

VI. Executive Summary

Development of Vermont's Wildlife Action Plan (WAP) (formerly the Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy) began in January of 2004. Completion of a WAP by October 1, 2005 is a requirement of the federal State Wildlife Grants (SWG) program. The goal of both the State Wildlife Grants program and the WAP is to prevent wildlife from becoming endangered through early, strategic efforts to conserve wildlife and habitat. SWG provides funding and the WAP provides the strategic guidance. Since 2001, Vermont has received or become eligible for more than \$3 million in State Wildlife Grant funds.

This is an historic effort. Never before has Vermont undertaken such a comprehensive review of its wildlife. Moreover, every state and territory in the nation is also developing Action Plans. Combined, this is the largest wildlife conservation effort in the US—ever. Wildlife biologists, ecologists, sportsmen and other conservationists, business leaders and state and federal agencies representing more than 60 entities have signed on as Conservation Partners to work with the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department (VFWD) to create Vermont's Wildlife Action Plan.

This report is the result of extraordinary effort. Employing a rigorous science-based process using the best available existing information WAP technical teams of VFWD staff and Conservation Partners assessed the status all of Vermont's birds (268), fish (94), mammals (61), reptiles and amphibians (42) and many, many groups of invertebrates ranging from mussels, to beetles, to butterflies (estimates of Vermont invertebrate diversity range from 15,000 to 36,000 species).

Following Congressional requirements, the WAP focuses on Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN)—wildlife with declining populations; wildlife that are threatened or potentially threatened; and, wildlife that are so little known in the state that experts cannot yet ascertain their status. Congress further required that each WAP include the following eight elements:

1. Identification of the distribution and abundance of SGCN
2. Descriptions of the location and condition of key habitats
3. Descriptions of key problems and research needs for SGCN and their habitats

4. Prioritized conservation strategies
5. Monitoring plans for species, habitats and conservation actions
6. A process to review and revise the WAP at intervals not to exceed ten years
7. Coordination with other wildlife and land management plans
8. A public involvement process.

Identification of Species of Greatest Conservation Need began in May of 2004. By September 2004 technical teams had selected 143 vertebrates, 191 invertebrate and 577 plants as Species of Greatest Conservation Need. (Note that plants are not eligible for SWG funds, but our hope is that conservation of wildlife SGCN will benefit the plants).

From September 2004 through May 2005 technical teams completed element numbers two through seven above and an interim review of conservation strategies (a.k.a. the reality test) by the Conservation Strategy Review Team occurred in January and February of 2005. Review of the WAP by Agency of Natural Resources commissioners, conservation partners and the general public ran from April through July of 2005.

Problems and Solutions

The problems most frequently identified as impacting SGCN are not new concepts to those concerned about wildlife conservation, they include:

- Information needs and data gaps critical to conservation success
- Loss of habitat (from conversion, degradation, fragmentation and lack of needed successional stages in appropriate juxtaposition)
- Impacts of roads and trails
- Pollution and sedimentation
- Invasive species
- Climate change

As a wildlife conservation guide for the entire state—not just the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department—the WAP includes some strategies that almost any individual or organization can implement. The most common strategies proposed here to alleviate problems impacting SGCN also aren't new: they include conducting habitat restoration, providing education and technical

assistance to landowner and land managers, providing financial and economic incentives and encouraging wildlife-compatible resource use.

Moreover, the recommendations in this report underscore the need for proactive, cost-effective conservation efforts and increased collaboration, coordination and sharing of data and expertise among all those interested in wildlife conservation. The WAP and its recommended strategies help realize these needs by:

- Providing a common conservation vision to guide state and federal agencies as well as sportsmen's and non-profit conservation organizations.
- Putting existing land and resource management and conservation needs into a broader context, providing recognition for the contributions that landowners and land managers are already making towards a long-term conservation strategy.
- Building a reliable, science-based data set to provide a "big picture" view (biophysical region and statewide) of Vermont's wildlife resources to establish current conditions and to measure changes into the future. These data will allow state agencies to work with the public and private sector more effectively.
- Identifying areas where conservation activities will provide the greatest benefit to cost ratio (thereby increasing the effectiveness of limited conservation resources).
- Allowing use of existing programs to more effectively provide incentives or technical assistance to private landowners for voluntary actions to conserve natural resources on private lands and identify the need for additional landowner incentive or technical assistance programs.

Finally, a monitoring program will collect new data and provide an ongoing assessment of the impact and effectiveness of conservation strategies. This information along with regular communication and coordination with conservation partners will serve as the backbone of a adaptive management program to fine-tune conservation strategies and ensure that Vermont's Wildlife Action Plan will remain a vital road map for wildlife conservation efforts.

The Future of Wildlife Conservation

State Wildlife Grants funding comes at a critical time. The traditional funding source for wildlife conservation at the state level has been sportsmen. Hunting, fishing and trapping licenses and taxes on their gear account for nearly 80% of Vermont's wildlife conservation funds. But the pressures on wildlife have changed and increased in intensity since these funding programs began in the early decades of the 1900's. Today, these funds, most of which are dedicated for game and sportfish species, are stretched thin as the Fish & Wildlife Department addresses new issues and problems such as development and Act 250 reviews, pollution, invasive species and overabundant wildlife. Furthermore there are new and expanding constituencies interested in wildlife and putting pressure on wildlife including hikers, bird watchers, and off-road vehicle users.

The State Wildlife Grants program is not intended to replace sportsmen's dollars. Rather, it will take some of the weight of conservation funding off the shoulders of sportsmen and broaden our capacity to conserve wildlife.

The task of conserving our Species of Greatest Conservation Need is challenging but we know success is possible from our history with wildlife conservation successes such as the wild turkey, white-tailed deer, moose, common loon, fisher and peregrine falcon. Conserving wildlife is in all our best interests. It means reducing the potential imposition of regulatory requirements on Vermont businesses and communities that come with threatened and endangered species listings. It means healthier ecosystems upon which we all depend. And it means a Vermont rich in wildlife which we can all enjoy.

The Wildlife Action Plan and State Wildlife Grants dollars mark the start of a new era in wildlife conservation, one where we can keep common species common.