

BEYOND STRATEGIC HABITAT CONSERVATION – THE UNREALIZED POTENTIAL OF NABCI

REX R. JOHNSON^{1,3} AND CHARLES K. BAXTER^{2,4}

¹*Division of Bird Habitat Conservation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 18965 County Highway 82, Fergus Falls, Minnesota 56537, USA; and*

²*U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2524 South Frontage Road, Suite C, Vicksburg, Mississippi 39180, USA*

Abstract. Strategic habitat conservation (SHC) is becoming a well established approach to bird conservation that yields potentially valuable tools for communicating resource needs and strategies. Unfortunately, the bird conservation community has made less progress at developing the capacity to communicate these needs and strategies to the public and public and private-sector decision makers. In this short communication, we postulate the need for developing a larger pool of motivated actors by addressing the social and economic drivers of conservation. This larger pool of actors may in turn affect public and corporate policy. Greater efforts at communication and marketing the challenges and benefits of conservation in socio-economic terms are required. This is the unrealized potential of the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI) partnership.

Key Words: business ecosystem, community, conservation, marketing, NABCI, SHC.

MÁS ALLÁ DE LA CONSERVACIÓN ESTRATÉGICA DEL HÁBITAT – EL POTENCIAL NO ALCANZADO DE LA INICIATIVA PARA LA CONSERVACIÓN DE LAS AVES DE AMÉRICA DEL NORTE (ICAAN)

Resumen. La conservación estratégica del hábitat (CEH) se está transformando en un sólido enfoque para la conservación de aves, facilitando herramientas de valioso potencial para la comunicación de las necesidades de recursos y estrategias. Lamentablemente la comunidad de conservación de aves ha podido alcanzar menor progreso en el desarrollo de su capacidad de comunicar, estas mismas necesidades y estrategias, al público y a quienes toman las decisiones en los sectores público y privado. En este breve trabajo, postulamos la necesidad de formar un mayor número de agentes, motivados en abordar las motrices sociales y económicas de la conservación. Este gran banco de actores podrían a la vuelta, afectar la política pública y corporativa. Son necesarios también mayores esfuerzos en la comunicación y la comercialización de los retos y beneficios de la conservación en términos socioeconómicos. Este es el potencial no alcanzado aún por la asociación de la Iniciativa para la Conservación de Aves de América del Norte.

“The difference between getting somewhere and nowhere is the courage to make an early start. The fellow who sits still and does just what he is told will never be told to do big things.” (Anonymous)

Basic concepts of strategic habitat conservation (SHC) are becoming deeply entrenched in the bird conservation community. In this paper, we present some ideas for using the growing body of SHC products to greater advantage in fulfilling our mission of conserving abundant future bird populations.

As a process, SHC consists of 5-elements: biological planning, conservation design, conservation delivery, outcome-based monitoring

and assumption-driven research (Johnson et al. 2009). Each element yields products that are valuable in making our objectives and strategies more credible and visible. Through the application of SHC, we are seeking to affect bird populations, help habitat managers make more efficient decisions, and affect the awareness and attitudes of the public, i.e., conservation investors. This last function of SHC, affecting public awareness and attitudes, has not been adequately implemented. While, employing a strategic, science-based approach to population and habitat management is a profound positive change for much of the conservation community, it is not enough to ensure mission success.

³E-mail: rex_johnson@fws.gov

⁴Deceased.

Participants in the Fourth International Partners in Flight Conference and similar meetings are often very good at communicating SHC techniques and products. These meetings are routinely attended by finite group of staff of state and federal agencies, and non-governmental organizations with a significant interest in bird conservation. We will call this group the bird conservation community. Most SHC products such as population and habitat objectives, priority conservation areas, and the outcomes of monitoring and research on the effects of management and landscapes on bird populations are discussed almost exclusively within this small community.

The idea of a bird conservation community deserves greater consideration. Communities are comprised of two groups called *actors* and *effectors*. Actors, such as the public, take an interest in an issue and express their will to effectors such as elected officials or corporate leadership who, in response, effect a change in the system. We submit that the number of *motivated* actors that comprised the existing bird conservation community is too small to achieve change in the way we manage lands to conserve healthy ecosystem function including abundant bird populations. We need a new approach to bird conservation based on a broader community with *many* more motivated actors including a large segment of the public.

To understand the challenge of building this new, broader bird conservation community, we can think of a hierarchy of human concerns in order of priority: preserving physical and emotional health, perceiving financial security, and investing in aesthetics. Each level in this simple hierarchy is founded on having achieved the one below it. Most of the world's population, even in the U.S., never perceive financial security and thus fail to routinely seek the aesthetic level. This affects the conservation of wildlife and ecosystem health (at present, a very abstract concept for most people) which are usually treated as aesthetic issues in American society. As an example, the FY2008 funding for NAWCA, the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act, and State Wildlife Grants totals \$158 million, while the FY2008 National Endowment for the Arts is \$128 million.

