

Ten Years of Collaborative Conservation:  
**A review of the North Carolina  
Sandhills Conservation Partnership**

Summary Report



Sara DiBacco  
AEC-ORISE Fellow  
US Fish and Wildlife Service

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## **OVERVIEW**

Established in 2000, the North Carolina Sandhills Conservation Partnership (NCSCP or ‘Partnership’) is a collective of organizations dedicated to the protection and restoration of the longleaf pine ecosystem and its flagship species, the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW). The NCSCP represents a diverse set of stakeholders, including core partners that are signatories on the Charter and Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and regional partners that are valuable, but non-signatory organizations and individuals. Core partner organizations include: NC Department of Environment and Natural Resources, NC Department of Forest Resources, NC Division of Parks and Recreation, NC Wildlife Resources Commission, Sandhills Area Land Trust, Sandhills Ecological Institute, The Nature Conservancy, US Army at Fort Bragg, US Army Environmental Command, and US Fish and Wildlife Service. At least one representative from each core partner organization sits on the NCSCP Steering Committee. Regional partners include: Sustainable Sandhills, Base Realignment and Closure Regional Task Force (BRAC-RTF), Fort Bragg/Pope Air Force Base Regional Land Use Advisory Committee (RLUAC), NC Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, as well as individual forestry consultants and private landowners. Both core and regional partner representatives serve on one or more of the NCSCP working groups.

In 2010, the NCSCP celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> year. This benchmark presented an opportunity to ‘check-in’ with partners to reflect on and learn from the past ten years to ensure the continuation of a collaborative path forward. Sara DiBacco facilitated this process by leading an internal review of the NCSCP. The goals of the review were to engage partners, foster dialogue, and promote action that could help ensure the efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability of the NCSCP for years to come. Every partner played a vital role by participating in the process and contributing honest and critical feedback. This document presents a synthesis and preliminary assessment of results compiled from surveys and interviews conducted during the summer of 2010. To complete the review effort, small workshops will be held to collectively discuss results and develop actions that address priorities identified in the interview and surveys.

## **REVIEW PROCESS**

The review process created for the NCSCP consisted of a comprehensive evaluation, including interviews and surveys, and will culminate in a series of small, facilitated workshops. The immediate, explicit goal for the NCSCP review process was to stimulate reflection, feedback, and action from the NCSCP partners regarding the collaborative process embodied by the NCSCP as well as the conservation outcomes achieved as a result. The overarching, implicit goal of the review was to reinforce or strengthen partner commitment to, and participation in, the NCSCP to secure a productive and successful future.

To accomplish both goals, core participatory values were incorporated as a foundation for the approach. Core participatory values promote stronger individuals, stronger groups, and stronger agreements<sup>1</sup>. Thus, by creating a neutral forum for expressing ideas and perspectives about all aspects of the NCSCP and by promoting a common understanding of, and an opportunity to build upon, the successes and lessons learned, the guiding principles for this process were:

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<sup>1</sup> Kaner S. 2007. Facilitators’ guide to participatory decision-making. San Francisco. Jossey-Bass

- ❖ **Full participation** by core and regional partners in evaluations and workshops that results in:
  - An opportunity to provide open and honest feedback, which participants feel is meaningful and which demonstrates the value of their participation in the evaluation and within the broader context of the NCSCP.
  - A comprehensive representation of partners' viewpoints about the form and function of NCSCP and its path for the next 5 – 10 years.
  
- ❖ **Mutual understanding** among partners, promoted through participation in evaluations and workshops, that results in:
  - An affirmation of the mission and vision of NCSCP as well as the value of the collaborative approach to enhancing conservation benefits on-the-ground and a renewed sense of shared responsibility to that mission.
  - An identification of strengths, weaknesses, misperceptions, or misunderstandings about the form, function, and conservation benefits associated with NCSCP, which forms the basis for a productive discussion on how to move forward, i.e. the groundwork necessary to develop inclusive solutions that address any issues brought out during the evaluation.
  
