2021 SWAP Alignment Survey Results

Executive Summary

SWAPs and Landscape Scale Conservation

In 2018, the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA) adopted a resolution on landscape conservation. This resolution recognized "the importance of collaborating at landscape scales to help fish and wildlife agencies meet their statutory and regulatory responsibilities to conserve fish and wildlife and their habitats." In response to the resolution, in 2020, AFWA established a President's Task Force on Shared Science & Landscape Conservation Priorities, which recommended that State Wildlife Action Plans (SWAPs) serve as a framework for regional coordination and collaboration. Following this recommendation, an AFWA State Wildlife Action Plan & Landscape Conservation Work Group was formed. In the spring of 2021, the SEAFWA Wildlife Diversity Committee (WDC) formed a subcommittee to identify opportunities for standardizing elements of SWAPs for southeastern states.

Recently, the State Wildlife Action Plan & Landscape Conservation Work Group released a report that provides guidance and recommendations on how SWAPs can become even more effective at improving range-wide conservation for Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) by leading or contributing to regional and/or national landscape conservation priorities. One of the guiding principles described in the report is to increase consistency and alignment of SWAPs across jurisdictions so conservation can more readily be implemented at biologically relevant scales.

Ultimately, the President's Task Force on Shared Science & Landscape Conservation Priorities, the AFWA State Wildlife Action Plan & Landscape Conservation Work Group, and the SEAFWA WDC all recognize and encourage the alignment of SWAPs as an efficient and effective way to support cross-jurisdictional conservation actions and sustain SGCNs.

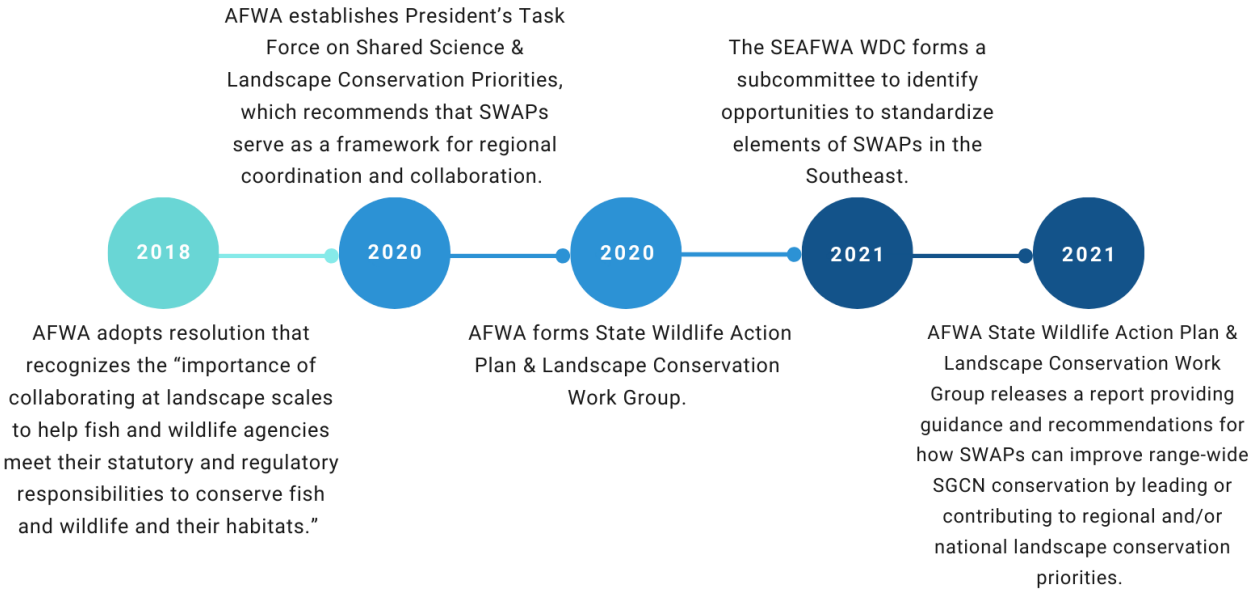

Figure 1. Timeline of recent efforts to promote SWAP consistency.

