

Chapter 2. Ohio's First 10 Years of CWCS Implementation

Ohio's first Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy served as a vehicle to strengthen existing relationships between the Division of Wildlife and conservation partners, as well as create new relationships. The CWCS was a product of an increased interest in wildlife diversity and the realization that more needed to be done for SGCN. What conservationists needed at that time was a rallying point – something tangible that could be used to channel their interest and passion – and the CWCS provided that. State Wildlife Grant funding provided the fuel for the CWCS vehicle, and in Ohio, wildlife diversity surveys, monitoring, research, and management progressed at a rate not seen before. A tremendous amount of knowledge regarding SGCN and their habitats resulted from the first 10 years of CWCS implementation. That knowledge essentially fell into two categories: (1) the accrual of new information, and (2) a cognizance of how much we don't know.

The Division worked with many partners in the form of state and federal agencies, academia, environmental groups, conservation organizations, and stakeholders during implementation of the first CWCS. The following section describes some of the conservation efforts that contributed to the “accrual of new information” category – efforts by the Division and its partners during the first ten years of CWCS implementation.

2.0 Conservation Efforts 2006-2015

Conservation projects focused on habitats

- Habitat management on conservation opportunity areas including forestlands, grasslands, and wetlands
- Forest conservation opportunity area inventory and management
- Forest habitat research in fragmented landscapes near Lake Erie
- Conservation of riparian forests in urbanizing landscapes
- Local and Landscape scale forest habitat attributes
- Lake Erie and other coastal wetlands research and surveys
- Conservation easements to protect habitat for endangered terrestrial wildlife
- Mechanistic understanding of landscape-scale responses of animal communities to urbanization
- Statewide stream conservation programs

Conservation projects focused on birds

- Peregrine falcon distribution and productivity
- Conservation of Cerulean warblers in the southeast Ohio
- Barn owl distribution and productivity
- Development of a habitat model for nesting barn owls
- Bald eagle research and management
- Trumpeter swan restoration program
- Osprey reintroduction research
- Sandhill crane restoration and monitoring
- Dispersal, behavior, and habitat use of non-breeding sandhill cranes
- Ohio sandhill crane migration study
- Common tern nesting colony protection and development
- Statewide bird conservation planning and coordination
- Research on needs of early and late successional habitat birds
- Radio-telemetry study of migrating birds in fragmented forests near Lake Erie
- Monitoring and demographic modeling of grassland birds on strip-mined lands
- North American breeding bird survey
- Ohio breeding bird atlas
- Ohio winter bird atlas
- Wetland habitat avian diversity surveys

- Importance of emerging aquatic insects to spring migrating landbirds
- Conserving birds in urbanizing landscapes
- Forest conservation opportunity area songbird monitoring survey
- Forest habitat attributes effect on abundance of stopover migrant land birds

Conservation projects focused on mammals

- Monitoring the status of bobcats
- Bobcat population genetics
- Protection and management of Indiana bat hibernacula
- Ecology, movement and site fidelity of black bears in Ohio
- Mammalian diversity in Ohio

Conservation projects focused on reptiles

- Captive propagation and augmentation of eastern plains garter snake populations
- Radio-telemetry study of Lake Erie water snakes
- Lake Erie water snake recovery plan implementation
- Ecology, status, conservation, and management of timber rattlesnakes
- Radio-telemetry study of eastern massasauga rattlesnakes
- Conservation genetics of eastern massasauga rattlesnakes
- Survey and distribution of eastern massasauga rattlesnakes
- GIS-enabled modeling of habitat suitability for state-listed eastern massasauga rattlesnakes in Ohio

Conservation projects focused on amphibians

- Distribution and status of Ohio frogs and toads
- Seasonal, temperature, and wetland correlates with ranid frogs
- Long-term salamander monitoring
- Response of salamanders to forest management practices in Ohio's southeastern oak-hickory forest

Conservation projects focused on butterflies

- Karner blue butterfly reintroduction
- Long-term butterfly monitoring

Conservation projects focused on mussels

- Mussel conservation, research, and surveys
- Mussel health assessment

Conservation projects focused on fish

- Restoration and protection of Ohio River fish diversity
- Statewide fish inventory and distribution
- Rare stream fishes restoration program

Conservation projects focused on invasive/nuisance species

- Establishment of purple loosestrife control agents
- Management and monitoring of double-crested cormorants

