

Executive Summary
Conserving Wisconsin's Biological Diversity Session
Governor's Conference on Forestry
November 2004

Overview

Prior to the Conference, a diverse team developed the approach to the session on biological diversity. We created four Desired States, broad goals that we felt were critical to conserve our state's biological diversity. Our goal for the session was to bring all participants to a common understanding of biological diversity. In addition, we intended to produce a list of action items for each of the four Desired States, prioritize these actions, and develop an implementation plan for the highest priority action items.

Approximately 60 people attended the session. The session began with brief presentations, including an overview of the session by Mary Jean Huston (state director, The Nature Conservancy); background on biological diversity and Wisconsin's diversity by David Mladenoff (ecologist – UW-Madison), and a industry perspective by Cheryl Adams (ecologist - UPM Blandin Paper Mill) on how one corporation manages using ecological concepts that directly relate to biological diversity.

The remainder of the session was devoted to group processes to develop and prioritize action items for each Desired State. Participants were asked to vote on those action items they felt were priorities. Finally, we broke into four small-group sessions (one for each Desired State) to develop a plan to implement the priority action items.

The four Desired States were:

- 1) Reliable science-based information about biological diversity is available and includes components of inventory, monitoring, analysis, and assessment. This information drives conservation practices and decisions.
- 2) Public policies, plans, and actions support conservation of biological diversity as an integral part of long-term ecological and economic health.
- 3) Wisconsin's citizens value the conservation of biological diversity and recognize it as an essential part of sustainable forest management and productivity, as well as tourism and recreation.
- 4) The State of Wisconsin has a long-term vision (for timeframes of more than 50 years into the future) that anticipates challenges to biological diversity, even though these challenges may be beyond our direct control, and initiates actions that will minimize damage.

Outcomes

The proceedings of the Governor's Conference on Forestry will contain the detailed ideas, comments and action plans that were generated by the session Conserving Wisconsin's Biological Diversity. When the top priority actions to achieve the four Desired States are reviewed, the following five recommendations emerge as high priorities overall for this conservation issue.

1. Invest in and maintain an inventory and monitoring program that is the foundation for biological diversity conservation in Wisconsin.

Discussion: There are currently good resources available for inventory and monitoring, such as through the DNR's Natural Heritage Inventory Program, US Forest Service efforts, and academia. Action steps include creating a group to develop the goals and strategy of a more extensive inventory and monitoring program; reviewing literature to see what is already available; filling inventory and monitoring gaps; and sharing data. It was stressed that this should be integrated with forest certification requirements, but not limited to certified lands. Inventory and monitoring efforts should include obscure but important groups of organisms, and consider genetic diversity. Strong and effective inventory and monitoring efforts underway should be supported.

2. Base biological diversity conservation (including protection, management and policies) on landscape scale plans.

Discussion: Build upon existing plans, such as TNC's Ecoregional Planning, DNR's Land Legacy, Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Plans, and State Natural Areas, and develop conservation strategies for areas of conservation importance (moving from science to action). In using landscape scale planning methods, develop desired future conditions to address issues such as invasives and increased fragmentation. Integrate big picture planning for Wisconsin and/or the Midwest; consider linkages, and plan across political borders. Involve all stakeholders and economic, social, and ecological perspectives in creating the vision or desired state. Use adaptive management principles for implementing plans and for taking action on threats. Create more flexibility in management approaches, improving resiliency.

3. Develop a representative system of reference areas to function as baselines for monitoring changes in biological diversity.

Discussion: These areas should include but not limited to State Natural Areas that provide refuge for the most disturbance-sensitive elements of biological diversity. Actions include defining reference areas, making these areas part of the inventory and monitoring program for biological diversity, identifying gaps in our system of reference areas and filling those gaps using private and public lands. Private landowners can play a role. Managed lands may play a role. Include making "high conservation value forests" part of forest certification and part of reference areas.

There should be greater funding allocated toward conserving these areas. Designation of areas on public lands plays a huge role in establishing this system.

4. Provide incentives for managers and landowners to conserve biological diversity.

Discussion: The first step to achieve this goal is to conduct a statewide landscape evaluation and assessment to identify restoration targets and priority areas for biodiversity conservation. The results of this evaluation will be used to establish and direct incentive programs. Actions to achieve this goal include more effective incentive programs for private landowners, as well as addressing methods to maintain large blocks of land that are often in industrial ownership. Increased technical assistance is a component, as is better alignment of government programs to focus on biodiversity across all levels.

5. Use strategic marketing and outreach to make landowners and the general public stakeholders in conserving Wisconsin's biological diversity. Change the perception that biological diversity is antithetical to forest management and economic sustainability.

Discussion: The first action is to create a communications and marketing plan to identify target audiences, develop key messages, and devise strategies to reach each audience. Research will identify messages that resonate, and incentives that motivate good land management. Economic benefits of biological diversity will be clearly identified in a way that can be easily communicated. The Council on Forestry was identified as a lead player to both help develop the marketing plan, and to commission a white paper about the economic benefits of biological diversity.