Climate-Smart Conservation: An Assessment of State Wildlife Action Plans from the Southeast United States

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Overview and Approach

The Southeast United States is experiencing high rates of population growth, urbanization, land use change, and shifting climate conditions. These changes present near and long-term challenges to the health and sustainability of the region’s fish and wildlife populations and habitats. This project was designed to support the Southeast Conservation Adaptation Strategy (SECAS) and its efforts to develop and coordinate regional conservation goals and actions, including those intended to address climate threats.

Most states identified interest in, and importance of, further investment in state- and climate change and other threats (e.g., urbanization, land use change) as particularly challenging. A few conducted vulnerability assessments, although a few conducted vulnerability assessments, although a few conducted vulnerability assessments.

Key Observations:
- The analysis paid particular attention to the extent to which plans a) incorporated efforts to manage for changing conditions, in addition to maintaining current or historic conditions and b) considered updates to conservation and management goals in light of climate change.
- In general, SWAPs articulated management goals that tend to emphasize the persistence of existing species, habitats, and systems. Goals typically reflect, or are consistent with, those provided by legislative mandates or organizational missions. Only a few plans provide examples of change-related, future-oriented goals. Climate adaptation goals are frequently referenced; however, definitions of the term vary widely.

Opportunities:
- Interviews revealed that internal discussions that acknowledge the need to reconsider and update conservation targets are occurring. Furthermore, states are closely engaging in “behind-the-scenes” conversations about the feasibility and achievability of existing conservation goals in light of climate change, and how those goals may need to be updated.

Step 1: Define the Planning Process and Scope

Key Observations:
- States varied considerably in their climate change-related planning approaches. Some assimilated climate change throughout their SWAP, while others considered it in separate chapters and/or documents.
- States do share a collective concern about climate change threats, but they developed SWAPs with limited interstate or regional collaboration, not surprising since SWAPs are mainly state focused.

Opportunities:
- Interviewees acknowledged that limited staff time, expertise, and funding hindered climate-related planning. However, most states were able to use a range of external experts and resources.

Interviewees noted that supportive, internal leadership helped to advance climate planning in some states. Many plans describe actions, such as protect diversity or restore habitat, that reflect a “business-as-usual” approach. This suggests a perception that existing conservation practices will be sufficient in the future, when this might not actually be the case. Few states established climate-related priorities within their broader set of conservation actions.

Some states established climate-related priorities within their broader set of conservation actions.

Integration of climate adaptation considerations into existing processes may make climate adaptation more feasible and acceptable in the future.

Step 2: Assess Climate Impacts and Vulnerabilities

Key Observations:
- The project examined SWAPs from 15 southeastern states, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands.
- Interviewees noted that supportive, internal leadership helped to advance climate planning in some states.

Opportunities:
- Interviewees noted that supportive, internal leadership helped to advance climate planning in some states.
- However, most states were able to use a range of external experts and resources.

Examples of climate planning challenges and opportunities identified by interview participants:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Opportunities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of information for some state-specific habitats and species of concern</td>
<td>Availability of information for some topics and species</td>
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<td>Lack of information on impacts, which reduced the sense of urgency to address the issue</td>
<td>Availability of trainings to increase familiarity with the issue</td>
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<td>Lack of resources to conduct more research</td>
<td>Assistance from the LCCs, the Southeast CSC, and other outside experts</td>
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<td>Limited staff</td>
<td>Ability to engage staff when they realized that addressing climate change could be linked with other ongoing activities</td>
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<td>Lack of expertise within the agency</td>
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<td>Difficulty planning on long time frames</td>
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<td>Long-term climate change considered less urgent than other threats (e.g., agriculture, urbanization)</td>
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Step 3: Review Conservation Goals and Objectives

Key Observations:
- interviewees pointed out that most climate adaptation actions are being implemented, several discussed recent or ongoing activities that may have benefits for climate change but were initially designed to address other concerns or threats.

Opportunities:
- Integrating climate adaptation considerations into existing processes may make climate adaptation more feasible and acceptable in the future.

Recommendations

The project team developed a set of recommendations intended to enhance existing opportunities and further advance the incorporation of climate change into wildlife conservation planning in the Southeast. These recommendations are intended for state fish and wildlife agencies, as well as the various governmental and non-governmental partners working to develop shared conservation goals and actions for the region.

- Enhance collaborative planning and implementation efforts by capitalizing on and building on existing regional activities, networks, resources, and expertise.
- Advance the application and use of both state and regional climate change impact and vulnerability assessments by making use of existing assessments and strategically allocating time and funding to develop regional-scale assessments.
- Facilitate the development and implementation of climate adaptation strategies through the development of regional-scale assessments.
- Foster the adoption of climate-informed conservation goals by exploring how climate change may affect the feasibility of existing plans and goals, and the changes that should be targeted for conservation action.
- Enhance monitoring and evaluation efforts by engaging with scientists and others to identify effective indicators of climate change and its effects on conservation targets and management outcomes.

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Reference


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