

**DEVELOPING THE NORTH AMERICAN WATERBIRD CONSERVATION PLAN: AN ANALYSIS OF PROCESS**

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## INTRODUCTION

The goal of this paper is to examine the process of developing the North American Waterbird Conservation Plan (“The Plan”), and to assess the effectiveness of that process. To do so, I will first place the process into its proper context by summarizing the events that led to its inception and by identifying the conservation issue that it is meant to resolve. Next, the goals of the process must be defined (i.e. the goals of the individuals involved), along with the actions identified to accomplish those goals. The process followed in developing the Plan will be described, and events and decisions significant to its outcome highlighted. Finally, I will assess the Plan’s utility from a conservation perspective – whether the original goals were met by the results of the planning process – and give recommendations for future actions.

The Kingdon model of policymaking describes a process composed of three streams:

*“The first, the problem stream, is the process by which conditions or issues come to be defined as problems and thus as a focus of government action. The second is the political stream; events, trends, institutions, and interest groups determine which problems will receive attention on the governmental agenda. The third is the policy stream. This shapes the decision agenda, the list of policy alternatives considered for responding to problems... At some point, the streams come together as policy entrepreneurs take advantage of ‘windows’ of opportunity to change policy.” (Fiorino p. 16)*

This model provides an excellent framework for understanding the events that culminated in the creation of the Plan. But to understand the convergence of these so-called ‘streams’, the development of policy must also be viewed as an incremental process in which “decisions one year rely on those decisions that were made in the past,” and “options and criteria change as the available information changes.” In essence, “policy tends to happen as much as to be decided on” (ibid p. 15). To a large extent, the Plan happened because the U.S. Shorebird Plan was happening, and because the Partners In Flight initiative was happening. The impetus for these initiatives was, at least in part, facilitated by the existence of the North American Waterfowl Plan. Thus in order to understand the development of the Plan, it is necessary to begin more than ten years before it was conceived.

By the mid 1980’s, the concept of monitoring populations of species at the national scale, and the desire to do so, had been growing for decades among wildlife biologists and within the avian conservation community, but few comprehensive programs yet existed at the national level to coordinate such an effort. The only nationally coordinated nongame monitoring program in existence was the North American Breeding Bird Survey (BBS), and its usefulness in establishing population trends was restricted to certain groups of passerines. Rarer still were programs aimed at actively managing wildlife habitat specifically for the purposes of maintaining avian populations – game or nongame – at target levels (see Howe 1991 for a comprehensive review of federal research on conservation of nongame migratory birds through 1990). This changed in 1986, when the North American Waterfowl Management Plan was signed by the governments of the United States and Canada (Mexico joined in 1994).

## **HISTORY**

### ***The North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP)***

The NAWMP was spearheaded by a consortium of private interest groups and government institutions who were concerned about record low numbers recorded for gamebird populations in 1985. Their goal was to restore those populations to the levels recorded in the 1970's (U.S. NABCI 2000). The passage of the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) in 1989 provided funding for implementation of the NAWMP, which works through 11 regional partnerships called Joint Ventures to manage habitats important to waterfowl in order to achieve specific population targets.

The flurry of legislative, funding, and management activities occurring in the name of waterfowl conservation, and motivated largely by a focused hunting constituency, galvanized another sector of the avian research and conservation communities into action.

### ***Partners In Flight (PIF)***

Specifically, researchers and conservationists both within and outside the government became concerned that nongame birds were being neglected. Aided by the publication of fifteen years of data from the BBS (Robbins et al 1986), which showed drastic declines in the populations of some nongame migratory birds (Robbins et al 1989), in 1998 these individuals succeeded in amending the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act of 1980. This "Mitchell Amendment" required the Department of Interior "to monitor and assess migratory nongame birds, determine the effects of environmental changes and human activities, identify those likely to be candidates for endangered species listing, identify appropriate actions, and report to Congress... at 5 year intervals on actions taken" (USFWS 2001). Building on this legislative mandate, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation led a consortium of nongovernmental organizations, research and academic institutions, private conservation groups, and state and federal government agencies in forming Partners In Flight, a broad-based initiative to conserve nongame landbirds in the United States. In its early years PIF focused on coalition building. Then in 1995, the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (IAFWA), working on behalf of its constituent state and federal wildlife agencies, acquired a grant from the Wildlife Service Federal Aid Administrative Fund to hire four regional coordinators, and a national coordinator was contributed by the American Bird Conservancy. The addition of dedicated staff to the initiative enabled the development of a blueprint called "The Flight Plan". With its guidance, the regional coordinators have facilitated the development of 52 Bird Conservation Plans covering the continental United States (Pashley et al 2000).

### ***The U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan ("The Shorebird Plan")***

As waterfowl management plans began to take shape under the NAWMP Joint Ventures, and PIF regional working groups began to craft their plans, concern was mounting among shorebird researchers and conservationists over observed declines in nongame shorebird populations and also over a lack of accurate baseline data on shorebird population sizes. With an initial grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Division of Federal Aid, the Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences recruited a "wide array of state and federal

agencies, non-governmental conservation organizations, and individual researchers throughout the country” (Brown et al 2001) to develop a plan for stabilizing and maintaining populations of shorebird species. A key element of the group’s regionally-based planning strategy was their recognition of “the opportunity to integrate management practices beneficial to shorebirds... into current management practices focused predominantly on game species” (ibid) - namely the NAWMP Joint Venture programs.

