

IOWA

Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy: From Planning to Implementation

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OVERVIEW

As part of a distributed graduate seminar funded by the National Council for Science and the Environment's (NCSE) Wildlife Habitat Policy Research Program, eight universities conducted research on development and implementation of Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategies (CWCS) in all 50 states. Our goal was to gain a synoptic view of state activities related to wildlife habitat conservation in the U.S. and territories. Our overarching question was: "How do conservation science, social, and institutional processes come together to set state and regional conservation priorities and the design and implementation of conservation solutions across the U.S.?"

Iowa's State Wildlife Action Plan ("the Plan") is comprehensive and ambitious. The Plan is both descriptive and strategic, with a clear description of species at risk and threats and a strategy for addressing those threats. Iowa's Plan is also highly collaborative: conservation partners were involved

in developing the Plan and are clearly identified as crucial to effective implementation. Iowa does an impressive job involving other stakeholders in the process.

Iowa clearly identifies a strategy for conservation, including a comprehensive private lands strategy and mapping of critical habitats. Iowa also excels in conservation monitoring, developing a full guide to monitoring that other stakeholders can follow.

Implementation in Iowa has been slow due to lack of staff. Coordination of the Plan thus far has fallen on existing staff members whose time is limited. Iowa recently hired a new staff member to coordinate implementation, so stakeholders are now optimistic about moving forward. No substantive changes have been made to the Plan since its acceptance.

THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE STATE IN WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

Iowa's Plan includes non-game species in their species of conservation need. More importantly, the Plan attempts to shift conservation planning to landscape scale interests, not simple property management for game species. This new landscape focus is important in that it targets habitats rather than individual species and focuses on multiple species rather than traditional game species.

Iowa's Plan has not necessarily changed the areas of focus within the state. Prairies and wetlands still take the highest priority, although as stated above

the focus has shifted to more landscape scale projects.

Iowa has continued to obtain State Wildlife Grant monies, as well as leveraging grants from the Doris Duke Foundation. Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation has been a recipient of some of these grants and has worked actively with the state conservation agencies to take advantage of these new funds. The state has also been able to leverage more private funding, particularly for land acquisition.

COLLABORATIVE PROCESSES

Iowa's planning process was highly collaborative. Iowa's Department of Natural Resources has

historically been small but has a history of working with partner organizations in conservation. They continued this in the development of their Plan.

Partner organizations indicated a high level of approval for their involvement in the process, from species and habitat identification to strategic planning.

Key partners in this process include a wide variety of groups, from The Nature Conservancy to Iowa State University to the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, a state non-profit. These partners had a good working relationship with Iowa DNR before the Plan was developed and were involved in the process from the beginning. These groups are also helping to implement some new projects under the Plan and leverage more funds, including a Doris Duke Foundation grant. Collaboration has been a key to most conservation in the state.

Partners are also going to be actively involved in monitoring and implementation. Iowa has a comprehensive monitoring strategy and a guide for monitoring, which will allow partners to be involved with monitoring.

Public meetings were used to gather input from the general public. Based on our interviews, more of the input from these meetings could have been incorporated into the Plan. One interview also indicated that the Plan should be made more accessible to the public.

INFLUENCE OF THE PLAN ON OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

Interviews indicated that the Plan has not necessarily affected agency goals or planning. This is mainly due to the fact that the Plan dovetails with existing goals of partner groups. The Plan in Iowa has outlined a new procedure for awarding SWG

monies within the state. Groups are already taking advantage of this new system and matching it as well. Nearly \$1,000,000 has been leveraged already since Plan adoption.

KEY CHALLENGES TO PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

According to implementation coordinators, early implementation has been opportunistic and limited by personnel shortages, resources, and time need to to prepare grant applications.

Collaborators indicate that the plan can be imposing and at times not clear, though the plan does make partnership easier. The need for more data collection was another important issue to collaborators. Environmental changes such as invasive species (e.g., zebra mussels), increase in land prices, and changing political leadership further hinder implementation of the plan.

Although State Wildlife Grants (SWG) funds are available to collaborators, funding is limited so these groups mainly use the plan to support funding applications to other sources. Bureaucratic obstacles and lack of communications between vested stakeholders also continue to present challenges. The above challenges highlight the need to develop partnerships with private landowners and the federal government.

Public outreach remains low and it is crucial to bring public up to speed and explain conservation efforts in concise and simple manner.

EXAMPLES OF INNOVATIVE OR SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

According to the plan coordinators, Iowa has been involved in interstate cooperation with Missouri on the Grand River Grasslands project encompassing 150,000 acres and emphasizing prairie chickens and rare birds. Though a project existed prior to implementation of the plan, the plan increased cooperation and led to more effective implementation and management. Success of this project is primarily based on support and permanence of funding for the USDA.

The project called the Upper Midwest Wildlife Habitat Protection Initiative, created with the \$10.8

million three year grant from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation (DDCF), was created to facilitate implementation of the state wildlife action plans in Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri and Wisconsin. Under the coordination of the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF), and with significant assistance from other partners including The Nature Conservancy and the Iowa DNR, the five-state project will protect important wildlife and habitats in the Upper Midwest region. As part of this effort, INHF created the Special Campaign for the Bluffs, the Hills, and the Lakes in order to permanently protect 15,000 acres of priority wildlife

habitat in the Mississippi River Bluff lands, Upper Iowa River, Loess Hills and Iowa's glacial lakes.

Furthermore, the Upper Midwest Wildlife Habitat Protection Initiative, with the help of Defenders of

Wildlife (DOW), is attempting to influence the Farm Bill program in order to have a better link between SWAP priority areas and conservation programs.

HIGHLIGHTS OF PLAN DEVELOPMENT OR IMPLEMENTATION

Additional highlights include the partnership with the DOW in producing five workshops with the state Department of Transportation, Wildlife Agencies, land trusts, and other partners aimed at encouraging incorporation of Iowa Wildlife Action Plan habitat priorities and actions into transportation planning, road management, and regional enhancement.

The INHF, focused on land protection and partnership with the DNR, have been using the Doris Duke Foundation grant toward several acquisition projects: 1,224 acres along the Upper Iowa in northeast Iowa; two Mississippi River Blufflands properties totaling 300 acres; a 93-acre property with approximately 3,500 feet of shoreline in northwest Iowa; and a 100-acre addition to the Hitchcock Nature Center in the Loess Hills of western Iowa.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NEXT PLANNING CYCLE

The plan has generated a lot of excitement among conservation groups, but this needs to translate into action. The collaboration nature of the project is extremely important and the creation of the Species of Greatest Conservation Need list was a much needed addition to Iowa's conservation efforts. Continued partnership with stakeholder and the federal government is crucial for successful implementation of the state wildlife action plan.

As with other state wildlife action plans, shortage of personnel and funding remain a key factor in

successful work of conservation agencies and stakeholders. According to state coordinators, there must be a shift in the Iowa's Resource Enhancement and Protection program's grant scoring criteria to better reflect the Plan's importance, but this has not been realized. The Plan has opened new avenues of funding and conservation efforts and with continued support and partnerships it will continue to play an important role in Iowa's wildlife conservation.

REFERENCES

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