

Minnesota Habitat and Species Workshop
December 16, 2008
Minnesota Pollution Control Agency Office
Duluth, Minnesota

Summary Notes

Patrick Carey of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) provided a brief welcome. **Roger Gauthier** of the Great Lakes Commission (GLC) reviewed the agenda and logistics for the day.

Jan Miller of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), Great Lakes and Ohio River Division provided an overview of the Great Lakes Habitat Initiative (GLHI), which provided the impetus for the 2007 state habitat and species workshop series, developed the regional database of potential habitat projects and funding/technical assistance programs. The GLHI also produced an internal USACE implementation plan which provided value to other federal agencies in planning for their resource allocations. These products are available online at <http://gjs.glin.net/habitat/>. The GLHI was a two-year project, completed in 2008. Stakeholders involved in this activity have continued to work together since. This effort is now part of the Habitat/Species Subcommittee of the Great Lakes Interagency Task Force to support implementation of the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration Strategy (GLRC). Brief comments were provided on recent activities to improve and link the habitat and projects databases.

Roger Gauthier of the GLC provided additional detail on the updates and enhancements underway for the GLHI habitat projects repository and the funding/technical assistance databases. These enhancements include additional quality control over projects that were previously entered, a more simplified data entry form for habitat projects, a new user-friendly web interface and linkages with the funding database. Users will be able to query the databases to find potential funding sources that match habitat projects based upon project attributes. All enhancements are expected to be fully functional in January, 2009.

Participants then heard from a panel of speakers who provided overviews of programs involving habitat protection and restoration within Minnesota and within the multi-state St. Louis Estuary from a lake-basin and statewide perspective.

Ann McCammon-Soltis of the Great Lakes Indian, Fish and Wildlife Commission provided an overview of the Lake Superior Binational Program (LSBP). The LSBP was created in 1991 to restore and protect the Lake Superior basin. She indicated that the GLRC strategy recognizes tribes as valuable partners in carrying out the goals of the LSBP. The initial and ongoing focus has been on bioaccumulative toxins and a Zero Discharge goal. In 2008, a new set of LSBP goals – developed largely by the Lake Superior Habitat and Terrestrial Wildlife Committees – were approved. The LSBP has several ecosystem goals and associated strategic outcomes. Some of the challenges identified include:

- A Lake Superior habitat projects database exists but needs updating from both sides of the border.
- A Lake Superior Decision Support System was developed in the 1990s but due to a lack of funding it has not been maintained.
- Funding has been and remains a significant obstacle.

However, McCammon-Soltis concluded by saying that there are lots of opportunities for the LSBP committees to feed into the GLRC habitat plans and process. Gauthier noted that the binational aspect is an area of the database that needs addressing and that the Lakewide Management Plans (LaMPs) can help in this regard. McCammon-Soltis suggested that maybe the database web page could link to mapping sources such as the LSBP binational map. A complete copy of the LSBP is available at:

<http://www.epa.gov/glnpo/lakesuperior/index.html>.

George Host of the University of Minnesota Duluth Natural Resources Research Institute (UMD-NRRI) provided an overview of the Minnesota Statewide Conservation and Preservation Plan (SCPP). Developing the SCPP was a two-phase approach: A preliminary plan was completed in June 2007 and the final plan was released in June 2008. Host reviewed the goals of the SCPP. The plan includes identification, prioritization and a detailed analysis of issues and recommendations; mapping of habitat quality; threats to resources; shared data from the Minnesota County Biological System; GIS integrated maps showing specific parcels of land wildlife that inhabit it; aquatic data; and watershed summaries. The SCPP does not, however, include watersheds adjacent to Lake Superior, including the St. Louis River Area of Concern. The SCPP includes an assessment of aquatic habitat quality versus current environmental stressors; it recommends areas where the state may want to address and apply funding.