### ***The Seeds of the Waterbird Plan***

Thus by the mid-1990’s, a decade of activity by conservation organizations, private individuals, legislators, and government agencies had changed the face of avian conservation in the United States. Before the mid-1980’s, management of bird populations and habitat had focused only on a handful of gamebirds and endangered species. Now, NAWMP Joint Ventures, PIF Regional Working Groups, and Shorebird Regional Working Groups all over the country were busy creating conservation and management plans for their respective assemblages of birds. As awareness of these activities – and participation in them – grew, some researchers and government workers became concerned that yet another category of birds was being left out of the planning effort. Naomi Edelson, who had joined IAFWA in 1990 as its PIF coordinator, had done her graduate work on wading birds. “Something that was really important to me was not happening,” she recalls thinking (Edelson 2001). In fact, the needs of seabirds, colonial waterbirds, and marshbirds were not being considered in the decision-making process regarding avian habitat management.

In 1995 Dr. James A. Kushlan, a prominent heron researcher, was appointed to the position of Director of Patuxent Wildlife Research Center (“Patuxent”), one of six national research centers operated at that time by the short-lived National Biological Service (NBS). At the time, he was still unaware of the NAWMP and PIF activities that were already well underway. However he was aware of the BBS, which had been housed at Patuxent since its inception in the 1960’s and which stood as the only real nationwide standardized nongame avian survey in existence. He had also participated in waterbird survey efforts throughout the southeastern U.S., and had always been frustrated by what he refers to as the “lack of persistence” of efforts to establish comprehensive nationwide monitoring programs and centralized data repositories to complement the BBS. With the demise (due to loss of institutional support and lack of funding) of the National Audubon Society’s Colonial Bird Register in the mid-1980’s, the avian research and wildlife management communities were left with no minimum standard for collecting or sharing data on colonial birds. Researchers, land managers, and volunteers continued to watch and survey waterbirds on the local level (with greatly varying degrees of regularity), but there was no consistent funding, and little standardization or coordination of effort, across state and regional boundaries. “The fact that these data had been accumulated with a lot of effort and then no one could access them always was a bother to me,” Kushlan remembers (Kushlan 2001a). He became convinced that the best chance for establishing a permanent program lay in “creating a permanent position with base funding” in the federal government. Only at that level would “the persistence be secured and have a nationwide context” (ibid).

Thus Jim Kushlan brought to Patuxent a vision of a consolidated National Inventory and Monitoring Program for the Department of Interior. His idea was to locate the program at Patuxent, which already hosted the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) and the national Bird Banding Laboratory (BBL), but to establish it as distinct from the research program and provide it with its own management staff and operating budget (Kushlan 1996). His proposal was accepted, and Dr. Marshall Howe, a shorebird researcher with a long career in federal nongame wildlife management and policymaking, and who had been involved since the 1980's in the effort to increase monitoring and conservation of nongame species, was recruited to direct the new program. At its inception, the program finally provided an institutional home for the 30-year-old BBS, the BBL, and a fledgling amphibian monitoring effort. Dr. Kushlan was now able to create a new position within the program – his long-desired “permanent position with base funding” – whose role would be to develop a database and national monitoring program for colonial waterbirds.

As part of his new role as Center Director, Dr. Kushlan also visited Patuxent's field station in Vicksburg, TN. During his visit, he was given a summary of planning efforts underway for the Lower Mississippi Valley Joint Venture (a planning unit of the NAWMP) – efforts which included provisions for shorebirds but not for the herons that he observed wintering throughout the area. It was a definitive moment for Jim Kushlan; he realized that something more needed to be done – and quickly – to publicize the needs of colonial waterbirds and to ensure their inclusion in this landmark habitat management planning process. The model that seemed to be working for other taxonomic groups readily came to mind; the NAWMP, the Shorebird Plan, and PIF's bird conservation strategy, aptly named “The Flight Plan”. Dr. Kushlan wondered if a fourth continent-scale “conservation plan” was needed.

He began a dialogue with a network of colleagues developed over the course of his career. What did they think about a national conservation plan for colonial waterbirds? Would there be support for such an idea in the avian research and conservation communities? Among government agencies? Among federal wildlife biologists and land managers? It appeared that several years of lobbying, coalition building, and planning efforts by PIF and Shorebird Plan participants had already paved the way for such an idea. Response was positive.

To borrow from Kingdon's model, the streams of *problem* (in this case, insufficient monitoring and conservation of nongame bird species), *politics* (a Congressional mandate and a well-organized and politically active constituency), and *policy* (the management and conservation plan strategies pioneered by NAWMP, PIF and the Shorebird Plan) were rapidly converging, and Jim Kushlan was uniquely positioned to take advantage of his “window of opportunity”.

In April 1998, two important events combined to set the groundwork for the development of a colonial waterbird conservation plan. The first was the hiring of Melanie Steinkamp, a dynamic individual with several years of wildlife research and management experience, to fill the new colonial waterbird coordinator position at Patuxent. Shortly thereafter (on April 23, 1998) Dr. Kushlan convened a preliminary “scoping meeting” for the conservation plan at Patuxent. Among the 19 attendees were representatives from Ducks Unlimited, Wetlands International, the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (IAFWA), the National Audubon Society, Manomet Conservation Center, the American Bird Conservancy, the Ornithological

Council, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Office of Migratory Bird Management and North American Waterfowl and Wetland Offices. There was no official project, nor did a budget yet exist. Participants used their own travel funds to attend the meeting. They brought bag lunches or ate take-out from nearby restaurants. The agenda included discussion of the rationale for a plan, synergisms with existing plans and models, monitoring resources, and general discussion on "how to do a plan." Key to the success of this meeting was the fact that individuals were present who had been directly involved in the development of previous plans: Barbara Pardo from USFWS was involved in the NAWMP, Kathy Parsons from Manomet, Marshall Howe from PWRC, and John Trapp from USFWS/OMBM could all represent the Shorebird Plan, and Naomi Edelson (IAFWA) had played an integral role in the early years of the PIF effort. It was also important that they had known each other and worked together for years. "One thing about that group of people," reflects Jim Kushlan, "they go back a long way" (Kushlan 2001b). Naomi Edelson concurs: "There was a lot of camaraderie... and here I could work with all these great people... that was a big deal for me" (Edelson 2001).

