

Chapter 1. Introduction

European settlers coming to South Dakota in the 1800s found and exploited a wealth of natural resources, including abundant wildlife populations. Species such as the American bison, pronghorn, and white-tailed deer were decimated by the early 1900s and others, such as the passenger pigeon, eastern elk, and Audubon's bighorn sheep, were lost forever to extinction. Fearing further losses, hunters led a new movement of wildlife conservation, which included new hunting ethics, the science of wildlife management, and other protection measures.



A 2024 survey by South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (SDGFP) found that 85% of the public believe that South Dakota should preserve as much wildlife as possible, and 70% of respondents believe healthy wildlife populations contribute greatly to our quality of life. Respondents considered wildlife and natural resource conservation as critical components of our outdoor heritage. This result wasn't surprising to those of us who have both worked in the wildlife field and enjoyed our state's tremendous fish and wildlife resources in our leisure time.

Our forward-thinking ancestors helped assure that we would have fish to catch, game to hunt, and other critters to view, photograph, and just simply enjoy having around. The Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Programs were established to steer hunter and angler dollars back to the management and restoration of fish and game and to stem the tide of resource exploitation and misuse. Other laws have helped in the awesome challenge of monitoring and managing the complex pieces of our natural world.

But we still have far to go to do something as meaningful as our ancestors did when they passed the landmark bills that set the stage for sound fish and wildlife management. Wildlife managers have tended to focus on certain game species and their habitats, with less emphasis on nongame species and some landscapes that may not fit our traditional view of "good" habitat. Many of the species on state and federal lists of endangered species may have unfamiliar names and small distributions – they've fallen through the cracks of wildlife management, but we know that each component of our natural world is a critical piece.

Many dedicated people continue to search for a long-term solution to fill these cracks in our conservation efforts. In the meantime, annual funding from Congress has helped immensely in assisting states to meet their increasing responsibilities to manage for the needs of all fish and wildlife species and their habitats. SWG funding is one example, and the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks (SDGFP) will continue to make the best use possible of this important funding source as long as it lasts.

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When we accepted these funds, we committed to preparing a comprehensive plan for all fish and wildlife species in the state (SDGFP 2006). A subsequent major plan revision (SDGFP 2014) has led to this revised plan, which revisits where we are and where we should go from here.

The SDWAP is a voluntary guidance document with an emphasis on conserving biological diversity in South Dakota through partnerships and cooperation. The plan is not a set of mandates or a land acquisition model. Nor is the plan specific to SDGFP. To be successful in avoiding future endangered species conflicts and jeopardizing unique habitats, we must engage private landowners, Native American tribes, environmental and agricultural organizations, government entities ranging from local to federal agencies, as well as the overwhelming majority of our citizens who believe in the importance of wildlife to our quality of life and to our economy.

We recognize the sovereign status of Native American tribes in South Dakota and strive to cooperatively work toward conserving and managing the natural resources in South Dakota. Since the vast majority of lands in South Dakota are privately held, private land management and voluntary landowner participation are essential to successful wildlife management. The Plan focuses on native species and habitats, but we have no intention of abandoning our commitment to introduced species, such as the ring-necked pheasant, which is an irreplaceable part of our agency's history and our state's hunting legacy. This plan does not replace other planning efforts, such as those dealing with game management, but attempts to address broader, unmet needs. We hope to build on our traditional strengths and constituents in expanding our stewardship to resources that need our attention and care. We will build on many successful partnerships to enhance and expand habitat and access for fish and wildlife species and wildlife experiences. We support the use of the best science available and the continued collection of sound information to help South Dakota's legislature, SDGFP, the SDGFP Commission, and other resource managers make informed decisions. We will use the best practices available for conservation education and wildlife-associated recreation to teach South Dakota's children, adults, and visitors about our unique natural resources through first-hand experiences.

Each of us, whether we hunt, fish, hike, feed birds, or photograph nature, has a treasured memory or a special place that helped cultivate and personalize our connection with nature. It may be a memory of the first fish we caught, an amazing retrieve by a hunting dog, a traditional family camping spot, or an unforgettable chance encounter with something wild. Our vision for this Plan is that each of us can find a way to contribute to our state's future natural diversity to replicate what our ancestors did for us in fish and wildlife conservation. We hope our commitment to making things better will assure that our grandkids and yours have the chance to create their own treasured memories and find their special places in nature.