SEAFWA Wildlife Diversity Committee and SWAP Alignment

In August 2021, the WDC subcommittee surveyed SWAP coordinators in the Southeast region, which encompasses 15 states, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands (states). The survey was designed to elicit information about how each state approaches their SWAP revisions, what tools they use, and what elements they find most challenging. The subcommittee is using the survey results to help identify elements of the SWAP revision process where states can potentially align and standardize SWAPs.

Currently, the subcommittee is coordinating regular meetings focused on special topics identified from the survey. The meetings focus on discussing the state responses to the specific survey questions, identifying common challenges, and offering opportunities to share approaches. In addition, these meetings help identify and build consensus around ways to improve collaboration and consistency as the states work to revise their SWAPs. The subcommittee will develop recommendations and present them to the SEAFWA WDC in the spring of 2022.

Survey Results

All 14 states that responded to the survey find revising their SWAPs to be challenging in terms of time and resources, although some elements of the revision are more challenging than others. The states also agree that aligning SWAPs is important and share an interest in developing a template that provides guidance on how to populate chapters and address the eight required elements of a SWAP.

The survey asked about specific SWAP components and asked the states to rank these tasks as somewhat easy, moderately challenging, or very challenging to accomplish. The components included:

- formatting and organizing information
- identifying or updating SGCN
- identifying threats and conservation actions
- incorporating climate change information
- eliciting/collecting public input
- developing Conservation Opportunity Areas (COAs)
- developing habitat classifications

The majority of states reported identifying or updating SGCN and incorporating climate change information as the most challenging components of their SWAP revision in terms of requiring significant resources like staff time, facilitation, convening experts, partner coordination, and research. In addition, only four states reported that they intend to include climate change vulnerability assessments into their SGCN selection process. The majority of states also found identifying threats and conservation actions and developing habitat classifications as moderately challenging to accomplish in terms of requiring some resources like staff time, facilitation, and research.

There was no strong consensus about any one SWAP component that the states expect to be easy to accomplish. However, a few states reported finding it easier to accomplish some of the components that many other states find challenging, like integrating climate change information. This may be an opportunity to learn from these states' approaches. State representatives have already held a working group meeting to talk about SGCN and ways to improve the selection process and share experiences. For example, states may be able to use the NatureServe Ranking Methodology as a standard method for the identification and prioritization of SGCN.

Beyond identifying common challenges in the SWAP revision process, the survey also revealed areas of consistency in states' plans for their next SWAP updates. Thirteen out of the 14 states reported that they plan on incorporating plants as SGCN in the next revision cycle and at least 12 states will include COAs in their revision. Many similar groups also help states develop their SWAPs. For example, the majority of states reported that their natural heritage program, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service, universities, museums, botanical gardens, and national organizations like The Nature Conservancy participate in SWAP development. Understanding the pathways and organizations involved in SWAP development may reveal opportunities to work strategically to promote consistency.

