

VISION 20/20
Strategic Plan of the Waterbird Society
20 February, 2009

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Abstract: Vision 20/20, the Strategic Plan of the Waterbird Society, provides a road map for the Society for the next ten years and is presented in a series of components that includes both the governance of the Society and its science mission globally. Each component has its strengths, weakness, threats, opportunities, and recommendations section. The integrating themes found in the document are as follows:

1. Sustainability of the Society
 - Recommendations re Membership, Students, International members
 - Recommendations re Meetings, Publications and committee work
 - Recommendations re Finance-Investments

2. Implementing our International Mission
 - Recommendations re online publication
 - Recommendations re Membership, Meetings
 - Recommendations re Awards and Grants

3. Increasing our Impact
 - Recommendations re Publications
 - Recommendations re Awards
 - Recommendations re Conservation, Outreach, other committee work

Background

The mission of the Waterbird Society is to foster the study, management and conservation of the world's aquatic birds .

The Society's primary **goals** are to: (1) promote basic and applied research on waterbirds and their habitats; (2) to foster science-based waterbird conservation globally, and (3) to enhance communication and education at all levels among professionals, policy makers, and citizens by publishing an international peer-reviewed journal, hosting scientific meetings, and facilitating other outreach activities.

(Note: This is the suggested wording for changing the text of the Bylaws, as well as for use in the brochure and on the web site)

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The Strategic Planning process was initiated in late winter 2008 at the request of President David Shealer, with the goal of developing a forward-looking document to help guide the Society's activities over the next 5-10 years. Michael Erwin agreed to chair a committee that included a cross section of the Society, and the following committee members agreed to serve: John Coulson, Marco Favero, Gail Fraser, Peter Frederick, Kathy Parsons, and BA Schreiber. In December 2008, John Coulson resigned from the Committee. In addition, Marco Favero has been inactive.

The Strategic Planning process of the Waterbird Society required an evaluation of current governance and structure of the organization and its functions, and of its science – conservation goals. Following the evaluation, a series of recommendations for change was made by the committee members. To address these tasks, we divided the major duties among the committee members as follows: *Structure* – Officers, Council and Committees; *Functions* – Finance & Investment, Conservation, Publications, Outreach – Web site, Annual Meetings, Membership, and Nominations. Drafts were prepared by the committee members, circulated, and submitted in summer and fall 2008. Only one section (Membership) was not submitted.

This report is structured to be clear and concise, following a template that includes a strategic approach, i.e. briefly outlining the background with strengths, weaknesses, then indicating any threats, and opportunities. Last and most important are recommendations for change. We chose to not make a numerical target related to how large the Society should be, however, we hope to at least sustain current numbers of members and expand internationally which should result in some growth over time.

Governance – Committees and Council

Strengths: The Society has enjoyed sustained growth and activity since its inception in 1976 in Charleston, South Carolina, when its official name was the “Colonial Waterbird Society.” The Society has had strong leadership in its officers and Council over the years. The officers have been members of academic, government, and non-governmental organizations, and have had memberships in a number of national and international ornithological societies. In most cases, past officers have continued to attend meetings and/or play an active role in various aspects of the Society. The past two Presidents serve on the Executive Council, as indicated in the Bylaws. Especially since the advent of electronic mail in the 1980s, communications between the officers and Council have functioned reasonably well. A number of *ad hoc* committees have formed over the years as the Society's size and interests have increased.

Weaknesses: Of the past 15 Presidents, all have been from North America, and all but two from the U.S. Only three have been female. On Council, a number of Council members do not attend the annual meetings, even though there is an understanding at nomination that they are expected to attend each meeting during their three-year term. Especially problematic is the lack of attendance by non-North American councilors (often due to funding constraints). The Bylaws list only 4 standing committees (Archives, Bylaws, Membership, Nominating), with more than a dozen as *ad hoc*. Most

of the ad hoc committees serve important functions in the Society and thus should be “standing committees.” Some committees have not been active over a period of several years, and a few experience difficulty in finding chairpersons and/or committee members. As a result, there are occasions where no committee “paper trail” is left for incoming Chairs or committee members. Thus, some committees have been ineffective, and there appears to be high variance in commitment levels among committee members. Council has not been consistent over the years in maintaining a careful “paper trail” of key documents, and ensuring that originals of such documents be managed effectively in the Society’s archives. It has been noted that the By Laws are deficient in not addressing the issue of replacement of officers or council members in the event of either untimely death, incapacitation, or misconduct.

