

The Lower Mississippi Valley Ecosystem Management Effort

Noreen K. Clough, *U.S.D.I. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1875 Century Boulevard, Atlanta, GA 30345*

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I bring you greetings today from Director Mollie Beattie, who has made an amazing recovery after successful removal of a brain tumor in July. She is in good health and back on the job part-time and had planned to be here with you today. For the next few weeks, however, she continues to be held semi-captive to medical appointments for follow-up precautionary radiation treatments, one of which was scheduled for this morning.

One of the jobs of a regional director is that you get to be the stand-in for the director in cases of emergency. I must confess that as much as Mollie and I both would have liked her to be here, the opportunity to address the members of the Southeastern is one that I leaped at. For me, returning to the South as the Service's regional director has been a homecoming of sorts. We have much in common. Like many of you, my career path has been a natural extension of a love affair with wild places and wild things that began in my youth. My ecological conscience, so to speak, was generated when I was a little girl by my father's teachings as we'd walk through the Georgia woods squirrel hunting and he'd talk about mast-producing trees and other interconnections between people, wildlife, and the land. And later, in my high school years, we'd go fishing in the lakes on Wichita Mountains refuge in Oklahoma or TVA impoundments in North Alabama, and he'd expound on resource management and resource development and "sustainable use."

Jay "Ding" Darling, the father of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, friend and contemporary of Aldo Leopold and originator of the Federal "duck stamp," had a similar rearing. During summers of his youth, he worked on the farm of his Uncle John in Albion, Michigan. It is said that "Ding" Darling's first lesson in conservation came literally at the hand of his Uncle John. When young Darling once shot a wood duck in midnesting season, his uncle gave him a whipping that he wouldn't soon forget. Yet months later in the proper season, Darling recalled that his uncle instructed him to leave the milking and go down and get "a mess of ducks" for dinner. Truly, for all things there is a season, and for ecological management, the season appears to be upon us.

Just as many of us in this room have had similar childhoods working hard and playing hard in the outdoors, we now find ourselves embarked together, each in our various agencies and organizations, on this journey known as “ecosystem management.” I emphasize the word “journey,” because as I understand the ecosystem approach to fish and wildlife and habitat management, it is a dynamic process where strategies and plans change as information is gathered and we learn more. It represents for many of us perhaps the greatest professional challenge of our careers as we seek to get our arms around an admittedly evolving approach to maintaining our region’s, our nation’s and our world’s biodiversity. For many of us, certainly for those of us in the Fish and Wildlife Service, ecosystem management is a challenge (some may even say a threat) to not just the traditional ways of doing things but even to the traditional ways of thinking about doing things. One of the foremost writers and thinkers on ecosystem management, Dr. Ed Grumbine, puts it this way: “. . . ecosystem management is not just about science, nor is it simply an extension of traditional resource management. Implementation of ecosystem management requires a ‘seismic shift’ in the mindset of humans.”

So here we all are in Nashville, on a fall day in 1995, seeking ways to continue moving forward in protecting and restoring the wild places and wild things that we have cherished since childhood, while the ground seems to be moving beneath our feet. Where do we go from here? Is what we have accomplished to date still valued? Can we do ecosystem management? What will it take to make it successful? Those are legitimate questions for us to be asking ourselves at this juncture of our journey and ones that I’d like to discuss this morning. Even though my topic is the Lower Mississippi Valley Joint Venture, I’d like to expand a bit and offer some philosophy.

Some of us in this room had the good fortune to hear Director Beattie speak at the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies in Bismarck last September. In that moving speech, she used her hometown of Grafton, Vermont, population 600, as a metaphor for the dilemma we face in the conservation movement. In Grafton in recent years, she said, she had occasion to notice that there had developed an undercurrent of tension between the longtime residents and the new, urban transplants over their divergent interests in wildlife. Those who represented a long tradition of dedication to wildlife—the hunters and anglers, so to speak—and those who were newer members of the conservation movement—the hikers and birders, so to speak—came at things from a different perspective; and the challenge was, she said, to find ways to foster respect for the legitimacy of each others’ interests and to work together for the common good of the resources both groups valued.