## **CHALLENGES**

Excitement generated in April was carried into the first official meeting, on July 31, 1998, of what was now identified as the "Steering Committee". A common understanding of the ecological, political, and economic challenges of conserving colonial waterbirds, and a broadly defined strategy for addressing those challenges, emerged from the April and July meetings and intervening email discussions.

### ***Ecological***

Ecological challenges encompass those common to many types of migratory birds as well as non-avian terrestrial and marine wildlife, but also issues unique to the biology of colonial nesters. Significant threats faced by most wildlife populations include disease, conversion of critical habitat (particularly, in this case, via the alteration and development of interior and coastal wetlands), negative effects of pollution and contaminants (e.g. oil spills, plastic entanglement/ingestion, chemical poisoning), mortality from predation, bycatch, and illegal take, usurpation of resources by exotic species, degradation of water quality and feeding stocks in oceans and inland waters (particularly in relation to the aquaculture, commercial fishing, and oil industries), disturbance of populations stemming from tourism, development, and commercial activities, and potential impacts of climate change. Threats unique to colonial nesters relate to their dependence on restricted nesting and roosting sites, a characteristic that enhances their vulnerability to changes in local conditions. For example, the conversion of a single site can have a significant negative impact on the productivity of an entire region's population. Their colonial nature also potentially increases the effects on the population of disturbance by fishing vessels and boat traffic (i.e. light and noise effects), aircraft, military weapons testing, tourism, and recreational use (i.e. all terrain vehicles). In this manner, they have as much in common with nonmigratory species and other social taxa as with other migratory birds. Thus management plans geared towards the latter might not adequately protect colonial nesters.

### *Political*

The greatest political challenge facing colonial waterbird conservation is, of course, the conflict between their needs and those of human society. Some sectors of society value colonial waterbirds as biological indicators of ecosystem health, and others assign significant aesthetic and symbolic worth to these species. However conflicts and negative interactions with the aquaculture and fishing industries arising from competition over food resources, concern about birds as disease vectors, and perceptions of nesting colonies as smelly, dirty, and noisy have also damaged their public image. This applies particularly to so-called “overabundant” species like cormorants; in many regions, management of cormorant populations means issuing depredation permits aimed at “wildlife damage abatement”, with much political but little scientific support for the action. As one state nongame coordinator complained, “I’m spending my ‘species of management concern’ money on cormorants, and a considerable amount of my time, to the detriment of the declining species” (Pence 1998). This issue is tightly linked with other related political challenges – namely, lack of accurate information on existing population sizes, population trends, and impacts of management actions on different species of waterbirds, lack of guidance regarding appropriate management, lack of institutional support for necessary management actions, and time and resource constraints which inhibit the ability of wildlife and land managers to carry out the necessary actions even when they can identify what those are. Conflicts between the needs of different species of wildlife further complicate the decision-making process, as do questions of jurisdiction and coordination in the case of species whose habitats are distributed across traditional political boundaries. Isolation of state and federal land managers within their respective regions has traditionally inhibited information exchange and the development of a support network that could help address these difficulties. Also important were semantic distinctions drawn between “seabirds” and “colonial waterbirds”, as well as the distinction drawn between game and nongame wildlife. In particular, the traditional rift between game and nongame wildlife proponents and managers would need to be reduced/eliminated if significant cooperation between NAWMP Joint Ventures and nongame biologists was to occur (Smith 1998). An unforeseen issue that would arise early in the planning process was also the exclusive nature of a plan for *colonial* waterbirds. As a parallel movement for all bird conservation (soon to take form as the North American Bird Conservation Initiative, or NABCI) rapidly gained speed, it was recognized that this Plan would most likely be the last of the species-specific bird conservation planning efforts to take place. What would happen to those remaining groups of birds that didn’t fit into the categories of “waterfowl”, “land birds”, “shorebirds”, or “colonial waterbirds” – namely, nongame marshbirds, and those seabirds and waterbirds that did not nest colonially? Pressure mounted quickly to prevent these birds from falling through the cracks, by adding them to the colonial waterbird conservation plan. But to do so would dilute the Plan’s focus, and make it even more difficult to provide specific management suggestions given the greater variation in ecological needs of this wider array of birds.

### ***Economic***

The economic challenges identified by the founders of the Plan were two-fold. Most immediate was the question of how much money would be needed to complete the planning process, and how to fund it. The more long-term and critical issue, however, was the recognition that a conservation plan would be useless if no funds were available to implement it. This was closely related to human economic priorities; to the perceived impact of colonial waterbird conservation on the local economy and on commercial interests, and therefore to levels of institutional support within federal and state agencies for waterbird conservation activities.

Thus the major economic challenges from a conservation planning perspective can be identified as follows:

- The need to design a planning process that could be completed as cheaply as possible;
- To identify potential sources of funding for planning and successfully solicit from them;
- The need to design management goals and strategies that are realistic, given the lack of funding for staff to conduct monitoring/survey and management activities at the local, regional, and national levels;
- The need to develop a strategy to address long-term funding needs for implementation of the Plan.

### **STRATEGY**

In order to move forward, the steering committee needed to distill this daunting array of challenges into an inclusive but coherent and easily communicated statement of the problem, to craft an attainable statement of goals, and to identify a strategy by which a relatively small group of people could cheaply and efficiently design a plan that could effectively address them. At the same time, they needed to develop a realistic strategy for implementation of the Plan; one that could work within the inevitable funding, staffing, and time constraints, and that could also facilitate additional funding for implementation activities.