1.1 Background

Since the advent of wildlife management, federal laws and policies have placed the primary responsibility for wildlife management programs in the hands of the 50 states. However, the effective implementation of these programs has long depended on adequate federal funding. To fund these programs, Congress

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passed the 1937 Wildlife Restoration Act, also known as the Pittman-Robertson Act, which imposed a 10 manufacturer's tax on hunting ammunition and firearms. Tax proceeds generated from this Act are distributed to state fish and wildlife agencies for research, habitat protection, and species recovery. Anglers followed suit in 1950, urging passage of the Sport Fish Restoration Act, also called the Dingell-Johnson Act. The Dingell-Johnson Act placed a 10% manufacturer's tax on fishing rods, reels, and tackle to be distributed to state fish and wildlife agencies for sport fish restoration. The Wallop-Breaux Amendment was passed in 1984 to expand the Dingell-Johnson Act by including boating and angling gear for financial support of recreation access and education programs.

With the primary source of funding for state wildlife programs coming from hunters and anglers, state wildlife managers implemented very successful management programs to recover or improve game species. However, nongame and endangered species and rare or unique habitat funding needs have not been linked with a similar funding solution. Some current information sources predict that thousands of species may be in danger of extinction. Endangered Species Act (ESA) funds have helped recover some well-known species, such as the bald eagle and peregrine falcon, but hundreds more are declining every year. Efforts to recover declining species are extremely expensive, and most wildlife advocates agree that preventive actions that keep species from needing to be listed under ESA and state endangered species laws are the answer to assure the future of America's fish and wildlife resources.

Recognizing the need to take action to prevent species declines, a broad and diverse coalition has been working for decades to assure the future security of the broader array of fish and wildlife species and the habitats they need. Various legislative efforts have sought to identify and secure a stable, long-term funding source for fish and wildlife species that have not been traditionally funded by existing federal programs. A well-funded, coordinated approach to fund inventories, management, outdoor opportunities, and related educational efforts can help prevent future endangered species listings and help state wildlife agencies fulfill their trust responsibility to manage for the needs of all wildlife species and meet public expectations.

The SWG Program provides funding, at the discretion of annual Congressional allocations, to every state and territory to support conservation aimed at keeping wildlife from becoming endangered. This program continues the long history of cooperation between the federal government and the states for managing and conserving wildlife species. To receive future federal funds through the SWG program, Congress charged each state and territory with developing a Wildlife Action Plan. The wildlife plans provide an essential foundation for the future of wildlife conservation and an opportunity for states, federal agencies, and other conservation partners to strategically think about their individual and coordinated roles in conservation efforts across the nation.

The South Dakota Department of Game, Fish, and Parks (SDGFP) completed its first statewide Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Plan, now called the SDWAP in 2006. SDGFP completed a second major revision in 2014 and two minor plan revisions, one in 2018 and a second in 2022. The SDWAP provides a strategic vision and plan of action for statewide wildlife conservation and establishes South Dakota's eligibility for continued SWG dollars and future expanded funding to match species and habitat needs. The SDWAP identifies conservation needs and actions that can be implemented by landowners, agencies, partnerships, or private organizations. Further, it prioritizes

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resources and activities to prevent future decline of species and ecosystems in South Dakota. It places emphasis on landscapes, ecosystems, and SGCNs.

SDGFP continues to make the best use of SWG funding to implement the SDWAP until a more suitable funding source is identified to meet long term needs. Plan implementation accomplishments are presented specifically related to SWG funding (Appendix B) and from a more general perspective to benefit SGCNs and native habitats (Appendix C).

The purpose of the SDWAP is to provide:

1. A description of the current circumstances regarding species and habitat status and needs related to inventory, monitoring, research, management, and conservation actions.
2. A strategic vision and plan of action for statewide wildlife conservation and funding; a declaration of goals and how to achieve them.
3. A means for collaboration among diverse interests that helps achieve the goals of maintaining or enhancing South Dakota's ecosystems and wildlife resources.

The SDWAP is designed to maintain and conserve South Dakota's biodiversity. It is designed to operate using proactive measures and incentive-based programs on private lands and cooperative efforts with other agencies on public lands. It is a plan not just for SDGFP but for cooperative efforts to include landowners, other agencies, and organizations. It emphasizes the State's native biodiversity but is not designed to detract from the value of important nonnative species, and in fact, provides many indirect benefits to many of these species such as ring-necked pheasants. The plan does not replace other planning efforts, such as those developed for game management or agency- or tribe-specific needs, but rather addresses broader biodiversity objectives using complementary programs.

The SDWAP helps guide voluntary and cooperative actions and does not place mandates or restrictions on uses of private land. The programs and approaches recommended are based on a recognition and respect for private property rights as well as recognizing the importance of tribal sovereignty in any cooperative programs. It is developed with the view that working cooperatively and identifying mutually agreed upon programs and actions will produce desired conservation benefits that can be effectively integrated with other land uses and objectives.