That metaphor strikes at the very heart of what we are asked to do in implementing ecosystem management in the Lower Mississippi Valley and elsewhere. Within our organizations, we are being challenged to step back several paces from what we have traditionally seen as our mission—for many of us, game species—and look at the larger landscape and the resources it sustains—

endangered species, neotropical birds, nongame fish and wildlife, and plants; and come up with plans and strategies to maximize benefits to all the components of the ecosystem as our conference program states—to manage for a multiplicity of wildlife species. Implicit in that approach is a conscious granting of legitimacy and respect to each player at the table who can contribute information, knowledge, skill, experience or dollars to the effort. It means that we will actually need to talk to one another, in depth, and listen to each other. It also means we need to expand our line of vision and quit preaching to the choir.

It's no longer just a deal between the Fish and Wildlife Service and State game and fish agencies. We must open up the dialogue to all who are stakeholders in an ecosystem whether they know it or not—anyone who has or should have a vested interest in the outcome, who is willing to commit energy and effort and resources in a partnership to achieve mutually agreed-upon goals. Sounds simple, doesn't it? This latter process alone is shaking the very foundations of the way many of us operate. It isn't that we haven't always attempted to get stakeholder input—we have held our public meetings and asked for public comment—but often that input was largely intelligence-gathering to be used in developing means to our own legitimate and well-intentioned ends. "We" were the experts, the leaders; and "they" (the Feds, the states, the landowners, fill in your own blank) were the people to be converted to our way of thinking. However, remember that reciprocity is implicit in the laws of ecology. Therefore we can no longer demand conversion of, or dismiss non-believers. We must create ways for those outside our profession and our direct constituency to identify with and engage in natural systems. The Private Lands and Conservation Reserve programs are big steps in that direction. Extending one's identity increases one's responsibility. We need to expand our social self into the direction of an ecological self. Then, one may be able to see their interests served by conservation—we need to cultivate in others that same affirmation of life that we find in the resources we strive to conserve.

Ecosystem management also implies that those of us who have been leaders may be asked to relinquish that control to others who can lead the effort more effectively. I'm not saying that those of us who have been leaders will relinquish responsibility or hide our expertise under a bushel basket. Ecosystem management is, in fact, a call to greater responsibility and to a fuller use of our expertise.

So with the rules of the game changing, where do we go from here? The Fish and Wildlife Service has grappled with this issue mightily over the last two years.

I don't think the new way is to abandon the old way, any more than having hikers and birders moving into Grafton means that hunters and anglers must move out. Nor do I believe it implies any disrespect for all that we have accomplished so far. In fact, I think the old way—the knowledge base and program structures, and plans and strategies and achievements can provide the framework for the new way of looking at the world from a multi-species standpoint.

The ecosystem approach is not an abandonment of traditional values and priorities; it is rather an expansion of our vision to take in the full length and breadth of the landscape. Ecosystem management is intrinsic in our traditional wildlife programs. Once again, heed the unvarnished words of the father of the Duck Stamp Program, “Ding” Darling, who did more for wetlands and migratory waterfowl conservation than probably any individual before him or since:

He said, “. . . I am not nearly so much interested in the preservation of migratory waterfowl as I am in the management of water resources and the crucial effects of such management upon human sustenance. Wild ducks and geese and . . . shorebirds are only the delicate indicators of the prognosis for human existence just as sure as God made little green apples.”

When we look at this puzzle called ecosystem management, it's easy to throw our hands up in frustration—I mean, here are all these pieces piled up on the living room coffee table, all different shapes and sizes and we're supposed to work as a team to put this thing together. But just as we would do with a 1,000-piece puzzle, we can start with the pieces we know, the corners, the straight lines, the pieces of the frame; and with the frame in place, we can begin to fill in the rest of the puzzle, bit by bit, as our eye becomes more practiced at seeing where the pieces fit and as others working with us see pieces that we missed. But we must be cautious — the more we confine ourselves to fragments, the less we are able to visualize the whole. A main, if not the main goal of ecosystem management is the protection of the whole — biodiversity.