### ***The Problem***

Despite the multitude of concerns described above, the conservation issue that had brought the founding members of the steering committee together was a fundamentally simple one. They were motivated by:

1. The lack of readily available information regarding the status and long-term viability of populations of nongame waterbirds in North America,
2. Observed and suspected declines in the populations of some species of those birds;
3. The failure to consider their needs in the management of avian habitat.

### *The Goals*

When defining the goals of such an endeavor, it is important to recognize that just as a variety of stakeholders are involved in the process at different times and to varying degrees, the goals of those stakeholders may be quite different – and also may change over time. Nonetheless, in order to succeed there must be some commonly articulated mission that unites stakeholders in a common effort. By August 1998, the Steering Committee had articulated the following purpose:

“To produce a plan whose implementation results in maintaining healthy populations, distributions, and habitats of colonial-nesting waterbirds in North America, throughout their breeding, migratory, and wintering ranges”

-- (Outreach 1998).

This goal was broadly defined enough that it persisted almost unchanged throughout the planning process. Exceptions were to be the eventual inclusion of non-colonial nesters in the Plan, and the flexible interpretation of “North America” to include American territories in the South Pacific that proved to be important habitats for migratory seabirds. With these changes, the word “colonial” would eventually be dropped from the Plan’s name, and the term “seabird” would be included in the text of the Plan, along with “waterbird”.

It is important at this stage, however, to provide some insight into the goals of individual stakeholders in this process. For example, Jim Kushlan’s personal goals were to “get waterbirds on the table” with respect to regional habitat management, and to establish a national monitoring program. In his view, “the Plan is irrelevant other than for facilitating local conservation because all conservation is local” (Kushlan 2001a). It is interesting, given this, that he was instrumental in the decision to accomplish the Plan via a top-down strategy rather than by a regional approach. “From the regions up is the right way to do it,” he admitted later, but with NAWMP management planning already well underway and NABCI quickly taking form, “we just didn’t have time” (ibid).

The primary goal of Melanie Steinkamp, the project director, was somewhat different. From her perspective, the main purpose of the planning process was to connect individuals in different regions of the country, get them talking, get them collaborating. It was by making these connections, in her view, that things actually got done (pers. comm. 7/25/2001). As she saw it, her role as the national coordinator was to facilitate regional collaborations and information exchange, while promoting as much continuity and standardization across those boundaries as was ecologically advisable and politically possible.

Fortunately, both Ms. Steinkamp and Dr. Kushlan recognized that if the Plan was to succeed, they could not maintain rigid ownership of it. Rather, they needed to accomplish buy-in from a wide array of stakeholders at the federal, regional, and state levels. This required divestiture of ownership, and a willingness to be flexible and adapt goals to the needs of a broadening constituency. “We’re two steps away from my original vision with respect to what species this is involving,” Kushlan reflects today. “Originally I wanted the ...coastal colonial waterbirds. Blue herons, gulls, terns, pelicans and so forth. And at the first meeting of the interest group, we added seabirds. And [at

Plymouth] we added marshbirds. So it's a much more robust plan right now, but it's not nearly as focused as it could have been, with just the groups that nest in colonies in places along the shores. So, that's just an example of how something takes on a life of its own, and you need to go with it..." (Kushlan 2001a)

Finally, what were the goals of the Plan's regional participants; the land managers and state wildlife biologists who were expected to implement it? Their needs were simple, yet daunting. They needed a document that would inform them of the ecological needs of colonial waterbirds, give guidance on potential impacts of a variety of human activities, provide recommendations for implementing management efforts such as establishing buffer zones around nesting colonies or issuing depredation permits, and recommend appropriate methodologies for surveying and monitoring the species at the local level. They needed a scientifically and politically defensible framework for prioritizing among species, and an ecologically useful yet politically feasible delineation of responsibilities for population management among the regions. And of course, they needed institutional and financial support for undertaking these activities.

### ***The Course of Action***

By the end of the July 31, 1998 Steering Committee meeting, it was agreed that:

- ***The Plan needed to be developed quickly;***
- ***The Plan needed to be cheap;***
- ***The Plan needed to be developed in a "highly participatory way."***

### **Speed**

A fast-paced process was deemed necessary in order to intersect with waterfowl, land bird, and shorebird planning efforts already underway. By July 27<sup>th</sup>, 1998, Jim Kushlan had drafted a working outline based on early discussions, and a goal of two years was set for completion of a draft plan. As expected, this first outline differed greatly from the eventual product but provided a framework for immediate activity. It was soon agreed (by December 1998) that the organization of the final Plan would draw heavily from the formats of the National Shorebird and Canadian Waterbird Plans.

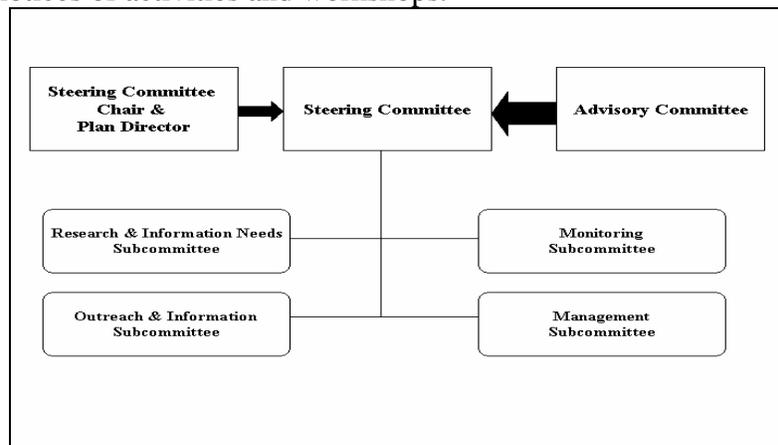
### **Costs**

Jim Kushlan was able to provide a project director by temporarily redefining Melanie Steinkamp's role, originally restricted to that of a national monitoring program coordinator, to assign her to the position of Plan Director. Still, additional funding for meetings and workshops would be scarce. The group decided that the majority of their planning efforts and discussions should take place over email, although a "Steering Committee", tasked with writing the actual plan, would meet in person 2-3 times each year.

