

Western Section of The Wildlife Society 2020–2024 Strategic Plan

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WESTERN SECTION

Western Section of The Wildlife Society

Mission Statement

To support the work of natural resource professionals, by serving and training our members, facilitating inclusive outreach and career development for pre-professionals, and educating the public

Preamble

Resolution on Transparency in the Western Section:
A Commitment to Western Section Members¹

Whereas, the Western Section of The Wildlife Society is a professional society and

Whereas, our mission is to serve the interests of our members and

Whereas, it is also our mission to advance the cause of wildlife conservation (*sensu* wise use) and

Whereas, the Western Section's Executive Board and chapter officers and volunteers are either elected or appointed per bylaws of the Section and

Whereas, these officers and volunteers therefore serve at the behest of the members and

Whereas, recognizing the mission and membership of the Western Section, secrecy has little place in such an organization and

Whereas, secrecy and lack of transparency can lead to deleterious situations and unintended consequences

Be it resolved, that a guiding principle of the Western Section shall be transparency in all its operations and functions, and its Executive Board and chapter officers and volunteers "shall endeavor to avoid even the suspicion of dishonesty, fraud, deceit, misrepresentation, or unprofessional demeanor," in accordance The Wildlife Society Code of Ethics.

Further, **be it resolved**, that the Western Section should maintain secrecy only under three circumstances – where personal information of contractors and members is concerned, when negotiating with prospective donors or contractors, and when a donor wishes to remain anonymous. Therefore, all Western Section business information available to the Western Section Executive Board (except the sensitive information described above) shall be available to any member of the Western Section upon request.

¹ This resolution was adopted by a vote of the Western Section's Executive Board on February 7, 2018. It became the impetus for creation of an ad hoc committee of The Wildlife Society to assess issues of secrecy and transparency in The Wildlife Society business affairs. Recommendations from the committee adopted on October 5, 2018, and were presented to The Wildlife Society Council via Section Representative October 10, 2018.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of Strategic Plans

Strategic plans provide policy direction and strategies to guide organizations, usually for a few years' duration. When the period encompassed by a strategic plan has elapsed, as has now occurred with the Western Section of The Wildlife Society's most recent strategic plan, a new plan is needed. Therefore, this new strategic plan for the Section is intended to guide operational goals for member services and inclusive programs, and take the organization into its 8th decade (est. 1953). This is the second formal strategic plan created by the Western Section (WSTWS 2014). This provides an opportunity to evaluate the success of the Western Section under the first strategic plan as well as to focus on new priorities for the Section. Thus, the plan is both a vision for the future and a reflection of the past.

The Western Section comprises wildlife professionals and students. Because very few aspects of our organization's operation (namely personnel decisions) need to remain confidential, we believe that all section members have a right to know all matters of business and policy that is conducted by the Executive Board (Committee) on their behalf. For this reason, we have included a resolution on transparency stated above as a "preamble" and guiding principle to this new strategic plan. Consequently, it is a commitment to section members that transparency should always be a fundamental policy for all Western Section business.

1.2 History of Western Section Strategic Planning

Strategic planning for the Western Section was ad hoc and informal prior to the development of the first strategic plan (WSTWS 2014). These efforts were not well documented and Section operations were guided primarily by the Operations Manual and bylaws for Executive Board governance. As part of a twenty-year plan of organizational development in response to Western Section's financial crises that occurred in 2004, the Executive Board developed the section's first formal strategic plan for the period 2015–2019. This important effort by the Executive Board formalized goals and operations of the section to better serve the section's members and guide program expansion efforts. The Executive Board embarked on a new five-year plan in 2018-2019 that stalled as Covid-19 and the pandemic changed our world, and our world view, and the draft document was completed in early 2021. This new strategic plan reflects both knowledge gained by the past planning process and the changes in capacity of and priorities for the section. Thus, the process will be ongoing - the plan will be a living and dynamic document and may be revised as needed - as it is implemented over 2021-2024.