Threats: Concerns continue over how truly “international” the Society will be if there is not stronger participation by non-North Americans in the governance of the Society. In addition, there are many examples of missed opportunities resulting from inactive committees or little follow-through by Councilors.

Opportunities: The use of email, teleconferencing, etc. permits communication across the globe, even if council members are not able to attend an annual meeting. Further, volunteering to host an annual meeting at a non-North American venue provides opportunities for significant involvement in the Society. The relevance of the Society and its mission continue to expand to new parts of the globe (e.g. possible spread of avian flu by waterfowl to North Africa, Europe, and middle east), indicating that we are not limited geographically by need or interest.

Recommendations: The Strategic Planning Committee (hereafter SPC) reviewed the composition of the Council and committees, tenure, the role of past presidents, and some of the Council functions. The sentiment for change in structure and tenure was very minor. Major agreement was arrived at:

1. Council should have a vote to approve all Committee Chairpersons and Co-Chairs if appropriate. Committee membership does not require a vote of Council and is open to all members of the Society. Committee members usually are appointed by the committee chair in consultation with the President.
2. Committee structure needs some modification, with the following added to the category of standing committee (currently only four): Publications, Scientific Program, Finance and Investment, Grants (endowed by I. Nisbet and J. Kushlan), Communications-Outreach (includes web page, representation on the ABC and Ornithological Council boards), Conservation, Awards (to include the International Awards, Distinguished Service awards), Student Activities (Student travel awards, auction, best paper/posters, mentoring sessions), and Future Meetings.
4. All important documents of the Executive Council and Officers should be copied and should reside in at least two physically separate locations. The original of any key document should be sent to the Society’s archivist at the Smithsonian Institution.
4. Council should include at least two international (non-North American) seats, one designated for “Old World” regions, and one for Central - South America, and Caribbean regions. Where attendance places a burden on current international Council members,

the local committee and Council should attempt to include these members through a telecommunication device during the annual Council meeting.

5. In a case where an officer or council member dies or is incapacitated due to prolonged illness or loss of faculties, or is removed by due process because of misconduct, a special election should be instituted.

Functions of the Society

1. Finance and Investment

Strengths: In 1998 the Society established a permanent endowment fund, and council approved a ‘basic investment philosophy’ and ‘investment goals’’: basically 1) to preserve the principal of the endowment in perpetuity, while using a small percentage (3-4%) of the principal each year to supplement the income brought in by membership and other means and 2) the endowment should grow over the long-term to provide income that increases over time by at least enough to offset the effects of inflation. Having this endowment will allow the Society to use it to supplement the annual budget and fund expenses on a reliable basis that it might not otherwise be able to afford to do, enable more efficient utilization of resources and mitigate disruption of cash flow.

The Society has benefited from the generosity of two of its member donors, James Kushlan and Ian C.T. Nisbet, in establishing research endowment grants. These support research and conservation for specific waterbird groups, the Ciconiiformes (Kushlan) and Laridae (Nisbet). The principles for management of these funds are the same as for the Society endowment, above. The ability of the Society to award research grants has enhanced the image of the Society internationally and advanced the Society’s mission in furthering research and conservation for these groups of waterbirds.

Weaknesses: (1) The Finance and Investment Committee does not receive original accounting documents from Vanguard, causing some confusion in the Committee’s ability to assemble accurate and timely annual reports to the Council; (2) Finding qualified officers, Council members and F&I Committee members with experience in financial details has been challenging; (3) Professional audits of the financial records are prohibitively expensive.

