

An Examination of Waterbird Conservation Council Structure and Operations

Preparatory Reading for Waterbird Conservation Council Annual Meeting, January 17, 2008

Introduction:

The stated role of the Waterbird Conservation Council (Council) is to serve as the steering body of the Waterbird Conservation for the Americas initiative and have responsibility for coordinating, supporting, and communicating implementation of the North American Waterbird Conservation Plan and other waterbird conservation plans and strategies in the Western Hemisphere.

The Council is now approaching five years of age; the 2008 Annual Meeting will be the fifth annual meeting following the inaugural meeting. A number of organizations use a five-year interval to perform self-assessments. Thus, the 2008 Annual Meeting is a good opportunity to re-examine how the Council functions and is structured in order to ensure continued effectiveness.

Background:

The Waterbird Conservation Council met for the first time in June 2003. At that time, the participants examined the role of the Council, developed rules for structure and operation, and identified priority tasks for the upcoming year. Of the Council's current 28 members; seven were present at the inaugural meeting.

The Council's *Terms of Reference* (the mandate and scope for work for the Council) was developed, which included the scheduling of an annual meeting and the formation of committees to work year-round on various types of activities relating to conservation or Council operation. There have been some adjustments and clarifications made over the subsequent five years, documented in revisions to the *Terms of Reference* and additional Council documents (*Principles of Membership, Involvement in Advocacy and Public Policy, Approach to Decision-Making*), but the structure and operations of the Council has remained fairly unchanged.

The following excerpts describe the current stated nature and structure of the Council and expectations of members:

The Waterbird Conservation Council is a voluntary board that accomplishes tasks and objectives primarily through participation in topical committees dedicated to advancing waterbird conservation through management, research, education, and policy activities. In addition, Council members participate in and/or liaise with regional working groups implementing waterbird conservation strategies at the regional or sub-continental scale.

- *From Terms of Reference*

El Concejo es una asociación voluntaria que lleva a cabo tareas y objetivos principalmente a través de la participación en comités tópicos que se dedican a la conservación de las aves acuáticas mediante actividades de manejo, educación y políticas. Además, los miembros del Concejo participan en/o se vinculan con grupos de trabajo regionales que implementan estrategias de conservación de aves acuáticas a escala regional o sub-continental.

- *de Términos de Referencia*

A Council composed of highly dedicated and reputable individuals will, through their personal commitment and stature within conservation and resource management organizations, be able to

leverage a great positive impact on the status of waterbirds throughout the plan area. By leading and participating in Council activities and institutionalizing waterbird conservation capacity within their organizations, Council members will collectively produce effective conservation results in a timely manner.

- *From Principles of Membership*

Un Consejo compuesto por individuos altamente dedicados y prestigiosos podrá, debido a su compromiso personal y estatura ante las organizaciones de manejo de conservación y recursos, obtener un impacto altamente positivo sobre el estado de las aves acuáticas a través del área del plan. Los miembros del Consejo, al liderar y participar en las actividades del Consejo y en la institucionalización de la capacidad de conservación de aves acuáticas dentro de sus organizaciones, producirán colectivamente resultados de conservación efectivos en un plazo razonable.

- *de Principios de Membresía*

Engaged participation by Council members is a critical element of waterbird conservation as envisioned by the Initiative. Council members are expected to serve as active participants and leaders on Council committees and within regional working groups that are implementing waterbird conservation at local scales.

- *From Principles of Membership*

Tal como ha sido establecido por la Iniciativa, el compromiso de participación por parte de los miembros de Consejo es un elemento esencial para la conservación de las aves acuáticas. Se espera que los miembros del Consejo sirvan como participantes activos y que lideren los comités del Consejo y los grupos de trabajo regionales que están implementando la conservación de las aves acuáticas a escalas locales.