2.0. Current Strategic Planning Process

2.1. Review of 2014 Strategic Plan

The Executive Board convened a strategic planning retreat in March 2018 at Grizzly Island Wildlife Area. Regular section members were invited, either to facilitate discussions or provide perspectives from past planning processes and business operations. Accordingly, retreat members reviewed the 2014 strategic plan document, as well as asking questions of the invited attendees who'd crafted the 2014 Strategic Plan in preparation for developing the 2020 plan. Capturing this institutional knowledge through discussion led to a guiding principle of streamlining the new strategic plan under two goals, based on the accomplishments and implementation of all five goals identified as priorities in the first strategic plan.

The board's assessment of the 2014 strategic plan and its planning process was that it was a seminal effort to create order and provide vision for section operations. However, the plan also reflected the comprehensive and effective engagement of the membership by the board to develop the first strategic plan. Therefore, the current board deemed both process and the plan as commendable for its membership engagement, comprehensive scope and planning, and strong implementation. As a result, a tactical plan focusing on distilling realistic yet ambitious goals that met the desires of the membership was envisioned. Moreover, the 2018 Board recognized original objectives had been completed or incorporated as routine functions by the Western Section, so the plan was successful in meeting its purpose - a testament to the planning process and the commitment of section members to make the plan succeed.

2.2. Member Engagement - 2018-2019 planning

The Executive Board did not survey section members in preparation for the second plan as had been done for the first plan. Instead, the broad makeup of the board (i.e., members from each section chapter and committees) in combination with this streamlined approach to distill the prior plan was recognized. Once drafted, the plan would be circulated to membership for review and comment. Member ideas and needs formed the foundation of the Board's objectives in the first strategic planning process, thus board members could accurately capture the interests and needs of all section members, requiring updating and review of applicability in current context.

In addition to the use of representative information from board members to inform the strategic planning process, the Board incorporated additional information. Such Sources included ideas from members taken from our annual meeting surveys, comments from members during the annual business meeting, the implementation success of the previous strategic plan, member surveys about specific initiatives presented to the membership (e.g., survey to gauge support for *March For Science*) by the Executive Board, and the state of the nation as it potentially influences wildlife conservation and the wildlife profession. Thus, the success and momentum of the previous strategic plan, combined with the broad engagement of

the board with members, directed the development of this strategic plan. Further, given the rapidly changing social expectations of non-profit services and business operations, by engaging members in the final review stage would be the most efficient form of education about new policies or laws affecting Section programs, and also position members to comment from a current perspective.

2.3. Strategic Planning Retreat

Planning retreat participants first focused on the accomplishments of the first strategic plan (see Appendix A). Yet the consensus emerged that the breadth of implementation for the first strategic plan was so successful that this next strategic plan could amalgamate future goals under broad categories to focus on fewer topics that we felt would serve both our members, wildlife conservation, and the public generally. Accordingly, the retreat members distilled the main topics that would be the goals of the next strategic plan.

3.0. Strategic Plan

3.1. Past goals and objectives

The first strategic plan established five general goals and multiple objectives within them. However, we reproduced them here verbatim so that it becomes apparent that (1) many of the goals and objectives were achieved or codified in Section operations and (2) two of them have become the focus of the current strategic plan.

Goal 1—Increase member involvement

Objective—Establish strong section and chapter identities

Objective—Support students and student chapters

Objective—Develop a diversity initiative

Objective—Increase member activity and enthusiasm

Goal 2—Develop and implement communications plans

Objective—Improve intra-board communication methods and mechanisms

Objective—Streamline, improve, and innovate communications

Objective—Increase section professional communications

Objective—Manage adaptively

Goal 3—Enhance careers of wildlife professionals

Objective—Have great annual meetings and professional development programs

Objective—Improve student and young professional outreach

Goal 4—Be an active voice for science-based information

Objective—Expand and promote conservation affairs

Objective—Effectively engage in public outreach

Objective—Promote consideration of science in decision making

Objective—Expand internationally

Goal 5—Have funds to run programs

Objective—Build endowment principal

Objective—Solidify financial standing

3.2. Current goals and objectives

3.2.1 Enhance the careers of wildlife professionals

The Western Section’s original goal remains - to work on behalf of its members, to foster communication among technical experts and managers, and to enhance the expertise of all members. This can take many forms, but we formalize it here to develop specific mechanisms for career enhancement of members.

