

Conservation Policy Draft 14

Commission Conservation Policy

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Signed by: Barbara Baker, Fish and Wildlife Commission Chair

As trustees tasked with managing fish and wildlife resources in the trust of the public, conservation of fish and wildlife is the paramount purpose of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW). This responsibility is becoming increasingly difficult with the amplified effects of climate change, increasing human population and development resulting in fragmented or lost habitat, invasive species, and increasing disease. We recognize that humankind is in the midst of a biodiversity extinction crisis and must act now while we still have the building blocks for success. The Department's Strategic Plan lays out a roadmap for addressing these conservation challenges, therefore the Commission sets out the following policy guidance.

Purpose: The purpose of this policy is to direct WDFW in preserving and protecting our state's fish and wildlife and their habitats by proactively addressing current and emerging conservation challenges.

Mission: The Commission supports the Department, its partners and the public in protecting and restoring ecosystems, including fish and wildlife species and populations, to healthy, viable numbers and distributions, and in managing fish and wildlife populations so as to meet the needs of current and future Washington residents and other nonhuman animals.

Definitions:

Conservation – Science informed actions to preserve the health and resiliency of natural environments including fish, wildlife and humans, safeguard the intrinsic value of nature, and provide equitable benefits to current and future generations of human and non-human life. These actions include protecting and restoring air, soil, water, biological diversity, ecosystem processes and evolutionary potential.

Ecosystem – A community of organisms and their physical environment viewed as a system of interacting and interdependent relationships and including such processes as the flow of energy through trophic levels and the cycling of chemical elements and compounds through living and nonliving components of the system.

Ecosystem-based management – An environmental management approach that factors the full array of interactions within an ecosystem rather than focusing on singles issues, species, physical environment or ecosystem services in isolation.

Sustainability – The use of fish and wildlife resources in ways and rates that maintain and enhance the integrity and resilience of ecosystems and the benefits that such provide to current and future generations.

Principles:

- 1) *Conservation first* — The WDFW's top priority is the conservation of Washington's fish, shellfish, and wildlife for the benefit of all state residents, current and future. Successful conservation is the foundation in order to meet the spectrum of values that Washington residents hold including providing sustainable recreational and commercial opportunities including, but not limited to, hunting and fishing.
- 2) *Conservation of all species, habitat, and ecosystems* — To preserve functioning, resilient, healthy ecosystems, the WDFW shall strive to conserve all fish, shellfish, and wildlife, whether rare or common, and their habitat. Doing so is essential to maintain species diversity.
- 3) *Conservation partnerships* — An ecosystem-based conservation strategy requires strong coordination and cooperation with local, state, federal, and tribal governments, non-governmental organizations, private landowners, academia, businesses, non-profit organizations and engaged citizens. Collaboration with neighboring states and Canada also is important because fish and wildlife distributions are not constrained by legal boundaries.
- 4) *Knowledge and science* — WDFW actions and decisions shall be based on objective, science-based knowledge. Scientific efforts to inform the WDFW must be sufficiently broad and multi-disciplinary, combining all related scientific fields (e.g., biological, ecological, economic, and social). Adaptive management is a critical and required step to implement actions learned from monitoring the decisions and actions against the results. Adaptive management thus informs necessary changes to meet the desired outcomes.
- 5) *Precaution* — Many, if not all, management challenges faced by the WDFW involve some degree of uncertainty and risk to fish and wildlife. Human growth and expansion resulting in habitat degradation or loss and climate change are examples where the uncertainty and risk may be substantial. Therefore, the WDFW shall seek to identify and consider risks to the conservation of fish and wildlife when making decisions or taking actions. The identified risks shall be a foundation for monitoring and adaptive management of those decisions or actions.
- 6) *Innovative leadership and solutions* — Fish and wildlife management challenges are being exacerbated by our rapidly changing world. Increasing fire, drought, warming water and air temperatures, coupled with human population growth and expansion, pose increasing risks to our natural ecosystems and, therefore, our ability to achieve our mandate. In response, the WDFW must be more innovative and determined in our conservation efforts. Innovation does not always lead to success, but the WDFW must be willing to make hard decisions, and

on occasion fail, to learn and develop the understanding and competence needed to fulfill their mandate.

- 7) *Aligning mandate, strategy, staff, and budget* — To achieve the mandate expressed in RCW 77.04.012, the WDFW must develop the necessary strategies, enlist the necessary staff, and secure the necessary resources. To that end, the WDFW must strengthen its communication to the public, legislature, and Governor regarding the need for expanded partnerships, additional authorities, and funding.

**As referenced in this policy, "WDFW" means all facets of the agency, including the Department, its advisory groups and the Commission.*

The foregoing policy, including its guiding principles, shall be incorporated by the the WDFW in the development and approval of the budget, planning, management and decision-making processes.