### **Participation**

The steering committee recognized that in order to succeed politically, they would need to include more stakeholders in the planning process. A representative from one of the NAWMP Joint Ventures was invited to join the Steering Committee, as was a

representative from Pronatura, Mexico’s leading avian conservation organization. Four subcommittees were defined to address the many conservation challenges that the Plan needed to address in an organized fashion. They were: Research & Information Needs, Monitoring, Outreach, and Management. Steering Committee members would chair the subcommittees, which would be tasked with writing specific portions of the Plan, but membership would “remain open to volunteers with the time, commitment and travel funds (Kushlan 1998). To ensure buy-in from those groups identified as necessary to implementation, an Advisory Committee would include “the leadership of the stakeholders in the outcome of the Conservation Plan” (Steinkamp 1998a), such as coordinators of the regional NAWMP Joint Ventures, FWS refuge managers, and representatives from Mexico and Canada. Regular updates would be emailed to advisory committee members, and a website hosted by Patuxent would provide information about the Plan and notices of activities and workshops.



**Conceptual Plan Organization**

To address the traditional gap between the west coast’s seabird research community and the east coast’s colonial waterbird constituency, the Research & Information Needs (R&I) Subcommittee would be co-chaired by Michael Erwin, a researcher from the east coast, and Scott Hatch, a seabird researcher from USGS/BRD’s Alaska Science Center. Two R&I workshops would be held: one at the Waterbird Society’s October 1998 annual meeting in Miami, FL, and the other at the Pacific Seabird Group’s February, 1999 annual meeting in Napa, CA.

The opinions of the steering committee itself were split on the need to involve regional groups directly in the planning effort. Ms. Steinkamp had worked primarily at the state level before coming to Patuxent, and was sensitive to the needs of state and regional biologists. It was pointed out that other conservation initiatives (i.e. PIF and the Shorebird Plan) were using regional working groups to identify overlaps between the plans, and proposed that in order to integrate with these plans the Colonial Waterbird initiative should follow their model (Steinkamp 1999c). However, some members clearly disagreed. In an early email, one member suggested that while a memorandum of understanding with “all those who will be charged with implementing the Plan” on a regional level was critical to establish “up-front buy-in... conducting regional-based, issue-specific workshops is neither needed at this time nor a function of this planning effort” (Wohl 1999). Another concurred, stating that “the Plan development, at least at this time, should focus on the national and continental nature of the Plan deferring to a

later stage for the regional aspects, but at the same time it should be clear that it is at the regional level where most of the implementation will occur... [but] I agree that it is too fine a scale for now” (Milko 1999a).

The group essentially retained Jim Kushlan’s original vision of a top-down process in the writing of the Plan, the responsibility of which remained at the level of the steering committee (a group dominated by federal researchers and managers). However, as Chair of the Monitoring subcommittee, Ms. Steinkamp insisted on the need for 4-5 regional workshops to identify existing surveying efforts, critical local habitat, and monitoring needs. Before long, the value of these workshops in identifying and recruiting local stakeholders became evident, eight workshops were eventually held, and their role was expanded to provide input for all aspects of the Plan. In the end, the realization would develop that a continental plan could not address regional needs in enough detail to be useful. Therefore, the North American Plan would in the end provide a unifying framework within which regional plans would subsequently be crafted and implemented.

## **THE PLANNING PROCESS**

A flurry of email activity and networking followed the July 1998 meeting, as steering committee members scoured their professional contacts for interested stakeholders. A ten-minute description of the Plan was developed for presentation at professional meetings taking place in the months to follow, such as the American Bird Conservancy’s annual policy council meeting, the 88<sup>th</sup> annual IAFWA meeting and PIF joint steering committee meetings, and the Waterbird Society meetings. Again, response to the Plan was positive. On September 23, 1998 Melanie Steinkamp wrote to the advisory and steering committees, which had already ballooned to include 58 individuals from the public and nonprofit sectors, “The NACWCP [North American Colonial Waterbird Conservation Plan] has been well received and other bird conservation planning interests are eager to work together with us. We’re definitely on our way! Keep up the good work of spreading the word and inviting additional participants.” By December 1998, the advisory committee alone had 84 members representing universities, NGO’s, refuge managers, regional-level wildlife biologists, and NAWMP Joint Venture coordinators, as well as workers from several federal agencies. The Research and Information Needs workshop at the October 1998 annual meeting of the Waterbird Society had attracted more than 40 participants, and the February 1999 meeting of the Pacific Seabird Group (PSG), was similarly well attended.

### ***Issues of Concern***

By the April 1999 meeting of the steering committee, Jim Kushlan’s original vision for the Plan had been successfully divested into a shared commitment of more than 100 individuals from regional and national organizations. At this time, review of the advisory committee membership list revealed that it lacked both state representation and Caribbean representation, and recruitment of individuals to fill these gaps was agreed upon. As the Plan took shape via the activity of its four subcommittees, discussion was facilitated by the development of a draft proposal for funding presented by Melanie Steinkamp and Naomi Edelson. At this point, debate regarding the progress and shape of the Plan revolved around three issues:

- Regional participation in the planning process

- Species prioritization
- The Establishment of Population Goals

## **Regional participation in the planning process**

The description of the advisory committee as a “ratifying or approving authority for the Plan” (Steinkamp 1999a) concerned some members of the steering committee. This should be the steering committee’s mandate, they felt, and endorsement and implementation at the regional level should be accomplished through state and federal agencies and NGOs rather than by relying on the broad-based but less formal coalition of advisory committee members. By the end of the planning process, this issue would become unimportant. This may be due to the fact that the members of the advisory committee in large part were members of state and federal agencies and NGOs, and in most cases their participation on the advisory committee was synonymous with the support of their institutions.