Conservation projects focused on statewide/multi-species issues

- Wildlife diversity database
- Surveys of state-listed terrestrial wildlife
- Conservation genetic approaches to conserving state-listed wildlife species
- Using citizen scientists to monitor frogs, toads, butterflies, salamanders, and birds
- Ohio biodiversity conservation partnership project
- Survey and monitoring of terrestrial species of greatest conservation need

- Wildlife diversity conservation
- Monitoring the impacts of climate change on wildlife and plant species
- Dam removal strategies to benefit aquatic SGCN

2.1 Revising the CWCS

At the time of creation of Ohio's first CWCS, no models, templates, or best practices guides existed to aid in its development. There were few diversity projects in existence, and staff was generally accustomed to dealing with diversity issues within the context of existing fish and wildlife management programs. Little funding earmarked for diversity species had existed prior to that time, and the general feeling was that diversity species benefitted from "sport" species conservation efforts. Putting together a CWCS document that focused exclusively on diversity species seemed a duplication of effort at the time, given how diversity issues had been handled in the past. It is not a surprise that the first CWCS was fit into a template that the Division was experienced and comfortable with. Ohio's 2006-2015 CWCS generally documented plans and processes that were already in place. It was a compendium of existing strategic, tactical, and operational plans, along with a significant amount of historical and statutory authority information. It demonstrated that effective conservation programs were in place, and that the Division understood the value of working with constituents and conservation partners – but probably stopped short of being a roadmap to a more productive relationship between all interested parties in the name of conservation in Ohio.

After 10 years of experience, it is clear that the format of this first Plan limited its utility as a conservation tool for our conservation partners. The original plan contained a tremendous amount of information, but most of that was geared towards wildlife professionals. That fact made it difficult for the average person to pick up the plan and identify a role for themselves in conservation in Ohio.

The goal of this revision is to make the SWAP a tool for all levels of conservationists. Statistics show that although participation in outdoor activities has changed through time, overall interest in the outdoors has not. The public has demonstrated interest in conservation to the point of creating their own organizations (e.g., Audubon, TNC, Ducks Unlimited, Rivers Unlimited, Ohio Bluebird Society) to provide money and effort for species and habitats. Given the financial and human capital available through these organizations, conservation efforts will be more effective if all conservation players are using the same playbook. Ohio's new State Wildlife Action Plan is written with the intent of facilitating conservation roles for all interested, and ensuring that funding and effort are used in concert with statewide priorities and strategies.

Issues experienced by Ohio with the first CWCS were also experienced to varying degrees by other states. In addition, it was clear that more continuity and standardization of action plans among states was going to be necessary to effectively address regional conservation issues. Recognizing this, the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA) State Wildlife Action Plan Best Practices Working Group, working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, developed the "Best Practices for State Wildlife Action Plans". Ohio has used this as its primary guidance document for the revision of the original CWCS.

2.2 The Next 10 Years

The mile-high view of the next 10 years under implementation of Ohio's 2016-2025 SWAP consists of four primary themes - building new and strengthening existing partnerships, making progress on priority species and habitats, filling data gaps, and addressing regional conservation issues. Focus on the first three themes will occur largely within the confines of Ohio's borders, and involve conservationists, conservation issues, and conservation actions on a state scale. Theme number four will be addressed at a spatial scale dictated by the species and/or habitat requiring attention, without regard to state borders.

2.2.1 Building New and Strengthening Existing Partnerships

Efforts need to be made to build a stronger conservation coalition in Ohio. All of the conservation "players" need to be identified, as well as the expertise, resources, authority, and mission belonging to each. A plan can then be mapped out that puts each player in the best position to succeed. Conservation

actions derive from the SWAP, and each player must be used in the most effective position to contribute to the overall effort. We must work to ensure that Ohio's SWAP is viewed as a state plan rather than state agency plan, and it will be important to promote ownership and buy-in of the Plan.

To make the conservation coalition work, there must be agreement on conservation priorities, direction, and appropriate strategies to get there. There must be better agency communication and cooperation. Missions and authority can (and will) differ, but that won't influence effectiveness if there is agreement to work together and agreement about what is being worked on. This new synergy has to start with leadership at the highest levels. With a sufficient level of consent among regulatory agencies in place, we can then leverage ngo conservationists – giving the conservation movement in Ohio the advantage of the numbers and passion of 11 million residents. With everyone pulling in the same direction, we can make efficient and effective conservation happen.

