

Recommended Strategic Plan Framework for Candidate Fish Habitat Partnerships

Introduction

The *Guidance for Establishing Fish Habitat Partnerships* requires that Fish Habitat Partnerships (FHPs) develop a strategic plan. Some Candidate FHPs have requested more guidance about the National Fish Habitat Board's (Board) expectations for a strategic plan, and the Board has concluded some consistency among the FHP strategic plans would be desirable. This planning framework was developed with these considerations in mind. It offers recommendations based on a standard approach to strategic planning – one that relies on assessment, implementation, and evaluation.

Each FHP should determine its own best approach for strategic thinking and planning. The process or journey of developing a strategic plan is important for each FHP's growth and development organizationally. A strategic plan will simply summarize why the FHP exists, what it is trying to accomplish, and how it will go about doing so. It will guide the FHP in achieving its mission, document the strategically planned actions and rationale, help gauge performance, and serve as a communication tool for internal and external audiences.

We suggest FHPs use this framework in conjunction with the *National Fish Habitat Action Plan*, *Guidance for Establishing Fish Habitat Partnerships*, and the *Final Interim Strategies and Targets for the National Fish Habitat Plan (November 8, 2007)*. All are available on-line at www.fishhabitat.org. Selected information was pulled from these documents for easier reference, but additional details remain in the original documents. In addition, we suggest FHPs reach out to the Board's Science and Data Committee, early in the planning process, for habitat assessment and monitoring guidance.

National Fish Habitat Action Plan

The mission of the National Fish Habitat Action Plan (Action Plan) is to protect, restore, and enhance the nation's fish and aquatic communities through partnerships that foster fish habitat conservation and improve the quality of life for the American people. Goals, objectives, and interim strategies have been identified at the national level as summarized below.

Goals

- Protect and maintain intact healthy aquatic systems.
- Prevent further degradation of fish habitats that have been adversely affected.

- Reverse declines in the quality and quantity of aquatic habitats to improve the overall health of fish and other aquatic organisms.
- Increase the quality and quantity of fish habitats that support a broad natural diversity of fish and other aquatic species.
- Reconnect fragmented river, stream, reservoir, coastal, and lake habitat to allow access to historic spawning, nursery and rearing grounds.
- Reduce and maintain sedimentation, phosphorus and nitrogen runoff to river, stream, reservoir, coastal, and lake habitats to a level within 25% of the expected natural variance in these factors or above numeric State Water Quality Criteria.

Objectives

- Conduct a condition analysis of all fish habitats within the United States by 2010.
- Identify priority fish habitats and establish Fish Habitat Partnerships targeting these habitats by 2010.
- Establish 12 or more Fish Habitat Partnerships throughout the United States by 2010.
- Prepare a “Status of Fish Habitats in the United States” report in 2010 and every five years thereafter.
- Protect all healthy and intact fish habitats by 2015.
- Improve the condition of 90 percent of priority habitats and species targeted by Fish Habitat Partnerships by 2020.

Final Interim Strategies

- Identify and protect intact and healthy waters.
- Restore natural variability in river and stream flows and water surface elevations in natural lakes and reservoirs.
- Reconnect fragmented river, stream, reservoir, coastal, and lake habitat to allow access to historic spawning, nursery, and rearing grounds.
- Reduce and maintain sedimentation, phosphorous and nitrogen runoff to river, stream, reservoir, coastal, and lake habitats to a level within 25% of the expected natural variance in these factors or above numeric State water Quality Criteria.

The goals, objectives, and interim strategies of the Action Plan are the umbrella constructs for the FHPs. In other words, ***FHPs should identify strategic fish and aquatic habitat priorities that are consistent with, link to, and support these national goals, objectives, and interim strategies where appropriate.***

The Action Plan and related documents use deliberate terminology. FHPs should carefully use terms with their specific meaning when drafting strategic plans. A list of definitions is provided in the Appendix.

Strategic Planning Considerations

We believe a strategic plan should simply describe the present, look to the future, and propose actions to achieve stated goals and objectives, with concomitant monitoring and evaluation. The strategic plan does not need to be lengthy. Documents such as detailed resource assessments and analyses do not need to be actually contained within the strategic plan. Instead, they can be referenced in the plan or attached as an appendix if deemed appropriate.