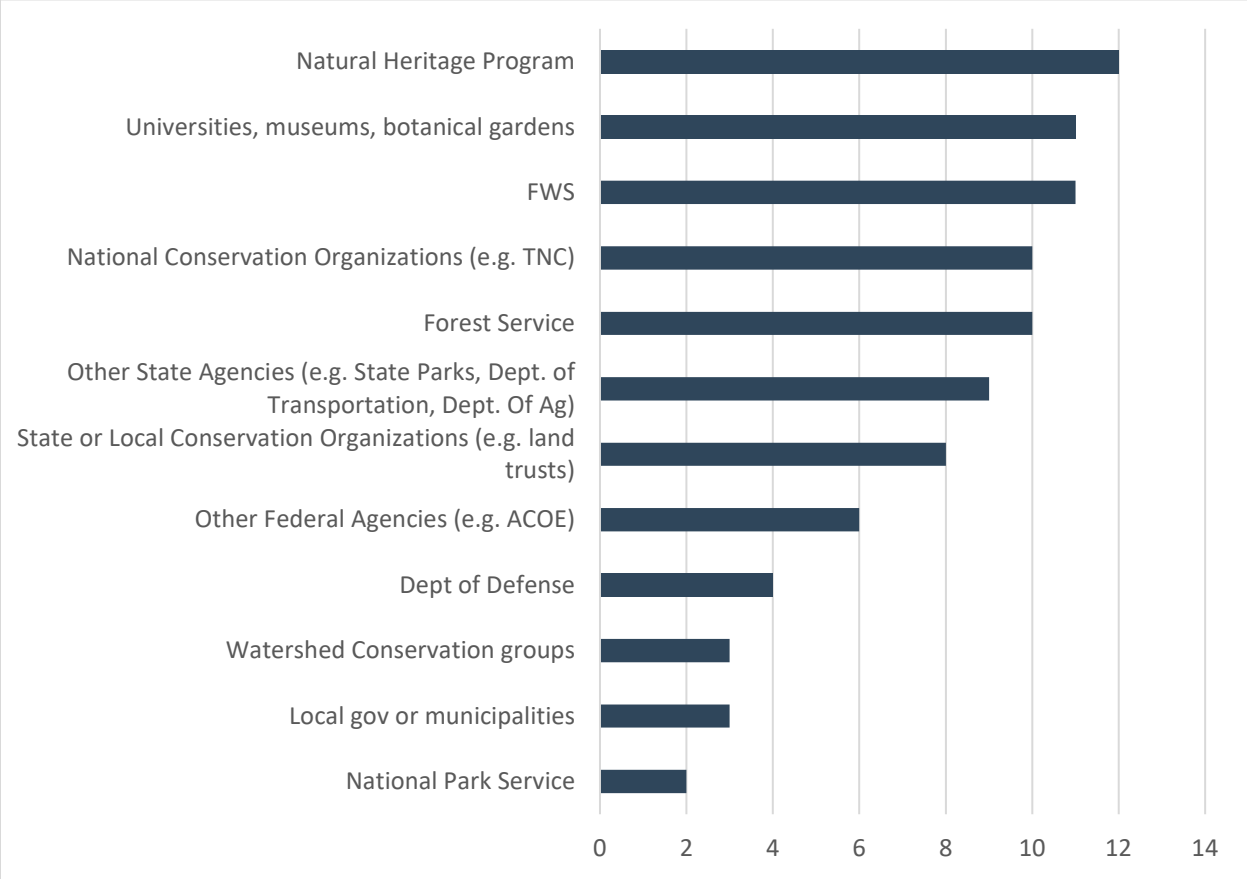

Figure 2. Number of states that report each organization as involved in developing their SWAP.

SGCN

Thirteen states reported that identifying SGCN would be either moderately or very challenging. The same number of states reported an interest in developing and implementing a standard approach for determining SGCNs. One state reported that they already have a process in place and would like to see if it could be improved.

We found that many states use similar resources and tools to develop their list of SGCN. For example, 12 states use federally listed species and 11 states use both global (G1-G2) and state (S1-S2) rarity ranks. Ten states use expert opinion and nine states use state listed species. Eight states responded that they will use the Regional Species of Greatest Conservation Need list released in 2019 to help identify their SGCN.