As recommended in the AFWA Best Practices Guide, some key strategies for partnership building, as well as effectively working with partners are:

- Revitalize and/or develop new Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) to integrate SWAPs into the initiatives of other agencies. MOUs legitimize and institutionalize the importance of their initiatives, which may otherwise be overlooked due to their nonregulatory nature. Additionally, become familiar with MOUs at the federal level to capitalize on partnership opportunities.
- Cultivate a partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Identify key NRCS staff and engage them in SWAP implementation committees. Participate in NRCS State Technical Committees to encourage the use of NRCS Farm Bill conservation programs to implement SWAP priorities and to influence priority setting in programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP), and Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP).
- Develop a familiarity with state Forest Action Plans to coordinate updates, identify common priorities, and find other ways to coordinate the two action plans.
- Develop a communications plan. Identify key constituent groups and audiences, and involvement goals appropriate to each audience. Define communication strategies that will be effective at getting information to, and gathering feedback from, affected groups.
- Host a SWAP Summit with identified stakeholders with goals that include reinvigorating partnerships, sharing information, soliciting input, sharing successes, and/or garnering support.
- Evaluate the state Teaming With Wildlife (TWW) Coalition and assess whether the coalition is meeting state needs – evaluate options for revitalizing the coalition if needed.

2.2.2 Making Progress on Priority Species and Habitats

We need to prioritize species and habitats in the most immediate need of attention. This exercise will involve initial prioritization based solely upon need, and then filtered by things like probability of success, regional status relative to Ohio status, overall contribution in terms of the big conservation picture, and conservation action bang-for-the-buck. Once we are in agreement as to priority, we can utilize our stronger conservation coalition to increase effectiveness and efficiency of actions, and focus them on the most pressing threats to those species and habitats.

2.2.3 Filling Data Gaps

In assessing the status of species and habitats during the development of this Action Plan, the amount of missing information (often basic distribution and abundance information) was significant. Closing those data gaps will take substantial effort. In the next 10 years, effort needs to be directed at identifying and prioritizing data gaps. Basic life history, distribution and abundance, population dynamics, and other aspects of Ohio's SGCN (especially invertebrates) is needed, particularly for those species whose abundance is unknown/low and whose population trend is unknown/declining. Where basic distribution

and abundance data is missing, information collection can be maximized by employing our conservation coalition in the form of citizen scientists and other partnerships. As described above, this is an example of matching the expertise and resources of our conservation coalition “players”, with the appropriate facet of an issue needing addressed to contribute to the accomplishment of higher level conservation goals.

Another area in need of work relative to data gaps is habitat mapping. Improving the accuracy and resolution of our habitat maps will improve our ability to assess, monitor, and manage habitats. This kind of data acquisition demands a higher level of expertise than the basic species data discussed above. Identifying all data currently available, and utilizing the best GIS expertise (regardless of where it exists) will be the best way to ensure timely, accurate, and economical maps necessary for future conservation efforts. Working to fill this data gap must be a priority if we are to be able to assess the success of conservation actions aimed at habitats.

2.2.4 Addressing Regional Conservation Issues

The Action Plans developed by the states for 2016 and beyond will be more alike than those from 10 years ago. More consistent SWAPs should improve our ability to identify and agree upon pressing regional species and habitat issues. From there it becomes a matter of improving our ability to communicate and cooperate on regional scale. Partnerships with Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs) can help bring additional partners together to identify shared priorities and identify landscape-level actions. Through the LCCs work with neighboring state fish and wildlife agencies can be facilitated. Cooperation with neighboring agencies with similar SGCN and habitats will allow the pooling of resources for regional conservation efforts including problem identification, funding, mapping, and tracking the effectiveness of conservation actions. In addition, we need to work with our international conservation partners and conservation organizations to address the conservation needs of SGCN and habitats at a broader geographic scale.

In summary, the experience under implementation of Ohio's initial CWCS has been a productive one. Knowledge gained on a number of fronts positions us well to face the conservation challenges of the next 10 years. We are better informed on a number of ecosystem-related issues, and we are also more aware of where we need better information. The pieces are in place to accomplish more under this Action Plan than we did under the previous one. In the end however, the amount of progress made on species and habitats will be directly related to our ability to elevate the value and priority of conservation in the hearts and minds of all Ohioans.