

by Karene Motivans and
Debby Crouse

Recovery Planning in the 21st Century

When the Endangered Species Act (ESA) was passed 30 years ago, it did not mention recovery plans or the need for recovery planning to chart the path for restoring a species. Instead, the ESA relied on reduction of take (through the section 9 prohibitions on direct takes and section 7 consultations on the impacts of federal actions) as the primary means for conserving endangered species. By 1978, the need for an active recovery program was recognized.

The 1978 amendments to the ESA required the development of recovery plans for all U.S. species, unless it is determined that a recovery plan will not

promote the conservation of the species. Nevertheless, statutory guidance as to the form and content of recovery plans was minimal until the 1988 amendments added requirements to include site-specific management; objective, measurable criteria; and an estimate of the time and cost to reach recovery. In addition, all recovery plans are now required to be distributed for public review and comment. Ironically, to this day, there is still no definition of the term “recovery” in the ESA.

Obviously, over the 30 years since passage of the ESA, our perceptions of the need for recovery plans have been



Many public agencies and private organizations have supported and operated programs to recover the nene, or Hawaiian goose.

photo by John & Karen Hollingsworth

evolving. The early recovery plans, written before such documents were required, were brief, action-oriented documents intended for the use of agency biologists. We now have a greater understanding of the biological complexity of recovering a species, the number of endangered and threatened species has increased dramatically, more listed species are on private lands, the role of non-federal organizations and the public in contributing to recovery is better recognized, and more listed species are the subject of controversy. Accordingly, plans are now longer and more detailed, the planning process has become more complex, and the need for recovery plans to serve also as outreach documents has increased.

Today, the process of recovery planning involves bringing species experts, federal and non-federal land managers, landowners, and others together to make decisions on all necessary actions. Recovery plans

organize, coordinate, and prioritize the many possible recovery actions, such as habitat restoration, developing conservation agreements with private landowners, reducing threats, conducting additional research, and monitoring species populations.

Since a recovery plan can be a valuable reference used by many organizations, universities, state and federal agencies, and property owners, it needs to justify the strategy and itemize recovery actions in clear terms. Recently, a study of recovery plans by the Society for Conservation Biology (Clark et al. 2002a & b) identified a number of strengths and weaknesses in recovery plans completed prior to 1999. This analysis has been a useful contribution to the development of new recovery planning guidance (Crouse et al. 2002). The two federal agencies that share primary responsibility for recovery, the Fish and Wildlife Service and NOAA Fisheries, will release new recovery

planning guidance later this year. The guidance strives to 1) ensure consistency in the application of statutory, regulatory, and policy requirements for the development of recovery plans, 2) emphasize certain aspects of planning, and 3) assist in keeping plans useful and up-to-date.

Plan Early and Often

The draft recovery planning guidance requires that an early planning document, a recovery outline, be developed as soon as a species is listed. This outline is a succinct, strategic document used to direct the recovery effort pending the development of a final recovery plan, which can take three years or more to be written, reviewed, and approved. The recovery outline addresses several needs. Actions that are urgently needed at the time a species is listed can be planned quickly and guide recovery in a cohesive way until a complete recovery plan is available.



One of the activities called for in the Red-cockaded Woodpecker Recovery Plan is the installation of nest boxes.

photo by John & Karen Hollingsworth

The guidance recommends several ways to keep the plans up-to-date with the most current scientific information. As threats to the species or habitat change in intensity or type, a threats assessment is a tool that can help planners anticipate recovery needs instead of simply react to changing conditions.

The long-term outlook for any endangered or threatened species depends largely on reducing or eliminating the problems that caused their endangerment. The new guidance calls for an explicit assessment of the sources and relative impacts of the various threats acting on a species, recovery actions that address every currently relevant threat, and recovery criteria that confirm the threats are eliminated or under control.

Stakeholder Involvement

Stakeholders in recovery planning are broadly defined as anyone who has an interest in the recovery of the species or particular actions taken to recover the species, including anyone who may be

affected, negatively or positively, by these actions or anyone who can affect their outcome. One emphasis in the draft recovery planning guidance is to increase stakeholder participation early in the recovery process by: 1) making recovery outlines available to the public over web sites; 2) providing public notification regarding an anticipated timeline for recovery planning and opportunities for stakeholder involvement in planning and implementation; and 3) soliciting information about ways to minimize social and economic impacts of recovery actions.

Establishing relationships with stakeholders early in the recovery planning process is essential to building an effective foundation for the development of recovery strategies. The public and interested stakeholders are encouraged to provide input into the Service's planning process on a variety of issues including, but not limited to, specific species information, methods of habitat restoration, the reduction or elimination of threats, or other actions that may be necessary during the recovery process.

Likewise, stakeholders may become involved through a variety of ways, such as participating at public hearings, submitting written material, or, when they might provide expertise on a particular issue, participating as a member of a recovery team.

Ultimately, any recovery plan is only good as good as its implementation. Many of the changes and additions to the new recovery planning guidance are intended to make plans more relevant, more understandable, and more practical. We hope these changes will lead to better implementation and, therefore, a more effective recovery program.

Literature Cited:

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Captive propagation and reintroduction into the wild was a vital part of the California Condor Recovery Plan. This captive-propagated California condor chick is fed using a condor puppet to avoid having the bird associating people with food.

Photo by Ron Garrison/San Diego Zoo



The reintroduction of captive-propagated pups was also essential under the Red Wolf Recovery Plan.

Photo by George Gentry

Debby Crouse (debby_crouse@fws.gov) is a biologist with the Service's Arlington, Virginia, headquarters office in the Division of Consultations, HCPs, Recovery, and State Grants (703/358-2106). Karene Motivans (karene_motivans@fws.gov) was a biologist in the same office until recently taking a position with the Service's National Conservation Training Center.