

Introduction

Historically, wildlife management has focused on game species, primarily because those species have dedicated funding sources from fees and taxes paid by hunters and anglers. In recent decades, threatened and endangered species have received funding from the Endangered Species Act; however, the recovery of listed species has been costly and the number of listed species has doubled in the past 10 years. As the number of species reaching imperiled status increases, it has become clear that a more comprehensive approach needs to be taken for wildlife conservation. The U.S. Congress has helped address this need by creating the State Wildlife Grants Program under the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The program was developed with support from the Teaming With Wildlife Campaign, a bipartisan coalition with the goal of expanding funding for state wildlife conservation. The State Wildlife Grants Program has provided funding to states and territories to support cost-effective conservation aimed at averting future wildlife declines and keeping common species common. Funds appropriated under the State Wildlife Grants Program are apportioned according to a formula that takes into account each state's land area and population.

As a requirement for participating in the State Wildlife Grants Program, each state and territory has created a Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (Strategy) for conservation of a broad array of fish and wildlife. Throughout the development process, the objectives were to identify species of greatest conservation need and their habitats, and to develop high-priority conservation actions to abate problems for those species and habitats. These objectives have been developed in a prudent effort to prevent declines before species become imperiled thereby saving millions of tax dollars. In addition, the matching requirement has encouraged partnerships and cooperation among conservation partners.

Requirements

Through the State Wildlife Grants Program legislation, Congress has identified eight required elements for each state's Strategy. Strategies must identify and provide for:

- (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 Florida's wildlife;
- (2) Descriptions of locations and relative condition of key 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 strategies 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 State Strategy at intervals not to exceed 10 years;
- (7) Strategies for coordinating the development, implementation, review and revision of the State Strategy 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; and
- (8) Provisions to ensure public participation in the development, revision and implementation of projects and programs.

Florida's Wildlife Legacy Initiative

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) has created Florida's Wildlife Legacy Initiative (Initiative) in order to meet the intent of the State Wildlife Grants Program. The goal of the Initiative has been to develop a strategic vision for conservation of all of Florida's wildlife. The three main objectives of the Initiative have been: (1) to create partnerships for wildlife conservation across the State of Florida; (2) to support partnership building and use of the Strategy by making funding available through Florida's State Wildlife Grants Program; and (3) to develop and implement Florida's Strategy.

Partnership Development

The FWC has committed to building partnerships by working with a broad array of public and private entities with an interest in wildlife management and conservation. Florida's Wildlife Legacy Initiative has not intended to be used as the basis or support for new or expanded regulations but has been a non-regulatory effort designed to create partnerships for on-the-ground implementation of actions needed to conserve wildlife. Partners, including representatives from other state and federal agencies, organizations, businesses, and individuals, have been integral throughout the Strategy development process. Partners have contributed information about species, habitats, threats, and conservation actions. The Strategy has been a stimulus to engage partners to strategically think about their individual and coordinated roles in conservation efforts throughout Florida. Cooperative implementation of the Strategy has strengthened existing partnerships and has forged new opportunities to expand existing resources for wildlife conservation.

Florida's State Wildlife Grants Program

The purpose of Florida's State Wildlife Grants Program (Grants Program) has been to fund projects that benefit Florida's wildlife and their habitats through implementation of the Strategy. In

conjunction with matching support from other sources, the Grants Program has been an important resource for wildlife conservation efforts in Florida. Projects funded under the Grants Program have included data gaps, conservation actions, and partnership-building opportunities identified in the Strategy or through its development. Certain actions or identified needs contained in the Strategy have been limited or restricted from receiving State Wildlife Grant funds under the federal guidance (e.g. education and law enforcement). In addition, the federal guidelines have directed states to consider the relative level of funding available for species. Under the Grants Program, game, sport fish, or endangered species projects have not been excluded but they have not been given priority because those species already have federally dedicated funding sources. The Grants Program has focused on multiple-species or habitat-level projects aimed at keeping common species common and preventing future declines in wildlife populations. Additional information about the Grants Program has been posted at <http://myfwc.com/wildlifelegacy/grantfunding>.

Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy

The Strategy has set a plan of action for conserving all of Florida's fish and wildlife. The Strategy has been written with the intent to be used by anyone with an interest in wildlife conservation. Although the FWC has led the Strategy development process, hundreds of scientific experts and stakeholders have provided input throughout the document. The Strategy has addressed conservation issues, management needs, and implementation priorities. The Strategy has been designed to be adaptive through the process of development, implementation, monitoring, and adjusting future efforts. As part of Strategy implementation, the FWC has led efforts to ensure that the Strategy will be regularly reviewed to guarantee its long-term success.

Definition of Wildlife

The Strategy has encompassed the broad array of Florida's native wildlife including vertebrate and invertebrate species in aquatic (i.e., freshwater, estuarine, and marine) and terrestrial habitats. Wildlife has been defined as "any species of wild, free-ranging fauna including fish." Wildlife also has included "fauna in captive breeding programs the object of which is to reintroduce individuals of a depleted indigenous species in a previously occupied range" (FWC 2002b).

Habitat-based Approach

Traditionally, wildlife conservation efforts have been conducted with a species-by-species approach; since the Strategy has listed more than 900 targeted species, this traditional approach has not been feasible. In addition, implementation of actions on an individual species basis alone would fail to protect Florida's diverse wildlife and their habitats. Since many of the factors that threaten these species have been contributed to their habitat, it has been practical and advantageous to take a habitat-based approach within the Strategy. This approach must be balanced with species-specific efforts when needed to effectively address conservation of species.

Habitats have been categorized to tactically represent Florida's terrestrial, freshwater, and marine ecosystems. The objective has been to represent Florida's diverse habitats in a spatially explicit manner. This approach, however, has not accounted for the interaction and interdependency of terrestrial, freshwater, and marine habitats. Dividing Florida's landscape into

habitat categories may present limitations in the future but this strategic-level approach has been imperative for initiating a comprehensive approach to conserve Florida's wildlife.

Non-regulatory Approach

The focus of the Strategy has been conservation of wildlife through voluntary and cooperative efforts. Controversial issues that affect wildlife have been identified by many experts and citizens, and these issues have challenged the interests of many stakeholders who would resist further regulation. But the Strategy has not proposed regulatory responses, nor has the FWC intended for it to be used to support new regulations. Instead, the Strategy has provided a starting point to explore these issues and the opportunity to cooperatively develop non-regulatory action. Actions have been proposed in the form of incentive programs, public-private partnerships, improved coordination of existing activity within and among agencies, and private citizen action. The Strategy also has been the stimulus to develop new, previously unrecognized voluntary actions for wildlife and habitats. The success of this approach has been dependent upon the support of numerous partners and their willingness to participate. By articulating and encoding the legitimacy of non-regulatory actions, the Strategy can become the basis for cooperative and incentive-driven actions for wildlife conservation.

Accountability

The Strategy has been developed for all of the state's wildlife; thus, implementation has required a large cooperative effort. Partners have been encouraged to implement actions from the Strategy if the actions have aligned with their authority, mission, and goals. The Strategy has conservation actions that typically fall under the jurisdiction of the FWC, other agencies, or organizations, and many of those parties have been listed as potential partners for those actions. The FWC has not intended for the inclusion of those parties to imply their accountability for implementing the actions. Success of the Strategy has been dependent upon voluntary cooperation of partners from diverse interests in Florida's wildlife conservation.