## **Species prioritization**

Steering committee members reviewed the PIF and Shorebird Plan species prioritization protocols, and determined that the colonial waterbird plan would need to develop its own species prioritization process. Mike Erwin commented that “species prioritization was a tough subject, and bounced around a long time. We need to follow a basic model... whatever we do, it must be defensible and consistent. This... is going to be a long, arduous process I think” (Erwin 1999). He was right; the issue continues to plague the Conservation Plan to this day.

## **The establishment of population goals**

The steering committee discussed whether it was desirable to develop population goals for species included in the Plan. At what scale – continental or regional – would such goals be appropriate? The management subcommittee was tasked with developing “continental *and* regional goals, where practical, for both habitat and population numbers” (Steinkamp 1999b). While one member believed that “the management subcommittee is supposed to present North American and regional goals and objectives statements for populations and habitats,” (Wohl 1999), another was “not convinced...[regional management teams] should be developing the regional goals. [But] does that belong in the Plan? Can that level of detail be attained in the timeframe allotted to... completion?” (Milko 1999b). This discussion is an indication of the dilemma that faces many conservation planners when setting explicit goals for species populations. In the end, specific population goals were not included in the continental plan.

### ***The Plan Takes Shape***

In the months that followed, steering committee members worked to refine the goals of their respective subcommittees and to collect and synthesize the information necessary for writing each subcommittee’s portion of the Plan. A deadline was set for the unveiling

of the Plan at the annual Waterbird Society meeting in November 2000. Representatives from the Caribbean and from U.S. states were added to the advisory committee, and efforts to increase participation by Mexico and the Caribbean included a workshop at the Society of Caribbean Ornithologists' meeting in the Dominican Republic, and one at the Neotropical Ornithologists Congress in Monterey, Mexico. For "reasons of coherency and focus... and to facilitate funding and dealing with federal and provincial agencies," (Milko 1999a) the Canadians had decided to write their own Colonial Waterbird Conservation Plan, separate from the U.S.-led Plan, but they continued to participate in steering committee discussions and workshops in hopes that links between the two plans would be "as strong and direct as possible" (Milko 1999c). And while it is unclear how the issue of regional participation issue was resolved, by November 1999 the decision had been made to hold four regional workshops between January and June 2000 in order to solicit regional input (Steinkamp 1999c).

By the December 1999 meeting of the steering committee, with less than a year until the Plan's scheduled unveiling, pressure was building to finalize a conservation plan outline and start showing results. Concern was also building about implementation: "Can we hand the Plan off to the [NAWMP] Joint Ventures and hope that they will implement [it]" (Steinkamp 1999d)? They decided on the concept of a "model project", using templates geared towards different scales (local, regional, continental) and targeted for implementation by Joint Ventures or state agencies.

With the decision to hold regional workshops made, attention turned to what the goals of those workshops should be. The primary goals of regional workshops were identified:

- To connect individuals managing colonial waterbirds within the given regions to the Plan, so that they develop ownership for that portion of the Plan specific to their region
- To identify persons willing to serve as the colonial waterbird plan "liaison" for the region.
- To solicit information on regional conservation issues, regional species and habitat priorities, regional monitoring needs, how well the Bird Conservation Regions (BCRs) define the given regions, and how implementation might best work within the regions.

-- (Steinkamp 1999c)

To maximize attendance by individuals from state agencies and Joint Venture programs, the workshops were scheduled whenever possible to coincide with meetings of other organizations already taking place within the regions. For example, the Intermountain West/Desert Southwest regional workshop was held at the PIF Western Working Group meeting in Tucson, AZ.

Regional workshop summaries indicate that the meetings successfully recruited participants at the state and regional levels to take part in the planning process. The workshop summaries are filled with local information on breeding sites, potentially important habitat areas, and local conservation and management issues and priorities. Predictable differences were identified; aquaculture conflicts were cited as an area of concern in the Northeast, while water management was an issue of importance in the

Desert Southwest. Follow-up emails and contributed reports indicate that state-level participants continued to think about and provide input into the conservation plan:

“Last Friday I was out at 1 of 60 Waterfowl Production Areas that the FWS manages in the Rainwater Basin Area (RWB), and happened to observe 56 black-crowned night-herons. This kind of stuff may be missed because not many people are out in the RWB on birding expeditions... So, keep RWB in mind when structuring some kind of monitoring....”

-- (Drahota 2000)

Perhaps the most important contribution of these regional workshops, aside from recruitment of regional representatives, was identification of existing infrastructure and activities in each region. Steering committee members had long been aware that colonial waterbird surveys and management activities had been occurring at the state level, but there had been very little coordination of such efforts across local and regional boundaries. Thus their nature and frequency was not universally shared information. Now, for the first time, that information was being collected and shared at the national level. “It’s not that we’ve convinced several hundred people to be involved with waterbirds,” explains Dr. Kushlan, but that “they already were there, and we didn’t know it, I didn’t know it, they didn’t know each other. And as we went around region to region, asking what should we include in the Plan, these people came forward, and we found out how many people were really engaged in conservation and management and monitoring of these birds, and were benefiting from the facilitation of being brought together” (Kushlan 1999a).

The species prioritization process tended to generate discussion at each region. The consensus at the first two workshops was that prioritization should occur at the state and regional levels, and then be stepped up to the continental scale (Steinkamp 2000a, 2000b). Summaries of later workshops suggest that the workshop leaders (Steinkamp and Kushlan) changed their presentation strategy to minimize debate on this issue. Perhaps they began to emphasize that a regional prioritization process would follow shortly after completion of the national process, and that this second phase would include the addition of “specific, regionally important categories for prioritization” (Steinkamp 2000c).

