

Strategic Habitat Conservation

The Right Stuff in the Right Places for America's Fish and Wildlife

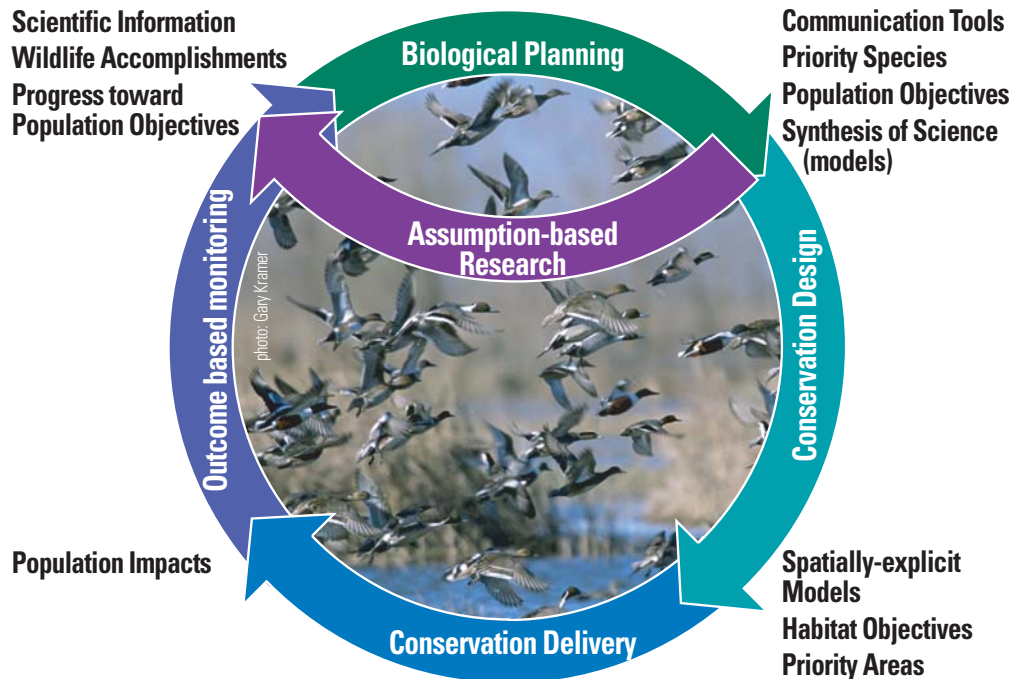
If you were given a tool that would help you make better decisions, achieve more conservation, building healthier fish and wildlife populations — using the same resources you have to do your work today, would you use it?

Consider: Over the past Century, the Service and our partners built a network of land and water dedicated to fish and wildlife conservation in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley. A quick look at a map of the Service's national wildlife refuges and the migratory bird flyways reveals the strategic thinking that took place. As the agency worked to fill in the holes, its managers were understandably opportunistic in their conservation activities particularly with private landowners, conservation groups and state fish and wildlife agencies. They continued to pursue conservation wherever possible – typically on small, disconnected tracts of land.

In 1998, the Service and our partners determined 15 million acres of land were available for restoration throughout the Mississippi valley. Biologists wanted to know where the highest value acres for waterfowl and high priority forest breeding birds were located. How much habitat was needed and where?



Jerry Tollison



Biologists in the Mississippi valley didn't have much money and they didn't have many people. They did, however, recognize that by conserving the right habitat in the right places with the right partners, they could exponentially increase the benefit to wildlife and migratory bird populations across the landscape.

Our biologists, working with the U.S. Geological Survey (U.S.G.S.) and other partners like The Nature Conservancy, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and Ducks Unlimited, did just that in the Mississippi valley. While it didn't happen over night, what they found was staggering. When they mapped the small tracts where conservation had been achieved opportunistically they realized they hit only three percent of the core habitat needed by waterfowl and forest breeding birds. When they focused on core habitat and connected it using the same level of conservation resources (i.e., money, staff), they captured 54 percent of the core habitat needed for those species.

That's an 18-fold increase in conservation benefit for those species; achieved by focusing on landscape-level outcomes. In addition to the fish and wildlife benefits, it's a result any policymaker would find persuasive. It's what strategic habitat

conservation is all about. These results represent the core of what motivates us each day to continue our pursuit of conservation with innovation and imagination.