- ❖ **Inclusive solutions**, developed by partners and based on the collective awareness raised in evaluations and workshops, that results in:
  - Action on, or resolution of, interests, concerns, or issues raised during this process that have a lasting impact.
  - A trajectory for NCSCP that ensures a collaborative path forward through means developed and determined by all partners.
  
- ❖ **Shared responsibility** among partners, generated through participation in evaluations and the workshops, that results in:
  - Recognition by partners of their contributions to the past successes of the NCSCP and the need for their continued participation to ensure future accomplishments.
  - An understanding or a renewed sense of the role each partner plays or can play, as well as clarification or improved understanding of the roles and expectations for Steering Committee and working groups members.
  - Collaborative and sustained action on inclusive solutions developed through this process.

The evaluation portion of the review consisted of two major steps:

1. Interview current Steering Committee members and the NCSCP coordinator.

Purpose: The purpose of the interview process was to provide at least one representative from each of the core partner organizations with a personal opportunity to give feedback about his/her experiences with the NCSCP and to discuss ideas for the future.

Procedure: Face to face or phone interviews were scheduled with all current Steering Committee members and the NCSCP coordinator. Additional partner representatives were also interviewed if the current Steering Committee member had not served for a majority of the 10 years, and he/she could identify another organizational representative with more experience. Prior to the interview, participants were provided with a copy of the Charter, the MOU, and the following interview questions:

- Question 1: Why did your organization join the Partnership?
- Question 2: What role do you and your organization play in the Partnership?
- Question 3: How has the Partnership been valuable to you and your organization?
- Question 4: What has your experience with the Partnership been like?
- Question 5: Where do you see the Partnership going in the future?

Responses were captured by hand, subsequently typed into a Word document, and emailed to participants so they would have an opportunity to review and make any necessary changes.

Outputs: Interview responses were collected from July – August 2010 from a total of 17 partners including: all current Steering Committee members, the NCSCP coordinator, and additional partners from the Army Environmental Command, Sandhills Ecological Institute, NC Division of State Parks, and The Nature Conservancy.

2. Administer an online survey to present core and regional partners and past core partners.

Purpose: The purpose of the survey was to provide a maximum number of past and present partners with the opportunity to give feedback and information about the collaborative process, the conservation agenda, and other benefits of the NCSCP.

Procedure: A 21 question mixed response-type, online survey was administered using Survey Monkey Pro. Sixty past and present partners were invited to participate in the online survey, which remained open from July 16 – August 30, 2010.

Outputs: A total of 39 of the 60 invited partners started the survey (65%), and 30 of the 60 completed the entire survey (50%).

## INTERVIEW SUMMARY

### INTRODUCTION

Interview responses were collected from July – August 2010 from a total of 17 partners including: all current Steering Committee members, the NCSCP coordinator, and additional partners from the Army Environmental Command, Sandhills Ecological Institute, NC Division of State Parks, and The Nature Conservancy. All interviewees were asked the same five questions. Following each interview, responses were typed and sent to each participant for verification. After necessary changes were made, responses were aggregated and processed to identify general themes and key examples. These results are summarized below by question; more details are provided in the **Detailed Report**.

#### QUESTION 1: WHY DID YOUR ORGANIZATION JOIN THE PARTNERSHIP?

Partners that were involved in the RCW situation prior to the inception of the NCSCP state that they elected to participate as a logical step toward sustaining their work on RCW recovery. Other partners mention reasons such as: they were asked to; and/or they also wanted to play a role in RCW recovery; and/or they wanted to learn more about managing longleaf pine; and/or their geographic focus area overlapped with that of the NCSCP. Partners cite other motivations as well, but overall, many note that the NCSCP presented an opportunity to proactively and cooperatively plan and implement conservation strategies for Sandhills species and their habitats.

