WILDLIFE ACTION PLAN – SOUTH DAKOTA'S FIVE-YEAR REVISION

A decade ago, a new funding source opened up new opportunities for state, tribal and territorial wildlife agencies to address the needs of natural areas and wildlife species. For South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (SDGFP), State Wildlife Grants funding has been an extremely important tool to address the needs of the broad array of fish and wildlife species that spend all or part of their lives in the state. This annual congressional appropriation has helped with the tremendous challenge of planning for the needs of all wildlife species and their habitats. A related legislative initiative called Teaming with Wildlife is designed to identify more stable funding for wildlife (http://teaming.com/).

In exchange for accepting these funds, each state and territory prepared a comprehensive wildlife plan to outline how the needs of all fish and wildlife species should be addressed. Plans were developed under a broad framework, but customized to meet the needs of individual states and territories. South Dakota's plan was completed in 2005 and approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2006. The lead agency in plan development and implementation was SDGFP, which committed to revising the plan 5 years after its approval.

These plans go by many names, but they are collectively called state wildlife action plans, signaling their role in translating federal match dollars (State Wildlife Grants) into specific, on-the-ground projects that help implement the needs identified in the plans. South Dakota's wildlife action plan took an ecosystem approach to address four main questions:

- What are South Dakota's essential habitats, and where are they?
- What habitats have changed since South Dakota was settled?
- Which animals need special attention to ensure their long-term survival?
- How can we be more proactive in wildlife and habitat management?

State wildlife action plans guide a state agency's priorities, but more importantly, they serve as a framework for potential cooperators to work together to benefit wildlife and healthy habitats. While much of the focus of these plans is to work to avoid future endangered species listings, plans should also help maintain common species in the face of known and likely future challenges.

SDGFP has begun its wildlife action plan revision. This website will serve as the primary communication tool for this effort. Here you will find updates on the planning process, background information, and opportunities to provide input. We welcome your involvement in helping to plan for the future of South Dakota's wildlife and special places.

Requirements of Wildlife Action Plans:

Although the plan process is flexible to allow relevance to individual states, all wildlife action plans must address the following 8 essential elements:

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;
2. Descriptions of extent and condition of habitats and community types essential to conservation of species identified in (1);
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;
4. Descriptions of conservation actions proposed to conserve the identified species and habitats and priorities for implementing such actions;
5. Proposed plans for monitoring species identified in (1) and their habitats, for monitoring the effectiveness of the conservation actions proposed in (4), and for adapting these conservation actions to respond appropriately to new information or changing conditions;
6. Descriptions of procedures to review the plan at intervals not to exceed ten years;
7. Plans for coordinating the development, implementation, review, and revision of the plan with federal, state, and local agencies and Indian 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. 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 in greatest need of conservation.

Schedule and planning process overview:

Fall – Winter 2011-2012:

- SDGFP staff and contractors identify and assign major plan revision tasks, including multiple ways to make the final plan more user-friendly and useful for partners
- New biological information and habitat mapping sources identified for both aquatic and terrestrial resources
- Fish and wildlife experts contacted to help review and formulate list of species of greatest conservation need
- Public and agency input involvement strategies developed
- Potential threats to fish and wildlife identified
- Develop general public attitude survey about wildlife and associated values

Spring – Summer 2012:

- Request public and agency input on potential threats, list of species of greatest conservation need, conservation priority areas, and implementation project ideas
- Meet with resource agencies and tribal agencies, upon request
- Summarize accomplishments for 2006 South Dakota Wildlife Action Plan

Fall 2012:

- Develop maps and background information on species of greatest conservation need
- Continue assessing potential threats to species of greatest conservation need
- Identify key ecosystems for aquatic and terrestrial habitats
- Continue publicizing opportunities for public and agency input on revision

Winter 2012-2013:

- Share draft plan for public and agency input
- Review input and finalize plan
- Submit plan to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for approval
- Present public interface on SDGFP website; request feedback on website usefulness

Why is South Dakota's wildlife action plan being revised?