Objective a — Create a uniform mechanism for sections and chapters in communicating and disseminating information. The board and its committees should develop a single interface for communicating with membership that includes chapter and section contact information, which will facilitate disseminating information to enhance careers of wildlife professionals. Currently, the section and chapters maintain different systems of communication such that not all information is shared or accessed by all members of the section. All forms of communication should be considered under this objective (e.g., website development and linkages; constant contact [or its equivalent]). Hence, the driving theme should be to foster cross-fertilization between chapter efforts, and increase collaboration within the section. A secondary objective is to streamline systems to create efficiency and increase opportunities for all members to have access to relevant information.

Objective b — Conduct regular member surveys. The Western Section establishes a comprehensive member survey to identify what actions or programs would best enhance their

careers or help prepare them for meeting career challenges. The survey should serve to identify future career enhancement programs, and evaluate past and ongoing efforts by the section to enhance the career goals of members.

Objective c — Prepare an annual summary report of Chapter and Section accomplishments. The Executive Board establishes a process for producing an annual report that is informative without creating an undue burden on the Executive Board. A natural starting point for a Western Section annual report is to transmit the chapter and officer reports into a narrative format with additions coming from Executive Board discussions (and decisions) held through the year and input from members at the annual members meeting.

Objective d — Expand the diversity and inclusivity of the Section and the profession. The Western Section is committed to enhancing diversity and inclusivity. However, our vision in this regard should not only include broad discussions to remove barriers for career-building pre-professionals to gain the skills that employers require, but also to explain how all people can contribute to the section and to society at large. Therefore, the board should seek mechanisms that foster broader discussions about diversity so that every member of the section feels empowered rather than identified and labeled.

Objective e — Continue to strengthen business operations, in support of member services and stabilize the financial health of the Western Section. The section has overcome past business difficulties and has taken steps to prevent reoccurrence. These include increasing transparency and fiduciary responsibility required of the board, adopting a business plan that follows standards for non-profit business operations and decouples funding sources from members and member-attended events. To date, the section has contracted with self-employed contractors to support and guide volunteer efforts. A funding plan should include continued growth of endowments, enhanced contributions via strategic fundraising campaigns, standard business operations, and seeking grant funding for high-impact programs (Foster et. al. 2009). Consider diversification of fundraising efforts for capturing all effective and feasible ways to accomplish this, including planned-giving, in-memorial recognition campaigns, and requests that build a relationship serving wildlife and connecting to donor's goals or passions.

Objective f - Create and facilitate expert-led, interactive training opportunities. Professional development programs are a historical source for generating revenue, facilitating professional network outreach, succeeding with member recruitment, and providing member services. Foundations of all section and chapter Professional Development programs include:

- Safety in the field and classroom, screening of instructors/assistants,
- Curriculum development occurs collaboratively across the wide-range of experts, and all within the community are invited to participate,
- Inclusive procedures to serve participants of diverse backgrounds,
- Accommodations facilitating participants requiring atypical engagement,
- Self-sustaining operations,
- Creating networked, thinking communities,
- Opportunities for emerging leaders as coordinators, assistants, advisors,

- Volunteer opportunities to members of all levels of experience,
- affordable registration rates (as determined in aggregate).

Objective f — Develop Success Metrics. Strategic plan accomplishment should be regularly evaluated to determine success in plan implementation and to provide feedback for future plan revision and update. But quantitative measures of success should be developed for each objective under the two broad goals so that the board can monitor accomplishments objectively. To facilitate this process, success metrics should be developed concomitantly at the time procedures and programs under each objective are developed. Metrics that can be used for assessments should be simple and easily obtained. The process of refining and developing objectives should drive the nature of metrics created to assess the programs a priori rather than at the end of the life of the strategic plan.

