

Appendix L. Communications and Outreach Technical Team Report

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Technical Team Members

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Regrettably, during the revision Stacy Shelton of the Fish and Wildlife Service and Marshall Williams of the Defense Department moved on to other responsibilities and could not continue with the committee. Susan Gibson volunteered to serve in Williams' stead.

Approach

Georgia's Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy, finalized in 2005 and now referred to as the more digestible State Wildlife Action Plan, was built on reports from teams of experts who researched conservation of specific aspects of Georgia wildlife and natural habitats, such as birds and plants. As part of that initial effort, one team tackled environmental education, an already vast realm made larger by including communications. When revising the plan in 2013 and 2014, as required every 10 years, DNR decided to form a team centered solely on SWAP communications. This group would also work with the Environmental Education Technical Team on common ground and goals.

Made up of representatives from 12 state and federal agencies, private organizations and companies that participate in conservation around the state, the Communications Team met in December 2013, and then and through follow-up in 2014 explored ideas and issues about SWAP communications. Work included a survey of members' opinions concerning communication objectives, target audiences and outreach tools; a survey of other technical team leaders regarding their top communication objectives and audiences; a brief strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-

threats analysis of SWAP communications; the beginnings of contact lists for priority audiences; and drafts of generic, high-level messaging.

The missions of members' organizations and agencies were also compared to identify areas where those missions intersect with SWAP values. The four core touchstones revealed mark where partners would be more motivated to promote the SWAP, a critical point in communicating by network. The four areas:

- Conserve and enhance native Georgia wildlife, plants and habitats on public and private lands.
- Promote land uses via farmers, forest owners and others that ensure healthy woods and waters.
- Identify natural habitats and wildlife species that need conservation attention in Georgia.
- Pursue effective wildlife conservation that allows for public recreation and military training.

Such legwork led to the discussion and recommendations that follow.

Conservation Communications

The original SWAP included at least five priority actions tied specifically to communications. The one with the longest reach called for developing a statewide campaign to increase public support for wildlife conservation. That general effort has included many facets of outreach, including SWAP-specific elements such as a 2010 DNR article series and lineup of events celebrating the 10th anniversary of the State Wildlife and Tribal Grants Program (www.georgiawildlife.com/node/2321), and a 2009 photo contest led by the Georgia Conservancy and called the Great Georgia Photo SWAP (www.flickr.com/groups/greatgeorgiaphotoswap).

Other recommendations called for developing educational materials to promote conservation to the public (items have included brochures such as “Is It a Water Moccasin?” produced by DNR and the University of Georgia’s Savannah River Ecology Laboratory), targeted messaging about natural resources conservation, and technical educational materials – examples of the latter include “The Breeding Bird Atlas of Georgia” (UGA Press, 2010) and “Amphibians and Reptiles of Georgia” (UGA Press, 2008).

Of course, the world of communications is far different than when the SWAP was completed a decade ago. Social media is now the go-to source for engagement (for comparison, in 2005 YouTube launched and Myspace ruled led social networking in the U.S.). More than two-thirds of Americans use online devices most frequently for news, second only to television (American Press Institute). In response, agencies, nonprofits and companies have plunged into social media, overhauled websites and revamped communications.

But, arguably, the goals for wildlife conservation communications remain the same: raise awareness, rally support, engage supporters, advance conservation. Communicating the revised SWAP will build on the foundation laid by the original, if with new tools and a renewed focus.

Recommendations

The messaging, products and other outreach efforts that result from the following three recommendations will be shaped by a) the SWAP revision themes determined by the Advisory Committee and b) outreach needs identified by other technical teams. Also, in all a robust communications network of SWAP partners will be vital.

1. Increase stakeholders' support for wildlife conservation; awareness of the SWAP, its importance, themes and successes; and, awareness of the partnership effort involved in SWAP.

As used here, "stakeholders" refers to five audiences that team members deemed most critical to reach with SWAP messaging. Those audiences: conservation and outdoor sporting organizations; state and federal lawmakers; private and corporate forestland owners; agencies that regulate or are otherwise significantly involved with wildlife and land uses that affect wildlife in Georgia; and, wildlife watchers.

The recommended action is written in stair-step fashion: Greater support for wildlife conservation leads the pack. But this action is obviously a tall order. As noted, messaging, including calls to action, will flow from the SWAP revision themes and technical team needs. The communication options used and items produced will be suited to the targeted group, be it providing a social media post with video to conservation/outdoors organizations, informing wildlife watchers through DNR's Georgia Wild e-newsletter (circulation, 43,000) and the partners network, or connecting with private landowners through a Georgia Forestry Today article and by supporting landowner days with brochures explaining forest management practices that benefit gopher tortoises and native groundcover.

Audience contact lists will be further developed. Online surveys will help measure before-and-after opinions on support and awareness. Analytics can be used to gauge traffic to related websites.

2. Increase awareness of the SWAP among partner organizations.

In-reach is important, considering that partners are the face of the SWAP. Raising awareness and understanding of the plan among our staffs will better prepare them to address the topic with constituents and fellow workers, and can widen the base of support for the SWAP.

Work with partners will identify best ways to reach their staffs on specific messaging. Online surveys of willing partner organizations can set benchmarks to monitor changes in knowledge of the SWAP. Partners' use of messaging can also be reported.

3. Work with the Education Team where needed to achieve its recommendations.

Specifically, this could involve creating an online survey supporting the assessment of Georgians' wildlife conservation literacy; helping shape the content of core educational concepts, related messaging and educational materials; and, helping identify SWAP stories per eco-region for use in regional education networks and community groups.

Conclusion

The analysis of SWAP communications strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT for short) noted that a significant opportunity – a sustained, active network of communicators can benefit SWAP and other conservation priorities in Georgia – is faced by an equally significant threat: Workloads and changing priorities and staff can undermine any communications network focused on the plan.

Maintaining a strong communications network will be the key in following the course suggested in this report. While not expansive, that course is achievable and – because of the SWAP's focus – will help conserve Georgia wildlife and raise awareness of the plan and the conservation actions it emphasizes.