Wildlife action plans must be revised at least every 10 years. SDGFP chose to revise its plan sooner to improve its usefulness to partners, to make use of new biological information, and to consider urgent threats to make the plan more meaningful.

What are the benefits of a wildlife action plan?

State wildlife agencies, such as SDGFP, are responsible for managing for the needs of nearly all fish and wildlife species found in the state. A wildlife action plan helps address that legal mandate by taking a broad approach and thinking about the future. By planning ahead, we hope to reduce endangered species conflicts with a nonregulatory approach. Many species are listed as threatened or endangered in part because little is known about them. By gathering information in a more systematic and proactive way, we can try to avoid many of the negative aspects of endangered species listings. A comprehensive plan with a habitat approach can also help assure that the needs of more common species are accommodated.

By gathering public input during the plan revision, we can better address the needs and interests of South Dakotans, who strongly support good stewardship of land and other natural resources. The plan revision will also allow South Dakota to continue to make use of federal match dollars provided as State Wildlife Grants funding.

Who is involved in South Dakota's plan revision?

SDGFP is spearheading the revision. The agency will reach out to other land and resource agencies and tribes for input to hopefully produce a revised plan that serves as a statewide planning document to help meet the needs of other entities involved in fish and wildlife conservation and management. SDGFP is also working with South Dakota State University and experts in ecosystem planning and aquatic ecosystems to bring the best science possible to the planning process.

Will the plan result in changes in laws or regulations?

The revised plan will be a voluntary guidance document that will not mandate legal changes. If any serious threats can only be addressed by changes in laws or regulations, those will be addressed through the typical rule-making or law-making process.

How is the planning process funded?

State Wildlife Grant funding is a special, annual Congressional appropriation. Each year, wildlife supporters lobby Congress to set aside federal match funding to benefit rare species work by state wildlife agencies. State agencies use their funds to match these federal funds on projects that benefit wildlife and habitats at the state level. State agencies can use a portion of their State Wildlife Grant funding to pay for the plan revision. SDGFP is providing the required nonfederal match.

How can the public get involved?

This website will serve as the primary source of information about the wildlife action plan revision. In addition, specific news releases will announce opportunities to comment. SDGFP recently hosted two open houses on this topic, one at The Outdoor Campus – East in Sioux Falls and a second at The Outdoor Campus – West in Rapid City. SDGFP welcomes input on the plan revision to make it as useful as possible. The plan is designed to be a statewide planning framework, not a strategic plan for a single agency.

What has been accomplished under South Dakota's original wildlife action plan?

Within SDGFP, the Wildlife Diversity Program has been the most involved in prioritizing and completing projects that implement South Dakota's Wildlife Action Plan (http://gfp.sd.gov/wildlife/management/diversity/default.aspx)

Because of limited staff, much of the work is accomplished through partnerships with individual biologists, environmental companies, universities, and other experts in wildlife research and monitoring. State Wildlife Grant funding provided to SDGFP has helped fund dozens of projects in South Dakota, with the highest priority being species and habitats that have not received funding or research attention in the past. To learn more about what has been accomplished with State Wildlife Grant dollars in the state, visit this site: http://gfp.sd.gov/wildlife/docs/wildlife-restoration-conservation-program.pdf

The wildlife action plan revision will include a summary of what has been accomplished with State Wildlife Grant funds provided to South Dakota. To learn more about what has been accomplished nationally with this funding, visit http://teaming.com/pdf/State%20Wildlife%20Grants%2010%20Year%20Success%20Report.pdf

How will the plan revision be different from South Dakota's original wildlife action plan?

