

## **Priorities of the Southeast Region, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service July 2007**

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the Southeast Region reflects our national mission.

### ***Our Mission***

To conserve, protect, and enhance the fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

Following the Shaping the Future Workshop, the Service Directorate continued its commitment to developing a strategic vision for the Service by identifying its highest priorities to meet the challenges of the future. The Service Directorate considered the responses from over 2000 employees in shaping its decisions. On the National level, the Service Directorate recently implemented a common vision and set of principles and priorities for the Service, shown below.

### ***Our Vision***

We will continue to be a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals, and commitment to public service.

That vision is carried out by a set of guiding principles that we all hold as professional resource managers and ethical public servants.

### ***Our Conservation Principles***

Science	Our work is grounded in thorough, objective science.
Stewardship	Our ethic is to conserve natural resources for future generations.
Service	It is our privilege to serve the American people.
Professionalism	We hold ourselves to the highest ethical standards, strive for excellence and respect others.
Partnerships	We emphasize creative, innovative partnerships.
People	Our employees are our most valued asset.
Legacy	We ensure the future of natural resource conservation by connecting people with nature.

Our reputation and credibility will be based on our vision, our conservation principles, and our priorities. These will be the foundation for shaping our future, and drive decisions about where we should allocate the majority of our people and resources.

### ***Our Highest Priorities:***

- ★ **National Wildlife Refuge System:** Conserving our Lands and Resources
- ★ **Landscape Conservation:** Working with Others
- ★ **Migratory Birds:** Conservation and Management
- ★ **Threatened and Endangered Species:** Showing Recovery Success and Preventing Extinction
- ★ **Aquatic Species:** National Fish Habitat Initiative and Trust Species
- ★ **Connecting People with Nature:** Ensuring the Future of Conservation

As the Director stated in his message of February 7, 2007, “These priorities will become “areas of distinction” for the Service and where we will focus our efforts to meet the challenges ahead. Within these priorities we want to be recognized for excellence. From this point forward, we’ll use these areas of distinction, as shaped by our Conservation Principles, to focus our efforts and, to the extent we can, funding. In doing so, we will work across all Service programs and all Regions, and we will continue to seek opportunities to work with additional partners.”

This document outlines the specific resource priorities for the Service’s Southeast Region and is based on the national vision and the conservation principles and priorities developed by the Directorate. It was developed in collaboration with all Service programs and reflects many of the very difficult and on-going priority setting efforts that have been taking place within the Region and on a national level. It is intended to provide employees, managers, and partners with important information about the priorities of the Region as a whole. It is also for the individual programs to use as they assess workload, set priorities, and invest human and financial resources toward these priorities and the associated goals for the foreseeable future. This document and the southeastern priorities listed will be reviewed periodically and will provide a working format to collectively accomplish our mission in the future.

We will focus our efforts and fiscal resources, whenever possible within program guidelines, on the priorities identified in this document. The priorities outlined here are resource-based and intended to draw our attention to the end results we would like to see on the ground in the Southeast Region. We envision that each Service program can and should contribute to achieving the Service’s mission in each of these priority areas.

Therefore, while each reader may not see mention of his or her particular program within each of our five stated priorities, we challenge each reader to see how they can contribute to each utilizing their expertise. For example, the Environmental Contaminants program contributes a great deal to the health of National Wildlife Refuges through technical assistance on acquisitions and through investigations and clean-up of contamination. The Federal Assistance program contributes to the priority of achieving recovery for imperiled species through their work to grant funds to states for acquisition of land that will support recovery. Technical experts in the Migratory Bird program are essential sources of knowledge for Ecological Services field offices assessing species for potential listing under the Endangered Species Act.

It is our hope that by outlining strategic priorities in this document, all programs will have a collective understanding of regional priorities and needs which will enhance existing cross-program dialogue, improve efficiencies, and contribute to a stronger delivery of the mission we all share. We hope that this document and the ideas it represents will be used to strengthen our resolve to show measurable and positive results from our efforts and that by working together on common goals we can achieve more than any of us could apart.

## **Implementation**

We appreciate your feedback because your comments helped us further refine this document. The document is intended to help define how we work as “One Service” to meet our vision and the identified priorities. We intend to take this document and continue to integrate your ideas and those of our partners to ensure we have employee and stakeholder support in the Southeast Region’s priorities when it is updated.