That is exactly the approach that is being taken today in the Mississippi River Alluvial Plain. Here, the Fish and Wildlife Service, wildlife agencies from the seven states of the Mississippi Valley, Partners in Flight, the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network, and non-government organizations such as The Nature Conservancy, the Tennessee Conservation League, and the Louisiana Black Bear Conservation Committee are working together to create an ecosystem plan that, at the outset, will strive to benefit forest-dwelling migratory birds, waterfowl, migratory shorebirds, and the Louisiana black bear; and in the longer term, the partners hope, will address other significant elements of biological diversity, including rare plants, high-quality natural communities, big river fish and mussels. Just yesterday the Lower Mississippi Valley Joint Venture Board voted to become a cooperator with the Lower Mississippi River Conservation Committee—bringing fish into that part of the puzzle.

The pieces of the frame for this ecosystem plan are traditional, well-developed conservation plans that are already in place and achieving results, most notably the Lower Mississippi Valley Joint Venture of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. I won't go into detail in describing the effort in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley because you have a series of presenters in numerous technical sessions who will do just that. Listen to the topics: Applying the Concepts of Ecosystem Management to the Conservation of Migratory Birds in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley; Finding Common Ground: The Economical

Basis for the Conservation of Game and Nongame Migratory Birds in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley; Development of Habitat Objectives for the Integrated Management of Game and Nongame Migratory Birds in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley; The Role of Research, Monitoring and Evaluation in the Development of a Mississippi Alluvial Valley Migratory Bird Conservation Plan; Toward Ecosystem Management—Turning Regional Habitat Objectives into a Comprehensive Plan for the Conservation and Management of Migratory Birds in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley. This effort is one of the most exciting, ambitious and promising of its kind. These partners are building on the strengths of a highly evolved program for restoring game species, the North American; overlaying plans and strategies of newer programs, such as Partners in Flight, that address the needs of nongame migratory birds and other animals; and integrating the old and the new into a wetlands conservation plan that, in the words of one of its proponents, “. . . should be more compelling and effective than the sum of individual plans.”

So in answer to our question, “Can we, meaning all of us, do it?”, I think the proper response is “We are doing it.” Speaking for the Service, just a little over a month ago I signed off on a letter committing the Southeast Region as a full partner with the State of Tennessee and conservation groups in the first phase of a \$3.9 million demonstration project on how to coordinate game and nongame migratory bird management. This effort is outlined in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley Migratory Bird Conservation Plan, also known as the “Gary Plan,” after its initiator and enthusiastic chief proponent, Mr. Gary Myers, director of the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency and our host for this conference.

And in the Southeast, we’re not just doing ecosystem planning in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley. Similar efforts are underway in Florida in the Everglades South Florida Restoration, in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Alabama under the Tri-State Interior Low Plateau Songbird Initiative; from southeastern Virginia to northeastern Florida under the South Atlantic Migratory Bird Initiative; along the Gulf of Mexico in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama under the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory Network; and in Alabama, Georgia, North and South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia and Tennessee by way of the Man and the Biosphere’s Southern Appalachian Assessment.

But the question remains, will we be successful, or, to put it in a more positive vein, what will it take to make ecosystem management successful on the ground, in tangible ways? From the standpoint of healing nature and of cultivating an ecological conscience in this country and elsewhere, land management reform will fail if we simply substitute ecosystem management for resource conservation. We cannot blame the loss of species and habitats on poor organizations or inefficient bureaucracies. We can’t rely on fiddling with environmental laws while the resources burn. It ain’t as simple as increasing funding for research, hiring more ecologists, drawing new boundaries on a map or convening interagency committees.

Implementing ecosystem management for natural diversity should be a short-term goal. For many endangered species and ecosystems there is no later—we must act now. Still we have to keep our efforts in perspective. Aldo Leopold recognized this when he said “We can be involved only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in.”

Our problem may be the reverse of a familiar saying—we walk the talk. We may need to find ways for gaining support by “talking the walk.” To get some possible answers as to how to succeed, I went to a few experts, some people who are actually in the arena, who strive with great enthusiasm and devotion to implement ecosystem management. The answers I received were as varied as the individuals who offered them, and in my mind they outline the work that lies before us as sojourners on the road to success in ecosystem management.

From Chuck Hunter, the Service’s endangered species listing coordinator and soon to be a Partners in Flight Coordinator:

“To achieve success, we must bridge the gap between game and nongame programs. The ecosystem approach is still somewhat vague and undefined; but when it is tied to specific resource needs that people care about the approach becomes clearer. I believe that widespread interest in birds can bring a lot of people together and provide a good base for increasing other nongame wildlife, too. We need to bring them together, see where goals and objectives match up; and where they don’t, develop new management strategies and funding mechanisms to carry out the new strategies. We’re going to have to be more creative in finding funding sources. Game funding sources cannot be expected to carry the whole load.”