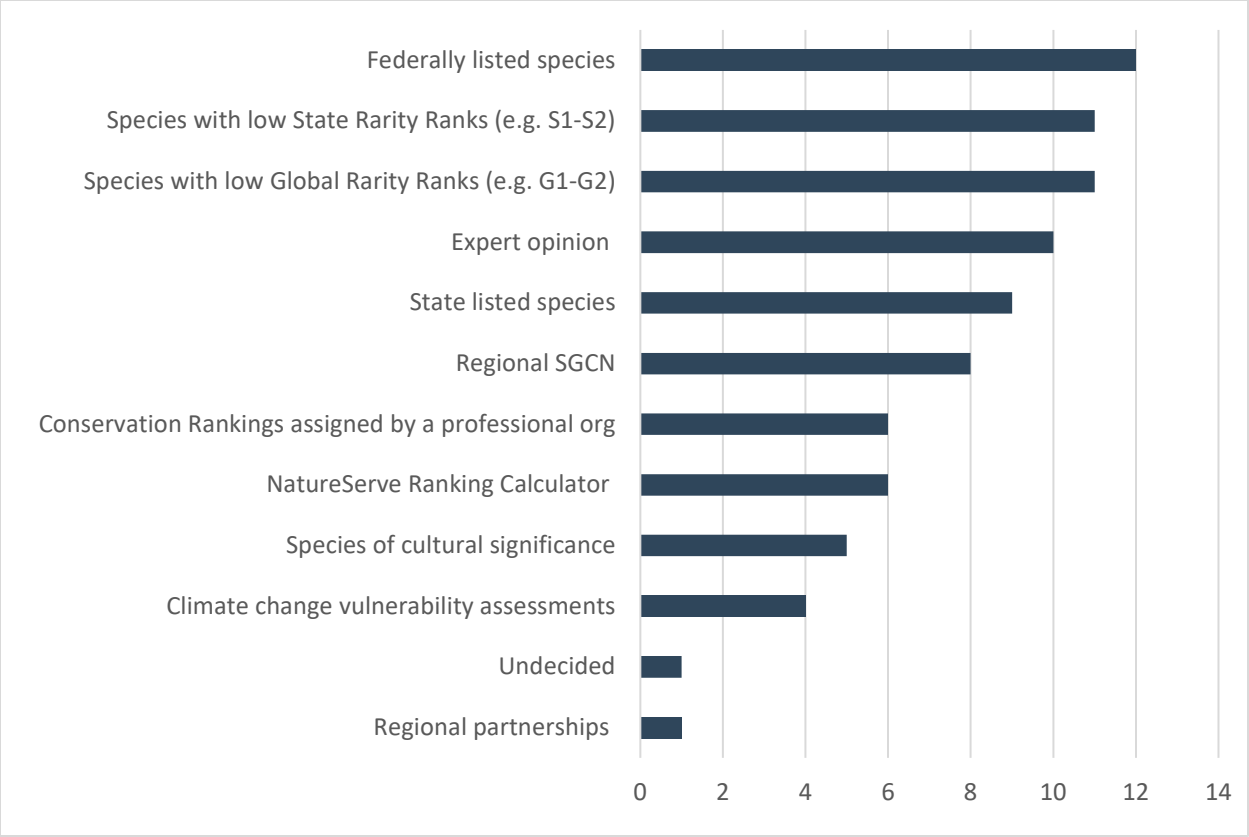

Figure 3. Number of states that report using each criterion to use to prioritize, identify, or update the list of SGCN in their SWAP.

Despite the widespread use of rarity ranks to inform the SGCN selection process, only six states reported that they intend to use the NatureServe Ranking Calculator to update state ranks during the next SWAP revision. This discrepancy could indicate the need for better coordination with state natural heritage programs.

There was also some consensus among the states about how to further prioritize and categorize SGCN. For example, ten states reported adding data-deficient species (where a lack of information prohibits identification of conservation needs for this species) and species of highest (Tier 1) and high (Tier 2) conservation concern.