One way to begin the process is for a FHP to ask a series of questions, such as these below:

Where are we now?

What is currently happening on the landscape?
What is the current condition of priority fish populations and aquatic habitats?
What opportunities for change exist?
What challenges exist?

Where do we want to be?

Why is the FHP coming together?
Who needs to be involved in the FHP to address root causes of habitat declines?
What does the FHP want to see as the desired future condition of fish and aquatic habitats?
What goals is the FHP trying to accomplish?
How do the goals fit within the Action Plan?

How will we get there?

How can the FHP reach these goals?
What strategies will the FHP formulate?
What is the timeline for achieving intermediate benchmarks and long term goals?

How do we measure our progress?

How will the FHP measure success?
What capabilities and resources can partners contribute to assess progress?
How will the measurements link with those of partners and other FHPs?

The process of addressing these questions and the resulting thoughtful dialogue may be as important for each FHP as the strategic plan itself. Certainly answers to such questions are a good jumping-off point for crafting a strategic plan.

Recommended Framework for a Strategic Plan

Recommended elements for a strategic plan, in one possible order of presentation, follow below. We offer a brief narrative, under most headings, to suggest content that we think is important.

Title

Authors/Contact Information

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Executive Summary

Mission and/or Vision of the Fish Habitat Partnership

State the mission and/or vision of the FHP in a succinct manner. The mission is the FHP's reason for existence. The vision is a compelling, conceptual image of the desired future.

Partnership Purpose and Governance

Identify the community of interest that brings partners together in the proposed FHP. Briefly describe the range of your partners' associations and their interests in conserving fish habitat as well as your governance structure. Describe the need for or problem(s) the FHP is forming to address and indicate how and why the scope of issues and priorities addressed by the FHP are considered to be nationally significant.

Geographic Scope

Provide a description of the geographic boundaries of the partnership and include a map to illustrate the geographic scope of the FHP. Identify and comment on connections to adjoining or overlapping FHPs.

Resource Assessment

Describe the current conditions of aquatic habitat and/or fish and aquatic communities in the partnership area. This section should be a general but science-based overview, using specific examples to illustrate general conditions and citing existing reports and databases to support conclusions. One may include the identification of the

major species and/or biological communities that will benefit from habitat conservation by the FHP. This section should also identify information gaps, research needs, and opportunities to address them as well as relevance or connections to existing plans (e.g., watershed plans, State Wildlife Action Plans, species recovery plans).

Goals

Develop conservation outcomes or goals for aquatic habitat and/or fish and other biological communities in the FHP area. These may be expressed as desired future conditions. This is the opportune place to begin demonstrating how the FHP's work will fit with or support the Action Plan.

Objectives

Objectives are measurable, time-based statements of intent for achieving the mission and goals identified above. One helpful rule for developing objectives is the SMART principle – i.e., make objectives **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**esults-Oriented, and **T**ime-Fixed. Here are some examples (in addition to those provided in the Action Plan):

- Three barriers to fish passage, within the Champlain watershed, will be removed by 2020.
- 60% of discrete trout populations within the FHP will meet management goals by 2020.

Strategies and Priority Conservation Actions

Identify strategies or conservation actions that will support attainment of the goals and objectives. Where practicable and possible, strategies should focus on addressing causes of ecosystem and habitat decline, rather than simply treating symptoms. They should also establish some relative order of priority in terms of focus areas (e.g., watersheds habitat types), key stressors or impairments, or other considerations. An FHP may want to refer to the information gaps or research needs described in the Resource Assessment when prioritizing their actions.

Implementation

Although FHPs will not typically be responsible for conducting on-the-ground-projects, a FHP will assess habitat conditions and utilize its strategic priorities to identify

and rank projects for funding by members and partners. The strategic plan, therefore, should offer a description of how the FHP will provide coordination services. This section may also include a description of funding needs and sources. FHPs may also identify strategies for effective internal communication among partners, as well as strategies to reach out to targeted external audiences.

