

North Carolina Sandhills Conservation Partnership  
Quarterly Meeting Minutes  
*"The Conservation Plan - A Decade Later"*  
1:00-4:30 PM, Wednesday, June 14, 2023

➤ **Welcome & land acknowledgement**

- As we gather to discuss stewardship and conservation in the Sandhills of NC, it is important to acknowledge the original inhabitants and stewards of these lands. Land acknowledgements are increasing in popularity, which is great, but we want to be clear that these acknowledgements are not meant to be performative. Rather, the intent must extend far beyond the words that we speak. Land acknowledgements should be part of a dedicated practice of learning histories that have historically been excluded, accepting responsibility for that history, & reconciling injustices that have been ignored.
- The Sandhills of NC where we live and work were the traditional territory and ancestral homelands of the Tuscarora, Coharee, and Lumbee peoples, the latter of which has still not been granted tribal sovereignty. Each of these groups were displaced through governmental policies. Despite this, many of these tribal members still live here today as active community members, and that fact challenges us to think creatively about how we can better involve them in our work, and become better involved in theirs. We pay our respects to these past, present, and emerging leaders who have been custodians of this land for many years, and accept a responsibility to continually support and advocate for the sovereignty of the native nations as both conservation practitioners and as individuals living in a settler state.

➤ **Attendance**

TNC: Sarah Hecoeks (TNC/USFWS), Debbie Crane, Jeff Marcus, Matt Greene

USFWS: John Hammond, Pete Benjamin, Liza Khmara

SEI: Jeff Walters

WRC: Brady Beck, Mike Martin, Hope Sutton, Jeff Hall

TRLT: Barry Hull

Fort Liberty: Brian Williams, Stacy Huskins, Jackie Britcher, Pete Edmonds, Jessie Schillaci

Quail Forever: Jake Comer, Hackney Deans

NCNHP: Scott Pohlman, Mike Schafale

USFS: Susan Miller

NCDEQ: Carson Wood

LLA: Ryan Bollinger, Jenny Haskell

NCFS: Julian Wilson

Public Works Commission of Fayetteville: Wendy Dunaway, Joshua Junot, Zach Hardwick, Georgeanne Randall, Tanner Bledsoe

Fort Stewart Altamaha Partnership: Wendy Ledbetter

NC Botanical Garden: Neville Handel

NCSU: Clyde Sorenson (SEI/NCSU), Lauren Pharr, Jennifer Fawcett

Eastern NC Sentinel Landscape: Mary Lou Addor

Southern Conservation Trust: Jesse Woodsmith  
Other: Pete Campbell

Total attendees: 40

Number of partners represented: 18

➤ **Working Group overviews & updates**

RCW Recovery (Jeff Walters):

- Goals in 2020: Improve connectivity of E & W RCW populations across “Gap” and other areas through conservation and improved management, and increase monitoring to track progress
  - By 2013, both populations exceeded recovery goals
  - By 2017, E & W achieved demographic connectivity (8 years ahead of 2025 goal)
  - When partnership started, there was only 1 RCW group on private land in Moore Co. Today, there are 24.
  - Connectivity improved on outer blocks of SGL & monitoring strengthened, largely thanks to Brady Beck
- Currently keeping eye on effects of tank range on Fort Liberty. 6 groups have had all their cavity trees cut. Recruitment clusters occupied by 2 of those groups but no sign of other 4 groups. Some recruitment clusters have new birds, but from elsewhere
- New challenges emerging:
  - Down-listing (to threatened) announcement anticipated in fall
  - Climate change
    - For now, provides benefits for birds. Able to expand range into north. Worse conditions in southern part of range.
  - FWS presence in Sandhills has largely disappeared; important to keep Safe Harbor going
- Findings from 40+ year monitoring dataset resulting in publications:
  - Relatedness & sex-specific effects on breeding:
    - The more related a helper is to a breeding pair, the better. Less-related & unrelated helpers don’t have as much as a positive impact (or no positive impact at all). There can even be negative effects to breeder survival from unrelated helpers
    - Help is also sex-specific; female helpers have a positive effect on female breeders, male helpers have a positive effect on male breeders, but not the reverse.
    - Relatedness has no effect on partial brood loss (proportion of eggs that don’t hatch into chicks)
  - “Floaters”. We have the biggest sample size ever of marked birds that are floaters
    - The impact of floaters on breeders is sex specific; if there is a female floater around, a female breeder is less likely to live into the next year, and same with males. We don’t understand yet what the floaters are doing.
  - Habitat quality index developed by TNC correlates well with predicting potentially suitable habitat for RCW (presence/absence), but doesn’t do

as well at predicting how productive birds will be in suitable habitat (not sensitive enough to differentiate between varying levels of good habitat)