Within the larger landscape of the Southeast Region, our trust resource responsibilities lead us to focus on area-based resource management (i.e., National Wildlife Refuge System) as well as achieving defined population objectives for trust resources. Our priorities and responsibilities lead us to manage this way as well as to lead others who can help us achieve our mission in the Southeast.

We challenge you to identify opportunities or tools that further our mission and help us work on our priorities. One example of a tool that affects our success in our priority areas includes our work in invasive species management. We recognize that invasive species are some of the greatest threats to meeting our mission for our priority resources. Because of this, it is critical that we incorporate into our efforts the prevention, eradication, and otherwise control of the invasive species with the most severe impact on our priority resources.

As we move forward, we must acknowledge that we cannot be all things to all people. We believe setting priorities is vital to the future of the Service and for the benefit of our employees, our lands, and the trust resources. We need to be recognized for excellence in these areas and if we focus our efforts we will gain credibility and public support. *Please note that as we implement the vision and work toward these priorities, some employees will be asked to take on new responsibilities—not more work, but different work—instead of what they do today.* This agency has proven over and over that we are adaptable and focused on results. We need your help. Through our everyday work we will need to reshape the Service based on our strategic vision, conservation principles, and priorities. We ask that each of you take time to review the mission and these priorities, initiate conversations with your supervisor and colleagues about them, and identify your role within them.

Supervisors will need to ensure staff know the regional and program/office priorities. This will help staff make decisions every day about how they spend their time and what they work on first. This can be done by simply working on a stepped down list of priorities, or by working consistent with the priorities articulated in station plans and/or other planning documents.

Supervisors will need to work with their staff to identify programs, projects, or other activities that they may discontinue or greatly de-emphasize in order to work on higher priority activities.

Supervisors will share this information with the program ARDs to ensure those activities they propose to de-emphasize will be supported by leadership and are consistent with the stated priorities. Additionally, this will help facilitate the sharing of ideas and efficiencies that a station may be using.

If the priorities are clearly defined and approved, it will give the staff the needed confidence that leadership will support them when they say "no" to low priority work, and will help us achieve our most important work more effectively. Additionally, documents describing program/office priorities should be shared with staff and reviewed and discussed at least annually to make appropriate adjustments as needed.

### **Highest Priorities for the Southeast Region**

As we endeavor to embrace the Director's national priorities outlined above and deliver these in the Southeast, the Regional Director expects that managers and employees will look across our traditional organizational programs. We will focus on each of the priorities as outlined below and bring together programs that can help meet the stated objective. Working together will require us to focus less on programs and focus more on the objective. The implementation of these priorities and objectives at the geographic and programmatic level will determine our success and the level to which we can provide for our public trust resources in the coming years. All of our programs must work cross-programmatically to deliver the objectives of each of these priorities.

For example, through effective enforcement of Federal laws, the Service's Law Enforcement Programs (i.e., Office of Law Enforcement and Refuge Law Enforcement) contribute to Service efforts to recover endangered species, conserve migratory birds, preserve wildlife habitats, safeguard fisheries, combat invasive species, and promote international wildlife conservation. In support of Service programs, the Law Enforcement program focus on potentially devastating threats to wildlife resources - illegal trade, unlawful commercial exploitation, habitat destruction, and environmental hazards. Special agents and wildlife inspectors investigate wildlife crimes; regulate wildlife trade; help Americans understand and comply with wildlife protection laws; and work in partnership with international, Federal, State, and Tribal counterparts to conserve wildlife resources.

Additionally, in 2005 the Office of Law Enforcement developed a long-term strategic plan and redefined its priorities to guide its work in a changing world. Through the development of this plan, law enforcement managers redefined priorities, which resulted in some areas being de-emphasized. This in turn provided the staff necessary guidance to help them make decisions about how work is prioritized, resources are allocated, and time is spent.

# 1. NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM – Conserving Our Lands and Resources

*Objective: Administer a world class network of lands for the benefit of fish and wildlife and the public through the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS).*

It is the priority of the Southeast Region to meet the purpose of each refuge and the mission of the system to 1) provide for the conservation of fish, wildlife, and plants, and their habitats within the System; 2) ensure that the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the System are maintained for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans, and 3) recognize compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses as the priority general public uses of the System through which the American public can develop an appreciation for fish and wildlife.

