

Multi-Species Recovery Plans



After stabilizing species that are headed for extinction, the ultimate goal of the Endangered Species Act is to recover endangered and threatened plants and animals to a secure status. Once a species is listed under the Act, a recovery plan is developed to serve as the blueprint for restoration. Until 1982, all recovery plans focused only on single species. That year, Region 1 of the Fish and Wildlife Service published a recovery plan covering two species of plants endemic to the sand dunes of Eureka Valley, California: the Eureka Dunes evening-primrose (*Oenothera avita* ssp. *eurekensis*) and Eureka Dune grass (*Swallenia alexandrae*). Thereafter, except for 1988, at least one multi-species recovery plan was completed every year, with a gradual increasing trend. In 1998, 18 multi-species plans were finalized, covering a total of 210 listed species. Why the change in our recovery approach?

According to Jeff Whitney, the Service's Southwest Strategy Regional Coordinator, recovery planners started asking more questions about the scope of recovery plans:

1) Is the species, as listed, distinct from other species in its floral/faunal community with respect to its habitat requirements and threats? Is it the only listed species in its general geographic area? If so, a single species recovery plan is appropriate.

2) Does the species, as listed, occur in two or more distinct geographic areas, and would the loss of any one of these areas diminish the species' capacity to survive or recover? If the answers are yes, designate "recovery units" for the species with separate goals.

3) Do two or more species of the same genus, or the same geographical areas, share a common threat? Such a situation calls for a multi-species recovery plan.

4) Do several listed members of a shared biotic community rely on protection and/or restoration of their ecosystem to reach recovery? Develop an ecosystem-based plan.

5) Does the species' range extend beyond the United States? If so, a cooperative international plan may be in order.

For all the complexity involved in developing such expanded plans, there are many advantages. A multi-species plan can streamline the public comment process and save time by reducing the need to describe habitats and threats separately for each species. Information can be presented in a format suitable for use in biological opinions and environmental impact statements with few modifications. A multi-species approach also promotes thinking on a broader scale.

Multi-species plans can reduce the conflicts between listed species that occur in the same area. For example, in the early 1990s, a proposed water management plan would have pitted endangered wood storks (*Mycteria americana*) against endangered snail kites (*Rostrhamus sociabilis plumbeus*) in the Everglades of South Florida. The plan would have improved habitat for wood storks in one area while decreasing habitat for snail kites in another. Opponents of the plan argued that destroying the kite habitat violated the Endangered Species Act. Proponents claimed that the improved stork habitat would benefit the kites as well, which

also frequented that area. The complex situation, with these and so many other listed species in one area, eventually led to the development of the South Florida Multi-Species Recovery Plan in 1999, which covers 68 species and 26,002 square miles (67,346 sq. km.).

In 1994, the Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service issued a cooperative interagency policy for applying the ecosystem approach to the Endangered Species Act. After all, the Act states that one of its primary purposes is "to provide a means whereby the ecosystems upon which endangered or threatened species depend may be conserved..." Various sections of the law authorize programs to cooperate with other federal agencies and non-federal partners in using the ecosystem approach.

Among the mechanisms the 1994 policy suggested for ecosystem management were the development and implementation of recovery plans for communities or ecosystems where multiple listed and candidate species occur. The policy also authorizes developing and implementing plans for listed species in a manner that restores, reconstructs, or rehabilitates the struc-

ture, distribution, connectivity, and function upon which those species depend. Obviously, an ecosystem plan is a form of multi-species recovery plan.

There are, however, still occasions when single-species recovery plans are preferable or when they should be written in addition to multi-species plans. For example, extremely imperiled species may require more detailed plans. The Florida panther (*Puma concolor coryi*) has captive breeding programs that are detailed in its own recovery plan, but it is also part of the South Florida Multi-Species Recovery Plan. The latter focuses on land management activities to benefit the entire group of imperiled species.

Multi-species recovery plans show a potential for solving many dilemmas characteristic of single species plans. We look forward to seeing more plans that take an ecosystem approach, such as the Lower Colorado River Multi-Species Conservation Plan (see sidebar).

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Lower Colorado River MSCP by Sam Spiller

The Lower Colorado River Multi-Species Conservation Plan (MSCP) was initiated in 1995 as a partnership providing Endangered Species Act compliance for water and power resource management in southern California, Nevada, and Arizona. The Bureau of Reclamation releases flows for various water users, including Los Angeles, San Diego, Las Vegas, and Phoenix. The goal is to meet public needs, avoid species jeopardy, and assist in recovery of such species as the bonytail chub (*Gila elegans*), razorback sucker (*Xyrauchen texanus*), southwestern willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*), and Yuma clapper rail (*Rallus longirostris yumanensis*). But the MSCP does more, by targeting at least 90 species in an approach that addresses all the habitats that comprise the riverine corridor of the lower Colorado River from Hoover Dam to the Mexican border: aquatic, marsh, cottonwood-willow riparian, and mesquite bosque. Non-listed species that will benefit from the plan include fish like the flannelmouth sucker (*Catostomus latipinnis*), the yellow-billed cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*), and other neotropical migratory birds and bats that use riparian habitats. In implementing the plan, we are working closely with tribes, private landowners, irrigation districts, local communities, and other parties. Sam Spiller, the Lower Colorado River Coordinator for the Service, is located in Phoenix, Arizona.



The wood stork is just one of a number of listed species that should benefit from the South Florida Multi-Species Recovery Plan.

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