#### Land Protection (Jeff Marcus):

- At start, work group had more regular and formal meetings
  - Coordination about focal areas, opportunities, landowner contacts
- Now no formal meetings, partners operate independently and collaborate as needed. Largely led by TRLT & TNC, with communications happening on an as-needed basis
  - Can be seen as measure of success, as landscape priorities have become engrained
- Going forward: new opportunities and needs for some level of coordination?
  - RAWA funding could come in (potentially 26 million/yr to WRC), so WRC could become bigger player
  - TRLT expanded cooperative agreement to work around Fort Liberty & Camp Mackall, overlapping with TNC area
- Work group still functions as a mechanism to share protection happenings with partnership
- Acquisitions:
  - 92 acre Fort Liberty buffer adjacent to another TRLT property near north Bragg boundary. Ag land being leased to former owner. Prevents encroaching development to south and east.
  - Montgomery Co Little River 80 acre TRLT CE
  - Uwharrie NF OHV trail inholding 8ac transferred to USFS from TRLT
  - TNC 236 acre Van Geem CE between SGL and Haskell TNC CE
  - Moses Farm 291 acre TNC acquisition in "gap"
  - Godwin II 44 acre transfer from TNC to WRC into SGL

#### Resource Management (Jessie Jordan):

- Goals: promote and evaluate strategies for cooperative management of natural resources in the NC Sandhills at the landscape level
- Comprised of land managers in the partnership; used to contain PBA
  - o Open to all members of partnership
- How to achieve goals:
  - o Cooperation: share resources, equipment, knowledge
  - o Training: identify training needs, cross-train
  - o Information transfer: share management techniques, disseminate info about programs, funding, etc.
- Current state:
  - o 15 members, most of activity is for field outings
    - Members provide input on what they want to see from outings
  - o Learning trips
    - 1-3 outings per year
    - Opportunity for land managers to get together, showcase work they're doing & get feedback
    - Open to all members of partnership
    - Recent outings:
      - McCain Forest management history - Sept 2022
      - Carver's Creek Long Valley Restoration Project (pre-harvest) - June 2022

- Calloway Preserve Wetland Restoration and SFS experimental plots - Oct 2021
- Meetings
  - Held before or after field trips. Other group input is via email
- Where to next?
  - Next outing in late summer/early fall. Please send ideas for projects in the Sandhills to highlight

Communications (Debbie Crane):

- There are now more success stories to tell
- Would like to increase membership (currently only Debbie & Julian Wilson)
  - Do not need to be a communications-specific employee to help
- We need a communications plan! More comprehensive, bigger picture story. Need to define who we are trying to reach and what messages we want them to receive.
- New website (ncscp.org) has been big success
- Previous communications have been more internally focused- partners communicating more effectively with one another- and Debbie sees an opportunity and a need for more external communications.

Reserve Design (Sarah Hecoeks):

- Main role: maintain & update the Reserve Design map as the Sandhills landscape & priorities change.
  - The map and related map layers have historically been updated by the ORISE fellow
  - The map identifies areas of the greatest overall biological value and diversity in the NC Sandhills, and helps justify why conservation actors are going after certain tracts for protection. Map includes Tier 1 & Tier 2 resources.
    - Tier 1 resources are the most important, and emphasis should be placed on protecting and managing as much of these areas as possible for the long-term preservation of Sandhills ecosystems.
    - Tier 2 resources provide function, but not every acre needs to be, or can be, managed to maximize natural ecosystem benefit. Some of the mapped areas are large, and the conservation strategies will be different, including supporting the viability of working lands.
  - Map changes this year:
    - Make each of the tiers a single color, so map is easier to digest
    - Added in TNC's Resilient & Connected Network
    - Something we still need to work on is updating the Potential Areas layer, and getting access to RCW foraging partition data for private lands
- In addition to the RD map, the RDWG oversees and carries out biological research to fill the knowledge gaps we've identified as priorities in our conservation plan
  - Results from that research are then incorporated into the Reserve Design map, and shared with relevant players who will carry out the identified management/restoration/protection needs

