



A Blueprint for a Regional Restoration Initiative in the Delaware Estuary

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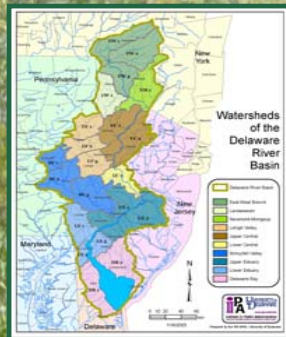
Abstract

The feasibility of a regional approach to identifying and prioritizing protection and enhancement projects in the Delaware Estuary and its watershed was assessed by: 1) determining whether a regional strategy is worth pursuing based on interest and perceived value, and 2) outlining implementation. The outcome was a white paper that confirmed that a Regional Restoration Initiative would be beneficial, and that the Partnership for the Delaware Estuary (PDE) has the expertise, resources, and shared sense of priorities to make this watershed-based effort successful. The white paper "blueprint" describes a two-track approach for evaluating and forwarding regional priorities. An important requirement for stakeholder satisfaction was found to be the quick elevation of priorities that can be applied immediately for project selection. Over time, these would be refined or redirected through science and partner input.

Based on our Comprehensive Conservation Management Plan, input from partners in the region, and our knowledge of the Delaware Estuary, we identified four areas to initially focus on: tidal marshes, urban waterfronts, signature species, and forested headwaters. These focus areas have multiple "stacked" resource values and strong partner interests. These will be examined by two operational groups that will work to develop and elevate conservation, enhancement and restoration priorities rooted in the best available science and cooperative decision-making. Decision-makers will be engaged through a PDE-led Alliance for Comprehensive Ecosystem Solutions. Contingent on continued support and involvement from key partners, the Partnership plans to proceed with implementation of both tracks of this regional restoration initiative in 2008.

Need

The need for this effort arises from a region-wide concern that our current fragmented restoration efforts may not be leaving the functionality of our system and its continued ability to purify our water, provide clean air to breathe, and supply the hundreds of other critical goods and services that enable survival for both people and natural communities. This concern spurred the identification of conservation and restoration of natural habitats as a primary program objective in the writing of the Comprehensive Conservation Management Plan (CCMP) for the Delaware Estuary. There is mounting recent interest in applying new concepts to ensure that restoration investments are sensible and equitable in protecting core ecosystem structure and functions in the watershed.



The Regional Restoration Initiative would consider opportunities and needs for watershed regions as well as the overall basin.

Approach

The Partnership solicited input from numerous stakeholders across the region about the need and feasibility for a Regional Restoration Initiative, through meetings, direct outreach, and via a workshop in September 2007 that attracted more than 100 scientists and managers. Experts with experience devising and implementing regional restoration case studies elsewhere were consulted. The most recent literature was reviewed regarding natural resource I assessment methods in a search to find the most useful currency on which to base natural capital for the initiative. Regional restoration coordinators and practitioners were also engaged in a small, ad hoc regional restoration workshop to devise a scheme for an integrated project registry as a one-stop shop for all available projects across the watershed. A matrix-based system was developed ensure that project solicitation and inclusion is as comprehensive as possible across the watershed, yielding "restoration matrices" that cross-link to the project registry. Importantly, the willingness to participate by key stakeholders was assessed in 2007, resulting in a broadly supported idea to form a policy-oriented decision group referred to as the Alliance for Comprehensive Ecosystem Solutions, which would be furnished with decision tools and project lists for decisions.

Description

The blueprint report outlines the initiative, which will consist of a system for evaluating and forwarding regional priorities that includes elements to ensure that key stakeholder concerns are met. One of the most important elements for stakeholder satisfaction is to start with at least a preliminary set of priorities that can be used in the short term and refined or modified through science and partner input over time. Based on our Comprehensive Conservation Management Plan (CCMP) input from partners and other efforts in the region, and our knowledge of the Delaware Estuary, we have identified the following initial general focus areas:

- Urban Waterfronts
- Tidal Marshes
- Signature Species
- Forested Headwaters

These focus areas represent cases where there are multiple "stacked" resource values and stresses, and strong partnership interests. We have identified them as initial priorities to launch a regional strategy of protection and enhancement that will be further refined and developed over time through two concurrent operational tracks. After implementation and demonstration of positive outcomes through these case studies, the RRI will be expanded to encompass the full array of ecologically significant natural resources across the watershed.

