

The North Central Washington Biodiversity Council
Connecting People to Sustain Our Natural Heritage

Final Report

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The overall goal of this project was to demonstrate how the recommendations of the Healthy Lands Initiative and the Washington Biodiversity Conservation Strategy that it helped inform can be implemented to effect near-term actions in North Central Washington i.e., Okanogan, Chelan, and Douglas counties. The accomplishments, challenges, lessons learned, new opportunities and future directions resulting from the pursuit of project objectives are summarized below. A portfolio of materials documenting project activities is attached as an Appendix.

Objective #1:

Develop combined, non-regulatory Conservation Opportunity Framework (COF) map for NCW that can be used to develop strategies and to prioritize the use of incentives and other tools needed to advance land conservation, agriculture and economic development across the region.

Accomplishments:

IRIS worked with contractor Susan Driver and GIS/planning staff from The Nature Conservancy and Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife to assemble data needed to create a series of maps for review and analysis by a task force of regional planners.

Products include:

1. Existing base map of relative biodiversity values for region using information from ecoregional assessments
2. Existing NCW COF map clipped from that at state level combining relative terrestrial biodiversity values with projected human population growth using information derived from Western Futures dataset
3. Existing NCW COF map combining freshwater biodiversity values with potential impacts
4. Adapted NCW COF map combining relative terrestrial biodiversity values with local land use codes instead of projected human population growth
5. Adapted NCW COF map combining relative biodiversity values with planned development intensity using comprehensive plans and local zoning codes instead of projected population growth from Western Futures
6. Adapted NCW COF map combining biodiversity values with projected regional population growth

We also explored potential uses for the locally-adapted framework and the underlying data on biodiversity with a number of groups during the course of the project including the Natural Resource Conservation District, NCW Local Work Group, and other regional

partners we convened to discuss implementation of the Washington Biodiversity Conservation Strategy. See Outreach Summary and the Appendix for a list of meetings, presentations and participants.

Lessons Learned:

A few key lessons include: 1) do not assume that planning staff have the background, skills and tools they need to incorporate biodiversity into plans; provide resources and training opportunities to help them succeed including the source of data and how to interpret it; 2) to maximize effectiveness, introduce the COF maps and data at the beginning of comprehensive plan and zoning revisions so biodiversity can be integrated into land use and zoning codes; identify the question each map is designed to address; and 3) share stories about how planners have integrated biodiversity into their land use practices with elected officials and their respective planning departments to inspire implementation of tested as well as innovative approaches.

Challenges:

There were several challenges associated with completing this first objective including: 1) obtaining time from the municipal, county and regional planners to participate, particularly in light of the budget cuts that coincided with the beginning of the pilot project, 2) securing access to the underlying map data through the use of tools still being developed, 3) dealing with turnover in GIS staff dedicated to the project, and 4) effectively linking the information in the COF maps to other planning efforts, particularly the comprehensive plan in Okanogan County which was well underway by the time this pilot project began.

New Opportunities & Future Directions:

There are opportunities to use the series of NCW COF maps created through this project, along with the underlying biodiversity data, to help the NCW Local Work group prioritize the use of incentive program funds such as Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) and Environmental Quality Improvement Program (EQIP). The maps and data will also provide valuable information for a new pilot project the NCW RC&D and NASA are launching to forecast how changes in water availability could effect our the health of our lands.

Future directions for the refinement and use of COF maps in NCW include exploring how we might work as a community to build a GIS Cooperative that would enable IRIS, the NCW RC&D, counties, and many other partners in the region to explore options and create opportunities for balancing biodiversity conservation with agriculture and economic development at a regional scale. At the ground level, we'll also continue to link *Witnessing Change* program sites (see Objective #3) to the data in the COF maps to provide users with further context relative to the biodiversity values of a given site.

Objective #2:

Organize and conduct a NCW Biodiversity Council strategic planning session to clarify role, form, function and relationship to state Council.

Accomplishments:

IRIS convened a steering committee to begin exploring how the NCW community could work together to implement the Washington Biodiversity Conservation Strategy in spring, 2009. The recommendations from those committee meetings included:

- Do not form a separate entity; IRIS should work to foster cooperation and communication among various stakeholders operating in NCW by creating an informal learning network to share information about biodiversity.
- Develop a coordinated sense of biodiversity priorities for the region, i.e., those relative to urban, rural, and freshwater land uses.
- Expand *Witnessing Change* network and use as a means to report on landowner management successes and to engage citizens in stewardship.

The results of these discussions were brought to a larger meeting on September 9 where others offered suggestions and direction. There was agreement that a formal and separate NCW Biodiversity Council was not warranted, sustainable or feasible at this time. Instead IRIS will build on the success of the Healthy Lands Initiative and host two events each year that will help advance the implementation of the Biodiversity Conservation Strategy in our region: 1) the Healthy Lands Roundtable where private landowners, federal and state agency staff, Tribal representatives, conservation district staff, teachers and others will be invited to share information on their current projects and challenges, and 2) the NCW Community Success Summit where participants will share stories about projects that have worked well in the past year.

Lessons Learned and Challenges:

The principle lesson learned while pursuing this objective was to allow the function of a regional biodiversity council to shape the structure, i.e., don't presume a structure funded at the state level can be replicated at a regional one. People within the region want to coordinate and learn from each other. The structure needed to facilitate that communication will be more effective if it is kept simple and allowed to grow and change over time. An open forum for information exchange coupled with an annual summit to share successes will hopefully provide a sustainable and useful way to promote biodiversity conservation and the Biodiversity Conservation Strategy in NCW.