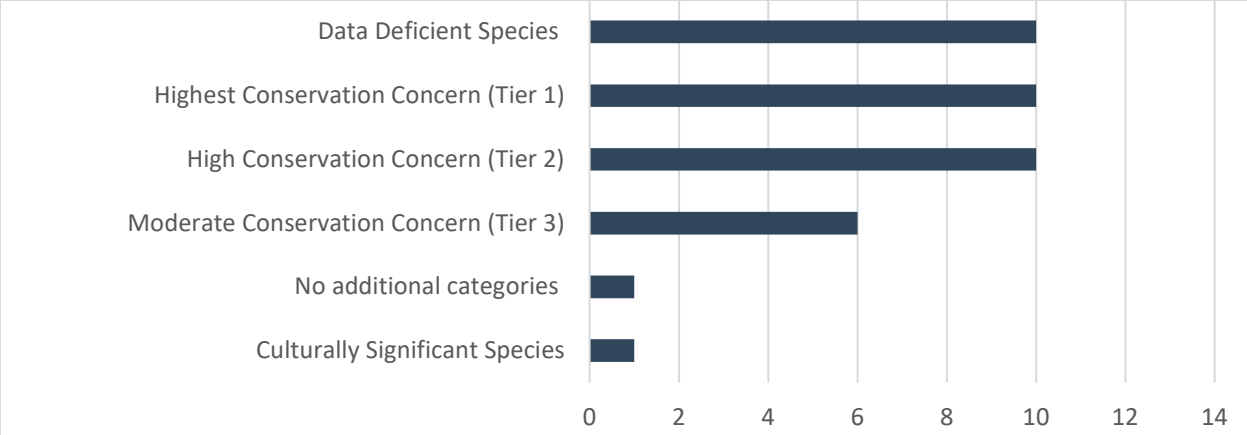

Figure 4. Number of states reporting that they would recognize each category if further prioritizing and categorizing SGCN in their next SWAP revision.

Conservation actions and threats

The development of SWAPs provides opportunities to coordinate conservation actions across state boundaries. In 2012, AWFA released the SWAP Best Practices Report, which recommends using a standard lexicon for threats and actions originally detailed in a paper by Salafsky et al. (2008) and later formally adopted and managed by the Conservation Measures Partnership. The Report states that "as conservation initiatives become more landscape-oriented, adopting a consistent framework for threats and conservation actions becomes more important for funding initiatives and ensuring the integration of SWAP priorities into regional and multistate efforts." The Northeast Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (NEAFWA) has already incorporated the classification system into the Northeast Lexicon.

We asked the states what types of threat and action classification systems they plan to use for their SWAP revisions. For threats, half of the states reported that they plan to use the Conservation Measures Partnership Direct Threats Classification. For conservation actions, states reported that they may use a mix of resources. Six states plan to use the TRACS Performance Matrix conservation actions and six states plan to use custom actions identified by experts. If states cannot align around common actions and threat systems, it may be necessary to crosswalk information to link specific actions and threats across classifications.

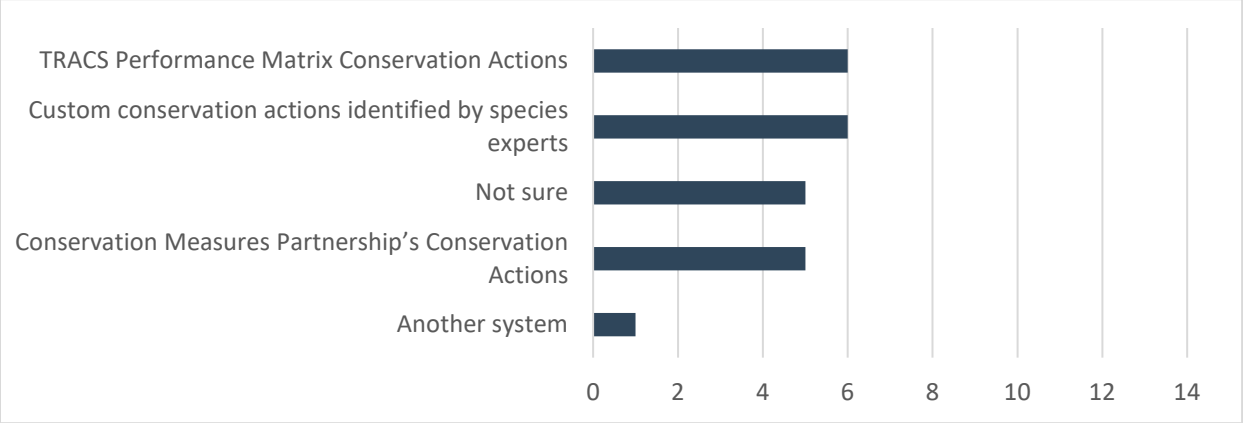

Figure 5. Number of states reporting they plan to use each conservation actions classification system during their upcoming SWAP revision.

We also asked if states were aware of which other organizations or groups use their SWAPs to inform conservation planning, research or to implement conservation actions. More than half of the respondents reported that universities, museums, botanical gardens, and natural heritage programs were using SWAPs. Eight states reported that national conservation organizations (e.g. The Nature Conservancy) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service used their SWAPs.