In accordance with the 2006 Work Force Management Plan for the Southeast Region of the NWRS, refuges have been categorized as focus refuges, targeted reduction refuges and unstaffed satellite refuges. These categories were developed to help us manage severe fiscal and staffing reductions which have been occurring throughout the refuge system. The classification is designed to assist in making decisions on where to place key staff and fiscal resources to best address the challenges facing all units of the National Wildlife Refuge System. For example, staff, equipment or dollars may be relocated to a Focus Refuge which would serve as a source of support for targeted reduction refuges. If such resources are eliminated, we would seek to support priority work at targeted reduction or satellite refuges through the use of remaining resources at focus refuges or other units or programs with an ability to assist. The classification should not be construed as a diminished commitment to the mission of the System or to fulfilling the purpose of individual refuges.

**A. Focus Refuges**, where the Service will strive to maintain or enhance existing field operations. These refuges are identified because of the significance of the natural resources, important opportunities for priority wildlife-dependent recreation, or other highly significant values that make their operations top priorities for the Service.

Alligator River NWR, NC  
A. R. M. Loxahatchee NWR, FL  
Big Branch Marsh NWR, LA  
Cabo Rojo NWR, PR  
Cache River NWR, AR  
Cape Romain NWR, SC  
Carolina Sandhills NWR, SC  
Felsenthal NWR, AR  
J.N. “Ding” Darling NWR, FL  
Merritt Island NWR, FL  
Mississippi Sandhill NWR, MS  
National Key Deer Refuge, FL

Noxubee NWR, MS  
Okefenokee NWR, GA  
Reelfoot NWR, TN  
Sabine NWR, LA  
Savannah NWR, GA  
St. Marks NWR, FL  
Tennessee NWR, TN  
Tensas River NWR, LA  
Upper Ouachita NWR, LA  
Wheeler NWR, AL  
White River NWR, AR  
Yazoo NWR, MS

**B. Targeted Reduction Refuges**, where reductions in operations will occur. They may have significant natural resources, opportunities for priority wildlife-dependent recreation, or other significant values, but their priority is less than focus refuges.

Atchafalaya NWR (LA)	Hillside NWR (MS)
Bald Knob NWR (AR)	Hobe Sound NWR (FL)
Bayou Cocodrie NWR (LA)	Holla Bend NWR (AR)
Bayou Sauvage NWR (LA)	Lacassine NWR (LA)
Big Lake NWR (AR)	Lake Ophelia NWR (LA)
Black Bayou Lake NWR (LA)	Lake Woodruff NWR (FL)
Blackbeard Island NWR (GA)	Lower Hatchie NWR (TN)
Bon Secour NWR (AL)	Lower Suwannee NWR (FL)
Cameron Prairie NWR (LA)	Mackay Island NWR (NC)
Catahoula NWR (LA)	Mandalay NWR (LA)
Cedar Island NWR (NC)	Mattamuskeet NWR (NC)
Chassahowitzka NWR (FL)	Morgan Brake NWR (MS)
Chickasaw NWR (TN)	Mountain Longleaf NWR (AL)
Choctaw NWR (AL)	Overflow NWR (AR)
Clarks River NWR (KY)	Panther Swamp NWR (MS)
Coldwater River NWR (MS)	Pea Island NWR (NC)
Crocodile Lake NWR (FL)	Pee Dee NWR (NC)
Cross Creeks NWR (TN)	Pelican Island NWR (FL)
Crystal River NWR (FL)	Piedmont NWR (GA)
Culebra NWR (PR)	Pocosin Lakes NWR (NC)
Dahomey NWR (MS)	Pond Creek NWR (AR)
D'Arbonne NWR (LA)	Red River NWR (LA)
Delta NWR (LA)	Roanoke River NWR (NC)
Egmont Key NWR (FL)	Sandy Point NWR (VI)
Ernest F. Hollings ACE Basin NWR (SC)	Saint Vincent NWR (FL)
Eufaula NWR (AL)	Saint Catherine Creek NWR (MS)
Florida Panther NWR (FL)	Santee NWR (SC)
Grand Bay NWR (MS)	Vieques NWR (PR)
Grand Cote NWR (LA)	Waccamaw NWR (SC)
Harris Neck NWR (GA)	Wapanocca NWR (AR)
Hatchie NWR (TN)	