- There's been some conversation to potentially change the name of the WG to something along the lines of Biological Research WG, because that is more reflective of the majority of what this WG contributes
  - Used to meet a couple times a year, but that stopped a few years before COVID. There is collective interest to reinvigorate those meetings, and perhaps combine them with field trips to potentially important sites needing biological assessment or underappreciated valuable sites. This could be one way to engage private landowners in the biological value of their lands.
    - A need identified in 2010 was to have at least one joint meeting between the LPWG & RDWG per year, so let's get that going again
  - Get in touch if you're interested in being an active part of this WG
- **Introduction** – *Sarah Heco*, current *ORISE* fellow, *TNC/USFWS*
  - The Conservation Plan is one of several documents that provide guidance for partnership operations. There is also the Monitoring Plan, State of the Sandhills report, Charter and MOU.
  - The purpose of this meeting is to ensure that anyone working on NCSCP efforts understand these documents and know where to access them.
    - All documents are publicly available on the Resources page of the NCSCP.org website, developed this year
  - As the partnership and its members change over time, with turnover and evolving objectives, it's worthwhile to refresh the collective group memory about the relationships, responsibilities, goals, and objectives that have been stated and agreed upon in each document, because the strength and effectiveness of these documents ultimately depends on awareness and buy-in from the majority of the group.
  - Today, a decade later since its inception, we will only be focusing on the Conservation Plan, and a little bit on the Monitoring Plan.
- **Origins of the NCSCP** – *Pete Campbell*, former *LIT* coordinator
  - Used to work for FWS in Sandhills 1997-2012; was the Sandhills RCW Recovery coordinator
  - From conflict to collaboration– Milestones:
    - 1990: Jeopardy Biological Opinion issued
    - 1992: Army & USFWS Co-host RCW Conference
    - 1993: Sandhills RCW Working Group Forms
    - 1994: Sandhills USFWS Office Established
    - 1995: NC Sandhills RCW Safe Harbor HCP
    - 1996: Army-TNC Cooperative Agreement; Private Lands Initiative (Now ACUB)
    - 1999: First Conservation Property purchased under Private Lands Initiative
    - 2000: NCSCP Formalized
    - 2005: RCW Recovery Achieved

- Primary stakeholders: TNC, USFWS, Army + AEC, WRC, SEI, SALT, State Parks, NCFS
- Conservation center in Sandhills established in 2001 (USFWS, TNC, SALT, AEC)
  - Very unique in history. One stop shop for landowners
- Started integrating other stakeholders including state agencies, counties & local govts, sustainable sandhills, private landowners, consulting foresters, realtors
- 1999-2009: spent >\$53K & protected >25K acres
- Land Protection focus area expanded from gap to Lumber river corridor, ACUB priority areas, etc.
- **Overview of the 10-year Partnership Review** - *Pete Campbell, former LIT coordinator*
  - Conducted in 2010, led by ORISE Fellow Sara (DiBacco) Childs
  - Purpose:
    - Create a neutral forum for expressing and sharing ideas and perspectives about process and outcomes
    - Promote a common understanding of and an opportunity to build upon successes and lessons learned
    - Help ensure the efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability of the NCSCP for years to come
  - Review structure and process:
    - In-person interviews
    - Online surveys
    - Small workshops
  - Partnership benefits identified during review:
    - \$, project & personnel support, info sharing & knowledge gained, internal recognition, realized mandates, inclusivity/seat at the table, relationship building, ability to leverage funding, increased training, demonstrated success, "big picture" goals, access to expertise, credibility, improved communication & capacity, access to GIS data
  - Further work to be done identified during review:
    - Sustain RCW recovery and conserve other species
    - Acquire remaining large tracts, especially intact longleaf sites
    - Steward and manage existing areas
    - Connect and restore corridors between core areas
    - Scale up to make connections across a larger landscape
    - Increase work with local governments
    - Strategize to conserve working farms and forests
    - Incorporate aquatics, surface and groundwater concerns
  - Ongoing challenges:
    - Securing/sustaining money to buy lands
    - Securing/sustaining money and capacity to manage lands
    - Identifying opportunities to increase public support
    - Finding new opportunities to educate landowners
    - Sustaining turnover in land and leadership
    - Defining success to justify and secure resources

