

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: Achieving Our Conservation Vision Using Strategic Habitat Conservation – What It Means for YOU

The challenges facing conservation requires us to think about and do conservation differently. Unless we adopt a strategic approach to conservation, species and the habitats on which they depend will continue to be lost, regardless of the hard work and good intentions of dedicated professionals. Recognizing this fact, the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) leadership adopted Strategic Habitat Conservation – a landscape-scale, collaboratively oriented framework – a decade ago. Strategic Habitat Conservation represents a change in how we think about and do conservation, a shift to more strategic, accountable and adaptive action. It starts by working at larger spatial and temporal scales, across programs and with our partners and stakeholders, in a more focused way that links our actions to outcomes, with learning as an explicit objective of our conservation actions. This document reiterates our conservation vision and values and discusses Strategic Habitat Conservation as our approach and role in achieving that vision.

Conservation Vision:

We envision a future which fulfills America's passion for opportunities to enjoy landscapes and waterways that provide homes for diverse and sustainable populations of fish, wildlife, and plants.

Values Statement:

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service values strong conservation partnerships focused on restoring, connecting and conserving landscapes that sustain both wildlife populations and people. We are a learning organization, fostering and rewarding innovation and calculated risk-taking. Our workforce is valued for their opinions and expertise and is recognized for our engagement in decision-making that is critical to the long-term success of the Service. We are driven to improve, using the latest advancements in science, technology and wildlife management to achieve the greatest possible benefit for wild things and wild places. We have the courage to make hard decisions and focus our work on explicit objectives, the discipline to assess our progress, and the integrity to change course when needed. These values are embedded in the culture of our organization and expressed in everything we do.

SHC Principles:

1. Start with ecologically meaningful scales: Addressing conservation challenges that cross jurisdictional boundaries, such as habitat fragmentation, wildlife disease, and climate change, requires conservation planning at an ecologically appropriate scale (e.g., watershed, ecoregions) rather than smaller scales (e.g., single land management units) that coincide with jurisdictional boundaries. By starting at larger versus smaller scales,

we are better able to address conservation challenges (e.g., climate change, disease) that cross arbitrary boundaries.

2. Work in partnership to maximize effectiveness and efficiency: To be successful with conservation at landscape scales, it is even more important to involve a diversity of partners, both public and private, that have an interest in the geography. Broad conservation partnerships such as **Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs)** and **Joint Ventures** provide forums for identification of conservation priorities and common science needs, leveraging funding and capacity, and implementing conservation actions. Further, public support is critical for implementation of conservation actions at large scales. By establishing enduring conservation partnerships seeking shared conservation outcomes, we are positioning ourselves to better leverage resources and support for ensuring landscapes capable of sustaining diverse and sustainable populations of fish, wildlife, and plants.

3. Adaptive management framework:
Elements are:
 - *Biological Planning:* Through Biological Planning, we build a shared foundation for future conservation efforts by identifying our conservation targets, describing current and desired future conditions and defining the conservation deficit, and refining species-habitat relationships. Because the resources needed to conserve all of our trust resources outweigh our existing capacity, we must focus our investments wisely. **Surrogate species** is one tool to help focus our biological planning efforts in a way that benefits multiple species on these landscapes. **Population objectives** (e.g., numbers, range, trends) will be set for these species to help gauge our progress towards achieving our desired conservation outcomes.
 - *Conservation Design:* Conservation Design involves using the best tools and information available to bring together the results of Biological Planning to identify strategies for achieving population objectives. Through improved understanding of the relationship between populations and habitats, we assess the ability of landscapes to support populations, and determine the best strategies for attaining our desired conservation outcomes. **Landscape Conservation Design (LCD)** is both a partnership-driven process and a product that results in a science-based, spatially-explicit representation of the desired future condition of that landscape needed to meet population objectives. For example, spatially explicit habitat objectives would be identified as part of the LCD. Many LCC partnerships are already developing the science and tools (e.g., habitat classifications and maps, species and habitat vulnerability assessments) to inform LCD.
 - *Conservation delivery:* Conservation Delivery involves the identification and evaluation via cost/benefit analysis of management actions and implementation of those actions to address the objectives identified as part of Biological Planning and Conservation Design. Partnerships enable conservation that exceeds the sum of the potential actions of the individual programs, agencies and organizations that comprise them.

- *Monitoring and Research:* Monitoring and Research are a prominent and fundamental element of SHC that informs the iterative process whereby managers learn and improve conservation outcomes. Through targeted and purposeful monitoring and research we evaluate the effectiveness of our conservation delivery, gauge progress and the success of our actions, validate assumptions used in conservation design, and incorporate learning into future conservation planning and decision making. LCDs will identify appropriate monitoring activities to help determine the effectiveness of conservation delivery and whether refinements need to be made. The **National Wildlife Refuge System's Inventory and Monitoring Program** is investing resources to improve our monitoring capacity to help make the best use of resources and help prioritize efforts that are most likely to give us the greatest returns on our conservation investments.
4. Science and tools: To facilitate achievement of desired biological outcomes, our decisions must be made using the best science and tools available. Each of these components is based on science, including biological, ecological, social, and physical. A critical part of the SHC process is identification of gaps in knowledge, generating information and tools to answer questions, and using that information to inform and refine decision making.

How is this different?

Strategic Habitat Conservation involves identification of clear, consistent and shared strategic priorities to achieve landscapes capable of sustaining fish and wildlife populations; use of a consistent conservation framework that will enable our workforce to plan, design and deliver conservation actions more strategically; greater transparency, science-driven conservation investment decision-making process (agency-wide), reflecting Service priorities; increased accountability by measuring our progress – both as a Service and employees/partners; operating in a more coordinated and collaborative way by focusing programmatic efforts towards shared outcomes; working with partners to maximize our landscape-scale conservation results; communicating and engaging with our workforce to ensure their voices are heard and they have opportunities to contribute to this effort; and ultimately becoming more relevant to the communities we serve.