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Conservation Opportunity Areas for the 2015 SWAP

Conservation Opportunity Areas (COA) are intended to guide conservation activities at a landscape level. Landscape conservation is a developing theme across the country and throughout Indiana. Building off the successes of other Indiana landscape initiatives, like Goose Pond Fish and Wildlife Area and the Healthy Rivers Initiative, DFW has identified opportunities on the landscape to focus conservation efforts over the next decade. These COAs were identified as a way to direct actions toward specific areas on Indiana's landscape. Several guiding principles were identified as the rationale for the designation of a COA.

- Enhance and conserve fish and wildlife and their habitats
- Support biological diversity (real or potential)
- Provide opportunities for increasing and developing partnerships
- Guide organizations to important landscapes/areas
- Focus on deliberate acts of conservation
- Focus conservation funds
- Support long-term viability
- Concentrate actions on habitats, ecosystems, and landscapes

This is the first attempt at identifying COAs and will be an evolving feature, as resources and priorities are developed and identified in each area. It is recognized that COAs will not be the only areas in Indiana that DFW or its partners will be working, but it is believed that these spaces hold the greatest potential for successful cooperation and conservation.

The goal is that each COA would represent opportunities across Indiana to impact a variety of habitats and species. In order for a area to be designated as a COA several questions were taken into consideration:

- Does the area have SGCN?
- Does the area have unique habitat communities?
- Does the area have long term viability?
- Are partners or DNR working in the area?
- Is the area under threat?
- Is there habitat connectivity or the possibility of connectivity?
- Are there grants or funding opportunities in the area?
- Is there ongoing work in the area or public support?

In order to answer these questions a variety of resources were utilized including: public, partner and DFW staff input, the Heritage Database, the Species and Habitat Surveys, partner priority areas, the public lands database, and the Farm Bill private lands database. A concerted effort was made to identify at least one COA in each of the six regions to enforce the regional approach of the SWAP.

Four overarching habitat themes became apparent from results of the Habitat Survey and public input: river corridors, natural lake catchments, terrestrial habitats, and urban areas. These themes helped provide further guidance in the identification of COAs. Each theme provides unique opportunities and these opportunities will be driven by the conservation community and guided by the threats and actions identified within the SWAP.

The river corridors were identified for their unique aquatic habitat and species diversity but also for the opportunities to affect the habitats within the immediate 4-mile river corridors and ultimately the associated watersheds.

The natural lake catchment COA identified were based on the habitat potential for species and the potential of the habitats within the catchments. Natural lake catchments were delineated for seven coldwater and 22 coolwater natural lakes. Because lake eutrophication (i.e., nutrient loading) is a leading cause of natural lake degradation, these catchment delineations are intended to bridge-the-gap between terrestrial and aquatic conservation efforts that aim to sustain or enhance the water quality of streams and rivers that directly drain into them. This would ensure the long-term vitality of these unique aquatic habitats and adding valuable habitat for terrestrial SGCN.

Terrestrial habitat COA were primarily based around areas of existing conservation efforts and those with the potential for increased connectivity and large-scale habitat project potential throughout the state. Selected areas include known diverse or unique habitat features, SGCN, and the ability to have positive impacts on the surrounding communities through improved habitat.

Throughout the SWAP revision process, it was consistently stated that engaging the general public in conservation was the key to successful wildlife and habitat management in Indiana. For this primary reason, urban areas serving the greatest populations in Indiana were selected for implementation strategies to engage these populations in the work of the conservation, while educating them on the relationship of healthy sustainable wildlife populations with the health of future communities.