

Illinois Conservation Opportunity Areas: Coordination and Planning in Support of the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan

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Annual Report

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A report to:

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Background

Across the United States there is increasing recognition that conservation of natural resources must be focused on protection and management of critical habitats and species in order to preserve the nation's biodiversity (The Nature Conservancy, 2008). Incentives to this directed conservation effort are limited financial and technical resources that are constraining natural resource agencies in their capacity to protect all areas of their jurisdiction. To assist with developing priorities, the State Wildlife Action Plans provide a valuable foundation for guiding the conservation initiatives of the states and their partners.

Illinois' Wildlife Action Plan (IL-WAP) serves as a blueprint for management, protection and recovery of Species in Greatest Need of Conservation (SGNC) and associated habitats. Developed with input from a wide spectrum of conservation partners, this plan is both strategic and prescriptive, describing the broad issues and specific actions to achieve the identified goals and objectives.

From data compiled during development of the IL WAP, the basic findings concluded that four conditions or features were strongly influencing SGNC current and future status. These included: 1) insufficient habitat for sustaining many of the SGNC, 2) degraded conditions for those habitat which are available, 3) an increasing occurrence of invasive species, and 4) changing land use and other factors associated with anthropogenic influences. Yet financial and technical constraints provide that these issues cannot be addressed across the entire landscape and must be focused where actions will achieve the greatest benefits for long-term conservation of biodiversity.

Need

The multiple scales encountered with implementing this WAP promptly lead to recognition of a need for an approach to transition from a statewide perspective to "on-the-ground" implementation. Further, to achieve measurable progress in conservation, this change in scale must be coupled with targeted areas of ecological importance such as high concentrations or metapopulations of Species in Greatest Need of Conservation (SGNC), or critical habitats.

Natural resource management and protection requires the collaboration of many agencies and organizations and Illinois's conservation landscape has many active and productive partners. These groups also work at multiple levels from statewide to local.

Thus, within the framework of the statewide IL-WAP, focusing attention on priority habitats and species, and engaging local partners, requires a directed effort to help guide the application of resources and funding where it can have the most benefit for species and habitats. In the IL WAP, these areas were ranked based upon habitat patch size as well as threatened and endangered

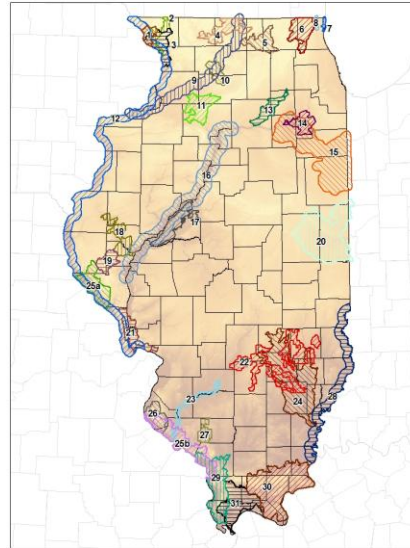
species, biodiversity, and regional workshop participants, and are identified as Conservation Opportunity Areas (COA's) (Figure 1).

Objective

The objective of this project is to facilitate communication, coordination, and planning within the proposed Illinois Conservation Opportunity Areas to address the IL-WAP.

Approach

The various needs of these COA's, and associated species and habitats, require coordination and communication among partners to help ensure the most efficient use of resources and proper implementation of best management practices. Within each COA, guided by recommendations from partners, goals and priorities can be established to support protection and management of habitat for SGNC's.



The issues driving each COA are expected to be diverse, thus flexibility in the coordination, communication and planning approach will be critical. For example, conservation initiatives in some COA's may be directed at a particular species or suite of species, or at one or more habitat types. The area of interest (i.e., focus area) may encompass only a small portion of the identified COA. Yet it is expected that these directed efforts can serve to initiate and address broader ecological concerns.

Of interest to this project is the current level of planning and implementation within each COA. Based upon numerous on-going and completed planning efforts of both federal and state agencies, as well as non-governmental organizations, the approach for coordination will vary widely among COA's (Figure 2). To be successful, the project must assess the needs of each COA and in a collaborative approach with the partners, determine the level of involvement.

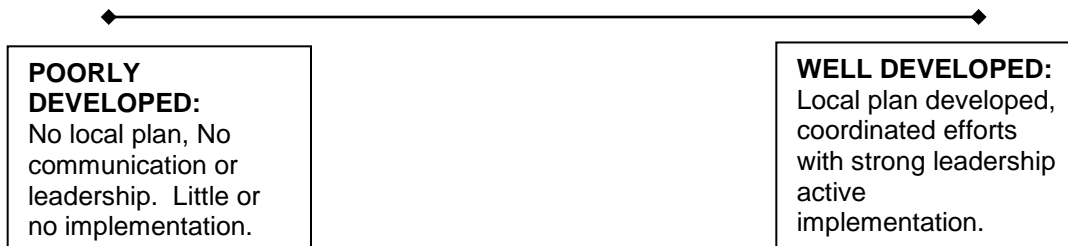


Figure 2. Anticipated range of planning and coordination within COA's.

