STRATEGIC PLAN
Jacksonville Field Office
2009 update

Introduction

First developed in 2006, the Strategic Plan for the Jacksonville Field Office has proven to be a valuable guiding document for our field office. We have remained true to our vision, principles, priorities, and strategies, and **your collective accomplishments have been nothing short of outstanding!**

> ***Our vision, to secure a network of habitats of sufficient quality and extent to insure the viability of our native fish, wildlife, and plants for the use and enjoyment of future generations, remains sound. And our core principles, realistic planning, working smart, and working together, are as applicable today as they were 3 years ago.***

In my 30 years with the Fish and Wildlife Service, I have worked for administrations of both political parties, and in good economic times and bad. At no point, NEVER, has Ecological Services as a program had the resources necessary to accomplish what the laws and regulations seem to envision. Not even close.

So I think the time has come for Service managers to stop asking for one more FTE, or a little more money to build one of these, or buy two of those. We have to change our view of our role in conservation and our basic mode of operation to reflect the resources we have.

We will never have enough time, money or people to address conservation issues, applicant by applicant, project by project. However we already have sufficient resources to be highly successful if we step back from the individual project and take on our responsibilities at the program and landscape levels. We make the rules of the game. We set the standards for acceptability. And we have more than enough latitude to build systems and incentives to achieve a greater goal.

> ***So the key for us is to develop the right mindset. From there, the rest will fall into place.***

Strategic Habitat Conservation

This 2009 update provides a blueprint for the Jacksonville Field Office to continue to move forward in the application of the principles of Strategic Habitat Conservation (SHC). And we will work even more closely with our partners as we carry out our mission.

Our habitat priorities (Attachment 1) remain unchanged, at least for now. However, our program strategies and actions need to be more focused to continue to improve our effectiveness.

In 2008, we conducted a general assessment of our recovery efforts for our 25 lead species in the context of SHC, i.e.: the continuum of Biological Planning; Conservation Design; Program Delivery; Outcome Based Monitoring; and Assumption Driven Research. Our findings were as follows:

- There are population-related objectives for about 60% of our species, but only about half of these are based on current scientific publications. The majority of our objectives are heavily influenced by professional opinion/judgment.
- Up-to-date population models are largely absent from the landscape.
- Equally scarce are habitat objectives that have their roots in population goals.
- Nevertheless, in some 80% of the cases, we think we know where we need to focus our habitat conservation efforts and what we need to do.
- Most species also have ongoing conservation efforts but only half of these are proactive. The remainder is in-box driven.
- There is ongoing monitoring or research for about half of our listed species.
- Over half of the species have at least a "moderate" amount of FWS effort.
- There are several species where there is at least a moderate amount of Federal/State coordination but almost all species have at least a moderate level of overall effort by various partners.

So how do we move forward without an infusion of money or people?

One key effort is already underway.

> ***In 2008, FWC and FWS leaders agreed that the next revision to the State Wildlife Action Plan will reflect the elements of SHC. This "buy-in" of the SHC approach from FWC is a landmark commitment that ensures that the primary conservation agencies in the State of Florida are operating from the same list of priorities.***

However, there is more we can do both in the interim and as opportunities arise.

<u>Biological Planning and Assumption Driven Research</u>

We do an excellent job of taking the species and habitat information we have and getting it to the people who need it. In fact, I would put our internal coordination among recovery and regulatory personnel up against any office in the country. However, our internal assessment in 2008 showed that we are short on basic biological information for a significant percentage of our species.

Action Item:
Identify the information gaps. Our 5-year reviews have been most helpful identifying major issues related to biological information. However, all of our species recovery leads must conduct a meeting with other appropriate office staff to discuss, confirm, and document the primary information shortfalls for each species. What knowledge or tools do we need to do better?

Conservation Design

I think our work in identifying priority habitats in 2006 was an excellent step in the right direction in terms of focusing our efforts. It reflected the most current information we had on our species, as well as the comprehensive assessment of habitats by the state. The 2008 review also showed that for most species, we think we know what we need to do to achieve recovery. So while information may be lacking, confidence is not. Given the outstanding networking of our staff and the excellent job we have done on the 5-year reviews, I am certain we are doing the very best we can based on the current body of knowledge. So I think action in this area is less urgent.

That said the FWC is in the process of updating the "Closing the Gaps" report. This report identifies "Strategic Habitat Conservation Areas" (SHCAs) for focal species, species groups, and natural communities and will be integrated into an overarching document identifying Florida's critical lands and waters (a.k.a. "CLIP).

Action item:
GIS staff should make sure we have or are developing data layers of listed species occurrence information and any geographically-specific conservation needs identified in recovery plans and 5-year reviews (such as acquisition and/or restoration). Then, within 3 months of the completion/release of the updated FWC data, overlay this information on the state SHCAs. When this task is completed, we can then reassess and update our geographic and habitat conservation priorities.

Action item:
Recently, the Region adopted a geographic approach for SHC implementation organized on the Joint Venture boundaries. The approach is titled: "The Six Geographies of the USFWS Southeast Region". We will have representation in any area/group which overlaps with our geographic boundaries. The expectation is to make sure these groups have the information they need from us, improve our networking, and bring back any information/contacts that can improve our conservation efforts.