Opportunities: Because the Society had the foresight to establish an endowment 10 years ago, it now has some funds that can be used to supplement its annual budget. The Society has also been fortunate not to experience a decline in membership that some other societies have. This has kept the income stream fairly steady. Because of the above, and because of wise spending by Council over the years, the budget operates in the black; therefore, Council can begin withdrawals from the endowment (as prescribed by the endowment policy statement) to further the conservation and other goals of the Society. At the same time, the Society also has the opportunity to increase its endowment by adding excess funds to it, allowing the endowment to continue to grow. This steady

income stream can have a buffering effect on fluctuating budgets owing to annual variations in income.

Having two well-established, well-run research endowments is highly appealing to new potential donors. Most potential donors want to establish or contribute to special endowments, not simply to provide funds for general operating expenses. The Society can more easily solicit and receive donations with its three established endowments.

Threats: (1) The Society has never had a professional audit and thus, it could expose the Society to fraud and theft. Additionally, the current insurance only covers up to \$1000 for theft; (2) The limited number of Society Council members with investment experience can result in making long-term investment decisions less than optimal; (3) The Society has not developed a protocol for engaging and communicating with donors. Donors can be easily discouraged through improper communications or requests.

Recommendations:

- 1) Form a subcommittee to formulate a plan for conducting regular financial reviews of the records by a CPA firm (at present, a triennial review is done, and when a new treasurer is appointed).
- 2) Consider raising the amount of ‘crime coverage’ in the Society’s insurance policy to \$100,000.
- 3) The Finance and Investment Committee and Treasurer should communicate effectively to determine if and when deposits and withdrawals should be made into and out of the endowment.
- 4) Because Council has voted to hire a professional firm to manager the endowments, the major function of the Finance and Investment Committee is to monitor the investments, receive quarterly reports from the firm, and report their status to the Council. The Committee also should make recommendations to the Council concerning changes in asset allocation, and transmit the wishes of Council to the firm.
- 5) The Treasurer should continue to have a second individual sign endowment transactions as a measure of safety against fraud.
- 6) As a further safety measure, the Treasurer should provide the Vice President with copies of Society financial transactions each quarter. This will both protect the integrity of the Treasurer and provide some “on the job” training for the incoming President.
- 7) Review and revise as necessary the existing list of duties and responsibilities when considering nominees for the Treasurer, chair and members of the Finance and Investment Committee.
- 8) When Council decides to commit periodic resources from its general endowment to support new Society initiatives (e.g. publication award, local conservation initiative), it should do so in consultation with the editor and the chairpersons of all the committees before a final Council vote is taken.
- 9) Develop a set of “Guidelines for Communicating with Donors.” Ideally, an F&I committee member could be tasked with this, or a member who has had experience with academic or nonprofit fundraising. These guidelines should

include a set of standards under which funds are to be accepted, how funds are to be received and managed, whether there are constraints associated with use, and clear direction as to personnel within the Society authorized to initiate and maintain communication with the donors once an endowment is established.

2. Journal and Publications Committee

Strengths: The Society has enjoyed a steady increase in membership over the past decade, and the journal *Waterbirds* has improved its standing among the world's ornithological journals. This in part results from its international appeal and the fact that the Society has expanded its domain of interest to include shorebirds, waterfowl, and marsh birds. The Society has enjoyed a very strong relationship with the E.O. Painter Printing Company for more than 20 years, which has given the Society excellent value for its investment. The journal has also enjoyed an exceptional succession of accomplished and dedicated journal editors over the past 30 years. Most of these received little to no remuneration for their services. The Publications Committee has been active in pursuing new ideas to speed the process of publishing and has a strong track record in working closely with the Editor.

Weaknesses: Some concerns by Council for the ability of the current printing company, E. O. Painter, to keep up with the "new age" technology such as electronic submission or E publishing. Also, with the increase in the number of special publications of *Waterbirds* in recent years, there is concern over the ability of the chief editor to keep up with the increased volume. At present, there is also limited opportunity for descriptive information on waterbirds from developing countries to find global outlets. This may perpetuate the threat to conserving avian diversity and wetland habitats in these countries.

