Northeast Conservation Framework Workshop
Pre-Workshop Assessment Report

North Atlantic
Landscape Conservation
Cooperative
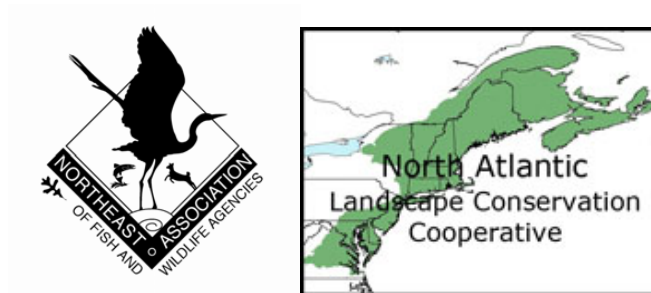
**Prepared for the
Northeast Regional Framework Workshop
Planning Team**

by
Michele Baumer
Project Manager
Sarah Hughes
Project Manager
Phil Seng
Project Manager
Gwen White, Ph.D.
Project Manager

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DJCase
& associates

Communication specialists
in natural resources conservation

Executive Summary

A web-based, pre-workshop assessment was administered to selected natural resource professionals to assist planning and implementation of the upcoming Northeast Regional Conservation Framework workshop scheduled for June 14-16, 2011, in Albany, New York.

There were 126 completed assessments and 102 partially completed assessments.

Key results follow for each question:

Monitoring & Evaluation
- "Monitoring programs that link monitoring to outcomes and decision making at multiple scales" was highest priority among *monitoring and evaluation* activities rated by respondents.

A qualitative summary of these open-ended comments was developed:
Purpose (why)
- Need clear picture of current situation on the ground
- Inform decision-making at multiple scales
- Monitoring should be required by funders

Techniques (how)
- Develop infrastructure for monitoring first before protocols
- Systematic, unified, consistent, meaningful approach
- Clear objectives to measure change and monitor targets
- Adapt existing successful data management protocols (e.g., Teaming with Wildlife)

Barriers/challenges
- Difficult to measure some outcomes, but quantification should be the goal (don't get bogged down)
- Difficult to collect baseline data for unanticipated outcomes
- Standard measures may not work for specific species/community/ecosystem metrics

Biological Assessment
- "Spatial status and vulnerability assessments for priority populations and habitats" was highest priority among *biological assessment* activities evaluated by respondents.

A qualitative summary of open-ended comments follows:
Purpose (why)
- Identify focal species as surrogates for other priority species
- More understanding of uncertainties may not be critical in adaptive management context

Techniques (how)
- Definition and objectives must be clear for focal species and vulnerability assessments (common language exists on threats)
- Identify measurable population targets from field observations

Barriers/challenges
- State plans don't always have a common language
- Cannot rely on focal species to represent full suite of priority species
- Verifying causal links takes money and years

Conservation Strategy Adaptations
- Among *conservation strategy adaptations* that respondents rated, two activities tied for highest priority: "develop information to guide local land use decisions" and "design conservation for maximum multi-species benefit and resolve conflicts among species."

A qualitative summary of open-ended comments follows:

Purpose (why)
- Protect the best, manage the rest

Techniques (how)
- Incorporate real engagement of private lands managers
- Cater towards specific needs of highest priority species
- Managing habitat will be easier than managing species and will provide for species
- Compile data from unconserved lands for comparison (tracking land that is managed is medium priority)
- Too much money and emphasis on marketing analyses which are not helpful
- Give high priority to spatial forecasting in coastal and some riverine areas

Barriers/challenges
- Plans that rely only on conserved public lands will fail
- Maximum benefit measured by number of species will skew projects to common species and habitats
- Interspecies conflict resolution may be hard to define and analyze
- Unclear about spatial and nonspatial decision support tools (e.g., GIS layers to view habitats and species distributions)

On-The-Ground Conservation
- "Explicit strategies to recruit specific landowners/programs to adopt prescribed practices" ranked as highest priority activity for *on-the-ground conservation*.

A qualitative summary of open-ended comments follows:

Purpose (why)
- Focus on implementation not how to do conservation

Techniques (how)
- Have a good perspective on BMP effectiveness (use and add to manuals)
- Market products to influence choices

Barriers/challenges
- Resources to conduct many efforts

Manage and Integrate Data and Tools
- The highest priority activity in the category, *manage and integrate data and tools*, was "data sharing agreements among partners."

A qualitative summary of open-ended comments follows:
Purpose (why)
- Data management will be a logical spin-off to effective conservation delivery programs
- Better data management by all organizations to be easily transferred to and interpreted by others
- Innovative ways of delivering what exists, not new mechanisms for sharing data or tools

Techniques (how)
- Database management should happen at the LCC level
- Central data sources need to be flexible
- Adopt and modify existing data management protocols (e.g., TRACS)
- Cover basic data needs: collection, storage, standardization, analysis, dissemination, reuse

Barriers/challenges
- Standard methods are insensitive to organizational objectives, site conditions and field use
- One system that fits all taxa and needs is impossible
- Top down design will cause too many to abandon rather than participate as a partner
- Have everything to make this happen except a driving reason
- Vague topics and effectiveness of actions are difficult to evaluate
- Most biologists think they have data management skills, but they really don't

Barriers to the Success of the RCN and LCC Efforts
- The *greatest barrier to the success of RCN and LCC efforts* was "insufficient staff preparation in regional processes or administering joint projects due to time."