Another common discussion regarded geographic delineation of regions by ecological versus political boundaries. Issues such as the splitting of one state into two or more Bird Conservation Regions created potential problems for management by state agencies, whose jurisdiction stopped at a political boundary.

At all of the workshops, universal themes emerged that emphasized the difficulties of implementing conservation strategies on the ground, with limited information and few or no resources. Participants consistently identified urbanization and development as forces that overwhelm conservation efforts, and conflicts between society and birds were evident in the repeated discussion of “nuisance species” such as gulls and cormorants. Participants called for guidance on balancing the outreach and education values of tourism with the threat of disturbance to colonies. Monitoring efforts, where they existed, were piecemeal and great gaps existed within and across

regions as allocation of resources to nongame monitoring was inconsistent across states. For example, the Upper Mississippi/Great Lakes workshop revealed that monitoring in that region in general was “pretty good” and that monitoring by state agencies was “very impressive” (Steinkamp 2000d), while participants at the Southeast regional workshop reported “a general lack of monitoring” in Mississippi due to lack of resources (Steinkamp 2000a).

Overall, it was clear that biologists at the local and regional levels were struggling with the same issues that had motivated Kushlan and the other steering committee members to begin the planning process. Charged with the extra burden of implementation, the most critical need of the former group was clear: in order to tackle the difficult task of nongame bird management and conservation, they needed consistent financial and institutional support to develop the necessary management infrastructure at the state level.

By mid-August 2000, eight regional workshops had been completed in as many months. Melanie Steinkamp had organized, facilitated and personally attended each one, and Jim Kushlan had attended six of the eight – a remarkable commitment considering his responsibilities as Center Director at Patuxent. But with only two months until the Fall 2000 Waterbird Society meeting, a draft plan had yet to be written. A monumental effort would be required by the steering committee to get a serviceable product done in time. A three-day writing retreat was arranged in a last desperate effort to complete the Plan. On October 24, 2000, just in time for its official unveiling at the First International Conference on the Conservation Plan on October 30<sup>th</sup>, the North American Colonial Waterbird Conservation Draft Plan was released for public comment.

## **CONCLUSION**

120 individuals from state and federal agencies, academia, and nongovernmental organizations within the United States, as well as representatives from Canada, South America, and the Caribbean, attended the Conference. Several hours of verbal comments and more than thirty pages of written comments were contributed on all sections of the Plan. The planning process had placed colonial waterbirds on the radar screen of NAWMP Joint Venture managers; the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI) now included the Waterbird Conservation Plan in its structure and a Plan representative now sat on the NABCI steering committee; and IAFWA had added a Waterbirds Working Group to its Migratory Bird Committee. Thus Jim Kushlan’s original vision had certainly been attained, and by his measure the planning process was a success.

Plan Director Melanie Steinkamp, who saw the process primarily as a vehicle for building communication within and among the regions and inspiring local leaders into action, and secondarily as a way to begin a dialog on the development of a national monitoring program, can say that her goals have been attained as well, although she still harbors concerns and some frustration about the lack of a funding framework for implementation (pers. comm. 8/24/2001).

But what about the goals of the Steering and Advisory Committee members, and of the 120 people who attended the conference? Will the Plan be implemented? Does it meet the needs of those regional and state groups who are expected to apply it? If implemented, will it ensure healthy populations of waterbirds and adequate waterbird

habitat in the years to come? The answers to these questions are less obvious, and also seem to vary by region.

In essence, the North American Waterbird Conservation Plan provides a valuable conceptual framework for conservation, monitoring, and management activities at national, regional, and local scales. The planning process did an excellent job of identifying and establishing communication among waterbird biologists, interested parties, and stakeholders throughout the United States, Canada, Mexico, and some countries in Central and South America. It was also effective for eliciting information from managers and researchers on waterbird habitat and colony sites, preliminary population estimates (where available), opinions on the accuracy of such estimates, information on existing surveying and management activities occurring at local and regional scales, management issues of primary concern in different regions, and status of conservation efforts and activities. It is still far too early to say whether the goals officially outlined at the beginning of the planning effort, or those articulated at the end (in the draft plan), will be achieved. It will take years, if not decades, to establish the role that development of this plan may play in the maintenance of healthy populations, distributions, and habitats of colonial-nesting and/or non-colonial waterbirds in North America. However, we can draw some general conclusions about how effective the planning process was in establishing the infrastructure and the stakeholder buy-in that are necessary for successful implementation.

Three of the most controversial issues of the planning process – the questions of regional participation, of implementation strategy, and of funding – turned out, not surprisingly, to be the weakest points in both the process and in the resulting plan. Early in the process, a decision was made to follow a top-down strategy in writing the Plan, despite the recognition that endorsement, acceptance, and implementation would all have to occur at the local and regional levels. In fact, as the process continued, it became clear that a continental plan could not meet regional needs. By mid-2000, this realization had led to the decision to form regional working groups, now called “Practical Units for Planning” or PUPs, that are now beginning the process of drafting regional conservation plans, following the framework provided by the North American plan. Thus a two-year planning process has hatched not an implementation strategy, but rather additional planning. If sufficient funding can be found, it is likely that the regional planning will actually result in implementation of at least some of the Plan’s recommendations, thus the net effect is positive. However, the cycle might have been accelerated if regional planning had been incorporated earlier in the process. Furthermore, the top-down nature of the continental plan has not gone entirely unnoticed by regional constituents. An ornithologist from the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife comments that