Threats: The cost of contracting with a new press for electronic submissions may need careful evaluation. There is a range of services that different institutions provide and these can vary widely in costs.

Opportunities: There may be additional marketing opportunities for advertising and selling the special publications that, to date, have been revenue-neutral to the Society. Also, with blank pages in every issue, there are advertising opportunities that may become available.

Recommendations: With the election of the new Editor for 2009, the suggestions for change of the journal will depend in part on the philosophy of Dr. Elner and the editorial board. A few suggestions were:

- (1) The re-institution of guest editorials in the journal;
- (2) The issue of special publications raised questions about the value of these to the Society membership, as they did not reap much profit to the Society, yet represented a good deal of extra work for the editor. The chief editor should retain the right to reject submissions to special publications, even if the issue has Special Editors for that issue;

- (3) The Publications Committee should actively research options for electronic submission that will facilitate moving the journal into the “modern era” as other ornithological journals have done;
- (4) The Publications Committee should be a standing committee of the Society.
- (5) A subcommittee should investigate and report to council on the feasibility of an on-line publication for descriptive studies of waterbird resources worldwide where information is scarce.

3. Communications and Outreach

Strengths: The Society has done an admirable job of building the organization over the past decade, reaching out to more scientific groups including shorebird, waterfowl, marsh bird groups. The journal has effectively served as the major scientific communication to the community of academic professionals. The annual meetings have been well attended with a growing number of scientific sessions on a variety of important issues. The web site has been in development and is vastly improved over the past 5 years. The Society has maintained representation for many years on the Ornithological Council, and more recently on the council of the American Bird Conservancy.

Weaknesses: The Society has not taken a major role in reaching out to the managers, larger conservation community, or public to the extent possible. The annual meetings are primarily attended by scientists. The tremendous societal demands for information on climate change and water resource issues reveal a different audience than was the case 10-20 years ago. The challenge is to determine the balance between continuing to “do the science” versus the larger domain of connecting the science to the conservation-management community and public. The web site has been underutilized and has often contained dated materials that reduce the Society’s effectiveness. The web site is entirely in English.

Threats: Major threats are the rising costs of maintaining effective web pages and management, and the loss of relevance and concern for “our” waterbirds as the public becomes more concerned with the larger issues of climate change, wholesale loss of biodiversity, drought, etc.

Opportunities: The involvement of many conservation scientists in the Society and the dedication of key individuals in maintaining a web site presence provide strong opportunities for expanding our outreach to the public. In the future, the distinction between scientists and managers may become more blurred, resulting in better contact and communication at meetings and through publications. Working on some marketing strategies also could enhance the Society’s position in both North America and internationally.

Recommendations:

- (1) The Society needs to define its role in informing the scientific community, policymakers, and the public concerning the science and conservation of waterbirds.

This will require the development of an outreach strategy and a review of the effectiveness of the Society's representation on the American Bird Conservancy and the Ornithological Council as well as the boundaries of political expression given the 501C3 designation;

(2) Web site maintenance and its content have been significant to the Society's outreach, but the site has not been used to the fullest extent possible. For example, summaries of annual meeting special sessions could be added to the site to encourage membership and provide useful public information. Adding more demands to the web manager will require additional resources, as most of the work has been done *gratis* to date;

(3) Consider annual meetings as an opportunity to do better "marketing" by contacting the local media for press coverage, interviews with scientists to address some local-regional conservation issues, and promoting the importance of waterbirds and their habitats;

(4) Publishing issue papers on the Society web page, as long as they are peer reviewed and are consistent with the mission of the Society;

4. Annual Meetings

Strengths: The Society is committed to maintaining a series of North American meetings on a rotation of about 3 years, with the fourth being at a non-North American venue. The annual meetings have been well attended, usually well-organized logistically, with numerous symposia, good field trip options, and good support for student travel. Registration rates are reasonable, and include the cost of a year's membership to non-members. Lodging, while not four-star quality, is usually adequate or better. Low registration rates have resulted in strong attendance at most non-North American venues. Support and encouragement to students (travel and presentation awards) is strong. The annual meetings offer a welcome alternative to the often unwelcoming masses of an ESA, AOU, or NAOC conference.