The pieces of strategic habitat conservation
Building on past success and informed by experience, strategic habitat conservation simply integrates all the facets of conservation biology necessary to achieve our highest conservation priorities. It relies on a combination of relationships and science to help us achieve our goals. This is not a new concept. Indeed, nearly a dozen years ago The Nature Conservancy was among the first to introduce this kind of framework and called it "Conservation by Design."

Strategic habitat conservation is **biological planning** with measurable, landscape level outcomes. Its **conservation design** that integrates biological objectives for different wildlife species, management practices, and ecological functions. Its **conservation delivery** on the ground – something the Service does as well as any organization.



Its **decision-based monitoring** that emphasizes evaluation and appropriate decision making throughout the process to enhance knowledge and bolster results. Finally, strategic habitat conservation takes advantage of **assumption-driven research** grounded in the best science available.



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We are achieving some of these elements in many parts of the country. In the Southeast Region, consider the Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership

where the Service is working with states, land trusts, and fisheries conservation groups to conserve aquatic species. In the Mississippi valley, we've charted a course aimed at restoring the Delta's rich landscape for the benefit of migrating waterfowl, forest breeding birds, black bears, and a host of other fish and wildlife species.

In south-central Tennessee along the Barrens Plateau, there is an ongoing, collaborative effort to restore the imperiled Barrens topminnow and other rare aquatic species through habitat improvement and enhancement and hatchery propagation. And in the Roanoke Tar Neuse, the Service is working with partners to restore coastal habitats and barrier islands, bottomland hardwoods, and pocosin wetlands for the benefit of native wildlife. No where are we implementing all of the strategic habitat conservation elements on the ground. Our challenge is to implement those elements at the appropriate scales to achieve our highest conservation priorities. It does not mean that every station needs to implement every element. Rather, implementation will occur in the context of landscape-level outcomes working with partners.



J & K Hollingsworth

Just as today's laptop computers grew from the larger unwieldy computers of the 1970s that filled entire rooms, strategic habitat conservation represents the latest iterative step in modern conservation and would not be possible without the extraordinary successes the conservation community has achieved over the past century. Recent advances in technology and their effective use in conservation planning and implementation are leading us to a strategic pursuit of sustainable landscapes.

Strategic habitat conservation is not a new organization. It is not a new initiative. It is not a set of procedures to be checked off. It is, instead, a tool to guide our conservation work with more integrated information and more cross-programmatic collaboration to achieve even stronger results. It is a blending of science and relationships to meet our highest conservation priorities.

As its name implies, it is a strategy for building on the incredible conservation work being accomplished on the ground by improving coordination, planning, implementation and monitoring at the landscape level.

Strategic habitat conservation and regional priorities

Our effort to incorporate the strategic habitat conservation framework into our daily activities will be guided by our newly-identified highest priorities. It will help us align our work. By identifying and achieving consensus around our most important work here in the Southeast Region, we will focus on our highest priority work and recognize that lower priority work won't get done, or will be done at a later time when time and resources allow.

The strategic habitat conservation framework and the identification of our highest priorities will enhance our credibility for science-based, consistent decision-making; strengthen our effectiveness in conservation of trust resources and draw us closer to partners such as state fish and wildlife agencies and U.S.G.S. By matching our priorities with those identified in State Wildlife Action Plans or other conservation agency plans, we will quickly identify landscape- and watershed-level priorities we have in common, and the entities who can help us meet those priorities.

As we move from simply "more" to questions like "how much more?" and "where?" our partnership with state fish



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and wildlife agencies, U.S.G.S., private landowners, and conservation groups will grow stronger and the results will be more substantial.

What's next?

At the Director's request, the Southeast Region established an implementation team to develop a strategy aimed at incorporating this framework into everything we do. It won't look the same in the Roanoke Tar Neuse as it does the Mississippi valley. In some parts of the region the work may center on a joint venture, in others it might be an existing ecosystem team, and in others it might mirror the framework established in the successful effort to restore the Barrens topminnow. Different mechanisms will be used in different areas. As the team works through these issues, it will seek input from employees at every level.

For now though, here's the take away. Understand that not every question has an answer. Take some time to think about this framework, all it involves, how its elements match up with what you are doing today, and how what you are doing today could be bolstered by implementing parts of the framework with new and existing partners.

Think about strategic habitat conservation as the next step for our agency's role as a leading player in today's conservation movement working to strengthen our commitment to doing more of the right stuff in the right places for America's fish and wildlife.

To read more about strategic habitat conservation including a copy of the National Ecological Assessment Team's report, please visit <https://intranet.fws.gov/region4/>.