**C.** All other national wildlife refuges in the Southeast Region are categorized as **Unstaffed Satellite Refuges**. These are refuges that have never been staffed and those where staffing will be eliminated. Regardless of this status these units are still a part of the National Wildlife Refuge System and legal obligations for management of the units will remain. For example, we will retain the need for providing basic protection to the refuge unit, e.g., timber clearing, dumping. As such they will require continued monitoring and support on an as needed basis.

## **2. LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION - Working with Others**

*Objective: Ensure the Service's Southeast Region addresses conservation on a landscape scale through collaborative, proactive approaches.*

We recognize that we cannot achieve our mission alone and that it is inherently necessary for us to work in partnership with landowners, other agencies, and non-governmental organizations to meet our mission. Therefore we strive to operate mainly through collaborative approaches where we rely on our expertise and our ability to meet common goals. We need to work proactively and engage in a strategic approach to conservation, which is more effective than an opportunity-driven approach. As a science-based organization, we will use tools such as Strategic Habitat Conservation (SHC) and structured decision making. SHC is an adaptive management approach to conservation planning, implementation, and evaluation with our partners. SHC is strategic because the on-the-ground actions are guided by biological planning and design that is directly linked to the improvement of the fish and wildlife resources and is measured through monitoring and research. This approach will help us and our partners meet common, high priority conservation objectives while leveraging resources. We must, and will, work across all Service programs and across the region with our partners to accomplish our goals.

The Service has traditionally approached conservation with an emphasis on “more” - more protection, more restoration, and more management ... we find opportunities in our programs, take action, and then report on completed projects using standard measurements, such as number of acres, river miles, and funds expended. Recent advances in the field of conservation science, however, are leading us in a new direction – a strategic pursuit of sustainable landscapes. Enhancing our capacity to execute conservation priorities around more specific “how much more” and “where” questions is our best hope of increasing efficiencies and effectiveness as an agency in climates of uncertain budgets and heightened accountability.

SHC will help programs work synergistically for the greater good. SHC can also provide a framework under which we can feel comfortable saying “no” to some actions in favor of saying “yes” to the best actions. Developing and implementing this strategy will require participation from all programs at all levels from the regional office to the field. It will require that we take the time to critically think about our long term goals and priorities and what actions we can take today, tomorrow, and in the future to achieve them. It will require that we evaluate our existing capacity for developing and using the tools necessary for SHC and work closely with our partners – USGS, state wildlife agencies, and conservation groups to maximize our contribution to developing sustainable landscapes.

To more fully implement our philosophy of working with others, the Service will need to draw upon all of our management programs that are available for working with States and other partners. One way to facilitate this collaboration would be through the administration of the State Wildlife Grants. This program has become the nation's core program for managing wildlife and their habitat which has resulted in new and stronger conservation partnerships. For the first time in history each of the states and territories have completed a State Wildlife Action Plan, which are strategic plans for wildlife conservation. This is the first time such a comprehensive planning effort has been undertaken and it will result in strategic and cost effective conservation

decisions. The SWAP can act as a catalyst for new and stronger partnerships for coordinated conservation in every state across the nation.

### **3. MIGRATORY BIRDS - Conservation and Management**

*Objective: Ensure healthy populations of migratory birds, including those that provide outdoor recreation for the benefit of the public.*