Weaknesses: Lacking the resources to have a professional organization handle logistics sometimes results in gaps in meeting room set ups and other arrangements, and places a burden on the local committee. Often too many symposia are scheduled with some not having strong planning or prior speaker commitments.

Threats: The high costs of overseas air fares, and their associated "carbon footprint," make non-North American meetings increasingly difficult for most of the North American membership, especially students. Further, the relatively few European, South American and Asian members reduce opportunities for finding hosts for non-North American meetings.

Opportunities: As costs escalate, the Society might investigate having more joint meetings with similar organizations to help reduce the organizing demands of the local committee.

Recommendations:

- (1) Try to have at least one non-North American member on the Future Meetings committee;
- (2) Actively solicit chairpersons to convene non-North American meetings every 3-4 years;
- (3) Ensure that the handbook for meeting operations is maintained by the Chairperson of the Future Meetings committee, is updated as appropriate, and is sent to the next local committee chairperson a year in advance of the next meeting;
- (4) Ask that the Vice President and Chairperson of the Future Meetings committee communicate and try to investigate joint meetings with other major scientific organizations (e.g., The Wildlife Society, BirdLife International, Wetlands International, Coastal and Estuarine Research Federation, etc.), especially at non-North American venues.

5. Conservation

Strengths: The Conservation Committee is firmly rooted in the origins of the Society, as conservation was indicated as a priority upon the founding of the original Colonial Waterbird Society in 1976. The Society over the years has held a number of workshops, symposia, and meetings directly addressing specific science-based conservation issues facing waterbirds. Committee members have previously written a number of letters to policymakers concerning threats to various waterbird populations. As members of federal, state, and non-governmental conservation-oriented organizations, committee members over the past 30 years have had important roles in supporting waterbird conservation initiatives. A major strength of the Society is its providing science-based conservation recommendations, rather than policy advocacy; this strength grows with the experience of its members and the maturation of the field of conservation biology. Using its journal and annual meetings, the Society clearly has both the ability and responsibility to address scientific issues related to conservation controversies and provide solutions.

Weaknesses: The Conservation Committee's activities and role seems to have varied over the years, and at present is less involved in specific conservation issues or campaigns on behalf of particular species or issues. Overcoming the problem of having committee activities simply be those issues of direct interests to the current members of the committee is not insignificant. The impact of representation of the Society on the advisory board of the American Bird Conservancy has not been clear in promoting conservation issues in a larger context. In addition, the question of advocacy on conservation issues and how it affects the nonprofit status of the Society has been a recurrent theme.

Threats: The perception that there are many other organizations better funded and equipped to deal with the real bird conservation issues globally may undercut the credibility and support of the Society's conservation committee.

Opportunities: With the growth of some conservation organizations (Point Reyes Conservation Center, Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences, American Bird

Conservancy, BirdLife International), there may be good opportunities for the Waterbird Society to “partner” more strongly in providing some of the science they need in support of their policy agendas.

Recommendations:

(1) Recognizing that there is an advocacy conundrum in the Society concerning the role of science, conservation, and political advocacy, a high priority is for strengthening the capacity of the conservation committee; this could include developing a series of recommendations for the committee and Society to take vis a vis the science – conservation agenda. An annual work plan (or multi year plan) should be developed with specific tasks and timetables;

(2) The conservation committee chair, if not already a Councillor, should be included as a non-voting member of the Executive Council to facilitate communication;

(3) A review of the role of the Society’s representatives to ABC should be undertaken, and interviews with ABC officials should be conducted to determine how that organization might benefit more from the Society’s expertise. Similarly, the Society should inquire of other conservation organizations (e.g., Manomet, Point Reyes, BirdLife International, Wetlands International, Wildlife Conservation Society, ProNatura (Mexico)) how it might help facilitate their conservation activities;

(4) Develop a plan for awarding the best conservation-oriented paper published in *Waterbirds* over a certain period (e.g., 2 years) or a “community” or service conservation project award that has benefited waterbirds with emphasis on underdeveloped countries.

