

Executive Summary

The authority and responsibility for fish and wildlife conservation in Virginia is vested with Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF) and the Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC). These agencies have partnered with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to manage harvested and endangered species under many federal programs. As a result, populations of many of these species have rebounded.

However, DGIF is also charged with managing all other wildlife in the Commonwealth. This responsibility has presented numerous challenges, primarily because of a lack of adequate funding. In 1998, the Virginia General Assembly recognized the importance and value of a broader “user pay, user benefit” approach and directed a portion of the state sales tax collected on wildlife-related outdoor recreation equipment to DGIF. While this additional revenue has enabled the agency to continue conservation and management programs, these resources do not address the continued shortfall of funds available for comprehensive wildlife conservation.

Congress began to provide annual funding to supplement existing state fish and wildlife conservation programs in 2000. Along with this funding came the responsibility of each state and territory to develop a Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy—an Action Plan for wildlife—by October 1, 2005. In 2003, DGIF was also charged with the development of a similar strategy as a result of Governor Warner’s Natural Resources Leadership Summit. This task was also to be completed by October 1, 2005.

Key to the successful development of this document was input from partners, stakeholders, and citizens. The development of this Action Plan has provided an unprecedented opportunity to develop important partnerships. This initiative has also provided a foundation from which all parties interested in wildlife conservation in the Commonwealth may work towards common conservation goals. It is a wildlife conservation strategy for the Commonwealth, not just DGIF.

Results are reported by six ecoregions across Virginia: the Coastal Plain, Piedmont, Blue Ridge, Ridge and Valley, and the Northern and Southern Cumberlands. This format provides a natural regional framework, allowing groups to focus conservation efforts at the appropriate level.

The Action Plan includes an evaluation of the location and relative abundance of wildlife and the habitats required to support these species; an assessment of problems facing these species and habitats; recommended conservation actions to address these problems; research and survey needs; and monitoring programs and needs.

The Virginia Wildlife Action Plan identifies 925 species of greatest conservation need, 60% of which are aquatic, 70% of which are invertebrates. These species are grouped into four tiers of relative conservation need: *critical*, *very high*, *high*, and *moderate* conservation need. These tiers allow for prioritization of threats facing species and of conservation actions addressing those threats.

Evaluation of the problems facing these species and actions needed to address those problems are presented in summary at the statewide level, as well as in more detail for each of six ecoregions. One approach taken was the identification of the “Top 10” threats faced by terrestrial and aquatic wildlife. For terrestrial species, seven of the top 10 threats were related to habitat destruction or fragmentation from various sources, including development and some agricultural and forestry practices. Eight of the top 10 aquatic threats related to water quality, including pollution and sedimentation, are from such sources as development, industrial activities and some agricultural and forestry practices.

Priority conservation actions were developed statewide, and include detailed recommendations for coordination, education, enforcement, habitat management, land conservation, planning, regulations and policies, and species management.

Some of the most comprehensive and widespread issues identified in the development of this Strategy include:

(a) *A need for greater coordination between conservation partners.* The partnerships formed and renewed during this process will help to facilitate conservation projects statewide.

(b) *Unprecedented fragmentation and development of habitat.* This is one of the most frequently identified problems facing wildlife. To address it, those responsible for land planning will need to be more fully engaged in wildlife conservation efforts.

(c) *Invasive exotic plants and animals negatively impacting native wildlife and habitats.* Even though they are already widespread, the prevalence of invasive species is increasing in both aquatic and terrestrial communities. From exotic common reed (*Phragmites*) in coastal marshes to crayfish introduced through the bait trade, this is a crucial statewide conservation issue.

(d) *Existing data gaps that impede effective conservation planning and implementation.* For many species of greatest conservation need, basic life history and distribution information are not known. These gaps are critical to address, especially for Tier I species, in projects funded by the State Wildlife Grants program or by other conservation programs and partners.

(e) *A chronic shortfall in funding of conservation programs.* This issue was identified by both our partners and the public. Land acquisition and protection, research, and habitat management are expensive, and many species of greatest conservation need have historically been a low priority for the limited funding that does exist.

The next step of this process is implementation of the Wildlife Action Plan. The group of partners involved in the development of the Action Plan is being expanded to form Implementation Working Groups, with representation from a remarkably diverse group of organizations and interests.

Monitoring our activities and accomplishments will be an important evaluation tool: It will provide the framework necessary to modify and update the Action Plan as new data are acquired and as conservation successes are realized.

The Virginia Wildlife Action Plan provides a blueprint and vision for effective and efficient wildlife conservation in the Commonwealth. It draws on the strengths of existing efforts and partnerships, while recognizing that there is work to be done to ensure healthy wildlife populations in Virginia. In the decade between now and formal revision of the plan in 2015, we hope to accomplish much of that work.

“To the end that the people have clean air, pure water, and the use and enjoyment for recreation of adequate public lands, waters, and other natural resources, it shall be the policy of the Commonwealth to conserve, develop, and utilize its natural resources, its public lands, and its historical sites and buildings. Further, it shall be the Commonwealth’s policy to protect its atmosphere, lands and waters from pollution, impairment, or destruction, for the benefit, enjoyment and general welfare of the people of the commonwealth.”

Article XI, Section 1, of the Constitution of Virginia