In 2005, the Service initiated a new strategy to better measure its success in achieving its bird conservation priorities. The "focal species strategy" involves campaigns for selected species to provide explicit, strategic, and adaptive sets of conservation actions required to return species to healthy and sustainable levels. The Focal species identified are a subset of the list of the Birds of Management Concern, and many of the same species we identified are also identified by our partners as high priorities. These species also demonstrate the breadth of management challenges faced by the Service and our partners, and by improving their status, all migratory birds and other wildlife will benefit. The Service must work closely with partners, such as the states in the southeast in the implementation of their State Wildlife Action Plan, to achieve these benefits across the landscape. The Service commits to placing priority emphasis on these birds, and working with our partners during the next ten years to work on the conservation efforts that are underway that will benefit these species. For example, the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program now considers focal species when ranking potential projects; Habitat Goals and Objectives Workshops are being held across the Region to discuss integrating management actions on refuges to benefit focal species; and the Office of Law Enforcement conducted a sting operation, indicting six individuals for selling, among other birds, painted buntings, which is an important focal species in our region. Focal species demonstrate characteristics such as high conservation needs, representative of a broader group of species sharing the same or similar conservation needs, high level of current Service efforts, potential as a unifier for partnerships, and great likelihood that factors affecting their status can realistically be addressed. Strategies for the management of focal species – which are not our only priority birds to focus efforts on – will be incorporated into larger over-arching, ongoing strategic plans, specifically in the context of landscape-scale, integrated bird conservation.

**A. Gulf Coast Marsh Birds:** Mottled Duck, King Rail

Priority Geographies: Gulf Coastal Prairie (esp. West GC), Caribbean

Priority Habitats: coastal marsh

**B. Wading Birds:** Reddish Egret, Great White Heron

Priority Geographies: Everglades, Florida Bay, Gulf Coastal Prairie

Priority Habitats: flats, bays, estuaries, mangroves

**C. Migratory Bird PART Focal Species:** Painted Bunting, Cerulean Warbler, Snowy Plover, American Oystercatcher, King Rail

Priority Geographies: South Atlantic Coastal Plain (includes southeastern Virginia) and Peninsular Florida

Priority Habitats: maritime forest, agriculture and commercial forest, backyards

**D. Interior Forest Breeding Birds and Wintering Waterfowl:** Swallow-tailed Kite, Swainson's Warbler, Ivory-billed Woodpecker, Prothonotary Warbler, Rusty Blackbird, wintering waterfowl

Priority Geographies: MS Alluvial Valley, South Atlantic Coastal Plain (includes southeastern Virginia), East Gulf Coastal Plain

Priority Habitats: bottomland hardwoods, supplemental managed habitats (e.g., natural moist soil units)

**E. Interior Forest Breeding Birds:** Cerulean Warbler, Golden-winged Warbler, Wood Thrush, Worm-eating Warbler, Black-throated Blue Warbler

Priority Geographies: Appalachians, Central Hardwoods

Priority Habitats: deciduous forests, glades/open woodlands, bottomlands of the Central Hardwoods Bird Conservation Region

**F. Shorebirds and Atlantic Coast Marsh Birds:** American Oystercatcher, Wilson Plover, Red Knot, migrating shorebirds; Nelson's & Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows, rails

Priority Geographies: South Atlantic Coastal Plain (includes southeastern Virginia)

Priority Habitats: beach, marsh

**H. Open Pine Forest Birds:** Bachman's Sparrow, Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Henslow's sparrow

Priority Geographies: East Gulf Coastal Plain, South Atlantic Coastal Plain (includes southeastern Virginia), upper Peninsular Florida

Priority Habitats: longleaf pine, longleaf pine savannahs

#### **4. THREATENED AND ENDANGERED SPECIES AND IMPERILED SPECIES – Showing Recovery Success and Prevent Extinction**

*Objective: Demonstrate recovery success and bring threatened and endangered and other imperiled species to a condition of self-sustaining populations.*

While we consider addressing the needs of all imperiled species and their habitats important, with declining funding we recognize that we cannot address them all adequately. We should strive to work closely with partners who share common goals so that our funding is leveraged to the greatest extent possible.

We should work very closely with each state in the southeast in the implementation of their State Wildlife Action Plan through which states can address the needs of declining species and the habitats they depend upon and hopefully arrest declines before listing under the ESA would be necessary. Within the agency, all programs should look for ways to integrate these objectives so that they are contributing strategically to the conservation of imperiled species when possible. Additionally, we need to also focus on the importance of other federal lands, such as the National Forests, National Seashores and military bases that are essential conservation cornerstones for

some of the imperiled species. Our Federal partners are a very important piece in the conservation and recovery of species, while maintaining a tight focus on priority federal trust resources.