6. Nominations

Strengths: The Society has enjoyed having a strong list of candidates from which to choose over most of its history, with several serving on the Council more than one term. The nominee slate has gone out well in advance of the annual meeting, with good summaries of each nominee’s professional credentials. For the position of Editor, a special nominations committee has been established and has functioned well.

Weaknesses: The Council representation has been strongly skewed toward North America, as many from other continents are reluctant to be nominated because of travel limitations. Also, in some cases, Council members do not attend the annual council meetings for the three years in which they serve on the Council, in spite of their acknowledging this as a responsibility beforehand. In some cases, council members only seem to be engaged in Societal business at, or just prior to, the annual council meeting.

Threats: Without stronger engagement from the non-North American members, the Society will become more geocentric and less engaged in global issues of importance to waterbirds.

Opportunities: With the rapidly improving developments in technology, those council members not able to attend an annual meeting should be able to connect via teleconferencing and “net-meeting” capacities (videomonitoring).

Recommendations:

- (1) The immediate past President of the Society should serve as the chairperson of the Nominating Committee for a two-year period;
- (2) It is desirable for nominees for officer positions to have had some council experience, and for council member nominees to have had some committee service experience;
- (4) Upon receiving the list of potential nominees from the chairperson, the President should ensure that each receives a list of the appropriate duties from the Policies and Procedures manual;
- (5) The Chair of the Nominations Committee should invite newly elected Council members to the fall meeting that precedes their official beginning date (January 1).

7. Membership

Strengths: In spite of the concerns for declines in membership across scientific societies, the Waterbird Society has grown over the past decade. The number of Life Members is satisfactory for a small society. In the past 5-10 years, membership has been increased by those interested in shorebirds and marsh birds, in addition to the traditional colonially nesting species.

Weaknesses: A challenge is to maintain or increase membership among non-North American members. When a meeting is held outside of the U.S. or Canada, membership increases as a result of having one-year membership combined with meeting registration. However, retaining such members, especially students, has been problematic. Also, Committee duties and activities need to expand beyond tracking membership by one person and include innovative ways to provide additional benefits to students and regular members.

Threats: A concern remains that some members may discontinue if they can gain access to the journal via the internet.

Opportunities: If the Society chooses to become more active in its conservation mission, there are additional opportunities to gain members interested in conserving wetlands and their birds. An opportunity exists for the student awards committee, future meetings committee, and membership committee to cooperatively develop ideas to benefit students and enhance professional development for all members.

Recommendations:

- (1) The committee should be expanded in its membership to develop ideas to enhance the benefits of membership in the Society, especially to students;
- (2) The committee needs to coordinate with other committees (student awards, future meetings) in researching productive localities for future meetings that might increase membership and bring new opportunities for Society activities;
- (3) The committee should consult with membership chairpersons of other scientific societies to glean ideas for energizing membership;

(4) The Society should encourage graduate advisors to strongly encourage their students to join the Society and, if able, help defray expenses for travel to meetings and/or membership.

Acknowledgments

The Strategic Planning Committee appreciates the many ideas and comments of a number of dedicated Waterbird Society members, including President David Shealer, Vice President Chip Weseloh, Treasurer Christine Custer, and former editor and Committee member, John Coulson. Susan Elbin assisted with the Membership portion of the Plan, and a number of current and former officers, Council members, and committee members were consulted on various issues as the Plan was being developed over the past year. While the committee did not reach consensus on all the points in this document, we used the democratic “majority rule” in some cases.