1.2 Summary of Plan Updates and Changes

SDGFP began the plan review process by informing the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) of the agency's intent to conduct a major plan review and revision (Appendix A). For the last several years, SDGFP has been coordinating and leading an internal planning team and associated working groups to revise the SDWAP by incorporating new or updated information and considering ways to improve the Plan's content to reach more potential users. The 2014 Plan focused heavily on the terrestrial planning foundation of the tools and ecological information developed for MLRAs, as classified and mapped by the NRCS. Although this system remains relevant to many land managers, range and grassland specialists, and landowners, the 2025 revision includes a second terrestrial habitat classification system that may be more

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relatable to a broader array of the public. The MLI of the MAFWA provided important background information to assist SDGFP habitat staff in creating this habitat classification map.

The MLI connection is one example of SDGFP's effort to better coordinate and standardize information where possible. The 2025 revision uses standardized classification systems for describing species and habitat conservation threats and conservation actions. These systems were developed by the CMP, with the IUCN involved in the conservation threats classification system. This revision benefited from a MAFWA-led effort to better understand impacts of climate change on a sample of South Dakota's SGCNs. This revision also includes consideration of this topic from a broader perspective, because climate change and severe weather impacts to the state's lands and water will affect many land uses and livelihoods.

The 2006 Plan included 90 SGCNs, with an increase to 101 in 2014. The minor revision of 2022 added 60 species, the majority of which were plants. An important early planning component for the 2025 revision was the identification of specific taxonomic experts outside the agency for input on additional SGCNs, particularly those for which the agency lacked internal experts. The result of the 2025 SGCN revision process is a list of 245 SGCNs; 205 animal species and 40 plant species. Because many of these species are not well studied in the state, there is an urgent need for surveys, monitoring, and research on many species and species groups, particularly invertebrates and their associated habitats and population limiting factors.

To assist with targeted planning for conservation actions, COAs were updated for this SDWAP. These areas represent the best opportunities for voluntary ecosystem restoration or other effective management actions within South Dakota and may also include areas with large numbers of SGCN or important linkage zones. Identification of COAs also allows for improved or renewed opportunities to build collaborative relationships with landowners and stakeholders in those landscapes, especially those with an interest in fish and wildlife conservation in South Dakota.

Two public opinion surveys were conducted early in the plan revision process. The first was an attitude survey to understand the public's attitudes about and commitment to wildlife and nature in general. A second survey targeted important potential plan users, both internal and external, to learn whether the plan is relevant to their work and, if not, to identify ways to improve its content to make it more meaningful to their work.

SDGFP made a special effort to acknowledge the formative values of outdoor experiences by tapping into internal expertise on environmental education and wildlife-associated recreation. This subject area also touched on the relationship between nature experiences and mental health and the importance of hands-on childhood experiences to continued outdoor connections as an adult and a resulting commitment to the environment. State wildlife agency relevancy is an ongoing issue throughout the nation. South Dakota's changing demographics and shifting rural and urban populations offer an opportunity for the agency to expand its effectiveness by connecting with new partners.

1.3 Key Elements and Plan Roadmap

Congress identified eight required elements of a state wildlife action plan with the expectation that “species in greatest need of conservation” will be identified, while also addressing the “full array of wildlife” and wildlife-related issues. The strategies must provide and make use of:

1. Information on the distribution and abundance of species of wildlife, including low and declining populations as the State fish and wildlife agency deems appropriate, that are indicative of the diversity and health of the State’s wildlife; and,
2. Descriptions of locations and relative conditions of key habitats and community types essential to conservation of species identified in (1); and,
3. Descriptions of problems which may adversely affect species identified in (1) or their habitats, and priority research and survey efforts needed to identify factors which may assist in restoration and improved conservation of these species and habitats; and,
4. Descriptions of conservation actions proposed to conserve the identified species and habitats and priorities for implementing such actions; and,
5. Proposed plans for monitoring species identified in (1) and their habitats, for monitoring effectiveness of the conservation actions proposed in (4), and for adapting these conservation actions to respond appropriately to new information or changing conditions; and,
6. Descriptions of procedures to review the strategy at intervals not to exceed ten years; and,
7. Plans for coordinating the development, implementation, review, and revision of the SDWAP with Federal, State, and local agencies and Native American tribes that manage significant land and water areas within the State or administer programs that significantly affect the conservation of identified species and habitats.
8. Congress also affirmed through this legislation that broad public participation is an essential element of developing and implementing these plans, the projects that are carried out while these plans are developed, and the Species of Greatest Need of Conservation that Congress has indicated such programs and projects are intended to emphasize.

Table 1.1 provides the roadmap for documenting and identifying where each of these key elements are addressed.

