Frequently Asked Questions: Conservation Targets

What is meant by the term "conservation target" in natural resource management?

The concept of "conservation target" means different things to different people and different organizations. For some, the term is equated with a "goal" or a "desired condition" whereas for others the term is more equated with an "objective." Various organizations have defined conservations targets in the most appropriate terms for that organization's mission.

What types of conservation targets are there?

Conservation targets must be based on indicators that can be quantitatively measured and can be drawn from species, community, abiotic, or process attributes of an ecosystem:

- Population numbers or species range based (species targets may also express the desired spatial configuration of habitat components for migratory species);
- Ecosystem-integrity targets: These are clear, measurable descriptions of systems that support and maintain a balanced, integrated adaptive assemblage of organisms having species composition, diversity, and functional organization comparable to that of natural habitat of the region. Indicators with quantitative measures for ecosystems will be drawn from species, community, abiotic, or process attributes of the system;
- Ecosystem occurrence target: Often associated with general "habitat" representation, these targets focus on redundancies of and connectivity among the unique components or community structures that comprise the ecosystem;
- Ecosystem-service conservation targets reflect the desired level of an ecosystem component that would both meet conservation goals for natural systems/species AND the human use component. Examples objectives linked to ecosystem services targets.

Why are conservation targets important?

Natural resource challenges today are as difficult as any ever faced by our nation, the time we have to solve them is shorter than ever and our natural resources are experiencing new and increasing stressors. We need to be efficient with our time and resources, and to do that requires that we have an explicit definition of our targets and strategies to achieve them. Setting, or adopting, conservation targets is a process in planning. Just as management actions require plans, plans require a focal point for which the plan is developed. Conservation targets set the basis for the types and scope of actions developed in plans from prioritizing science to informing trade-offs to alternative conservation actions to achieve targets most effectively and efficiently. The mandates and authorities of all partners must be respected and considered throughout the process, with the intent that individual partners retain complete freedom and flexibility in determining their own contribution to achieving an individual target.

How can conservation targets be set? What is the process?

In general, a "coarse-filter/fine-filter" approach has been demonstrated to be practical and robust. Within this context, the first method of establishing an LCC's conservation targets could be to use the conservation targets of individual partner organizations, and develop science-based solutions to meet these multiple objectives. With this method, the LCC's role would be to collaboratively identify the commonalities and components of the individual entities' conservation targets to find the most effective means to address science needs that aid in accomplishing those targets. One of the key benefits of this approach is that it provides a mechanism for the LCC partnership to recognize how one partner's work to meet their conservation target can be enhanced by other entities focused on different conservation targets.

A second approach for setting conservation targets is to use recognized regional, national, or continental conservation targets (if available), and determine the responsibility of an individual LCC in achieving those targets. This approach has been used quite effectively by joint ventures for many of the continental-scale bird conservation plans. Another example of a habitat-based conservation target that has been established nationally are wetlands (remember "no net loss?").

Lastly, the LCCs can help to reconcile conflicting conservation targets through discussions within the partnership. It is also likely that the LCC would create conservation targets and objectives specific to the LCC region if none exist to meet the goals of the LCC. Under this approach, it could be the responsibility of each LCC, through its Steering Committee, to determine the appropriate conservation target to meet the regional, national, or continental objective.

How will progress and outcomes be measured and at what frequency?

There are a great number and variety of approaches to measuring progress towards achieving conservation targets. Within an adaptive resource management framework, monitoring and evaluation are required elements in assessing progress towards objectives. Within the scientific literature, there are several approaches that have been advanced as part of a monitoring and evaluation process.

How do conservation targets help the conservation community communicate with others?

By identifying targets we convey to our partners, our constituents, and our funders what we plan to accomplish and perhaps how long it will take to get there and what resources are needed. Clearly-articulated conservation targets are valuable when communicating management decisions before Congress and public. Targets provide transparency and accountability. These two attributes are even more important for new collaborative efforts such as LCCs when members are understandably cautious about an unproven track record to improve conservation delivery.