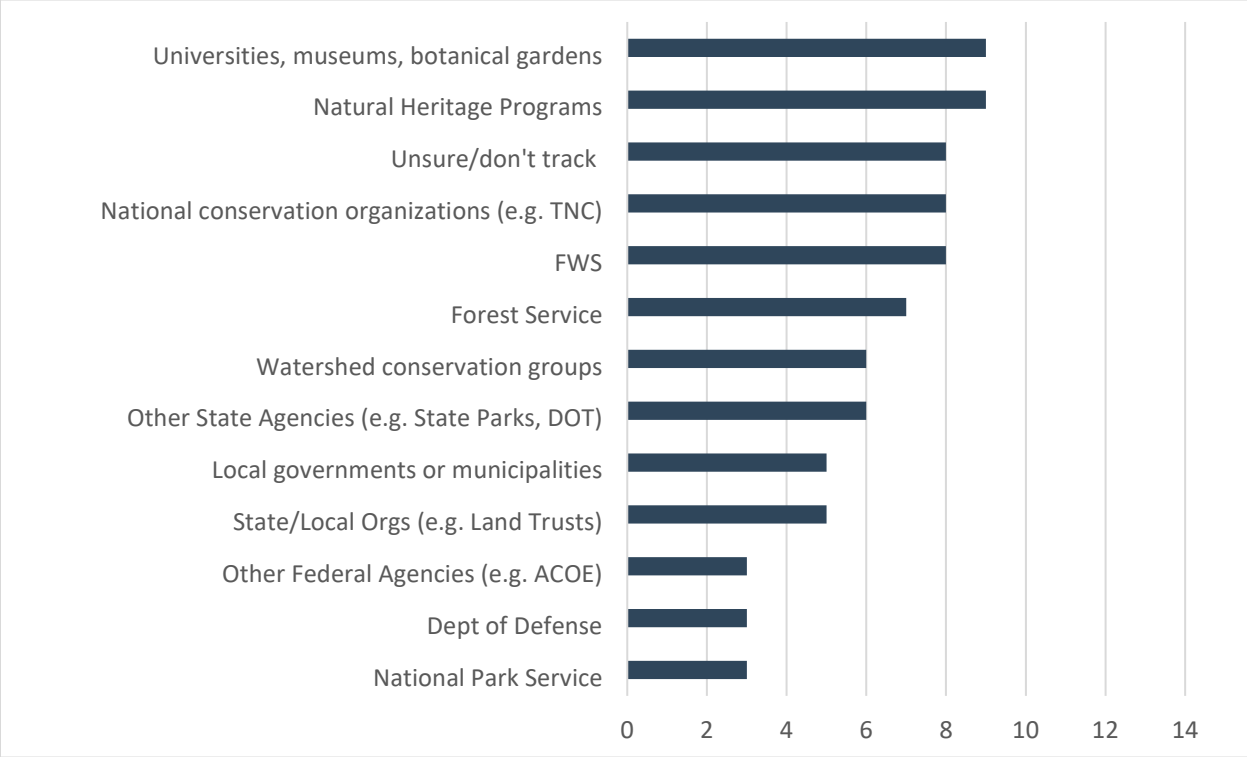

Figure 6. Number of states reporting that each organization is using their SWAP to inform conservation planning, research or to implement conservation actions.

However, much of this information may be anecdotal, as eight states reported that they are unsure or don't track this information. In addition, when it comes to monitoring conservation actions, 13 states report that they use the TRACS system, a requirement for federal funding. But beyond the TRACS system, only one state reported that they systematically monitor the status of all SWAP conservation actions using a database or other system.