- **Developing the Strategic Conservation Plan, and how it ties in to ALRI goals** – *Ryan Bollinger, former ORISE fellow, Longleaf Alliance*
  - Developing the Conservation Plan:
    - Late 2011: core team & steering committee of partnership got together to draft conservation plan. Had an advisory committee to bounce ideas off of, and several internal & external reviewers to provide feedback
    - Used an open standards approach to plan. Internationally-used. Utilizes computer program called Miradi
    - Planning process:
      - **Scope and Vision** of the Partnership
      - **Conservation Targets and Target Goals**
      - **Target Viability Assessment** (highlight the current status of each target and facilitate monitoring of the target health and status over time) through identification of **Key Ecological Attributes and Indicators**
      - Threats to Conservation Targets including **Direct Threats and Stresses**
      - **Strategies** and associated specific **Activities** to abate threats and **Objectives**
    - Conducted threat analysis & developed conceptual models for each threat
  - How the Plan ties into ALRI goals/ 2009 Range-wide Plan for LLP
    - NCSCP is one of 18 Local Implementation Teams (LITs) working on goal of achieving 8million acres of LLP (with 3m+ acres in high quality habitat) by 2025 through collaboration and on-the-ground restoration
    - New conservation plan 2.0: 2025-2040
      - Presented at Longleaf Partnership Council meeting this spring
      - Really bolstered 2 sections: Conservation Plan Implementation & Evaluating Conservation Outcomes
      - Lays out broad goals & progress to date
      - Keeping the overarching 8mil acre goal, with 3mil in maintenance condition (didn't achieve by 2025)
        - Need for monitoring system as dashboard for progress beyond acres
        - Need to understand & reduce losses
- **Content of the Conservation Plan** – *Sarah Hecoeks, current ORISE fellow, TNC/USFWS*
  - Shoutout to all the ORISE fellows that have contributed to the partnership!
  - The Core Team chose four broader ecosystem and community level priorities, or conservation targets, to represent NC Sandhills biodiversity, which aligns with the landscape-scale work our partners do.
    - Conservation targets are elements of biodiversity: species, habitat/ecological systems, or ecological processes.





because, while implied in the plan, our partnership has functioned less as an organization and more like an information-sharing forum.

- We collaborate on many things where objectives are compatible, and the goals of the partnership have shaped much of the work that's been done in the region to date, but our partners and the people within them aren't necessarily shaping their priorities based on those outlined in this plan. Our partners have varying objectives, opportunities, and structural differences that simply don't always fit within the confines of this plan's implementation strategy.
- Reserve Design map from 2013 is very similar to 2023 map in the sense that most of the same map layers are still used, but updated as things change
- **Current use & the path forward** - *Jeff Marcus, LIT coordinator, TNC*
  - Protection accomplishments since 2013: Many new Safe Harbor properties and acquisitions in our priority areas, including some properties that were formally enrolled in Safe Harbor. Refer to map in slides.
  - Management accomplishments since 2013:
    - National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Funding
      - Shared burn crew
      - Contractual funding for burning, invasive control, midstory control, longleaf planting, wiregrass planting, landowner outreach and training
      - 10+ organizations directly supported
    - NC Sandhills Prescribed Burn Association
      - Equipment, training, support for private landowners
    - Many partners have "upped their game"
    - Several organizations sharing personnel, equipment, expertise
  - Accomplishments by conservation target:
  - Longleaf upland mosaic:
    - Increased protection, management & restoration of longleaf in buffers & corridors
    - Demographic connectivity of Sandhills E & W RCW populations & population recovery goal achieved well ahead of target date
    - Establishment and continued success of Sandhills PBA
    - Landscape-wide assessment of Bachman's sparrow distribution and abundance
    - Standardized method for assessing longleaf quality, with range-wide assessment of longleaf quality completed (LEO Project)
  - Of the 4 targets, we've really nailed it with the uplands, and have a clear path forward for continued success.
    - We have reliable and relative simple indicator species we can monitor (RCW, BACS), but there's opportunity to expand by putting greater emphasis on upland snakes and rare plants
    - SE Fire Map & LEO are ways we can continue to assess progress on condition across the landscape

- Room for improvement on tracking private lands management
  - Even have some more clarity on climate impacts due to past partnership meeting on climate change & resiliency; REPI challenge grant is addressing some of those issues
- Upland depressional wetlands:
  - Better herp inventory data
  - Discovery of several previously unknown wetlands
  - Improved understanding of connectivity needs
  - Several dozen wetlands restored on Sandhills Game Lands, Calloway, McIntosh Bay, and others
  - Strengthened information sharing
  - Past and current mapping projects as well as dedicated field personnel have greatly improved our spatial knowledge of UDWs in the Sandhills, although largely on protected lands. Really need a better sense of wetland quantity and quality on private lands
  - Matt Moskwik created wetland scoring criteria; are we using it?
- Blackwater streams:
  - Identified several issues surrounding declining base flows, flood events, water quality, and aquatic species communities
  - Secured REPI challenge funding to better understand base flows and flooding
  - Obtained baseline data on impoundment locations
- Streamhead pocosins & seeps:
  - Improved field identification of seeps
  - Better data on pine barrens tree frog
  - Of the targets, this is the one lacking the most focus
- See slides posted on website for questions to think about going forward.
- **Open discussion**
  - Does the current Strategic Conservation Plan help to inform your work? If not, are there ways that it can be made more useful?
    - Most people don't consult it regularly, but the process of creating the plan (and now revisiting it) internalized our objectives and it is an important structural document that gets at the "big picture"
      - And has proven useful for grant proposals, DEQ mitigation, and strengthening the Safe Harbor program
      - If it was updated, more people would find it useful
    - Consensus that the Reserve Design map is really useful and should be updated annually or as-needed
    - Most think that the plan should be updated to reflect progress that's been made, including redefining goals (e.g. *sustaining* RCW now that they're recovered)
    - Can the plan be made more user-friendly? Need specifics of what that would look like
  - Does this plan still represent our collective priorities? Is there anything missing?