From Donny Browning, manager of ACE Basin National Wildlife Refuge in South Carolina, a centerpiece of flagship ecosystem management in the Ashpoo, Combahee and Edisto river basin:

“You can’t do ecosystem management without good partnerships, and private landowners are the Number 1 partners. They are the key to success. In the ACE Basin, Ducks Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy, the state and the Service operate like a tag team. If a private landowner doesn’t like the Feds, he may talk to the state; or if he doesn’t care for DU he may really like TNC. We use the partners to do the legwork.

“You can’t do ecosystem management by staying on the refuge, either. We have to use our refuges as demonstration areas for private landowners, to show them what can be done on their own land.”

From Gary Myers, TWRA director:

“This is really a system, a process that you take to the ground level and watch it develop into project proposals. The joy of my job is watching these guys do their jobs, watching it come together. We haven’t ever really had research driven by key needs of managers on the ground. Now, we go to a meeting and suddenly the researchers see clearly the information that we need and don’t have. They end up in the back of the room hashing over what they need to do to provide the information to us. And the biologists are saying, ‘Now I see where my part fits in with everyone else’s.’

“You have to get outside your state and look at the bigger picture, then develop strategies to implement the big picture. That requires lots of expertise, and you may have to go to universities to get it. That takes dollars. Dollars will determine our success or failure, not enthusiasm.”

From Doug Fruge, the Service’s Gulf Coast Fisheries Coordinator:

“Given the mood in the country away from regulation, we can’t effect resource conservation on a grand scale unless we get support from the public. To get that support, people need to understand the basic concepts of ecosystem management. People are gathering information less and less from reading today, so we must focus on the mass media as our tool for educating people.”

And finally, from Roger Banks, supervisor of the Service’s Charleston Field Office and leader of our Savannah-Santee-Pee Dee Ecosystem Team:

“The Feds and the states need to leave our agency and personal egos at the door and be a partner in all senses of the word. Task force chairman of ecosystem planning focus areas should be from the private sector. It helps potential partners warm up to us because private sector people have the freedom to talk to anyone—they’re not constrained, as we are, by regulations or by their government responsibilities.

Those are a very few views from the trenches, so to speak. Those of you here today could no doubt share insights of equal or perhaps greater value from your own travels on the road to ecosystem management.

Ecosystem management must not be an attempt to manage around our inabilities to control ourselves. Just like my returning to Georgia, it should be the first step toward a sense of place, of coming home. It should be a call to restorative action on behalf of Appalachian streams, pocosin wetlands, Louisiana black bears, bog turtles and Florida panthers. It should be an invitation to those outside our profession to join in and take on responsibility, a call to companionship with our natural world. It should be a call to learning, and the lesson to be learned is that the social self and the ecological self are inextricably interdependent. Outside this room, there is an amazing lack of a sense of belonging in our natural world, and the value of that belonging.

To reference our program for this meeting once again, and in summary, I’d like to repeat: Individually we are doing well, but in a partnership, we could develop the financial and technical resources to manage for a multiplicity of wildlife species across the entire Southeast. The 1995 Southeastern Conference is our opportunity to identify exactly what work is going on, where, and with what species. And it is the right time to make the necessary adjustments so these various initiatives work together, logically, economically, and efficiently to expand our capabilities and improve our focus for the future.

The journey is both hard and joyful, laborious and fun, confusing but yet at times crystal clear. We can take comfort that we are in it together, comrades in arms in a struggle to conserve that which we value second only to the lives of our families and ourselves—wild places and wild things. The words of Dr. Grumbine encourage us along our way:

“Ecosystem management, at root, is an invitation, a call to restorative action that promises a healthy future for the entire biotic enterprise. The choice is ours—a world where the gap between people and nature grows to an incomprehensible chasm, or a world of damaged but recoverable ecology integrity where the operative word is hope.”

I am confident that we of the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, who represent a long and proud tradition of leadership in fish and wildlife conservation, will choose the way of hope.

Thank you and good luck.