I. Introduction

Impetus for Improved Wildlife Conservation

Many Alaskans depend upon the state's diverse wildlife resources in their daily lives. Commercial and sport fishing, sport hunting, guided hunting and fishing, and harvesting for traditional uses are central to the Alaskan economy and lifestyle.

Article VIII of the Alaska Constitution directs that "fish, forests, wildlife, grasslands, and all other replenishable resources belonging to the State shall be utilized, developed, and maintained on the sustained yield principle, subject to preferences among beneficial uses." Under this mandate, significant effort has been directed at managing wildlife populations that are commercially or recreationally hunted, trapped, or fished. Alaska has been largely successful managing these so-called game resources via an existing regulatory framework administered by a variety of regulatory boards and agencies. For details, see Section IIIA under "Legal Basis for Conservation of Fish and Wildlife."

ADF&G has conducted limited nongame and marine mammal programs for a number of years. Information about these programs is available at: http://www.wildlife.alaska.gov/management/nongame/nongame.cfm. Meanwhile, for decades existing funding has focused primarily on programs designed to ensure conservation and sustainable use of species sought by hunters, trappers, commercial fishermen, and anglers. It is widely recognized that many management activities focused on these species (e.g., instream flow/water volume maintenance, prescribed burning, or habitat protection) benefit nontarget species as well. The collection of information specifically directed toward management and conservation of nongame species has generally been inadequately funded, however, and scientists and others remain unsure of their status. Indeed, Alaska's nongame species, including its numerous endemics, provide ample opportunities for new discoveries in such fields as taxonomy, genetics, evolution, and habitat adaptation.

Although basic biological information on life history, population levels, and other parameters is lacking for many species, the majority of Alaska's wildlife resources are considered healthy. Only 17 of Alaska's 1,073 vertebrate species[8] are listed as Threatened or Endangered. In contrast, more than 1,200 species are listed nationally, with the number expected to increase over the next decade. For specific information on the USFWS and State of Alaska endangered species programs, see http://www.r7.fws.gov/fisheries/endangered/listing.htm and http://www.wildlife.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=endangered.main, respectively.

[8] Appendix 1 lists all vertebrate species known to occur regularly in Alaska. Federally listed Threatened or Endangered species are shown with an asterisk; included among them are the five species the State of Alaska has designated as endangered (Eskimo Curlew, Short-tailed Albatross, humpback whale, right whale, and blue whale).

Northern Hawk Owl banding near Fairbanks.

J.Whitman, ADF&G

After years of working with a broad coalition including state, federal, and international fish and wildlife agencies, businesses, nongovernmental organizations, and citizens, Congress has recognized the need to conserve a broader array of species.

Between 2001 and 2004, Congress passed a series of bills designed to encourage and facilitate a greater level of coordination and joint funding among and within fish and wildlife programs and funding sources. One of these appropriations bills laid out the requirements by which states, territories, and tribes could begin receiving millions of dollars in federal funding under a new program administered by USFWS called the State Wildlife Grants (SWG) program. The intent is that SWG funds be used to address conservation needs of species in the United States that are: a) little known and poorly understood; b) underrepresented in the mix of species receiving more traditional funding; or c) believed by experts to be in need of specific conservation actions.

Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategies

To qualify for SWG funds, each state or territory must produce a Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (CWCS or Strategy). Congress' intent is captured under H.R. 2217, the Department of the Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2002 (Public Print), which reads in part:

> No State, territory, or other jurisdiction shall receive a [SWG] grant unless it has developed, or committed to develop by October 1, 2005, a comprehensive wildlife conservation plan, consistent with criteria established by the Secretary of the Interior, that considers the broad range of the [State's] wildlife and associated habitats, with appropriate priority placed on those species with the greatest conservation need and taking into consideration the relative level of funding available for the conservation of those species.

The criteria mentioned consist of eight required elements (paraphrased below) that a CWCS must include for final federal approval. Appendix 2 contains a guide showing where Alaska's CWCS addresses each element.

The Eight Required Elements of a CWCS

1. Information on the distribution and abundance of species, including low and declining populations, that are indicative of the diversity and health of the state's wildlife.
2. Descriptions of locations and relative condition of key habitats and community types essential to conservation of species identified in (1).
3. Descriptions of problems that may adversely affect species identified in (1) or their habitats, and priority research and survey efforts needed to identify factors that may assist in restoration and improved conservation of these species and habitats.
4. Descriptions of conservation actions proposed to conserve the identified species and habitats and priorities for implementing such actions.
5. Proposed plans for monitoring species identified in (1) and their habitats, for monitoring the effectiveness of the conservation actions proposed in (4), and for adapting these conservation actions to respond appropriately to new information or changing conditions.
6. Descriptions of procedures to review the CWCS at intervals not to exceed 10 years.
7. Plans for coordinating the development, implementation, review, and revision of the CWCS with federal, state, and local agencies and Indian tribes that manage significant land and water areas within the state or administer programs that significantly affect the conservation of identified species and habitats.
8. A plan to ensure broad public participation in implementing the CWCS and the projects that are carried out as the CWCS is being developed.