We will focus our efforts internally on conservation efforts that will result in species reaching the point of de-listing or reclassification from endangered to threatened, and showcasing those successes; preventing the extinction of critically imperiled species; and preventing the need to list imperiled species under the ESA. We expect that these lists of species will be fluid. As we and others are able to implement successful conservation actions, species status may change and their inclusion on these lists may change.

**A. Species potentially eligible for downlisting or delisting under the ESA:**

Wood stork	Snail darter
Louisiana black bear	Cape Fear Shiner
Key deer	Wacamaw Silverside
Large-flowered skullcap	Gray bat
Tennessee purple coneflower	Least tern
Cumberland sandwort	Running buffalo clover
Brown pelican	West Indian manatee
Okaloosa darter	Redhills salamander
Apalachicola rosemary	Magazine Mountain shagreen
White-haired goldenrod	
Short's goldenrod	
Puerto Rican boa	

**B. Species where actions are needed to prevent their extinction:**

Puerto Rican parrot	Shinyrayed pocketbook
Carolina heelsplitter	Ochlocknee moccasin shell
Lower keys marsh rabbit	Conasauga logperch
Key Largo woodrat	Red Wolf
Florida panther	shortnose sturgeon
Mississippi gopher frog	pallid sturgeon
Perdido Key beach mouse	Alabama sturgeon
Ivory-billed woodpecker	Relict darter
Oval pigtoe	
Fat threeridge	

**C. Species where actions could preclude the need for an ESA listing:**

Barren's Topminnow	Robust Redhorse
Yellowcheek darter	Surprising Cave Beetle
Rush darter	Swallow-tailed Kite
Gopher tortoise (unlisted range)	American Oystercatcher
American oystercatcher	Striped Newt

Florida leafwing  
Whorled sunflower  
King rail

Clapper rail  
Lesser scaup

**D. Other imperiled species, not otherwise noted, that are central to the purpose of a National Wildlife Refuge.** Priority species to maintain at the current level or improved status at refuges that are not listed as focus refuges under the land based management category.

American crocodile  
Loggerhead sea turtle  
Mississippi sandhill crane  
Hawksbill sea turtle  
Florida scrubjay  
Watercress darter

Whooping crane  
Ozark cavefish  
Green sea turtle  
Leatherback sea turtle  
Alabama beach mouse

## 5. AQUATIC SPECIES - National Fish Habitat Initiative and Trust Species

*Objective: Restore and maintain aquatic trust species to self-sustaining populations for the benefit of the public.*

The southeastern U.S. continually ranks as one of highest aquatic biodiversity hot spots on the earth. The species groups that are proportionately the most imperiled – mussel, crayfish, and amphibians – consist entirely or primarily of freshwater species. Further, the southeastern U.S. has the world's greatest diversity of temperate freshwater fishes. Over half (> 500 species) of North America's entire freshwater fish fauna occurs in the region, and new species continue to be discovered and described. The challenge and opportunity for conserving aquatic trust species is enormously complex and dynamic and requires a concerted and focused effort.

The need to protect, restore, and enhance aquatic habitats has never been greater. Since 1900, 123 aquatic freshwater species have become extinct in North America. North America's temperate freshwater ecosystems may be declining as quickly as tropical forest ecosystems. Of the 822 native freshwater fish species in the United States, 39% are at risk of extinction. Forty-three percent of federally-listed threatened and endangered species rely to some extent on wetland habitats.

Our regional priorities are largely defined on species-level information, but we acknowledge that watershed processes and functions must still be considered in the context of landscape conservation efforts for these taxa.

### Priorities for Aquatic Species

In the Southeast Region, we will focus on the management of imperiled aquatic species (addressed under Priority #4), interjurisdictional fish, and our fisheries mitigation responsibilities. In addition, we will work toward ensuring that the effects of Federal water

development projects (e.g., FERC projects) on aquatic species and the adjacent landscape are fully mitigated.

Our focal species for interjurisdictional fish include: Atlantic sturgeon, lake sturgeon, paddlefish, red drum, striped bass, river herring, Alligator gar, Alligator snapping turtle, American eel, and American shad.