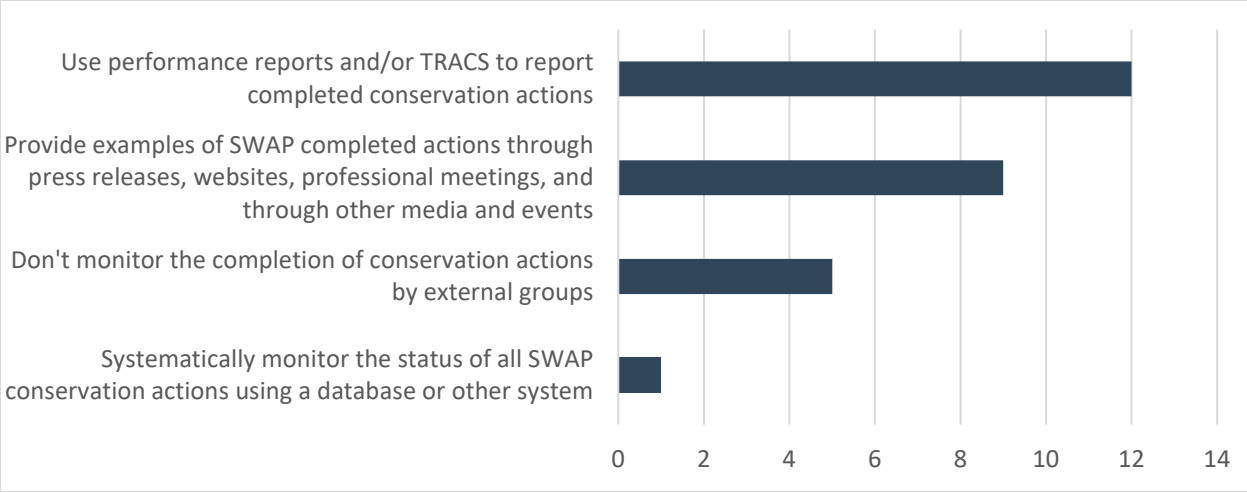

Figure 7. Number of states reporting to use each system to monitor the implementation of SWAP conservation actions.

The majority of states share interest in using a species assessment database that facilitates the assignment of conservation ranks, threats, and actions using consistent terminology. Sharing data entered into the database could support the identification of regional conservation actions at the discretion of an individual state or territory. Recently, Georgia, Arkansas, and North Carolina were awarded a C-SWG grant to develop such a database and plan to make it available to all SEAFWA states in 2022.

Twelve states reported that they plan to include COAs in their SWAP revisions and two states reported that they were not sure if they would include COAs. The most common features that states plan to include in COAs are priority sites for SGCNs and the location of existing protected areas. Eight states plan to use the Southeast Conservation Blueprint and partner priorities. Nine states indicated that they would identify specific conservation actions or management activities for COAs in their SWAP revisions.

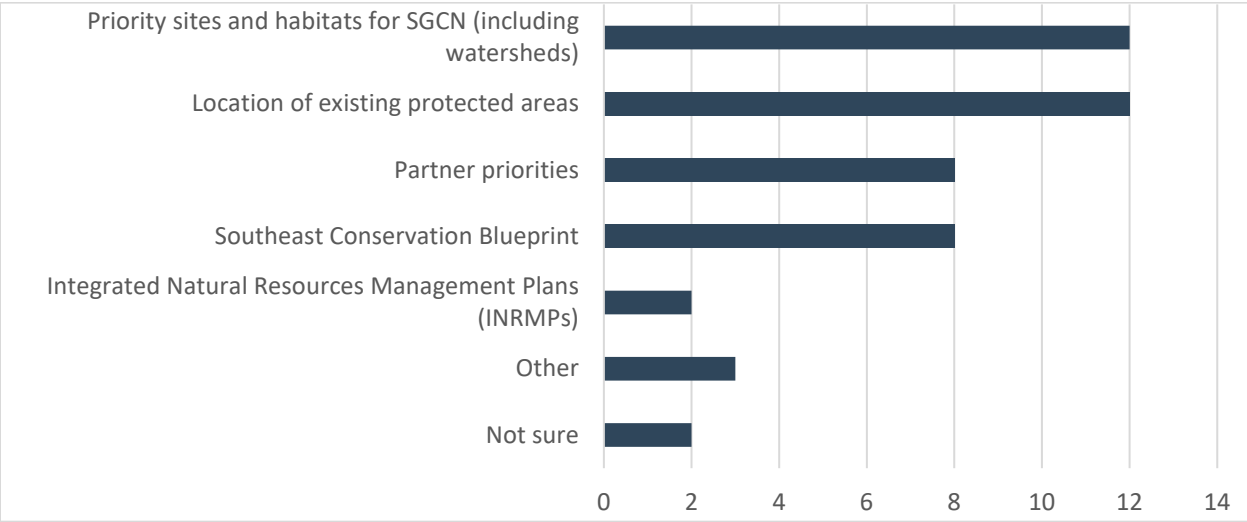

Figure 8. Number of states reporting using each source of information to define or update COAs.

