

Southeast Conservation Adaptation Strategy – Case Study

Overview: Program Description

The Southeast Conservation Adaptation Strategy ([SECAS](#)) is a regional conservation initiative spanning the Southeastern United States and Caribbean. SECAS was started in 2011 by the states and territories of the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (SEAFWA) and includes the federal agencies of the Southeast Natural Resource Leaders Group (SENRLG). In 2020, SECAS also added three conservation nonprofit members. Each organization designates a Point of Contact to serve as their liaison and work collaboratively to identify priority actions, provide technical input, and focus the work of the partnership.

At the highest level, SECAS is governed by an Executive Steering Committee composed of five SEAFWA state directors and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Southeast Regional Director. The Committee is an official committee of SEAFWA. Its purpose is to provide oversight and strategic direction by helping guide the actions of SECAS staff and designated Points of Contact (POCs) to support, promote, and improve the products and services of the partnership. Committee members also communicate the priorities and activities of SECAS among SEAFWA agencies, other state and federal agencies, and partner organizations.

Capacity for SECAS includes a full-time SECAS Coordinator and numerous additional staff devoted to science coordination, GIS support, Blueprint user support, and communication roles. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service funds these staff positions as an investment in the relationships, people, products, and services that deliver value to SECAS partners.

Drivers: Shared Vision or Problem/Motivation

SECAS emerged in response to the unprecedented challenges facing Southeast natural and cultural resources, including increasing urbanization, energy development, and climate change. Recognizing these challenges are too vast for any one organization to overcome alone, SECAS was created to strengthen collaboration among the agencies and organizations responsible for sustaining natural and cultural resources into a changing and uncertain future. To do that, SECAS brings together conservation partners from every sector around a shared vision for the future: a connected network of lands and waters supporting thriving fish and wildlife populations and improved quality of life for people.

SECAS was also established to ensure that individual subregional conservation planning efforts, initially developed through the Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs), contributed to a coordinated regional strategy to define the landscape of the future to sustain fish and wildlife in the Southeast, specifically described as “an ability to add things up ecologically on the landscape.”

Innovation: Overcoming Barriers and Challenges

The [Southeast Conservation Blueprint](#) has always been the primary product of SECAS and a major focus of innovation. SECAS embraces several novel approaches in Blueprint development and implementation. One is a “lean startup” philosophy borrowed from the tech industry, which emphasizes rapid cycles of testing and improvement with a goal of maximizing learning. In the Blueprint, this manifests as an annual revision cycle that captures updated data and input from new partners. We publish a list of known issues with each version of the Blueprint that transparently documents all known shortcomings and helps prioritize future improvements.

Another novel approach is our investment in Blueprint user support. SECAS continues to increase its user support capacity, dedicated to helping conservation practitioners apply the Blueprint to their decisions and use it to help bring in new resources to accomplish their work. As conservation professionals are increasingly inundated with new tools and prioritizations to inform their decisions, the availability of support staff can make the difference between a plan that’s used to make a difference on the ground, and a plan that sits on the shelf. Working closely with Blueprint users provides valuable insight into which improvements will best clear barriers to using the Blueprint. User support staff incorporate that feedback into the Blueprint revision cycle and advocate for users’ needs. User support staff also apply techniques from the field of user experience and user-centered design to improve the Blueprint’s online interfaces. Our commitment to user support helps ensure equitable access to the Blueprint, so everyone can use it without needing technical expertise or access to specialized software.

Today, SECAS is taking advantage of the momentum created by 30x30 to continue updating the Blueprint using these innovative approaches, increase user support capacity, and expand engagement with key and overlooked constituencies.

Assessments: Results and Evaluation

SECAS recently completed a holistic assessment of how SECAS is adding value to partner organizations and sustaining progress toward meeting its vision and goal. The final report provides a comprehensive evaluation of the partnership. The project found that SECAS provides value in two key ways: 1) as a forum for collaboration, and 2) as a hub for decision-support and information-sharing.

SECAS also measures its success by tracking progress toward an overarching goal: a 10% or greater improvement in the health, function, and connectivity of Southeastern ecosystems by 2060. Every year, we synthesize the most recent 3-6 years of data available from existing regionwide monitoring programs to determine which ecosystems and indicators are on track to meet the goal, and which ones may be falling through the cracks. In this way, the success of SECAS as a partnership hinges on how well we galvanize collective action by the conservation community to effectively sustain our natural and cultural resources into a changing future.

Endurance: Effort and Evolution over Time

Over the past decade, SECAS has grown significantly in formality and visibility. It began largely as a lightweight wrapper around efforts to align the subregional products of the Southeast and Caribbean LCCs. SECAS added additional structure as needed, like a vision statement, designated points of contact for member organizations, a full-time coordinator, and a website. In recent years, it has become a much more formal partnership with the addition of the 10% goal, structured governance, new user support staff, a monthly newsletter, and more.

As the partnership itself has evolved, so has its primary product, the Southeast Blueprint. Up until now, the Blueprint has stitched together a series of smaller subregional plans, many of which originated as LCC products. Today, SECAS is embarking on a new approach that uses consistent methods and indicators across the vast majority of the Southeast. This improved Southeast Blueprint is planned for release in Fall 2022. With this new approach will come opportunities for new partners across the region to participate in Blueprint development and implementation.

Remaining Barriers/Challenges

The [SECAS Futures Project](#) recommended five short-term actions to address remaining barriers to the success of SECAS. All of these recommendations have been implemented.

- To ensure continued overall performance and value-add: Recommend that the Steering Committee be made permanent, and that periodic assessments of SECAS' performance and governance are one of the committee's duties.
- To ensure continued focus on coordination and delivery of value: Recommend making the SECAS Coordinator a full-time permanent position, and continuing to support SECAS technical and coordination capacity.
- To maintain relationships and continuity under changing conditions: Recommend creating a succession plan and onboarding materials to ensure continuity and momentum in the face of leadership and staff changes.
- To improve overall understanding and communication while maintaining informal governance: Recommend creating a [SECAS Statement of Shared Purpose](#) that provides the regional goal and vision, structure, leadership commitments, roles and responsibilities, and focus areas.
- To play a broader coordinating and convening role: Recommend conducting a social network analysis to better understand existing relationships and connections among partners.

New challenges on the horizon for SECAS are: 1) to successfully implement the new 2022 Blueprint modeling approach, which will require scaling up subregional methods, indicators, and expert review strategies to the entire Southeast, and 2) to successfully capitalize on the momentum of America the Beautiful to advance the ongoing work of the partnership.