Progress To-Date

Job 1. Coordination and Communication

The initial efforts to address this job centered on communicating the purpose of this project with project leaders/contacts and partners. This coordination included ongoing discussions with several Offices within the IDNR including Realty and Environmental Planning, Land Management and Resource Conservation. Developing this network will be critical to success in the COA's as there are many activities that have either been conducted by the IDNR or are currently underway. The purpose of this project is to support these ongoing activities at whatever level is appropriate. This support may range from providing a basic explanation of the project and potential assistance to a more involved level of coordinating and facilitating meetings. Specific accomplishments are identified in the attached spreadsheet.

Products include:

- a project brochure to disseminate information about the project (see Appendix A),
- development of contact lists for some of the initially targeted COA's.

The project directed initial efforts towards identifying areas that have strong potential for prompt successes and where these actions could serve as a catalyst for the change necessary to move the local efforts towards on-the-ground activities. To identify these areas, a survey for COA prioritization was developed (See Appendix B). The survey was directed at IDNR staff, multiple COA partners and the general public through the IDNR website. In addition to COA prioritization, the survey was developed to increase understanding of diverse needs within the COA's and to gain the public perspective as a foundation for updating the IL-WAP.

Working with SIUC faculty (Dr. Mae Davenport-Forestry), a research component of the project was identified to assess COA capacity thresholds. This effort will help the IDNR, TNC and other agencies and organizations to identify the specific needs and thresholds for successful COA's. See Appendix C for a brief description of the proposed research.

Finally, working with the IDNR Geographic Information Systems Analyst (Andrew Hulin), an approach to refining the areas of the COA's was initiated using GAP models and habitat patch size. To provide a more appropriate perspective relative to the ecological values of the COA's and minimize landowner concerns associated with boundaries, a proximity allocation analysis was conducted on the COA's. This approach provides a gradient association with the COA's.

Job 2. Planning

Several of the initial COA's addressed by the project are at various levels of organization and planning. Provided below is an assessment their status.

Middle Mississippi River Corridor Hill Prairie South:

A local organization referred to as "Clifftops" conducted its first annual meeting and has developed a local plan for the area, adapted from the IL-WAP. Goals, challenges,

strategies and actions have been identified for the area. The group has a leader and is making progress towards implementing its plan. (Southwestern Illinois Wildlife Action Plan found on Sharepoint Site).

Mason County Sands

Activities in this COA have formed around recovery of the Illinois Chorus Frog. There are several ongoing activities including research and habitat development that are part of different projects, of which greater coordination has been initiated. For this project, numerous data gaps have been identified, including basic distribution data. It is expected that the Illinois Chorus Frog may serve as the catalyst for additional work on other species (e.g., mud turtle, grassland birds, shore birds) and a SWG proposal, currently under development, is anticipated to address this larger Illinois Chorus Frog work. The anticipated role of T-55 will be to provide coordination among the various partners and track progress.

Middle Illinois River

There is considerable interest in the Middle Illinois COA, with the primary emphasis on migratory birds. This is a complex area, often with conflicting issues (e.g., fisheries and waterfowl), so developing clearly identifiable goals and objectives will be essential for successful implementation. Initial coordination efforts were conducted in January.

Cache River (Cache River Wetlands Joint Venture Partnership and Friends of the Cache)

Major groups involved in the Cache include the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, IDNR, TNC and Friends of the Cache. Both TNC and FWS are developing independent conservation plans, so a role for this project may include facilitation and assistance with planning and determining how these plans may be coordinated.

Conservation Planning

This job also provides for identification of a common planning process. Given the diversity and complexity of these COA's, as well as the minimal amount of time and resources able to be devoted to planning within each COA, a common planning process must be very simple and rapid. It would also be expected that these local COA plans would be updated frequently, thus requiring a very simple process. The Nature Conservancy Rapid Conservation Action Planning process (i.e., Rapid CAP) has formed the foundation of initial efforts. However, the Rapid CAP is a 2-3 day process which, in some situations, may be unacceptably lengthy for some COA's. We expect that plans developed through this project will provide very basic guidance and form the foundation for future coordination. As funding, interests, or needs begin to drive implementation in a COA, we fully expect that the COA and Focus Area plans will be updated to reflect the new information. These local plans will help drive the broader Illinois Wildlife Action Plan. We also are exploring the use of "results chains" (*sensu* Nick Salafsky, Foundations of Success) as a component of such a plan and for establishing desired outcomes.

Job 3. Development of Performance Measures

No significant progress was achieved on this job as planning processes were often too young to identify performance measures or planning was complete and implementation was currently underway (e.g., Cache and Midewin) ----Need to check on this statement.

Job 4. Report to IDNR

This job was addressed with this first annual report and through status meetings convened to track progress.