“while the Plan notes how critical the state and local levels are, it is basically structured and discussion is consistently ordered from the top down,” and that “an overall tone suggests that scientists will carry most of the weight in management decisions. In reality, in the field many management decisions have and will be based more on experience than on results of studies. The report should recognize ‘strong, empirically-gained knowledge’ and ‘management experience’, not just scientifically gained knowledge.” -- (Blodget 2000)

Thus the fact that the writers of the Plan drew more heavily from a research and federal background than from the field had a real impact on the results. The planning process could have been improved by greater participation by field-level professionals within the inner circle of the steering committee. A related point of concern was uneven representation and involvement of the different regions. A wildlife biologist from the Northeast reports that

“the regional planning meeting in the northeast was not conducted in such a way to encourage state participation (too far, too brief, and not enough notice). I also noticed a lack of northeast states participating at the Plymouth meeting. This needs to be addressed if the Plan is to be translated into action.” -- (Jenkins 2000)

This comment reflects the hurried nature of regional workshop planning; Ms. Steinkamp almost single-handedly identified locations for, organized, and conducted eight workshops around the country in as many months (from January to August 2000), for which little or no planning occurred before December 1999. If the need for regional participation had been accepted earlier, in April or July of 1998, this process could have occurred in a more gradual and well-thought-out manner. In addition, early acceptance of a regional approach, rather than slowing down the process, might have actually facilitated it by taking advantage of overlap with other regional plans. Of the nine regional waterbird plan working groups for the United States, three are lead by individuals who also serve as chairs for the Shorebird Working Group in their region (Chuck Hunter, Steve Lewis, Maura Naughton). A fourth waterbird regional leader (Carol Lively) is the Joint Venture coordinator representative to the Shorebird Plan Council. In addition, numerous members of the Waterbird Plan’s advisory committee are also involved in the Joint Venture, PIF, and Shorebird planning processes at the regional level (e.g. Craig Watson, Barbara Pardo, Steve Bouffard). Thus combining regional planning efforts may have resulted in a more efficient process overall. In fact, the recognition of this overlap, and of the strain that it has been placing on regional managers, was part of the impetus for the formation of the NABCI all-bird conservation initiative. And given the support for incorporating waterbirds into regional planning that was evidenced early in the planning process, it is likely that beginning with a region-up planning process would not have slowed the acceptance of waterbird initiatives by the Joint Ventures or by NABCI.

Naturally, concerns regarding funding have existed since the inception of the planning process. Thus it is somewhat surprising that the word “funding” appears only three times in the October, 2000 draft document. There is not a section or even a paragraph devoted to this crucial need, although it is addressed in the form of responsibilities of future potential planning staff and volunteers. For example, one of the nine specified responsibilities of the yet-to-be-formed North American Waterbird Conservation Council is to “facilitate the acquisition of resources to support colonial waterbird conservation continent-wide” (Review Draft I 2001). In order to meet the formal goals outlined for the Plan, as well as the informal goals of participants at the regional level, it may have been advisable to include funding as an active part of the planning process. Since funding and implementation go hand-in-hand, perhaps the

inclusion of a Funding & Implementation Subcommittee would have facilitated the development of these critical aspects of the planning process.

Concerns about the lack of an implementation strategy for the Conservation Plan also began to arise early in the planning process (Peterjohn 1999), and continued to be voiced throughout the stages of plan development. However, the continental plan's implementation strategy, while conceptually strong, falls short in the realm of practicality. For example, pie-in-the-sky recommendations – such as the one suggesting that every nesting colony should have an appointed guardian – are unlikely to ever be implemented. But the primary weakness is due primarily to the lack of available funding for implementing such strategies, and also because of the top-down perspective that persisted in the implementation section of the original Draft Plan: “The North American Waterbird Conservation Initiative is firstly concerned with implementation at the continental scale” (Review Draft I, p. 56). Perhaps because this violates the widely recognized perspective that “all conservation is local,” it was almost the first implementation plan to be defied (in Review Draft II of the Plan, to be released in September 2001, this sentence has been changed to read that the initiative “supports implementation at the continental scale”). While the Council charged with continental-scale implementation has yet to convene, working group leaders in two regions have already held their own workshops (Upper Mississippi Valley/Great Lakes PUP in June 2001, and Southeast/Appalachian PUP in late July, 2001). Essentially, regions that were already active leaders in conservation planning and management have taken the continental plan with its recommendations and framework, and are already running with it, adapting it to their own regional needs. Hopefully, these leaders will act as role models for the rest of the country, much as they have for the Joint Venture effort.

Recommendations for the future of the waterbird conservation planning effort center around the most critical of the weaknesses outlined above – funding. In order to succeed, this plan must develop an effective funding strategy to support its implementation. In order to ensure implementation of the Plan, members of the steering committee should, at the very least, develop a list of potential funding sources and distribute it to the PUP leaders, along with sample proposals to be used as templates. Better yet, they might identify both standard and novel funding sources (i.e. private individuals and philanthropic foundations as well as federal agencies), and write one or more funding proposals at the national level that will provide money to all regions, rather than relying on managers within each region to find their own funding. The latter scenario would allow the current piecemeal nature of activity to continue, while the former would provide for more even funding across regions. Ongoing lobbying activity by IAFWA and other conservation organizations to pass the Conservation and Reinvestment Act (CARA) may succeed, providing secure, long-term funding for various wildlife and public land management activities. Even in this event, additional work will be required to ensure that some portion of that money is funneled to waterbird management activities. Ideally, legislation similar to the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, which funds the NAWMP, will exist – but this is unlikely in the near future, as IAFWA is currently fully engaged in the CARA effort.

Without a proactive strategy for funding the Plan's implementation, monitoring and conservation of waterbirds will continue to occur in an inconsistent and piecemeal fashion, and any excitement and energy that has built up around the initial planning

process will dissipate as local and regional managers struggle with competing priorities and shrinking resources.

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