South Dakota's Wildlife Action Plan emphasized the use of historical reference, which described the ecosystem conditions in a landscape resulting from natural processes, such as fire and grazing, and human disturbances. This approach is based on the assumption that if most of the historical plant communities still exist in the state in sufficient acreage and quality, the needs of the majority of wildlife species should be met. The list of species of greatest conservation need helps test the effectiveness of the ecosystem diversity approach. For more background on South Dakota's Wildlife Action Plan approach, please review this document: (http://gfp.sd.gov/wildlife/docs/wildlife-action-plan-article.pdf)

South Dakota's revised plan will again use an ecosystem diversity approach to assess current habitats and the species associated with them. The plan revision will have the following refinements or improvements:

- Rather than using large ecoregional boundaries, the plan revision will use Major Land Resource Areas as classified and mapped by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Because this is an NRCS planning unit, ecological information is available for these areas.
- New information on aquatic resources will be incorporated.
- New potential threats will be evaluated. Examples include climate change and white-nose syndrome.
- The species of greatest conservation need list will be reevaluated.
- Important conservation focus areas will be identified. These may be sites with large areas of intact native habitats or areas that provide for the needs of many rare species.
- The revision will contain a list of specific projects to help implement the plan. This will help conservation partners identify projects that are consistent with the needs of the wildlife action plan and eligible for State Wildlife Grants funds.
- The plan will incorporate accomplishments from the past decade of State Wildlife Grants funding in South Dakota.
- The plan and its components will be more user-friendly. SDGFP is investigating examples where the public can access a website to learn more about a rare species or about a particular site. We hope to translate the results of the plan revision into components that are accessible and understandable via the web.

Citizen Survey Some South Dakotans received a survey during the spring of 2012. Results will be included in the Wildlife Action Plan Revision.

The purpose of the citizen survey is to identify how people think about wildlife and to measure a range of attitudes and options related to a number of wildlife and environmental issues in South Dakota. The survey results will be used to guide future projects by SD Game, Fish and Parks, measure trends in wildlife and environmental attitudes, and as performance measures. Survey results will be summarized and the full report is posted on GFP's web-site.

Description of the Survey Questionnaire. In order to reduce the overall length to the questionnaire two versions of the questionnaire were developed. Five sections in each of the two questionnaires are similar (described here).

- General Questions about Fish & Wildlife Management in South Dakota (page 2). Questions in this section are designed to measure general attitudes towards wildlife and are used to measure overall trends in attitudes. Questions 1-5 in this section are questions that have been asked on past surveys of citizens and question number 6 has been added to the survey.
- Wildlife Values (page 3). This set of 14 questions was developed by researchers from Colorado State University. They are designed to measure a person's general value orientation towards wildlife. The purpose of these questions is to expand upon research to determine the utility of value orientations in predicting attitudes towards specific wildlife and environmental issues. These questions will sort people into four value orientation types:
    1. Utilitarians – believe that wildlife should be used and managed primarily for human benefit.
    2. Mutualists – view wildlife as capable of living in relationships of trust with humans and deserving of rights and caring.
    3. Pluralist – hold both a mutualism and a utilitarian value orientation towards wildlife and one's thinking is dependent upon conditions of the given situation.
    4. Distanced – tend to be less interested in wildlife and wildlife-related issues.
- Hunting & Fishing Participation (page 6). These questions are used to develop specific hunter and angler attitude profiles to measure similarities and differences in attitude between hunters/anglers and non-hunters/non-anglers.
- Wildlife Viewing (page 7). These questions are used to develop a specific wildlife viewer profile and to measure a few activities of wildlife viewers.
- Demographic Information (page 8). This information is used to provide a general description of the sample and to determine relationships between demographic variables and wildlife values orientations and other specific attitudes measured in the survey.

Pages 4 and 5 in the two versions of the questionnaire had different sets of questions. Version one measures attitudes about prairie wildlife, bats, mountain lions, and some wildlife management issues. Version two has questions about climate change, energy development, management of rare wildlife, and wetlands.

South Dakota residents were randomly selected to participate in this survey.

http://gfp.sd.gov/wildlife/management/plans/docs/WildlifeAttitudesProgressReport2012.pdf