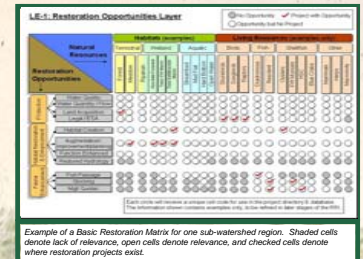
Development and elevation of conservation, enhancement and restoration priorities will be grounded in the best available science with input from a workgroup of the Partnership's Science and Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) and a consensus approach that involves key decision-makers, funders, and stakeholders. The two groups will complement each other and work synergistically to ensure that project identification, prioritization and selection is quick and rooted in the best available scientific information at any given time. The Partnership will also work with key partners and members of both tracks to develop a comprehensive project registry that includes entries from existing directories from participating agencies and entities as well as newly solicited opportunities.

Consensus Track

The consensus track will serve as the decision-making body that will bring their own priorities from various sectors, and cross-compare them to the best available science-based information and tools from the project track. This track will be operated by a new body named the Alliance for Comprehensive Ecosystem Solutions (ACES). In addition to elevating priorities for the watershed, this group will help to match them with potential sources of support. This "Alliance" will be formed by the Partnership to include selected PDE EIC and Board members, along with representatives of the funding and corporate community including the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and DuPont's Clear Into the Future program. The goal of this track is to cultivate a shared sense of estuary priorities that benefits from the decision-making tools developed by the project track to maximize investment in the natural capital of the Estuary. Part of the role of the Alliance will also be to provide input and feedback to the project track on project needs and opportunities and for evaluating success, and to explore new financing tools/opportunities.

Next Steps

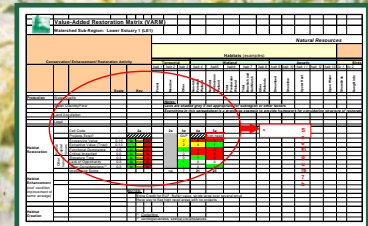
The Partnership is prepared to take the initial steps necessary to advance both tracks of the process described here. Start-up funding is being allocated in the next annual budget for the Partnership to initiate a two-year implementation, focusing on development of a comprehensive project registry completion of the first version of decision tools for the four case studies, and launching of the Regional Restoration Workgroup and Alliance for Comprehensive Ecosystem Solutions. The pace at which we can proceed in both arenas will rely heavily on securing internal support, resources, and partner involvement.



Example of a Basic Restoration Matrix for one sub-watershed region. Shaded cells denote lack of relevance, open cells denote relevance, and checked cells denote where restoration projects exist.

STAC Workgroup

A technical workgroup will develop decision-making tools to evaluate high priority project activities or prioritize lists of projects that can yield highest value outcomes to the environment. This effort will be led by a Regional Restoration Workgroup affiliated with the Science and Technical Advisory Committee (STAC). An ad hoc workgroup began to meet in December 2007, and its formalization and expansion is expected after approval by our managing entity (Estuary Implementation Committee). The workgroup will develop a matrix-based system for identifying and ranking high value activities and priority projects based on science. An estuary-wide Project Registry and decision-making tools will be developed on a sub-regional basis for use by the Policy Track. Basic matrices linked to the project registry will contrast signature or ecologically important natural resources with protection and enhancement opportunities and geographic locations. Value-added matrices will build on the basic matrices by including a fourth layer that assigns natural capital values to cells to facilitate project ranking and identification of high-value needs. The workgroup will be immediately operational to provide guidance at the outset of the initiative. Over time however, updated versions of decision-making products will be prepared (similar to new versions of software programs) becoming more refined into the future.



Example of a Basic Restoration Matrix for one sub-watershed region. Shaded cells denote lack of relevance, open cells denote relevance, and checked cells denote where restoration projects exist.

Purpose

With support provided by DuPont's Clear into the Future Program, the Partnership for the Delaware Estuary (PDE) collaborated with restoration specialists to assess what it would take to launch a Regional Restoration Initiative (RRI) that would facilitate cross-sector needs analysis, identification, coordination and selection of diverse projects that conserve, enhance or restore natural resources across the Estuary. The goals of were to both expedite project selection as well as provide science-based tools to decision-makers so that selected projects yield the greatest possible ecological outcomes over the long-term.

Partnership for the Delaware Estuary

Since taking on the responsibilities of the National Estuary Program for the Delaware Estuary in 2005, the Partnership has greatly expanded its scope and focus, and has been strengthening its science coordination, land restoration, and policy activities. The Partnership is now leading an assessment of current status, trends and needs regarding the science and management of natural resources in the Delaware Estuary and its watershed linkages. Of special importance is our new role in facilitating the exchange of educational resources and science and technical information among the many agency, academic, industry, and public groups in the region.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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