

Training Courses Highlight Partnerships

What do the bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*), golden-cheeked warbler (*Dendroica chrysoparia*), grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos*), and Texas cave invertebrates have in common? They were all the subject of field trips conducted during National Conservation Training Center (NCTC) courses last year. In these courses, we've explored some of the many tools available to protect listed species on non-federal lands. The courses highlighted just how important strong partnerships are to the recovery of listed species on non-federal lands.

Since the early 1990's, the Fish and Wildlife Service has been increasing its efforts to cultivate different approaches for working with private landowners to conserve endangered species on their land. Over the last several years, NCTC has developed several workshops and courses to address this very important topic. In 1996, our workshop "The

Endangered Species Act: Private Land Strategies for Working Together" attracted a wide variety of participants from federal agencies, private industry, universities, conservation organizations, and other groups. A similar workshop ("Endangered Species Partnerships on Private Lands") was sponsored by the Service, The Conservation Fund, and the Anheuser-Busch company in 1997.

In September 1999, NCTC offered the pilot session of the week-long course "Conserving Endangered Species on Non-Federal Lands" in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and the second session was held in Austin, Texas, in March 2000. We took a different approach to designing this course by including representatives of private industry and conservation organizations on the design team. James Sweeney, formerly of Champion International (and now with International Paper), and Michael Bean of Environmental Defense (an

Greg Neudecker of the Montana Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program and two landowners spoke to the Partners class in May of 2000.
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environmental organization) have played an active role in this course since its inception, and their willingness to share their expertise has been invaluable during course design and presentation.

These courses have explored a wide range of tools available to aid non-federal landowners and land managers in their conservation efforts for listed species. These tools include Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances, Safe Harbor Agreements, the habitat conservation planning process, conservation easements, land exchanges, landowner incentives and funding, and the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program.

The courses also included a session on how to work with people to build common ground, even if they come from different backgrounds and have different values and perspectives. A field trip allowed participants to observe current conservation efforts using some of the tools we discussed in class and to hear from some of the partners in these efforts.

Both sessions involved a diverse group of participants from federal and state agencies, tribes, national and local conservation organizations, and industry, as well as private individuals. The wide range of experiences among the participants generated a great deal of discussion all week, and many people commented that the diversity of the participants was one of the strengths of the class.

In May 2000, NCTC held the “Partners for Fish and Wildlife—Habitat Restoration” course in Missoula, Montana. Under its Partners for Fish and Wildlife program, the Service works in voluntary partnership with private landowners to restore important fish and wildlife habitats on their properties. Participants learned how to set priorities, identify partners, find funding, and select, design, and construct projects. One of the highlights of the week was getting out in the beautiful Blackfoot Valley of west-central Montana to see

Partners projects that encompass wetland and stream restoration, grazing systems, fish screens, removal of fish passage barriers, off-site water development, noxious weed management, and methods to reduce predation on livestock. These projects have restored habitat for bull trout, bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), grizzly bears, gray wolves (*Canis lupus*), and many other species.

The Partners program doesn't do all this impressive work on its own. Local landowners play a vital role in habitat restoration efforts in the Blackfoot Valley. One project, the Blackfoot Challenge, was started over 20 years ago to “enhance, conserve, and protect the resources and rural lifestyle” of this area. This group, comprised of private landowners and federal, state, and county land managers and officials, takes an active role in habitat improvement projects, conservation easements, recreation plans, weed management workshops, and landowner workshops. The Blackfoot Challenge has made a name for itself as a group that gets things done, from restoring and protecting habitat to dealing with the inevitable impacts that go hand-in-hand with an increasing local human population.

The Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited was formed in 1989 by concerned private landowners and recreationists, and has since been joined by the Service (Montana Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program) and the Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Department. With a goal of restoring the Blackfoot River's native trout fishery, the Big Blackfoot Chapter worked to implement a catch-and-release fishing regulation change and started working with private landowners to restore degraded tributary streams. Results have been promising already; bull trout redd (spawning beds) counts in two key tributaries increased from 18 in 1989 to 141 in 1999.

During the May course, participants had the chance to hear from and talk with local landowners and land manag-

ers who have been involved with both the Blackfoot Challenge and the Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited for many years. These landowners told a fascinating story of how they had formed productive partnerships in the Blackfoot Valley, which benefitted natural resources while allowing them to maintain their rural lifestyle. It was encouraging to hear that in spite of the many obstacles these local groups had faced, they had achieved great successes and enthusiastically supported continued work.

The Service has come to realize that developing partnerships isn't just a good idea; it is crucial to the success of conservation efforts for endangered species on non-federal lands. It can be daunting to figure out the best approach to take to form these partnerships. By involving local landowners and other partners in its courses, and giving participants the chance to observe successful partnerships firsthand, the NCTC is doing its part to support the cause of endangered species conservation.

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