

MEETING SUMMARY

North Carolina Sandhills Conservation Partnership
Reserve Design Working Group Meeting
May 4, 2010 - 9 to 12:30pm
Weymouth Woods State Nature Preserve – Library

ATTENDEES

Sara DiBacco	USFWS/AEC-ORISE	Brian Ball	Ft. Bragg – ESB
Brenda Johnson	Sustainable Sandhills	Scott Pohlman	NHP
Ryan Elting	The Nature Conservancy	Mike Schafale	NHP
Nick Haddad	SEI & NC State	Steve Hall	NHP
Jeff Marcus	WRC	Laura Gadd	NHP

OVERVIEW OF UNPROTECTED RESOURCES ANALYSIS

Sara performed a GIS analysis to identify known biological resources in the Sandhills that lack protection or management. The analysis is summarized as follows:

Purpose:

Assess current status of known, high value biological resources (i.e. what the data demonstrate) to ID those with no protection or management status

Methods:

Reserve Design data categorized as Tier 1 and 2 resources used to indicate ‘known’ biological resources, and Conservation and Managed Lands file used to represent areas with some existing protection or management status, i.e. resources falling within these areas considered ‘protected’; resources outside are ‘unprotected’

Results:

Numerical estimate of amount and spatial estimate of location, of known biological resources without any protection or management status

Caveats:

Estimates have varying degrees of accuracy and precision (due to inputs, geoprocessing, calculations)
Uncertainty associated with true status of resources considered ‘protected’ in this analysis

Conclusion:

Results provide probable location and extent of known biological resources on (mostly) private lands in Sandhills, i.e. the most obvious gaps in protection

Results were used by TNC in April for their biennial review with the Army Environmental Command, which administers the Army’s ACUB program. They will also be used by TNC and the Reserve Design Working Group (RDWG) to prioritize tracts for the updated TNC – Army ACUB agreement. Ryan and Sara will take the lead on this analysis to identify the top 25 tracts within the ACUB priority areas and at the same time, will begin a similar analysis to identify the highest priority tracts outside of the ACUB areas. Outputs will then be shared with the entire RDWG to get feedback.

DISCUSSION ON IMPLEMENTATION

The following questions guided a discussion about how the RDWG could more effectively support conservation efforts in the Sandhills:

- What information is missing but necessary for more effective implementation – learn from/ask the on-the-ground implementers?
- How can the Reserve Design Working Groups spur efforts to fill in these gaps/address implementers' issues?
- How can we reconnect with other working groups within the Partnership/encourage them to use the reserve design as a central resource/find out what is needed to do so more effectively?

Ryan commented from his perspective as chair of the Land Protection Working Group (LPWG):

- When making land protection decisions, the LPWG has always discussed the biological and non-biological factors that make a given tract important for conservation. I have always referred to the Partnership focus areas, the RCW corridors, One NC Naturally planning tool, as well as what I see on the ground and from aerial photos including habitat structure, restoration potential, and connectivity, which I share with the LPWG. But this is usually in the context of explaining protection decisions that have been made with specific partners, and isn't usually a discussion weighing pros and cons or assigning priorities.
- Because of the Army/TNC Cooperative Agreement the lion's share of the work that I do is embedded from the get go in the partnership including approvals to initiate appraisals, and agreements with the future managing agencies – mainly Wildlife and Parks – about the transfer of the property to the agency ultimately responsible for its management. I also use the WG forum to glean any information from the group that hasn't been shared about potential projects, and brainstorm ways to make projects work that are not yet funded. Not much time is spent evaluating the relative conservation value of tracts, mostly due to the opportunity and logistical side of land protection.
- Also, significant attention is paid to how a project could be funded because no matter how important a tract is, if nobody can figure out a way to pay for it it's not going to be protected. The Nick's Creek/Eastwood tract is a good example of this with nationally significant longleaf communities and no partners or cooperative agreements that can do it. Sometimes there could be creative ways to overcome such impasses but for lack of a process for identifying them, opportunities are missed and important land isn't effectively conserved. There will be lots of conservation opportunities in our partnership land protection focus areas that won't get Army CA funding and the LPWG needs help figuring out how to pursue them.
- I don't think there is really any new product that the LPWG needs to make protection decisions. The maps that Sara produced, showing the biological attributes on unprotected lands, gives us a clear framework on which to evaluate relative conservation importance of competing tracts. I think there's a really important role for the Reserve Design WG in terms of guiding and advising the LP and RM WG's, but I don't know how that should look. Also, I need to figure out what I need to do on behalf of the LPWG to support the Reserve Design WG in that role.

Sara shared Mark Bost's (DFR) perspectives as chair of the Resource Management Working Group (RMWG):

- To his knowledge, the group does not use the information for any purpose. DFR also does not readily use any of the data.