#### QUESTION 2: WHAT ROLE DO YOU AND YOUR ORGANIZATION PLAY IN THE PARTNERSHIP?

Partners list a variety of roles they have played in contribution to the efforts of the NCSCP. These include everything from providing meeting space, to funding for tracts, to equipment for burning, to capacity to lobby state and federal government, to public outreach and education. Toward the mission of the NCSCP, partners offer a range of logistic, financial, and personnel support, as well as expertise in science and research.

#### QUESTION 3: HOW HAS THE PARTNERSHIP BEEN VALUABLE TO YOU AND YOUR ORGANIZATION?

#### QUESTION 4: WHAT HAS YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH THE PARTNERSHIP BEEN LIKE?

In return for their contributions, partners mention numerous benefits received at both the individual and organizational level. These include: the ability to leverage funding for acquisition and resources for management; the establishment of stronger relationships that consistently help prevent major issues before they arise; and access to data and other information that increase knowledge and ease work flows.

Partners also highlight contributions the NCSCP has made to the greater conservation community. They note that the NCSCP model has demonstrated the success of the collaborative approach to conservation and has been used to foster and grow other conservation partnerships in the state. Successes and lessons learned have also influenced the approach taken by partners in their work in other landscapes, regions, and states. Other wide-reaching benefits of the NCSCP include energizing non-traditional bases of support and providing the cooperation and flexibility necessary to demonstrate new and innovative ways of doing business.

#### QUESTION 5: WHERE DO YOU SEE THE PARTNERSHIP GOING IN THE FUTURE?

In terms of future priorities for the NCSCP, partners note that the NCSCP must continue to focus on sustaining RCW recovery while at the same time using its success as a launching pad for conservation of other Sandhills species like the tiger salamander, gopher frog, and St. Francis satyr. Additionally, partners mention that the NCSCP needs to focus on acquiring the last big tracts of land that are vital connectors or intact, natural longleaf sites. At the same time, partners need to begin considering when focus might shift to enabling and sustaining management activities over the long-term. Partners also indicate new directions for the NCSCP such as working toward connectivity across the landscape; increasing work with local governments; and incorporating aquatics into conservation strategies.

Discussion about the future also included references to challenges the NCSCP continues to face or will face in the future. Most notably, partners identify the following major 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; and defining success to justify and secure resources.

#### CONCLUSION

Together with the results from the survey, feedback collected through the interview process will help partners realize a mutual understanding about what the NCSCP has accomplished and struggled with in the past. With this foundation, partners will be able to cooperatively develop solutions and implement actions that ensure a successful course for the future of the NCSCP.

## SURVEY SUMMARY

### INTRODUCTION

Survey responses were collected from July – August 2010 from present and past partners. Of the 60 invited participants, the average response rate was 50% with some variation on individual questions. The Survey Monkey Pro online service was used to tally and produce charts for quantifiable responses. Open-ended responses were exported and recorded in Excel. All results were processed to identify general themes and highlight potential discussion points. These are presented below by section; details for each question are provided in the **Detailed Report**.

### SECTION 1: YEARS OF INVOLVEMENT

A majority of respondents, 16 of 39, have been involved with the NCSCP for 10+ years, 10 have participated for 5 - 9 years, 4 for 3 – 4 years, and 9 for 1 - 2 years. The following number of respondents from each group started but did not complete the survey: 2 from the 10+ years, 1 from the 5 – 9 years, 1 from the 3 – 4 years, and 2 from the 1 -2 years; this does not affect the overall trend.

### SECTION 2: ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A majority of respondents, 26 of 33, indicate that the Charter and MOU are effective organizational structures; 2 indicate ‘Somewhat’; and 5 indicate ‘Don’t Know’. Two comments indicate that a partner was either unaware of the existence of these documents or unsure about whether the MOU had been signed. In general, as intended guidance documents for the operation of the NCSCP, it might be useful to refresh the collective group memory about the relationships, responsibilities, goals, and objectives that have been stated and agreed upon in each. Additionally, these documents can be a tool to help communicate background information about the NCSCP or convey partner commitments and responsibilities when there is leadership or personnel turnover within partner organizations.

