

Introduction

Project Need

This is an historic opportunity and challenge for the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries (DWFF), and its partners. The State Wildlife Grant (SWG) program, a new significant funding source, provides DWFF the first chance to comprehensively conserve wildlife. This is an opportunity to develop a Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (CWCS) that identifies those wildlife species of greatest conservation need (GCN) and actions needed to conserve Alabama's wildlife and their key habitats. This is the time to design how DWFF and its partners in conservation can together proactively keep common species common and reverse the decline of rare species to prevent them from becoming endangered.

Within the last century, DWFF has restored the decimated populations of white-tailed deer, turkey, and other game species. These restoration efforts were made possible by dedicated, long-term funding derived from user fees, hunting, and fishing licenses. Unfortunately, little funding has historically been available for non-game species conservation and many species are now in serious decline. Restoration of such species has the greatest chance of success and is most cost effective if addressed before species decline to the point of needing Endangered Species Act protection. This CWCS defines those wildlife species in greatest need of conservation in Alabama and describes the actions necessary for their restoration. It is through this tool that we have the opportunity to work with conservation partners and the greater public to best utilize available resources to ensure that declining species are restored and common species remain common.

DWFF is leading the effort to collect the best available information and research findings from the many existing plans, programs and priorities. It is coordinating with local, state and federal agencies and non-governmental organization (NGO) conservation partners for input and collaboration to identify species of greatest conservation need and priority conservation actions. DWFF is anxious to work with conservation partners and constituents to develop the best approaches to ensure long-term conservation and enhancement of Alabama's unique wildlife heritage.

Purpose

Alabama's CWCS represents the results of a broad and inclusive approach to compile and present the best available information on the status of wildlife conservation in the state while involving the diversity of Alabama's public and private stakeholders. The purpose of this document is to provide direction for and coordination of wildlife conservation efforts in Alabama for the next decade. The overall goal is to identify and conserve those species in greatest need for conservation action while also addressing the full array of wildlife and habitats. Specific components are presented as required to meet legal obligations under the

SWG program, which provides funding and guidance for this effort through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Office of Federal Assistance.

The conservation actions identified in this CWCS will be an essential foundation for the future of wildlife conservation, as well as a stimulus to engage federal, state, local public and private conservation partners to strategically coordinate their individual roles in prioritizing state wildlife conservation efforts. The development of the CWCS at the state level is the critical first step in defining the capabilities and needs of DWFF and its partners to accomplish wildlife conservation goals. This CWCS also identifies the measures that will be used to evaluate the results achieved and the threats and needs that remain for effective wildlife conservation in Alabama. The CWCS process provides an opportunity for DWFF to provide effective and visionary leadership in wildlife conservation. Strategy implementation with the new funds, periodic review, and resulting adaptive management makes this document a long-term tool for wildlife conservation.

Background and Approach

The Teaming With Wildlife (TWW) coalition, comprised of State fish and wildlife agencies and their governmental and non-governmental partners, has for over a decade, encouraged support for new sources of Federal funding to complement and expand State wildlife conservation programs. This support came in the form of annual appropriations to the states under the Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program (WCRP) in Fiscal Year 2001 and the State Wildlife Grant program beginning in Fiscal Year 2002. Under these new programs, Congress provided an historic opportunity for the state fish and wildlife agencies and their partners to design and implement a more comprehensive approach to the conservation of America's wildlife. A requirement of WCRP and SWG is that each State, Territory, and the District of Columbia complete a CWCS by October 1, 2005.

Congress identified eight required elements (see Alabama CWCS Element Guide, appended to the beginning of this document) in the SWG legislation. During the development process, the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' (IAFWA) TWW Committee provided more specific Guiding Principles, including criteria to help states define the scope and focus of their strategies. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Advisory Acceptance Team (NAAT) also provided guidance on basic information needed to satisfy the CWCS review and evaluation process. This document is designed in format and content to address these specific requirements.

In Alabama, this CWCS effort began under WCRP with DWFF sponsoring the 2002 Nongame Conference that assembled scientists/stakeholders to compile the best available information on Alabama's wildlife. This two-year effort resulted in the comprehensive four-volume publication *Alabama Wildlife* (Mirarchi 2004, Mirarchi et al. 2004a-c) and is the foundation for this CWCS. It developed ranking criteria, identified those species of greatest conservation need and recommended conservation actions for these GCN species.

Another noteworthy effort funded by WCRP is intended to provide a comprehensive publication on freshwater mussels of Alabama. Dr. James Williams, Dr. Arthur Bogan and

Introduction

Mr. Jeff Garner are currently preparing a publication entitled "The Freshwater Mussels of Alabama and the Mobile Basin of Georgia, Mississippi and Tennessee". This publication will be of interest to state and federal fisheries and wildlife agencies, environmental management agencies, aquatic biologists and malacologists in Alabama and other states since it will cover approximately 60% of the U.S. fauna. Most of the book will be devoted to species accounts. Included will be descriptions of shell, soft anatomy and glochidia, as well as sections on similar species, general distribution, Alabama distribution, ecology and biology, and current conservation status. Each species will have a distribution map which will reflect recent survey efforts and historical collections from 16 museums. Introductory material will include topics such as commercial utilization and management, habitat, ecology and biology, and conservation as well as discussion on the history of malacology in Alabama and physiography of the state. Estimated completion of the manuscript is 2005, with publication anticipated in 2006. New information generated by this effort has been incorporated into this CWCS.

In 2004, DWFF contracted Terwilliger Consulting to assist in expanding the scope of *Alabama Wildlife*. The ensuing 18-month process to update, refine, and reformat this information involved significant coordination with many conservation partners and reorganization of several key components of the information contained in *Alabama Wildlife* to meet NAAT requirements for the CWCS and provide for regional/national consistency. For example, terrestrial and estuarine habitats were reformatted to meet consistency recommendations. Although terrestrial species were assigned to habitat types, most aquatic species were instead treated by river drainage. Also, species coverage was expanded to include crayfishes, of which Alabama has more species than any other state.