New Opportunities and Future Directions:

IRIS will convene the first Healthy Lands Roundtable in winter 2010 and, with GIS support contributed from partners, explore and compare the various maps being used to guide conservation priorities and actions across the region. We will also invite members of the Pierce County Biodiversity Network to come over and share the results of their work as a model for how we might integrate biodiversity into planning and local community action in this region. The first NCW Community Success Summit held on November 18 proved to be an effective regional forum. IRIS will begin planning the 2010 Summit this winter which will include, among other presentations, an update on the *Witnessing Change* photo-monitoring network.

Objective #3: Establish network and website needed to support emerging photo-monitoring trail system as a means for engaging citizens in monitoring the effectiveness of biodiversity management actions.

Accomplishments:

IRIS contracted with web architect Ben Field to lead the development of the *Witnessing Change* photo-monitoring trail website using information provided by land managers at three pilot sites: Barn Beach Reserve in Chelan County, The Nature Conservancy's McCartney Creek Preserve in Douglas County and Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife's Sinlahekin State Wildlife Area in Okanogan County. Metals artist Jonathan Vollmer volunteered his time to build the steel trail markers for the project and graphics artist Liz Johnson with The Nature Conservancy designed the template for the trailhead signage and interpretive brochure for each trail. The website went live in November with the Barn Beach Reserve being the first of the three pilot sites where visitors are now invited to take photos and post on the website, www.witnessingchange.org

Challenges and Lessons Learned:

Development of *Witnessing Change* only became feasible in the past couple of years due to innovations in both website and digital camera technologies. Figuring out a way that citizens can easily upload photographs to the website and compare them with those from previous years challenged existing design protocols. Another challenge was to choose what type of background information would orient users to the landowner goals as well as the biodiversity values of each site. For the pilot phase we chose to limit the options to historic photographs, excerpts from oral histories, and data from the Conservation Opportunity Framework maps. We will be exploring the use of other types of background information and opportunities for citizen involvement as we go forward and expand the capacity of the website.

We learned two valuable lessons while developing and demonstrating this website to a variety of audiences. First, we found that it was easier to introduce people to the value of the Conservation Opportunity Framework maps by looking at the biodiversity values of a given *Witnessing Change* site. Secondly, we saw the importance of including the oral history excerpts for each site with the data on biodiversity and landowner goals. Hearing the voices and experiences of others enhances a sense of connection to the place.

New Opportunities and Future Directions: IRIS is finding a lot of interest among private and public landowners for this new monitoring and storytelling tool and working now to expand the program. Over the next six months we plan to add ten more NCW trails to the network on lands owned by Washington State Parks, The Nature Conservancy, Chelan Douglas Land Trust and others and to use the results of that work to determine a long-term business plan that will enable the program to be sustainable. We will also be developing password protected portions of the website to serve the needs of private landowners and schools involved in photo-monitoring. The modest expense of maintaining the program makes it feasible for landowners to use *Witnessing Change* as one component of their stewardship and outreach programs that can help them measure the success of biodiversity conservation and other values.

Budget:

Project Objectives	Biodiversity Council Funds	Icicle Fund Match	Total
Objective #1	\$11,274	\$28,000	\$39,274
Objective #2	\$13,588	\$11,000	\$24,588
Objective #3	\$21,638		\$21,638
RC&D overhead	\$ 3,500		\$ 3,500
Total	\$50,000	\$39,000	\$89,000 ¹

The NCW Biodiversity Council Outreach Summary

Date	Event	Attendees
9/9/08	Wild Links conference	~ 50
10/7/08	Project overview for Chelan County Commission	8
10/7/08	Project overview for Douglas County Commission	6
10/6/08	Planner's Task Force retreat	
10/24/08	Followup Task Force meeting	6
11/14/08	<i>Witnessing Change</i> program presentation, EEAW conference	15
1/29/09	Pilot project update to WBC Science & Land Use subcommittees	15
2/4/09	COF map presentation to NCW Core Group NRCS	12
2/13/09	Planner's Task Force meeting	8
3/12/09	Pilot project update to WBC	25
4/17/09	Planner's Task Force meeting	12
4/22/09	NCW Envirothon	100
4/24/09	NCW Biodiversity Council steering committee meeting	10
5/1/09	Biodiversity Scorecard meeting	5
5/19/09	NCW Biodiversity Council steering committee	12
6/9/09	NCW Local Work Group meeting	15
7/18/09	Democratic Rural Agriculture Caucus	25
9/9/09	NCW Biodiversity Council overview to NCW RC&D and EDD	30
9/9/09	NCW Biodiversity Council meeting	18
9/30/09	<i>Witnessing Change</i> presentation to WA State Parks Commission	30
10/7/09	Report to WBC retreat	35
11/18/09	<i>Witnessing Change</i> at NCW Community Success Summit	50
11/19/09	Pilot project presentation to WA State Association of Counties	15
12/2/09	<i>Witnessing Change</i> presentation to WA Association of Conservation Districts	45

¹ Corrected total (Incorrect total in 07/29/2009 Scope of Work document noted as \$87,500)