Wildlife and their habitat are only conserved with the concurrence and cooperation of the people. Aldo Leopold recognized this, but despite his profound effect on the existing bird conservation community, Leopold's writings have failed to resonate with the larger public. In fact, one might speculate that his premise of evolving a land ethic is fundamentally unattainable until we become more effective at

connecting ecosystem health to people's primary concerns—physical and perceived fiscal wellbeing—in the public's consciousness.

One way to build this large community of motivated actors is to increase awareness of the importance of healthy ecosystems, in part based on the products of SHC, using an aggressive marketing and communication campaign. Marketing professionals understand that a compelling message speaks to people's primary motivations using sticky messages that are simple and concise; full of visual images, not statistics; unexpected to the point of being sensational if not at least interesting; and emotional—people feel things for other people, pets, or individual animals, not abstract concepts like extinction rates (Heath and Heath 2007). In short, marketing is the antithesis of everything we teach scientists.

To motivate the public, we need explicit approaches to conservation they can support. We must either propose laws that limit how individuals use natural resources, including their own land, or we craft conservation strategies and programs based on good science and an awareness of social and economic factors that affect landowner participation. This does not mean that every agency and organization needs to reprogram its budget to hire marketing specialists, rural economists, and sociologists; however, we contend that only by embedding the importance of healthy ecosystems in the public consciousness using concrete concepts of individual health and wealth, and with a sensitivity to socio-economic factors, can we achieve our objectives for bird populations. In other words, biological science is only one facet of the complex conservation enterprise. We must broaden our capacities to include communication and marketing professionals that understand how to communicate compelling, concrete and easily understood messages rooted in terms that resonate with the public; i.e. we must begin to humanize conservation.

"Growing the pie" by bringing together more people to support community strategies for all-bird conservation was the expectation when NABCI was established ten years ago. The implicit promise of NABCI was that each agency and organization would bring its own constituencies to the table creating a larger community of motivated actors. Unfortunately, we failed to consider how much our respective constituencies overlapped. We also failed to account for the degree to which agencies and organizations were functionally redundant. Each had its own vertically integrated capacity for planning, fund raising, communication, and often management. In other words, we did

not enlarge the size of the bird conservation community, increase the number of motivated actors, or increase our capacity for conservation.

The conservation community's vertically-integrated, *program-specific*, agency-centric business models will not support a *collective* pursuit of conservation. To fulfill the promise of NABCI, we need to avail ourselves of transformational thinking occurring within the business world—specifically the concept of business ecosystems (Moore 1996, Iansiti and Levien 2004). The business world has turned to ecological systems as a metaphor in understanding the increasingly complex relationships that a business needs if it is to sustain itself. Conventional theories of markets and competition are falling by the wayside, unable to explain the complexities of horizontal integration, collaboration, and networking. Increasingly business are functionally allied in performing the basic tasks of business—research and development, supply chains, product distribution, marketing, and customer service (consider the “ecological relationships” that led to the manufacturing of your computer and its software).

Planning, implementation, biological and socio-economic monitoring and research, and communications and marketing are the functional elements of our conservation enterprise. We believe it is time for horizontal integration among private, state, federal conservation agencies in performing these functional elements.

The traditional paradigm of vertically-integrated businesses competing within the confines of their established industry is dead—replaced by the concept of business ecosystems. Is it not time to borrow the transformational thinking of business; embrace the concept and practice of horizontal-integration; and in so doing create “conservation partner ecosystems?”

LITERATURE CITED

- HEATH, C., AND D. HEATH. 2007. *Made to Stick*. Random House, NY.
- IANSITI, M., AND R. LEVIEN. 2004. *The Keystone Advantage: What the New Dynamics of Business Ecosystems Mean for Strategy, Innovation, and Sustainability*. Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA.
- JOHNSON, R. R., C. K. BAXTER, AND M. E. ESTEY. 2009. An emerging agency-based approach to conserving populations through strategic habitat conservation, pp. 201-224. *In* J. J. Millspaugh and F. R. Thompson [eds.], *Models for planning wildlife conservation in large landscapes*. Elsevier Press, Burlington, MA.
- KOTTER, J. P. 1996. *Leading Change*. Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA.
- MOORE, J. F. 1996. *The Death of Competition: Leadership and Strategy in the Age of Business Ecosystems*. HarperCollins Publishers, NY.