A majority of respondents that attend the Steering Committee meetings, 20 of 25, indicate that these meetings are useful; 4 indicate ‘Somewhat’; and 1 indicates ‘No’ (8 - ‘Don’t attend’). However, comments suggest that partners would like to see the Steering Committee take more of an active role in guiding the NCSCP forward and working together as a united group to help resolve major issues or challenges. It might be worthwhile for Steering Committee members to have an opportunity to discuss these comments and their implications for the overarching structure, role, and responsibility of the Steering Committee.

Most respondents (with some variation for each working group) indicate that working group meetings are at least ‘Somewhat’ useful. Partners’ general comments demonstrate that overall, better communication between working groups and among all partners is necessary to promote mutual understanding of the roles, responsibilities, and contributions of each working group. In addition, partner comments suggest that working groups revisit their goals and objectives, recognize the practical limitations on partner contributions, and streamline the overarching working group structure.

Approximately 2/3 of respondents indicate that the development of a comprehensive conservation strategy would be at least ‘Somewhat valuable’ to ‘support the overall mission of the NCSCP’ and ‘guide the work of the Steering Committee and Working Groups’. Partner comments note some hesitation about balancing the benefits of creating a comprehensive conservation strategy with the costs of doing so and question whether



the resulting document will be used in practice. If the NCSCP decides to move forward with this effort, it will likely be beneficial to ensure that all partners understand how it will be used to guide the ‘everyday’ efforts of the NCSCP and who will be responsible for implementation.

### SECTION 3: MISSION AND GOALS

Overall, a majority of respondents, 28 out of 30, indicate that the NCSCP has been ‘Fairly’ to ‘Very successful’ in demonstrating progress toward or accomplishing its mission. However, partner comments identify two major themes including that the NCSCP needs to: translate the value of, and share information about, accomplishments with the greater Sandhills population by capitalizing on the now robust internal and external partner network; and increase emphasis on other rare species (besides red-cockaded woodpeckers) and natural communities (e.g. seeps).

A majority of partners that could knowingly respond indicate that the NCSCP is successfully demonstrating progress toward or accomplishing the goals of collaborative planning, land protection, and development of an ecosystem database. In contrast, half of the knowing respondents indicate that the natural resource education and research goals are minimally or not at all successful. As noted by one partner, this benchmark of ten years may be an appropriate time for the NCSCP to collectively: consider or reconsider the value of these goals to the mission; assess whether these goals are practical and realistic for the NCSCP; and/or decide if some goals would best be pursued by other entities (perhaps with some support from the NCSCP).

Partner responses suggest that there is not a common understanding about how the NCSCP knows that it is progressing toward or accomplishing its mission. Although many metrics are given as examples, there is no formal process or procedure that requires such assessments to be regularly conducted and reported to the Steering Committee or the NCSCP as a whole. One partner provides a comment that summarizes the issue:

There is no end-state defined, nor are there established metrics. Progress has been measured solely by the general perception of NCSCP members that the group was making good progress in areas generally understood to be measures of success: increase in RCW groups, acres protected, buffered, etc.

Other partner comments suggest possible solutions, but in general, the NCSCP should decide whether the ability to demonstrate results is critical for sustaining engagement, justifying continued support and funding, and/or providing accountability for how resources are used.

Partner responses indicate funding and land acquisition most often in response to what limits the progress of the NCSCP in accomplishing its mission. Partner comments also suggest that performance measures are an important component of a productive and successful future for the NCSCP. Other challenges noted include: the need for a dedicated, full-time coordinator, the need for more public engagement and outreach, and issues with land prices and landowner cooperation.

