

CONSERVATION PLAN FOR THE
WOOD TURTLE IN THE
NORTHEASTERN UNITED STATES

Wood Turtle Council



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A formal body to facilitate the attainment of conservation benchmarks for Wood Turtles in the Northeast Region of the United States, as part of a Competitive SWG-funded project.

Draft: September 13, 2017

Overview: This document describes a formal structure for a Working Group to facilitate the long-term conservation of northeastern populations of Wood Turtles in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Virginia, and West Virginia by implementing a regional conservation strategy with the over arching goal of improving the status of the species in the Northeast Region.

Background

In 2009, the Northeast Wood Turtle Working Group was formed as a partnership of representatives from thirteen state wildlife agencies (from Maine to Virginia), universities, land managers, and researchers. Between 2009 and 2015, the group expanded to encompass other key partners. In 2015, the Northeast Wood Turtle Working Group completed a *Status and Conservation of the Wood Turtle in the Northeastern United States*, a multi-year planning project funded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Northeastern State Wildlife Agencies (NEAFWA) through its Regional Conservation Needs (RCN) grants program. Beginning in 2015, the Working Group began the development of a regional Conservation Plan, which includes a conservation genetics assessment, conservation area network, best management practices for regionally significant populations, basin-level conservation benchmarks and a conservation action and implementation plan for continued population assessment, monitoring, adaptive management, and prioritized land protection. The Wood Turtle Council represents a formal organization to advance the objectives of the Northeast Conservation Plan.

Structure

The Wood Turtle Council (WTC) is structured to facilitate conservation of Wood Turtles at the regional and site-specific levels and consists of a Steering Committee, advisory committee, site leaders, and other standing or ad hoc committee members appointed by the Steering Committee.

Steering Committee.—The conservation work of the WTC at the regional level is overseen by a Steering Committee, comprised of nine individuals: one representative from each of five northeastern wildlife agencies, one representative from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and three at-large members representing other partner universities, NGOs, or private entities, who are elected by the six state and federal agency representatives. The Steering Committee is responsible for furthering the mission of the WTC, specifically 1) ensuring that the goals and actions outlined in the regional Conservation Plan are furthered at the regional level, 2) that regional status is reassessed and the Conservation Plan is revised and updated at appropriate intervals, 3) developing other committees, as necessary, to further the mission of the WTC, 4) supporting conservation at the site specific level by appointing site leaders and maintaining a support structure for them, and 5) ensuring that Wood Turtles are appropriately and adequately represented in regional multi-species planning efforts such as Priority Reptile and Amphibian Conservation Areas (PARCAs) and the North Atlantic Landscape Conservation Cooperative (NALCC) Windows of Opportunity Program. The Steering Committee is led by two co-chairs, elected by the full

Steering Committee. The Steering Committee is advised and assisted by a non-voting advisory committee, the members of which are appointed by the Steering Committee.

Site Leaders.—Where possible, a site leader is appointed for each high priority site in the region by the state agency representative of the corresponding state. Site leaders that are not on the Steering Committee serve on the advisory committee and are responsible for furthering conservation efforts at their site and providing annual updates to the WTC.

The entire WTC (the Steering Committee, advisory committee, and other standing or ad hoc committees) meets *at least annually*, in conjunction with the Northeast Partners for Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (NEPARC) meeting or a regional Wood Turtle conservation symposium, to facilitate goals and actions at the regional and site-specific level. The entire WTC, the Steering Committee, advisory committee, and/or other committees may call meetings and/or conference calls frequently enough to ensure objectives are met, such as to initiate a new application for federal funding.

Fiscal Sponsorship

To be determined at the initial meeting of the WTC so that the organization operates autonomously with the support of a tax-exempt organization. As proposed here, the WTC will enter into a fiscal sponsorship agreement with a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization dedicated to northeastern conservation issues. Candidates: Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (ARC), Northeast Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (NEAFWA), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), American Turtle Observatory (ATO).

BYLAWS

I. Mission

To ameliorate threats, improve status, and promote the strategic conservation and management of Wood Turtle populations, their associated riverine, riparian, and upland habitats, and associated species of greatest conservation need (SGCN) in the Northeastern United States through an iterative process of population assessment, population prioritization, strategic land protection, prioritized habitat management, strategic population management, and critical evaluation and adaptation of management actions.

II. Purpose

- a. Provide for cooperation among the northeastern (participating) state wildlife agencies, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and key partners including land managing agencies (e.g., U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Forest Service, Department of Defense, or private forest landowners), other agencies (e.g., USGS, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service [NRCS], state departments of transportation), universities, conservation organizations, and other partners.
- b. Provide for coordination among partners in assessing, establishing, and pursuing priority actions for habitat management, habitat protection, research, communication, population assessment, and accomplishment tracking.

III. Membership

The business and affairs of the WTC shall be managed under the direction of the Steering Committee. All voting rights of the WTC are vested in the Steering Committee as hereinafter provided. Additional non-voting members of the WTC are appointed by the

Steering Committee to serve as site leaders, serve on the Advisory Committee, or other WTC committees, and participate in meetings of the WTC, or meetings of the Steering Committee, without voting privileges.