- *de Principios de Membresía*

Assessing the Council/Considerations and Discussion Questions:

An organization should be structured and operated in a way that best meets its purpose. The effectiveness and productivity of the Council can be assessed by looking at a number of measures:

- **Performance of Council compared to its stated workplans.** This is actually two analyses: 1) has the Council been able to develop meaningful and realistic workplans and 2) has the Council been able to accomplish the workplan tasks and account for the factors that allowed or prevented success? To date, the Council has generated workplans based on Committee activities, identified and endorsed at annual meetings. These activities are then reviewed on bi-monthly Executive Committee conference calls and presented at subsequent annual meetings. Committees provide the Council with a structure for specialists (both members and nonmembers) to come together around particular issues or activities, and a wide range of activities have been accomplished by committees over time. However, a number of committees have become inactive in the last year.

Should the Council continue to view itself as an organization that undertakes group activities outside the annual meeting? Is a committee structure the best way to accomplish this? Should it narrow its group activities to coordination and communication?

- **Participation of members in Council activities.** The majority of Council members attend the annual meetings. At the five Council meetings that have occurred to date, participation has ranged from 60-70% of the membership; however, if members who never attended any meeting are discounted, participation has been around 80% each year. Additionally, most of the current Council members have

identified themselves with working committees. However, two of the seven committees are currently without Chairs, and only three committees met with any regularity in 2007.

Should stated expectations of members be adjusted? Might each member agree upon some specific responsibility or task – in addition to attending the annual meeting – rather than an expectation of engaging in group activities during the year?

- **Influence of Council on member activities and behavior.** More difficult to measure, but very critical, is the influence that Council membership has on the way the volunteer members behave in their “real jobs” – that is, do members undertake new or different activities, make decisions, or shape agendas in their own institutions based on Council engagement. It appears that this is occurring – that individual member and their institutional capacity for waterbird conservation has increased. The question is whether the means of engagement (a once-yearly meeting, committees, written correspondence) are structured and operate such that this occurs to the maximum extent.

How can the Council maximize its role of an advising or guiding body? How should the annual meeting be structured to best facilitate strategic thinking around priorities and key issues? What about other opportunities throughout the year?

- **Role and activities of the Council’s coordinator.** For many organizations, staff are an important means of reaching goals. The Council currently has one dedicated coordinator, provided by the USFWS. The coordinator’s basic duties are laid out in the North American Waterbird Conservation Plan and includes acting as a staff member for the Council. In 2007, 30% of the coordinator’s work hours was spent in administrative support of the Council (correspondence, documentation, logistical and financial arrangements, representation) and 46% on actual Council projects working with Council members or committees (e.g., technical analyses, regional plans, symposium or technical workshops, communication products). The perspectives of the Council certainly influenced this coordinator’s behavior during the remaining work hours, spent on USFWS-explicit objectives. Additional dedicated Council staff would most likely increase Council’s presence, scope and output generally, as well as its influence in the organizations that house the coordinators.

Should the Council pursue additional staff? Would a change in formal status (e.g., incorporation) allow hiring of staff (i.e., a secretariat) to undertake activities on the Council’s behalf?

- **Increases or improvements in waterbird populations and habitat in the Americas.** The determination of whether an initiative and the operations of its steering organization have substantively affected the state of a natural resource is a complex and significant undertaking. An assessment like this was recently performed for the 20-year-old North American Waterfowl Management Plan by an assessment team working over two years.

Should the Council pursue a holistic assessment of the Waterbird Conservation for the Americas initiative?

Additional Note:

It should be remembered that in 2006, the report *Strategic Engagement in Seabird Conservation: An Opportunities Assessment and Action Guide for the Waterbird Conservation Council* included the results of interviews with over half (17) Council members about their perceptions of the Council. Members were asked about their perceptions of the Council’s strengths, limitations, principal benefits of membership, best niche for engaging in seabird conservation, and whether the current membership and structure was capable of engaging seabird conservation needs. Although the questions focused on seabird conservation, they

arguably can be applied to the Council's goals for waterbird conservation in general. Members are encouraged to consult this report as they consider the structure and operations of the Council.
(Report can be downloaded at <http://www.waterbirdconservation.org/seabirds.html>)