Alaska's Strategy: Comprehensive and Collaborative

The goal of the Alaska CWCS planning effort was to generate the blueprint of an overarching conservation vision for the state. To achieve this goal, ADF&G has worked closely with multiple partners and interests to look comprehensively at needs for our wildlife and create a multiyear strategy that:

- conserves the diversity of Alaska's unique fish and wildlife resources;
- promotes partnering and coordination among agencies, organizations, and programs; and
- encourages multisource funding to implement conservation strategies for multiple species and species assemblages.

Alaska's Strategy has numerous benefits and potential uses. It informs citizens about what's unique and valuable in the natural world around them. It improves public understanding and support by fostering greater agency efficiency and collaboration in programs. The Strategy establishes new partnerships and enhances old ones. It also highlights exciting opportunities for scientific study in various specialties of biology,

toxicology, and medicine. Further, Alaska's CWCS aims to improve the sharing of wildlife conservation information with others.

Implementation of the Strategy decreases the likelihood of additional Alaskan species being listed as threatened or endangered. This, in turn, reduces the likelihood of the federal government imposing species recovery-related restrictions on resource development or hunting/fishing opportunities in habitats used by that species. Finally, Alaska's CWCS provides general sideboards to focus activities conducted under the auspices of Alaska's SWG program. The importance of this program will increase in coming years with the influx of SWG funding and as our understanding of conservation needs related to nongame species improves.

Partnering to Implement the Strategy

ADF&G prepared the Strategy with the involvement of a broad array of partners, including government agencies, resource users, conservation groups, landowners, representatives of the Native community, and the general public. Not surprisingly, the CWCS planning effort relied heavily on the experience and best professional judgment of scientists and other Alaskans most knowledgeable about particular species and habitats. In the case of the scientists, these were often the same individuals, or individuals representing the same agencies, that have authored species-specific recovery or management plans.

The planning process highlighted the fact that habitat-related management practices and research directed at species that are commercially or recreationally hunted, trapped, or fished often benefit other species, and vice versa. In this regard, a rewarding partnership in conserving Alaska's biodiversity has been in place for many years. This relationship is expected to grow as needs identified in the CWCS are addressed.

The emphasis Alaska's CWCS places on increased partnering creates numerous benefits and beneficiaries. For example, multidisciplinary efforts to document nonharvest effects caused by humans (e.g., via wildfire suppression) can yield information important to managers of game and nongame species, and across taxa. In addition, collaborative efforts to gather local knowledge about species' life histories, habitat needs, and changing environmental conditions will benefit wildlife conservation in Alaska and, for migratory species, in other geographic areas as well.

Conservation and management of Alaska's fish and wildlife resources is aided by the department having professional and technical staff in a network of distant outposts across the state. These staff frequently possess broad knowledge of species found in their areas, and they are well-positioned to interface with sources of local knowledge to provide integrated management of biological resources.

The Strategy is meant to provide guidance and information to all partners, not just ADF&G. Similarly, it cannot be implemented by the department alone. Successful implementation through time will require the commitment and support of many

parties, including Alaska's Native corporations, military installations, state and federal land managers, conservation groups, industries, landowners, resource users, and neighboring jurisdictions. Continuing to build broad support for CWCS implementation will be a key activity for the department and its partners in coming years.

Species of Greatest Conservation Need: The "Featured Species" and "Key Habitats" Approach

Alaska's Strategy outlines measurable conservation goals and proposed actions for a broad array of wildlife. Rather than directing attention to the few species in Alaska known to be in serious decline, the Strategy highlights the conservation needs of a large number of species, species groups, and/or species assemblages and the habitats that support them. Appendix 3 lists these species and groups, which we've termed "featured species." Appendix 4 provides specific conservation action plans for Alaska's featured species and species groups. As part of this, the CWCS describes the conservation needs for a small number of commercially or recreationally hunted species. The Strategy also provides a list of Alaska species that have been raised in other planning processes as having significant conservation concerns. In combination, these wildlife and fish species constitute Alaska's "species of greatest conservation need" – a term being used nationally as part of the CWCS development process.

For more than 40 of the featured species, the Alaska Natural Heritage Program (AKNHP) prepared detailed information, including on distribution and abundance, concerns, level of protection, conservation status, and potential conservation and management actions (see http://aknhp.uaa.alaska.edu/zoology/zoology_adfg.htm). Key habitats of featured species are described in Appendix 5. Section VI of the Strategy provides information on how they were selected and general conclusions that can be drawn about location of especially important or at-risk habitats in Alaska.

In this document, bird names follow the *Checklist of Alaska Birds* (http://www.uaf.edu/museum/bird/products/checklist.pdf, Gibson et al. 2003). Mammal names follow the *Checklist to the Mammals of Alaska* (http://www.uaf.edu/museum/mammal/AK_Mammals/Checklist.html, Jarrell et al. 2004). Amphibian and reptile names follow Crother et al. 2000, and fish names follow Nelson et al. 2004.

Literature Cited

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