3.2.2 Be an active voice for science

This goal was similar to the original goal, but adjusts in response to the intense scrutiny and challenges that science in society receives today. Today, being an active voice for science extends beyond supporting “science-based information”. Rather, the effort requires a broader scope to speak for all of science (and hence to wildlife conservation programs). To meet the challenges of managing wildlife in an era of anti-science sentiment and disinformation, the Western Section and its members need to broaden our engagement with the public to convey the importance of science and how good science benefits not just wildlife and wildlife management but the public as a whole. While activism is not appropriate for our section given its nonprofit status, we can develop programs or disseminate information about the benefits of wild species and sound wildlife management that is based on science.

Objective a — Continually assess the degree and power of autonomy the Western Section has from The Wildlife Society. Historically, section members have had different views on issues that should concern wildlife professionals. While we believe the section should not attempt to operate independently of The Wildlife Society, it is prudent for the Western Section to determine the level of autonomy it should exercise given its relationship with the parent organization – particularly given the section is incorporated in California. We need to determine the level of creativity and independence of our position statements that may be perceived as conflicting with The Wildlife Society, when it is not clear that The Wildlife Society always shares our regional values. The section members have also prided themselves on their emphasis on leadership and independent thought over political and monetary expediency. Thus, we need to determine the degree of autonomy we can exercise given our different areas of incorporation and integration on many operational aspects.

Objective b — Engage with broader scientific and conservation communities. The Western Section’s support for the 2017 March for Science, and similar campaigns promoting the public understanding of science, should continue in ways deemed best by the section’s board. March for Science aimed to elevate the public image of science, educate the public about

science, and counter the anti-science narrative being promoted widely in the United States, particularly by special interests groups (Oreskes and Conway 2010a, 2010b). Our membership supported March for Science, and included a financial contribution of \$5,000 in support for educational events preceding and in connection with the original March. Albeit that support of science and the advocating of science in wildlife management are fundamental to our field, we recognize that the membership may have views different than the board so some initiatives undertaken by the board ought to seek counsel from the membership in such situations (e.g., as the board did for March for Science). Therefore the section should determine the most effective way we can continue to support March for Science or similar initiatives that promote the value of science in society, including partnership with AAAS, ASM, SACNAS, and others.

Objective c — Facilitate and encourage working group exploration and participation in ways the Western Section and its chapters can educate the public. Public opinion has been a driving force in democracies, and opinions are often formed on the basis of public outreach by interest groups. But interest groups have changed, and those representing science-based information are more frequently dominated by special economic and political interests (Oreskes and Conway 2010a). Thus, it is incumbent upon wildlife professionals to play a role in educating the public about wildlife conservation. Working groups should explore feasible, cost-effective ways of facilitating public outreach beyond what we have done historically (e.g., position statements). Using a new integrated system of communication will be a key element, allowing rapid interaction among chapters to address misinformation or provide input to policy makers in a timely manner. Obstacles to be overcome are: what to respond to, how to respond, who should respond, and in what time frame is response required; but professionals and students do not have the time, money, and other resources that special interests groups can employ. Thus, Western Section leadership and members should position themselves to strategically assist transmission of science-based information.

Objective d — Quantify Progress. Consider specific deliverables or program expansion guidelines to assess the impact of strategic initiatives in changing the wildlife professional's engagement with advocacy, education of decision-makers, or the general policy arena. Through annual operations plans, set specific, measurable tasks - e.g. provide comments on 1 issue per quarter, for 4 comment letters executed per year, and posted to WS website. Include establishing working group collaborations to establish annual conservation goals, informing desired topics or initiatives to direct efforts toward, and enlist working groups in written assessment of the engagement to help assess whether objectives are achieved, and what might change future outcomes more positively. Success is defined by meeting the annual goals.

Literature cited

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