were incorporated into the Plan as appropriate.

Recommendations for continuing and expanding specific partnerships are contained within many individual Conservation Actions in Section 6. Also, see Section 10 for additional information about partnering and coordination during implementation.

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