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Table 1.1. Roadmap to the 8 Key Elements in the SDWAP 2025 Revision

Element		Relevant Sections
1	SGCNs	Chapter 2 (page 9) and Appendices D-I (pages Appendices 28-244).
2	Habitats	Chapter 3 (page 28), Chapter 4 (page 59), Chapter 8 (page 167), Section 8.1 (page 168)
3	Threats/Stressors	Chapter 5, Sections 5.1-5.6 (pages 69-98) Appendices D-I (SGCN profiles; pages Appendices 28-244) Appendix O (CMP/IUCN Conservation Threats matrix for SGCNs) - https://gfp.sd.gov/UserDocs/nav/SDConsThreats.xlsx
4	Actions	Chapter 6, Sections 6.1-6.6 (pages 113-155) Appendices D-I (SGCN profiles; pages Appendices 28-244) Appendix Q (CMP Conservation Actions matrix for SGCNs) - https://gfp.sd.gov/UserDocs/nav/SDConsActions.xlsx
5	Monitoring	Chapter 8 (page 167); Tables 8.1 - 8.3 (pages 171-190) Appendix U (https://gfp.sd.gov/userdocs/nav/SD_Monitoring_Efforts-species_and_habitats.xlsx)
6	Reviews and Revisions	Chapter 9 (page 191)
7	Partner Involvement	Chapter 7 (page 160), all sections relevant, with exception of 7.3
8	Public Involvement	Chapter 7 (page 160), Section 7.3 and 7.4 (pages 163-164), Appendix M (page Appendix 262)

1.4 Goals

The goals of the SDWAP are strategic and designed to:

1. Guide the conservation of biological diversity in South Dakota.
2. Continue to identify and monitor the status of biological diversity in South Dakota.
3. Identify new and continuing challenges to maintaining or restoring biodiversity and establish a conservation action process for native habitats and species of concern.
4. Develop objectives and action plans to achieve these goals.
5. Satisfy legal mandates for rare species recovery.
6. Satisfy eligibility requirements for applicable funding sources.
7. Broaden the scope of the plan to include future environmental education and outdoor-associated recreation needs.
8. Provide results of the latest public attitude surveys conducted to gauge the public's interest in and commitment to wildlife and the relevancy of the previous Plan to critical conservation partners.
9. Maximize effectiveness through better coordination across political boundaries.
10. Identify and sort conservation threats and conservation actions using established frameworks.
11. Implement a process that allows and encourages participation by government agencies, Native American tribes, conservation partners, and the public.

1.5 Species of Greatest Conservation Need - Overview

A primary element of the SDWAP is the identification of SGCNs across the state. The 2014 list of SGCN was reviewed and updated during a [minor plan revision](#) completed in 2022. The minor revision of 2022 marked the first time plant species were included on South Dakota's SGCN list. Prior to beginning the process that resulted in the current plan, SDGFP Natural Heritage Program staff reviewed and updated state ranks for species monitored by the South Dakota Natural Heritage Program. Many of these plant and animal species are included as SGCNs because they are rare, their status is uncertain, or they depend on rare or unique natural communities. SDGFP staff gathered additional feedback on the draft 2025 SGCN list by identifying species or taxa experts who were asked for input and associated justifications for suggested additions or deletions. The Wildlife Action Plan Science Team (Science Team) reviewed this input and shared the revised draft list with land and resource management agencies and Native American tribes in South Dakota. The draft list was also shared with the public in a specific comment opportunity, and all feedback was considered before finalizing the SGCN list.

The SGCN list contains 40 plant species and 205 animal species: 5 amphibians, 10 aquatic insects, 52 birds, 4 crayfish, 28 fishes, 11 freshwater mussels, 5 (terrestrial) gastropods, 28 mammals, 17 reptiles, and 45 terrestrial insects.

1.6 Conservation Strategies – Overview

Conservation of a State's biological diversity and SGCNs can be approached through several strategies based on different objectives and assumptions (Grossman et al. 1998, van Jaarsveld et al. 1998, Haufler 1999, Gutzwiller 2002, Noon et al. 2003). Selection of a strategy or multiple strategies depends on the unique objectives of a state's planning effort. The 2025 revision remains true to the premise that a coarse-filter/fine-filter strategy will most effectively ensure the habitat needs of wildlife species are met by maintaining or restoring native ecosystem diversity and recognizing and mitigating for the loss of historical disturbance regimes. For many of the SGCNs identified, implementation of these two strategy components will improve and restore habitat conditions across South Dakota. In other instances, SGCNs may also experience non-habitat related challenges that must be recognized and addressed to meet conservation objectives. These non-habitat related conservation challenges and actions have been identified or updated for this revision.