Almost 50% of respondents are satisfied with the mission and goals as they are currently laid out. However, there are enough partner comments suggesting alternative approaches or special considerations that follow-up discussion and action is warranted. Some of the suggestions could be incorporated into specific working groups’ goals and objectives. Partner responses about seeking innovative funding sources and developing innovative conservation strategies may be important for maximizing the potential success of the NCSCP in increasingly challenging environments.

#### SECTION 4: COMPLEMENTARY ORGANIZATIONAL OBJECTIVES

Approximately 2/3 of all respondents identify participation in the NCSCP as at least 'Fairly helpful' in working toward or accomplishing the complementary organizational objectives listed in the MOU. As this document is recent, it might be useful for the NCSCP to collectively assess the value of each complementary objective in satisfying its mission and goals and for meeting the needs and interests of each partner. The degree to which complementary objectives are achieved may influence how successful the NCSCP can be in sustaining and justifying partner involvement, especially when time and budgets are limited.

Partner responses indicate that most organizations do not have a formal mechanism for measuring or assessing the contributions of the NCSCP to their own mission and goals, but most partners agree that participation in the NCSCP helps. This theme relates to tracking performance of the NCSCP and in this case, for documenting the value it provides to its partners. Other general consideration about the complementary organizational objectives might include: Which ones are practical? Can we define them more explicitly so that they could serve as performance measures by which partner organizations assess the value of their participation?

#### SECTION 5: WORKING GROUPS

Partner responses demonstrate that better internal communication is necessary, especially between the different working groups. They also emphasize that while progress has been made by most working groups, certain critical steps have yet to be achieved and require action. As a general recommendation, it may be useful for each working group to embark on a 'self-evaluation' using the results of this review as a basis. The purpose would be to assess the stated goal and whether it adequately captures the role the particular working group can and should play and what changes to priorities or objectives need to occur.

Lack of funding, time, and personnel are mentioned most often in partners' responses about the major limitations to working groups' success. One response summarizes that each group faces similar challenges: group participation is voluntary and it is collateral duty; groups do not use strategic documents; groups do not create annual work objectives; and groups lack the leadership necessary to execute action. Structural or organizational changes may need to be considered to address these limitations; several are suggested in the responses to the subsequent question. These could be used as a basis for creating and prioritizing a list of action items to improve the function and effectiveness of the working groups.

#### SECTION 6: OTHER BENEFITS

Partner responses note that many of the successes and lessons learned here in the Sandhills have been used to benefit conservation efforts across the state and even across the nation. They also highlight numerous benefits to organizations and individuals from participation in the NCSCP. Documenting and sharing these benefits of participation can help secure or increase partner motivation and involvement. In some cases, it also might help justify requests for resources and provide accountability for what outcomes are achieved with those resources.

## SECTION 7: FUTURE

Partner responses most often identify sustaining funding, momentum, and turnover as challenges the NCSCP faces in the future, although many others are also given. It is important that all partners understand and consider these challenges, especially in the overall context of using the review results to make decisions about the NCSCP. Similarly, the Steering Committee and working groups should be aware of the aspects of collaboration and conservation that responses identify as needing particular attention or additional focus. On the collaborative theme, better communication within the NCSCP and among external partners, including other partnerships, appears most often and could be a priority topic for future discussions. Outreach to the general public and local elected officials are the next most reported responses for future collaborative efforts. Land management and acquisition top the list of conservation issues to focus on going forward. In general, the responses provided by partners in this section might be a useful guide for shaping all future actions.

## CONCLUSION

Partner responses captured by the survey identify several common themes for the NCSCP to consider going forward. These include the need to reassess the Steering Committee and Working Groups' roles, responsibilities, and objectives; a focus on better internal and external communication; the need to explore mechanisms for documenting progress and achievements; a priority to improve public outreach and influence public perceptions; and a continued focus on acquisition and management while considering other conservation strategies and challenges. In addition to the feedback from interviews, the partner input collected through this survey process provides a comprehensive assessment of the major facets of the NCSCP, which can be used to chart a productive future for the NCSCP.

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