- In general, they respond to interested landowners (I think he was talking from the DFR perspective here, not necessarily as chair of RMWG); they don't necessarily target landowners (which is an area one might imagine the RMWG using the RD products for, but they don't engage that way).
- Things that could be potentially useful:
 - Outside of the Sandhills, maps of historical longleaf range based on soils or site quality for longleaf could be useful (but for Partnership purposes, is this out of our purview? Maybe not if still within Sandhills counties?).
 - Getting their 4220 database digitized (maybe just the last 5 or 10 years; lat/longs available) would help to show spatially, where and what type of work has been put on the ground (e.g. site prep, survival %, fire control, fire occurrence history). Interns who would otherwise do this work are often co-opted for fire mapping, but there is a lot of talk about this especially for the purposes of tracking accomplishments.

From the discussion that ensued, four action items came to light (those on which immediate action will be taken are underlined):

1. Identify priorities for conservation action – Ryan and Sara will have the lead on the initial analysis described under **Overview** that will be used to identify:
 - a. The key places that are missed – To paraphrase Nick, the natural role for the RDWG is to provide resources which help justify why conservation actors are going after certain tracts, but another potentially very important role, is to promote those areas which may be a high priority biologically but fall outside of traditional focus areas, e.g. outside of ACUB priority areas (→ could eventually be targets for other partners or partners yet identified especially when acquisition is an improbable option).
 - b. The key places that are within areas targeted for conservation action –Ryan suggested the RDWG work with TNC to pinpoint tracts within ACUB priority areas with the highest conservation value (→ in locations where existing resources for acquisition are already dedicated, it makes sense for the RDWG to help select the most biologically valuable tracts).
2. Promote awareness among other NCSCP partners about how the conservation data and conservation maps produced by the RDWG can be used in their work within their own organizations – Jeff and Sara will do so with WRC. Ryan and Sara will do so with SALT. Sara will speak with Mark Bost about the opportunity to do so with DFR and then Scott will take the lead. **It is also possible that we could provide these meetings in cooperation with GUCP so that the desired effect is similarly achieved for both partnerships (Scott noted that Scott Maynard with DFR would be a good person to have at such a meeting).**
 - a. The question of who should deliver the message was raised and it was decided that having both an internal partner (i.e. one employed by the respective organization) and an external partner present the data and discuss how it can be used would be best.
 - b. This could be an opportunity for the RDWG to also solicit information from on-the-ground partners. For example, determinations about the biological value of sites within the Potential Areas data set need to be made. If we provided this file with landowner attributes identified, we could ask that partners familiar with any of the landowners approach them about having a biologist survey their

land. This could then lead into a discussion about available conservation options. The approach is somewhat similar to GUCP in which they have a field biologist assigned to interact with selected private landowners by surveying their properties for priority species.

i. If NCSCP partners could find some money to do something similar, this would be ideal.

3. Continue to ask partners how the resources the RDWG creates can be more effective.

a. This is something that can be done in conjunction with Action Item 2, promoting awareness. As part of the discussion, we can ask this particular question and let the audience know that this is our goal.

4. Schedule some field visits.

a. This could be for the RDWG itself or to invite other partners to see examples of particular management strategies that are being used in some places.

b. This could be done for the purposes of determining the value of some Potential Areas (see 2b).

c. This could also be used to visit sites on the landscape that require improvements to management in order to be beneficial for wildlife and habitat conservation, e.g. McCain, maybe other Dept of Ag properties too (Cameron-Morrison, Samarkand – Laura Fogo may be working here already).

d. **This could be done to increase understanding of, and even enthusiasm for, some underappreciated habitats.**

STEVE HALL'S PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS FROM LANDSCAPE/HABITAT INDICATOR GUILD SURVEYS

Steve discussed the difference between the site-based approaches to conservation, which are more typically employed, versus the landscape-level approaches. He emphasized that both are needed to preserve long-term viability of wildlife and habitats. Preserving high quality sites that are also embedded in intact landscape units identified in his analysis is a good site-based approach but notes that landscape-level approaches such as working with a wider set of partners, including planners, landowners, and DOT, are also critical. In particular, working more closely with DOT is important because road projects can have a disproportionate impact on wildlife relative to their size.

In terms of the 12 days of surveys completed last May and June (2009) in the Sandhills, the focus was on wetland and bottomland type habitats, especially Sandhills Seeps and Beaver Dam Sedge Mires. Twelve new landscape units were identified but because of limitations of field time, not enough data was collected to elevate most of them to a 'mappable' rank. With wildlife such as insects that are highly dependent on metapopulation dynamics for survival, it is important that not all patches are burned at once. Other management recommendations associated with landscape-level considerations may be important too, and Steve is trying to figure out time to formalize these.

Regarding the seep habitats along the NC 73 power line, which is now managed by Progress Energy, the Wilsons and Stoltings (nearby private landowners) have been told not to burn under the power lines. Rob Evans and Bruce Sorrie were going to look into this. Currently, the power line seeps are mowed, but only in the dormant season. No further determinations have been made on what to do to protect these habitats.

MEETING CLOSE

A date for a new meeting was not selected, but it was agreed upon that email communication about above listed action items would be maintained and once that work commenced, an obvious need for a meeting would likely arise and probably one would be scheduled before the 10-year anniversary celebration in September.

Nick also asked for RDWG members to participate in a session for biology undergraduates in which current professionals could share how they use biology in their jobs and how they got to where they are today. If interested, contact Nick directly.