David Zenter provided an overview of Minnesota's Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment (CWLLA). The CWLLA, through voter approval, amended the Constitution of Minnesota to increase sales tax and dedicate proceeds to fish, game, wildlife, clean water, trails and the arts. Dedicated funding begins July 1, 2009. It will include \$273 million/year to continue over 25 years (about \$6-7 billion total), supplementing current revenue. Tools are included in the CWLLA which allow flexibility in decision making and ensuring wise use of the funds. A Minnesota Habitat Heritage Council to be created will recommend projects to legislators; the council includes eight citizen members. One-eighth of the funds will be earmarked for clean water and will be funneled through the Clean Water Legacy Council. Some potential projects under the CWLLA include: addressing Duluth sewage overflows; restoring the St. Louis River Estuary; and species restoration.

David Brakhage of Ducks Unlimited provided an overview of the Healing Our Waters (HOW) coalition and described ways HOW can help advance state priorities related to habitat restoration and protection. He reviewed HOW's priorities for Congressional authorizations and appropriations. He encouraged those present to join HOW. Brakhage also provided an overview of the Joint Ventures model that is used to implement the North American Waterfowl Management Plan under the North American Wetlands Conservation Act. He further described efforts underway in Michigan and Wisconsin that establish statewide frameworks to implement habitat restoration goals articulated in the

GLRC Strategy. A question was raised as to why the Joint Ventures model is organized by state and not by lake. Brakhage replied that much of the work under the program is state-driven and is a practical approach to get work accomplished.

Next, speakers discussed several specific habitat projects at the state and local levels which can “step down” the GLRC, noting obstacles to implementation and raising issues for open discussion among participants.

John Lindgren of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and **Ric Gitar** of the Fond du Lac Band provided an overview of the St. Louis River Habitat Plan including strategies and specific habitat projects. Some issues that Lindgren brought up included difficulties in acquiring non-federal match funds for large investments (e.g., Great Lakes Legacy Act projects); and approaches for identifying needs and methods to fund people to make projects happen. He cited the St. Louis River Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) Habitat Workgroup which has identified 25 prospective habitat restoration projects totaling just over \$70M. Other projects in the pipeline have been identified by the CAC’s Contaminated Sediments Workgroup. Much of the work in the St. Louis River is linked to implementing the delisting process under the Areas of Concern program. Gitar described the development of the Lower St. Louis River Habitat Plan. He discussed the plan’s implementation strategies, including those for mitigating threats. The plan was slated to be released in late January or early February, 2009. Projects from the plan have largely been entered into the GLHI database. Gitar indicated that some of these projects would seek local cost-share funding through the MN Habitat Heritage Council.

Dan Schreiner of the Minnesota DNR provided an overview of Lake Superior fisheries habitat goals and efforts in Minnesota waters. He emphasized that the fisheries goals include all Minnesota Lake Superior waters, not just the St. Louis River estuary. Schreiner discussed habitat areas of focus and watershed habitat management. He mentioned how low water levels on Lake Superior have reduced or in some cases completely impeded fish access to tributary streams. Restoration work has included instream habitat manipulation, structural manipulation to retain instream water levels and beaver control. Better knowledge of fisheries habitat is a critical concern within the state to improve decisions in prioritizing restoration activities. The Minnesota DNR has begun to address this need through the identification of Aquatic Management Areas – where unique geological, biological, and hydrological features should be collectively assessed. Schreiner identified climate change issues as impacting stream health and habitat, as some older species such as coaster brook trout have largely disappeared. Gauthier commented that the International Upper Great Lakes Study underway has a climate change component.

Lucinda Johnson of the UMD-NRRI provided an overview of the Weber Stream Restoration Initiative. The project received funding from a private donor (Mr. Ron Weber) to protect and restore ecology in sensitive streams draining into Lake Superior. The project coordinators developed a strategy to conduct restoration work at the watershed scale and educate citizens in the process. They promoted a concept that it’s cheaper to do conservation than to do restoration. The project team conducted a stressor assessment and quantification to identify areas of particular concern and target

parts of watershed to address impairments and focus conservation efforts. This included mapping of riparian zone areas of vulnerability. The team also conducted “community futures scenarios” where existing zoning was compared with scenarios that implement conservation practices. Johnson identified a number of challenges included long-term impacts of the project, how focused work relates to the larger watershed scale, the need to minimize quick fixes, the need to acquire additional funds to address ancillary watershed issues and the need to influence public perception with particular emphasis on engaging local stakeholders. The Weber Stream Restoration Initiative can be found online at: <http://www.lakesuperiorstreams.org/weber/>.