All programs within the Service are responsible for ensuring that the effects of Federal water development projects (e.g., FERC projects) on the aquatic species and the landscape are fully mitigated. Programs need to collaborate and work cross programmatically with federal sponsors to minimize and mitigate the effects on fish, wildlife and their habitats throughout the southeast. We will implement fisheries mitigation associated with existing Federal water development projects, as required in TN, AR, GA, KY, and AL, including:

- 1) minimizing adverse project impacts (e.g., designing and constructing fish-passage facilities);
- 2) rectifying project impacts (e.g., restoring aquatic habitat); and
- 3) compensating affected parties for project impacts (e.g., enhancing fishery resources in reservoirs and tail waters by providing alternative fish better suited for the altered habitat).

Cost reimbursement for these actions for Federal water development projects will continue to be a major objective of our mitigation efforts.

#### Priorities for Aquatic Habitats

Because it is an effective landscape level, partnership-based approach, the Southeast Region will support the National Fish Habitat Initiative (NFHI) as a primary way to conserve aquatic habitats. The NFHI is incorporating ideas and efforts from a number of partners to foster geographically-focused, locally driven, and scientifically based partnerships to protect, restore, and enhance aquatic habitats and reverse the decline of fish and aquatic species. The National Habitat Action Plan that has been developed through the NFHI is a science-based, voluntary, and non-regulatory partnership that will function through the National Fish Habitat Board and a set of regional partnerships. For the Southeast Region, we will deliver this action plan primarily through the Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership (SARP).

Through SARP, we will take a comprehensive approach to watershed conservation, considering the aquatic flora and fauna within the integrated landscape. We will coordinate the use of new and existing science-based data and expertise, and combine conservation dollars to improve outcomes and stem or possibly reverse the decline of aquatic species and their habitats. We will support SARP's development of the Southeast Aquatic Habitat Plan, a regional foundation for aquatic habitat conservation and restoration.

## **6. CONNECTING PEOPLE WITH NATURE**

*Objective: Connect people with nature and ensure the future of conservation by helping the public understand that they have a stake in conservation.*

Accomplishing our mission depends on partners - individuals and organizations alike - willing to work with us to conserve the nature of America. It also depends on citizens who believe that what we do everyday benefits them and their quality of life. Studies show a link between the attitudes and behaviors of adults toward nature and their direct interaction with nature as a child. Unfortunately, today's children are more disconnected from nature than ever before. This represents a serious threat to the ability of the Service and our conservation partners to conserve the nation's fish and wildlife resources.

Luckily, there is a growing national effort to address the disconnect between children and nature, and its consequences on children's health and well-being. The Service has an opportunity to participate in this national movement and help reconnect people – and in particular children – with nature. A national Children and Nature Working Group has been formed with representatives from each region. It will develop recommendations for the Children and Nature Executive Committee made up of members of the Directorate. Together, these teams will guide the Service's effort to reconnect children and nature.

Throughout the Southeast Region, Service employees across all programs are already providing opportunities for children and families to connect with nature. Through festivals and special events, junior ranger and junior biologist programs, fishing rodeos, school field trips, teacher workshops, school yard habitat projects, outdoor clean-up and trail maintenance days, and many other activities, the Service is bringing nature to people and people to nature. Additionally, through the partnerships and relationships maintained between the states agencies and the Service's various grant programs we support construction and operation of facilities (e.g., construction of boat access ramps) and coordination of outdoor and environmental education events (e.g., youth hunting and fishing mentoring programs) that connect people with nature at a state level. Plugging into the growing national movement to connect children with nature is an opportunity to enhance our ongoing efforts.

In concert with the national Children and Nature Working Group, the Southeast Region is engaging field staff from all programs to participate in a regional Children and Nature dialogue. This group will work with the regional representative to the Children and Nature Working Group to help guide both national and regional children and nature efforts. Outcomes may include:

- Production of regional and national outreach materials (e.g., brochures, fact sheets, websites, etc.) and use of consistent children and nature messages on appropriate materials;
- Establishment of new non-traditional partnerships (e.g., healthcare providers) to reach key audiences;
- Identification of new or refocused opportunities to connect children to nature;
- Initiation of at least one new school yard habitat project, which serves as a model for other effective school yard habitat projects; and
- Creation of a regional network of professionals to share ideas, discuss ways to implement the ideas, and how to achieve success.