- Consider redefining targets:
      - Need targets for Uwharrie corridor
      - Some think the 4 current targets are too broad and miss the mark on sustaining unique and rare natural communities or species
        - Perhaps we should define those communities under the umbrellas of the 4 broad target
    - Incorporate climate change/resilience as priority. Integrate this message into communications (e.g. importance of fire resiliency)
    - Still have major existing needs for monitoring & outreach
    - Incorporate preservation of cultural sites
    - Incorporate new threats (e.g. solar farms)
    - Keep RCW as top priority because it serves as an umbrella species
      - But could put some of the RCW energy into other species, such as southern hognose snake
    - Consider adding in strategies for working with private landowners
    - Could expand LIT boundary to include other important areas (e.g. Carolina bays). Would need to redefine/increase targets.
      - Or collaborate more with surrounding LITs/organizations working in those landscapes
    - Communications plan needed.
  - How can working groups & the steering committee more effectively support conservation efforts? What level of responsibility should they have in tracking progress?
    - Steering committee is necessary for making decisions. Working groups are critical for sharing resources.
    - Was very important at beginning of partnership, has now become institutionalized. However there has been a lot of turnover, so worthwhile to revisit the structure of these groups. Who is still engaged and actively participating, and who isn't?
      - Especially important if expanding landscape efforts
      - When revisiting, need to redefine roles & responsibilities
    - Consider integrating private landowners into RMWG
    - Like the idea of "Biological Research Working Group" instead of "Reserve Design WG"
      - This group should reconvene to tackle how to bolster monitoring
    - Rejuvenation of these groups could include increasing connection with lesser-engaged partners, or partners best suited to tackle specific threats
  - Final thoughts:
    - NC Longleaf Summit in March 2022 was awesome. Let's have another
    - Need to pay more attention to biodiversity under specific targets
    - Prioritize developing Communications Plan

- Next step: Convene steering committee to determine what plan updates should be pursued and get commitments for an ad hoc work group to do the plan update.
- **Partner updates**
  - Two new Federal species listings coming up, that may or may not impact the Sandhills: monarch butterfly & tricolored bat
  - Longleaf Coalition meeting Sept 20, joint with Fire Council meeting
  - NRCS has funded 12 landowner applications so far in 2023. 17 more contracts in the works. >1800 acres slated to be burned (\$218K in contracts)
    - Deadline to apply is October
  - Ember Alliance crew has been very successful in getting burning done in Sandhills-Uwharries corridor
  - John Langdon has stepped up to help serve as partnership coordinator for the GUCP, as Kacy Cook just took a job being a colonial waterbird biologist for WRC on the coast
    - John needs some help, and we may be planning to host at least one joint NCSCP-GUCP meeting per year
  - TNC hiring for a new assistant land stewardship manager
  - New Dedicated natural area at Samarcand on Drowning Creek, but is very active gun range, so don't visit
  - NHP hiring a new botanist; Brenda is leaving
  - USFS looking for 2 wildlife biologists for the Croatan
  - Successful WTREX event in Feb 2023 at Lake Singletary; first all-female non-binary burn at Carver's Creek. Featured in Audubon magazine
  - No natural breeding for gopher frog in Sandhills this year, but headstarted frogs are metamorphosing.
  - Mike Martin has taken over pine snake email alert list. Email observations to [pinesnake@ncwildlife.org](mailto:pinesnake@ncwildlife.org)
  - Talk of transferring St Francis Satyr monitoring responsibility to SEI with cooperation with NCSU, but was halted due to funding. None have been found outside of impact zone this year
  - Fort Liberty looking for 2 GIS technicians to help with operations
  - RCW nesting earlier this year, with SGL birds being very early (usually the latest to breed). Also several double broods this year. We know that breeding usually stops when there is a prolonged hot period (~10 days), but this spring has been very cool.
  - Next partnership meeting: Wed, September 13, 1-4:30pm. Theme: upland depressional wetlands