Nancy Larson of Wisconsin DNR and **Christine Ostern** from Douglas County presented on current and future restoration efforts for Hog Island Inlet and the Newton Creek Restoration project. Larson discussed the challenges of sediment contamination and chronic toxicity at the site and their remediation objectives. The Hog Island Remedial Plan is expected to cost \$6.2 million with funding under the Legacy Act with a 35% nonfederal match provided from the State Environmental Repair Fund. Ostern shared how Douglas County – one of the biggest landowners at the Hog Island site – addressed the challenge of getting local leadership on board with the project. First, a landowners committee was formed to work with U.S. EPA's Great Lakes National Program Office (GLNPO) to begin to address beneficial use impairments as part of the St. Louis River Area of Concern Remedial Action Plan (RAP). The group Biohabitats was then funded to serve as a local coordinator for the project. The project also received a small grant (\$20,000) from NOAA's Great Lakes Habitat Restoration Program. The site being restored is part of a three-year implementation plan.

John Lindgren provided an overview of the Lake Sturgeon Restoration Project. The project grew out of collaboration between the Minnesota and Wisconsin DNRs. An ancillary project is the Lake Sturgeon Riffle Project, a cooperative effort between Minnesota DNR and The Nature Conservancy (TNC). The major focus of these efforts deal with creating spawning habitat that can function under a wide range of flows in the constricted channels downstream of the Fond du Lac Dam. The project will also benefit habitat for other species. The Minnesota DNR conducted an Environmental Review for the project, the TNC handles contract work, the St. Louis River CAC provides coordination. A major challenge with this project is the substantial amount of time it takes to get from one phase of the project to the next. The project showcases the limitations which one partner can accomplish all alone, and the power of collaboration. Resource requirements, including personnel allocations, need to be identified as early as possible to make projects such as this flow smoothly from planning through implementation. A question was asked about monitoring the project results. Minnesota DNR will monitor sturgeon below the dam after restoration work is completed to help quantify the benefits of the project.

Federal agency representatives from the USACE, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) provided brief overviews of their habitat funding/technical assistance programs and handed out related materials or pointed participants to relevant web sites.

Roger Gauthier revisited the web tools with a few more details of how to use the web tools to search for potential funding to for specific habitat projects. He encouraged participants to register in order to update or add records.

Pat Collins of Minnesota DNR and Pat Carey of MPCA, co-workshop organizers, provided summary points they gathered throughout the day:

- Funding opportunities on the horizon (i.e. CWLLA funds) will be instrumental in getting projects off the ground;
- These new opportunities will allow Minnesota to move ahead on addressing goals of the GLRC and state habitat plans;
- We all need to think big about what could be accomplished if resources were available; though declining state budgets are adversely affecting staff levels;
- Protection of natural resources is a lot better than trying to restore lost ecological protection; and protection can be much cheaper than restoration;
- Minnesota has some very important success stories to tell – Hog Island and Lake Sturgeon projects are examples;
- In terms of St. Louis River restoration work, there is a need to measure and document progress;
- Regarding D. Zentner's comment “the price of democracy is constant vigilance” – players need to keep engaged in going beyond day-to-day to do more with less;
- There is a need for *people* to conduct implementation – organizations need adequate personnel to meet their own agendas;
- Need to breathe life into the GLHI database and get people using it;
- Forums like this workshop get people in dialogue with each other to talk about implementation opportunities;
- The state has limited staff to chase money – they would like to have better access and relationships with federal representatives to determine how to make things happen easier;
- Many Minnesota projects involve working across state lines with Wisconsin; this is an important factor in planning and conducting projects within the St. Louis River estuary.