A qualitative summary of open-ended comments was developed:

Note: Several organizational issues were raised throughout the assessment and are summarized only once under this question.

Purpose (why)
- Centralized versus localized decision-making (i.e., decisions driven by States, not forced by outside partners)
- Science-based focus on habitats, ecosystems and ecosystem processes not single, focal or multi-species
- Prioritize projects that provide specific information for future decision making

Techniques (how)
- Engage implementers and other integral stakeholders in the process by increasing communication
- Develop actions that have shared objectives and work with other sectors (e.g., local planners, biomass industry)
- Design projects for regional impacts

Barriers/challenges
- Joint ventures and similar cooperatives have enjoyed success at all resource management scales so data sharing, lack of science and poor communication may not be real barriers for LCCs
- Pragmatic barriers such as political priorities, fewer long-term technical staff (not temporary employees), lack of time and resources for coordination by states and other partners
- Poor communications among FWS programs and other agencies
- Lack of products and tangible successes to date that can be implemented have hampered enthusiasm
- Limited distribution of products (availability of project reports and summaries on study objectives and deliverables)
- Jargon in the assessment was difficult to understand (may communicate to planners or supervisors not field staff) or options were poorly defined and not self evident

RCN Projects in 2007
- The most *helpful RCN projects in 2007* were the "creation of regional habitat cover maps" followed closely by "conservation status of key habitats and SGCN" (species of greatest conservation need).

A qualitative summary of open-ended comments follows:

Utility
- Some products were poor but could be helpful if done well (e.g., biomass and invasives)
- Already have some products for specific geographic regions (e.g., habitat maps, USGS StreamStats)

Gaps/needs
- Maps based on outdated land cover, not finished or not available for some states or habitats (e.g., coastal marine)
- Multiagency group to coordinate with biomass industry
- Streamflow would be useful if flow were regulated and could be managed for habitat
- Comprehensive database of passage barriers (location and extent)

RCN Projects in 2008
- The *2008 RCN projects* that respondents felt were the most helpful in their geographic areas were "regional indicators and measures, monitoring protocols," and "regional focal areas for SGCN: site capacity, network resilience and connectivity."

A qualitative summary of open-ended comments follows:
Utility
- Guidelines will be helpful if staff positions focus on working with local planners
- Estimating target fish communities failed to meet objectives and passed on secondary data essentially repeating existing research

Gaps/needs
- The aquatic landscape has been fundamentally altered from what might be considered a template or reference condition, limiting utility of target fish communities, instead of describing and restoring missing pieces
- Exotics and invasives will affect communities regardless of management actions

RCN Projects in 2009
- The most *helpful RCN project in 2009* was "geospatial condition analysis of northeast habitats based on the northeast SGCN habitat maps."

A qualitative summary of open-ended comments follows:
Utility
- New England cottontail work needed but support to data not helpful
- Better to establish criteria to identify species at risk
- Invertebrate database would have been good to know about given specialized invertebrate collection for the last 5 years

Gaps/needs
- Ongoing process
- Pending true application

RCN Projects in 2010
- The *2010 RCN project* that respondents felt the most helpful was "lab and field testing treatments for White Nose Syndrome (WNS)."

A qualitative summary of open-ended comments was developed:
Utility
- Instream flow data useful if flow can be regulated or there is potential for water development projects that will affect flow
- Hope WNS (bat white nose syndrome) and frog monitoring are useful but haven't seen reports
- Have more bird focal areas than can be affected
- Anticipate that projects will be hopeful, but have only just begun approved projects

Gaps/needs
- Project areas have not included some states
- Improvements to WNS (bat white nose syndrome) work

LCC Projects in 2010
- The *most helpful LCC project in 2010* was "designing sustainable landscapes for wildlife: forecasting changes in terrestrial landscapes, habitats, and populations

in the North Atlantic LCC and developing decision support tools for conservation."

A qualitative summary of open-ended comments follows:
Utility
- Piping plover knowledge needed for numerous reasons

Gaps/needs
- Keep trucks and dogs off beach for piping plovers
- Actions that control sea level rise

Role in the RCN

- When asked "What has been your role with the RCN program," the most frequent responses were:
    o State agency review team (24%)
    o Technical review team (21%)
    o Applicant for RCN project (14%)

A qualitative summary of open-ended comments was developed:
Roles
- Given how much money my state has contributed to this program and how little we've received in tangible benefits, have advised agency to withdraw from this regional effort and use funding to implement more tangible projects that can be used to better defend the SWG program in Congressional budget fights
- Participated on technical review team, supplied datasets and commented on direction
- Joint Ventures provided input on relative value of proposed project to the regions

Gaps/needs
- Little to no outreach to Field Stations regarding recommendations for RCN projects
- Relatively new to program

Role in the LCC

- The most frequent answers to, "What has been your role in the LCC program," were*:*
    o Technical committee (17%)
    o Steering committee (12%)
    o Participant in a project (9%)

A qualitative summary of open-ended comments follows:
Roles
- Steering process as an administrator
- Technical committee and steering committee representatives are cross-purpose
- Involved in development from early stages of the program

- Not directly involved in North Atlantic LCC but with LCC program at regional and national level or in other LCCs
- Input to framework development

Gaps/needs
- Not much opportunity to be involved

Primary Affiliation
- Respondents' primary affiliations were:
  - State agency (51%)
  - Federal agency (36%)
  - NGO (10%)

There were no open-ended comments.