IV. Steering Committee

- a. The Steering Committee shall serve without pay and shall consist of up to nine members.
- b. The Steering Committee shall be composed of one representative of five northeastern state wildlife agencies or their designees. Each state wildlife agency determines its own process for appointing the agency representative to the Steering Committee. In the absence of a formal process in a state, the amphibian and reptile specialist, or equivalent, will serve as the *de facto* Steering Committee representative from each state wildlife agency, or another representative may be appointed by the Director of the agency.
- c. The Steering Committee shall include a representative of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Region 5.
- d. There are no term-limits for state or federal agency representatives, and vacancies in these positions are to be filled in accordance with each agency's appointment process.
- e. The Steering Committee may include up to three "at large members", representatives of partner agencies, universities, or other organizations. These positions are elected by the six state and federal Steering Committee representatives. They may be re-elected.
- f. "At large" Steering Committee members may resign at any time by delivering his/her resignation in writing to the Co-Chairs (see Officers, below). Vacancies in the "at large" Steering Committee positions shall be filled by a vote of the majority of the state and federal agency representatives for the balance of the term.
- g. The Steering Committee may delegate responsibility of day-to-day operations to staff, volunteers, and/or committees.
- h. As funding allows, one representative from a non-profit conservation organization may serve in *ex officio* status as the overall program manager at the discretion of the Steering Committee.

V. Officers

- a. The Officers of the Steering Committee shall consist of two Co-Chairs elected by the entire Steering Committee.
- b. The initial Co-Chairs shall volunteer from the active pool of the Northeast Wood Turtle Working Group, subject to the approval of state wildlife agency representatives.
- c. The elected Co-Chairs will each serve a term of two years, staggered.

VI. Advisory Committee

- a. The Steering Committee shall appoint an Advisory Committee, consisting of partners from agencies, universities, land trusts, and other public and private organizations.
- b. The Advisory Committee may be any size.
- c. Members are appointed to the Advisory Committee for renewable, three year terms, and may resign at any time by delivering his/her resignation in writing to the Steering Committee.

VII. Other Committees and Appointments

- a. The Steering Committee may appoint additional standing and ad hoc committees as needed, including site-specific teams charged with tracking and facilitating progress at each high priority site throughout the region.

- b. The Steering Committee shall appoint members of the Steering Committee or Advisory Committee to serve as liaisons to regional conservation planning efforts such as Priority Reptile and Amphibian Conservation Areas (PARCAs) and the North Atlantic Landscape Conservation Cooperative (NALCC) Windows of Opportunity Program to provide technical assistance and offer opportunities to synthesize priority areas with other ongoing regional conservation efforts.

VIII. Site Leaders

- a. If time and resources allow, each state agency representative from each state may appoint a site leader for each high-priority Wood Turtle site in their state. An individual may serve as site leader for multiple sites.
- b. The state agency representative may appoint him/herself as site leader for any or all sites in that state. If no site leader is appointed for a site, the state agency representative shall serve as the *de facto* site leader for that site.
- c. Site leaders are responsible, in coordination with the state wildlife agency representative, for furthering Wood Turtle conservation at his/her site by developing, implementing, and updating a site-specific management plan, carrying out population reassessments at 10 year intervals, and reporting progress to the WTC at annual meetings.
- d. Site leaders serve on the Advisory Committee if not on the Steering Committee.

IX. Meetings

- a. Meetings of the full WTC (Steering Committee, Advisory Committee, and Site Leaders) shall be held at any time when called for by the Senior Co-Chair or by a majority of Steering Committee members but will be held at least annually in conjunction with Northeast PARC.
- b. Meetings of the Steering Committee and other committees of the WTC shall be held at least once per Fiscal Year or as frequently as necessary to facilitate Steering Committee business and advance conservation of Northeastern Wood Turtle populations.
- c. Meetings are facilitated by the Senior Co-Chair or his/her designee.
- d. Agendas shall be provided in advance of scheduled meetings.

X. Voting

- a. Quorum
 - i. Four (4) State or Federal Steering Committee members constitutes a quorum
 - ii. In absence of a quorum, no formal action shall be taken except to adjourn the meeting to a subsequent date.
- b. Passage of a motion requires a simple majority of Steering Committee Members present.
- c. State or federal Steering Committee members shall, at their discretion, designate a proxy for their vote. Proxies shall be identified in advance to the Senior Co-Chair.

XI. Conflict of Interest

- a. Any member of the Steering Committee who has a financial, personal, or official interest in, or conflict with any matter pending before the Steering Committee, of such nature that it prevents or may prevent that member from acting on the matter in an impartial manner, will offer to the Steering Committee to voluntarily excuse him/herself and will refrain from discussion and voting on said item.

XII. Fiscal Year

- a. The fiscal year of the Steering Committee shall be October 1 to September 30.

XIII. Amendments

- a. These by-laws may be amended, including changes of the composition of the Steering Committee, by a two-thirds vote of Steering Committee members present at any meeting, provided a quorum is present and provided a copy of the proposed amendment(s) are provided to each Steering Committee member at least fifteen (15) days in advance of said meeting.

Next Steps.—

1. Revision of proposed Mission, Bylaws, Purpose by the WTC
2. Approval of Organizational Framework by the northeast state wildlife agency directors and
3. Volunteering and election of initial “at-large” Steering Committee members (to serve 3, 2, and 1 year terms, to result in staggered terms) and initial co-chairs (junior to serve a 3-year term and senior to serve two-year term, to result in staggered terms)
4. Formal designation of Steering Committee and initial meeting (in conjunction with NEPARC)
5. Appointment of Advisory Committee
6. Purchase, design, and launch a project-specific website
7. Identify appropriate fiscal sponsor to be in place by 2015 if the Team will have spending obligations. Conditions should be zero (or very low) overhead and autonomy to pursue conservation objectives.