Habitat classifications

The states reported using a variety of habitat classifications. Six states reported they planned to use the U.S. National Vegetation Classification System, but there was no clear consensus on a commonly used classification. As 13 states reported that they considered developing habitat classifications to be either very or moderately challenging to accomplish, this SWAP component will be the subject of a monthly meeting facilitated by the WDC subcommittee.

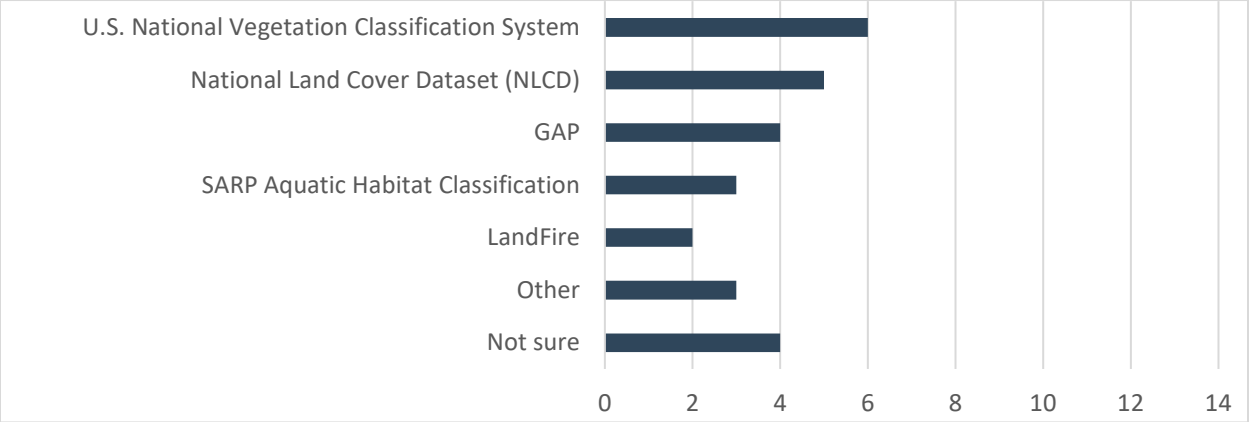

Figure 9. Number of states reporting using each habitat classification.

Next Steps

Southeastern SWAP coordinators share an interest in identifying consistent approaches to align their upcoming SWAP revisions. The results from this survey will help to coordinate regular meetings among state representatives to discuss areas where states may be able to use standard methods, datasets, and terminology. Both the survey and the working meetings will help the WDC subcommittee develop recommendations to present to the SEAFWA WDC in the spring of 2022. In addition, supported by a Competitive State Wildlife Grant (C-SWG), Arkansas, Georgia, and North Carolina are working with the subcommittee to develop a SWAP species assessment database for the upcoming SWAP revision. The database will be made available to all SEAFWA members in 2022.

Beyond recommendations for consistent terminology and methods, the WDC subcommittee can also help to identify how the states can meet the guidance outlined by the SWAP and Landscape Conservation Work Group, such as recommending potential methods, practices, and tools that can help overcome barriers to multijurisdictional landscape collaboration, improve range-wide conservation of SGCN, and contribute to regional and/or national landscape conservation priorities.

While SWAPs provide an effective means to advance regional priorities and conservation, developing recommendations for alignment is timely. Many of the SEAFWA states have either already begun or are about to begin their SWAP revision process. Also, there is a heightened urgency for the states to identify shared conservation priorities if the Recovering America's Wildlife Act (RAWA)—introduced legislation that seeks to invest in proactive, on-the-ground to support the long-term health of fish and wildlife habitat—is passed.