
FOREWORD

Since the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission was created more than a half century ago, our state has seen its wild turkey populations restored, anadromous striped bass populations stabilized, the return of bald eagles to the skies, more than two million acres of wildlife habitat conserved, and opportunities for fishing, hunting and wildlife-watching expanded to include North Carolinians of all abilities.

Tasked with creating more sporting opportunities for more people as rapid human population growth has changed the face of the state, the Commission has met this challenge in both rural and urban settings, and even expanded its work from a traditional game animal focus to embrace conservation of all species.

New research, new technology, and new management principles and philosophies have provided the basis for a growing emphasis on the sustainability of all of our state's wildlife resources.

But conservation challenges remain, and so I am honored to introduce the Commission's latest and most innovative effort to serve as responsible stewards of our state's wildlife resources: the North Carolina Wildlife Action Plan.

Developed in compliance with a Congressional mandate, the Plan is the Commission's blueprint for fish and wildlife conservation statewide for the next half century, providing guidance and assistance to other conservation-minded agencies, organizations, industries, academics and individuals.

The Plan builds on all of the conservation efforts that have come before, and it is strengthened by concurrent conservation strategies being implemented by other states across the nation. The Plan proposes a cost-effective, proactive approach to the conservation of entire communities, including those often overlooked fish and wildlife species for which management opportunities were traditionally under-funded.

It is an ambitious Plan, calling for the conservation of a wide array of aquatic and terrestrial species and their associated habitats.

It is a forward-looking Plan, anticipating new management strategies yet to be developed to meet the conservation challenges created by continued growth and diversity in the state's human population.

It is a comprehensive Plan for fish and wildlife, whose success will not be measured by population estimates or growth rates, but by the cultivation of lasting conservation partnerships and by the promise of fish and wildlife resources for future North Carolinians.

John E. Pechmann
Chairman
North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For more than fifty years, state fish and wildlife agencies have benefited from funds accumulated through the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act (Pittman-Robertson), the Federal Aid in Sport Fisheries Restoration Act (Dingell-Johnson), and the Aquatic Resources Trust Fund (Wallop-Breaux), to support the conservation and management of game fish and wildlife species. These funds have been critical to the establishment of long-term state agency planning related to game species. Yet conservation efforts for the majority of fish and wildlife species, those that are not hunted or fished, have in large part been opportunistic and crisis-driven, limited by the availability of funding, and by a lack of strategic approaches to species and habitat conservation. With more than 1,000 species now listed on the Federal Endangered and Threatened species list, the need has never been greater for funding and planning to support the conservation, protection, and restoration of the full array of wildlife species, especially those not covered under traditional funding sources.

In 2001 Congress, recognizing this need, began providing annual funding allocations to supplement existing state fish and wildlife conservation programs. Along with this new funding came the responsibility of each state and territory to develop a Wildlife Action Plan. This North Carolina Wildlife Action Plan is being submitted to meet that obligation, and in the process, provide a conservation blueprint for agencies, organizations, industries, and academics across the state to advance the sound management of our fish and wildlife resources into the future. Within the document, we identify critical fish and wildlife resources and priority conservation needs associated with those resources. Our Plan is strengthened by all of the local, state, and regional conservation planning efforts that have preceded it; these efforts provided us a foundation upon which to build. Our Plan promotes proactive conservation measures to ensure cost-effective solutions (“keeping common species common”) instead of reactive measures enacted in the face of imminent losses.

Five goals form the core of the Plan: 1) to improve understanding of the species diversity in North Carolina and enhance our ability to make conservation or management decisions for all species, 2) to conserve and enhance habitats and the communities they support, 3) to foster partnerships and cooperative efforts among natural resource agencies, organizations, academia and private industry, 4) to support educational efforts to improve understanding of wildlife resources among the general public and conservation stakeholders, and 5) to support and improve existing regulations and programs aimed at conserving habitats and communities.

In order to meet these goals, we engaged hundreds of people across a broad spectrum of agencies and organizations. We continue to seek the feedback and input of conservation stakeholders.

Key themes that are perpetuated through the document include:

- The need to strengthen partnerships among natural resource agencies, organizations, academics, and individuals in order to meet shared goals and visions,
- The need to impact the landscape in a large-scale fashion, and to consider all components of a sustainable community of plants and animals,
- The need to gather additional information and fill knowledge gaps in order to advance our understanding of species and their habitats,
- The need to work cooperatively with private landowners to influence the conservation of natural resources across the majority of the state, and
- The need to educate and engage local governments, planning commissions, and urban publics about the importance of fish and wildlife conservation as a key component of successful land use planning.

The sections of the Plan build on one another in similar fashion to its development. Within the **Approach** section are summaries of key processes and exercises that were carried out in order to develop the Plan, including organizational frameworks, partnerships and stakeholder involvement, and the species prioritization process. Next, in **The State of the State** we provide an overview of the condition of the state's natural resources, threats affecting species and habitats in the state, key conservation partners, and challenges faced in program administration and efficacy. In **Statewide Conservation Strategies** we address four broad-scale conservation issues, including strategies on urban wildlife issues, private lands wildlife management, land conservation priorities, and education and outreach. Following is the most detailed chapter of the report, entitled **Species and Habitat Assessments & Conservation Strategies**. In this chapter, we feature the conservation needs of terrestrial resources within habitats across the three ecoregions of the state (the Southern Blue Ridge, Piedmont, and Mid-Atlantic Coastal Plain), aquatic resources within the 17 river basins in the state, and marine resources at our coast (this section is largely based on the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries Coastal Habitat Protection Plan). Next, we address cross-cutting conservation needs among habitats and basins within **Synthesis of Conservation Priorities**. In **Status and Trends Monitoring** we discuss species and habitat monitoring needs. We outline ways to monitor the implementation of conservation activities, adapt to new information, and revise future iterations of the Plan in our final chapter, **Implementation Monitoring, Adaptive Management, & Review and Revision Procedures**. Last, we present **Acknowledgements**, a comprehensive **Glossary**, a **Key to Abbreviations and Acronyms**, and multiple **Appendices**.

This document was developed at the strategic level, meaning that the implementation of activities identified in the Plan must go one step farther to consider the operational details of involving partners, setting explicit objectives and targets, detailing monitoring protocols, etc. We have organized the format and content of the Plan to provide maximum utility as a resource to set conservation priorities. The Plan is designed to flow from beginning to end, but individual chapters and sections can also be used independently, as stand-alone documents. For example, users may turn to a particular habitat or basin section to review priority needs and recommendations pertaining specifically to their region or expertise area (e.g., the Catawba River basin, maritime forest habitat). We hope that the information provided within each chapter and section translates into clear and objective conservation planning at that level.

Our Plan has been nearly three years in development. The development process was strengthened by the input, feedback, and participation of hundreds of stakeholders across the state (stakeholder representation extended across more than 15 state and federal agencies, 12 non-governmental organizations, five universities, and four private companies). But the completion of this first edition is just the beginning. The Plan is a work in progress, and will continue to evolve during implementation and through future revisions. Though the funding that initiated development of the state Plan continues to be allocated on an annual basis (making long-term planning difficult), there is hope across the nation that our state Strategies will clearly demonstrate to Congress the need for increased and permanent Federal fish and wildlife conservation funding in the future. Regardless of funding sources, the partnerships and collaborative efforts that this Plan fosters should lead to significant accomplishments in the conservation of North Carolina's wildlife resources.