Conservation Delivery

Frankly, the 2006 Strategic Plan was all about delivery. And it is the area I personally like to focus on. I think it is our responsibility as public servants to make the best use of the tax money we are given to conserve wildlife. The following actions are carryovers from 2006 and reflect the basic tenets of how we need to conduct business to be successful:

- Look for opportunities to help one another.
- Leave the "bowling shirts" at home.
- Respect each other, our peers, and our stakeholders…apply the Golden Rule.
- Communicate! Communicate! Communicate!
- Promote species recovery through education and partnerships.

- Reduce reliance on discretionary Service funds. Take advantage of other conservation programs in Federal and State government.
- Maximize use of technology in delivering technical assistance to the public.
- Streamline regulatory processes to reduce costs/time while increasing effectiveness.
- Stay out of the "weeds". Fix the problem by fixing the program.
- Streamline administrative processes and improve efficiencies in tracking, processing, and reporting.

Since 2006, my commitment to streamlining has done nothing but increase. I believe the future of our delivery efforts will be oriented around management plans for key species, species groups, and habitat management plans. State law requires development of management plans for all state listed species. And the Endangered Species Act, Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act, and Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 provide almost unlimited tools for us to make implementation of these plans a reality.

Action item:
Continue to coordinate closely with FWC in the development of management plans which meet species recovery goals in the State of Florida, and develop MOUs and other tools to facilitate their implementation. I would like to see us complete joint products (e.g., scrub-jay MOU) with FWC that facilitate recovery and streamline conservation efforts in our work area.

Outcome Based Monitoring

Monitoring is the weakest link in virtually every Federal and State conservation and/or permitting effort. When fiscal resources are limited, almost every manager in government will put *doing* something ahead of *checking on* something. Likewise, almost every performance system values production over follow up. So how do we get something with nothing? I don't have a good answer, but I think we can do two things.

Action item:
Identify the follow up that needs to occur, and put that information in front of those who can do something about it or potentially carry it out…agency leaders, the Congress, research entities, volunteer organizations, etc. I want a list of monitoring needs as well as target entities to assist us in accomplishing this much needed element.

Action item:
Improve efficiencies in delivery mechanisms such that in the long term, our role shifts from individual project execution, to overall development and monitoring of program delivery.

Conclusion

I can't overstate how impressed I am with the extraordinary talent and dedication I see exhibited in our office on a daily basis. In order to continue to build on our successes, I am more convinced than ever that the future of Ecological Services as a program lies in our ability to work at the program and landscape level, and to use the SHC model as our checklist to improve the

scientific basis of our efforts. This update to our Strategic Plan will help us make measurable progress in this direction.

Attachment 1 – Habitat Priorities

The Florida Strategy identifies 45 different habitat types. Descriptions of each habitat type, its extent, and a list of the species each supports is contained in the document and is available on the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's website.

For our purposes, each habitat type was evaluated based on its degree of threat on a state-wide basis, extent of occurrence in our work area, value to federal trust species, and program applicability. Three habitats do not occur in the work area. Classifications are as follows:

Tier 1 Habitats are those which are very highly threatened, have very high or high resource value, occur to a great extent in our work area, and have very high program applicability. These include:

Beach/Surf Zone
Coastal Strand
Coastal Tidal River or Stream
Sandhill
Scrub
Spring and Spring Run
Submerged Aquatic Vegetation
Tidal Flat

Tier 2 Habitats are those which have significant threats, substantial habitat values, at least moderate occurrence in our work area, and a high level of program applicability. These include:

Bivalve Reef
Calcareous Stream
Cypress Swamp
Freshwater Marsh and Wet Prairie
Grassland/Improved Pasture
Hardwood Swamp/Mixed Wetland Forest
Inlet
Mangrove Swamp
Natural Lake
Natural Pineland
Salt Marsh

Tier 3 Habitats are those which on occasion merit attention depending on the significance of the potential resource payoff. These include:

Annelid Reef
Bottomland Hardwood Forest
Dry Prairie

Hardwood Hammock Forest
Hydric Hammock
Mixed Pine Hardwood Forest
Reservoir/Impoundment
Shrub Swamp
Softwater Stream

Tier 4 Habitats rarely merit special consideration because of low threats, limited occurrence, low values, or limited program applicability. These include:

Aquatic Cave
Artificial Structure
Bay Swamp
Hard Bottom (marine)
Industrial/Commercial Pineland
Pelagic
Seepage/Steephead Stream
Subtidal Unconsolidated Marine/Estuarine Sediments
Terrestrial Cave
Tropical Hardwood Hammock

Tier 5 Habitats are those where we may have a measurable workload and little resource payoff. In the regulatory arena, these could be considered personnel "sinks". However, they may also present restoration opportunities to higher value habitats. These include:

Agriculture
Canal/Ditch
Disturbed Transitional
Urban/Developed

Coral Reef, Large Alluvial Stream, and Pine Rockland habitats do not occur in our work area.