Delaware River Basin Conservation Initiative

Overview of the Initiative

In November 2011, the Delaware River Basin Conservation Initiative – a collaborative effort between The Nature Conservancy, Partnership for the Delaware Estuary, and Natural Lands Trust – completed a conservation blueprint that will help ensure a healthy Delaware River and Bay. This blueprint facilitates the development of coordinated actions and funding directed to a shared set of places that reflects input from key federal, state, regional, and non-governmental partners who share a commitment to conservation within the Delaware River Basin.

With funding and guidance from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, project partners examined a suite of ecosystems and habitat-forming species. For each freshwater and tidal marsh ecosystem, we also analyzed factors related to their condition, including aquatic connectivity, flow regime, landscape condition, size, and resiliency. In brief, the assessment identified conservation priorities for each of the following ecosystems:

- **Floodplain Complexes:** Sixty-two floodplain complexes were identified, where mosaics of floodplain communities across rivers of varying sizes frame the major rivers of the basin.
- **Headwater Stream Networks:** Approximately 49% of the headwaters in the basin were identified as the most physically intact; these headwaters provide intrinsic ecological value while also providing key resources to downstream riverine systems.
- **Non-tidal Wetlands:** Numerous non-tidal wetlands, focusing on those embedded within both headwater and riverine systems, were identified throughout the basin; however, noteworthy concentrations were located in the Glaciated Pocono Plateau and Coastal Plain Provinces.
- **Tidal Marshes:** Due to the ecological importance and significant losses of tidal marsh ecosystems, all freshwater tidal marsh systems over 10 acres (54 identified) and all brackish and salt marsh systems in the Delaware estuary were considered to be priorities, with some of the highest quality habitats located on the Delaware side of the Bay.
- **Oysters and Ribbed Mussels:** The assessment of marine bivalve habitats, specifically oyster reef and ribbed mussel habitats, identified priority areas for both current and future conservation in the Delaware Bay and associated tidal marshes.

Based on these results, we identified and recommended a suite of conservation strategies – blending protection, restoration, and management – that will be needed to ensure the long-term viability and health of the basin's ecosystems across priority places. The conservation of these places will require that traditional conservation strategies are coupled with creative, emerging strategies that leverage funding sources and accommodate multiple, and often competing, demands.

Final Products:

- **Final Maps of Priority Areas and Strategies.** Maps that show priority areas and conservation strategies for freshwater and tidal ecosystems, as well as for oyster and marsh mussel habitat conservation in the bay.
- **Recommended Conservation Strategies**. The maps of priority areas are accompanied by recommended conservation strategies within each watershed. Examples of how agencies and organizations are already collaborating to conserve these ecosystems are also highlighted.
- **Delaware Bay Benthic Habitat Map.** An ecological marine unit map that identifies the distribution of benthic organism communities in the Delaware Bay.
- **Focus Species Profiles.** Profiles of 25 focus species detail the current status of, threats to, and geographic distribution of species and provide potential conservation actions that would benefit these species.
- **Accompanying spatial data** illustrate priority areas for each freshwater and tidal ecosystem.

The Final Report, Maps, Appendices and shareable project data can be found at: www.nature.org/drb

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