Evaluation and Reporting

Over time, FHPs will need to demonstrate how well they are achieving stated goals and objectives (i.e., achieving success) as well as account for project-specific accomplishments. This section should identify priorities for monitoring, as well as factors that limit the effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation studies. FHP's should describe their plans for managing assessment information, including how it will be used to influence future decisions (i.e., adaptive management), and the steps they will take to coordinate that information with the Science and Data Committee for the national database.

Revisions

Strategic plans should be revised periodically, every five years or as needed. Factors affecting the need for revision include new scientific information, progress in protecting key habitats or remediating key stressors, changes in external conditions affecting the resource (e.g., climate change, land use), and changes in the mix of partners involved in the FHP. The strategic plan should indicate what revision schedule the FHP intends to operate under.

Appendix

Definitions

Aquatic communities: organisms living or growing in, on, or near the water and interacting with one another in a specific region under relatively similar environmental conditions.

Aquatic habitat: any area upon which aquatic organisms depend, directly or indirectly, to carry out their life processes, including an area used by aquatic organisms for spawning, incubation, nursery, rearing, growth to maturity, food supply, or migration; including an area adjacent to the aquatic environment if such adjacent area: 1) contributes elements, such as the input of detrital material or the promotion of planktonic and insect populations providing food, that make fish life possible; 2) protects water sources, quantity, and quality; 3) provides public access for the use of fishery resources; or 4) serves as a buffer protecting the aquatic environment.

Candidate Fish Habitat Partnership: a partnership that is working toward recognition by the Board as a Fish Habitat Partnership, and has notified the Board of its intent.

Coalition Partner: a partnership that is not working toward recognition by the Board as Fish Habitat Partnership, but that is working to achieve the goals of the Action Plan through the conservation of fish habitat.

Conserve: Protect, restore, and enhance the habitats of the nation's marine and freshwater fish populations to support a broad natural diversity of fish and other aquatic species, to promote self-sustaining fish populations, and to provide successful fishing opportunities.

Enhancement: The manipulation of the physical, chemical, or biological characteristics of a waterbody that heighten, intensify, or improve specific function(s) or for a purpose such as water quality improvement, flood water retention or increased fish production/habitat.

Fish Habitat Partnership: a National Fish Habitat Board approved group of state, federal, local, nonprofit, tribal, Alaskan Native or private individuals or entities that coordinate to implement the Plan at a regional level.

Fish habitat conservation project: (a) approved actions taken for the conservation of aquatic habitat for fish and other aquatic organisms; (b) the provision of technical assistance to states and local communities to facilitate development of strategies and priorities for aquatic habitat conservation; (c) the obtaining of a real property interest in lands or waters, including water rights, if the obtaining of such interest is subject to terms and conditions that will ensure that the real property will be administered for the long-term conservation of such lands and waters and the fish dependent thereon.

National Fish Habitat Action Plan: The April 24, 2006 *National Fish Habitat Action Plan* and any subsequent revisions or amendments to the Action Plan.

Protection: The removal of a threat to, or preventing the decline of, aquatic habitat by an action in or near a waterbody. Protection may include, but is not limited to:

- the purchase and monitoring of land or easement;
- repairing water control structures;
- assisting local units of government in zoning riparian corridors or saltwater marshes for non-development;
- establishing best management practices for agriculture and forestry;
- allocating water to protect ecological stream flows and lake/reservoir surface water elevations;
- acquisition and transfer of water rights;
- riparian zone fencing; and
- maintenance of structures.

Restoration: The manipulation of the physical, chemical, or biological characteristics of a site with the goal of returning natural/historic attributes or functions to degraded aquatic habitat. Habitat restoration includes, but is not limited to:

- practices conducted with the goal of returning a site, to the extent practicable, to the ecological condition that likely existed prior to loss or degradation, such as restoration of riparian area's aquatic vegetation or woody debris, restoration of channel sinuosity, re-creation of reefs and spawning shoals or recreation of freshwater inflows ;
- practices conducted when restoration of a site to its original ecological condition is not practicable, but which will partially repair original habitat functions, such as, dredging to reduce sedimentation or developing of new spawning shoals; and
- removal of the disturbing/degrading element to enable the native habitat to re-establish or become fully functional, such as removal of barriers to flow (such as dams or culverts), control of point and non-point source inputs or removal of breakwaters and bank armoring.