

Report from the Conservation Committee

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VHS Business Meeting

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1. Two members joined the Committee: Ms. Sarah Orlofske and Dr. Todd Frederickson; we are now a Committee of three. There are four tasks at hand. One task (Task #2) is essentially completed. The remaining tasks are currently being worked and are described below. The report will also be published in the next Newsletter.
2. Task #1. First major task was to develop a set of doctrinal tenets by which VHS can focus conservation efforts. A final draft with a description of each tenet is provided below & will be submitted to the Executive Board:

Final Draft of Conservation Committee Tenets

1. Coordinate Conservation Committee actions/programs with the Education and Research Committees.

The Conservation Committee may identify or develop special actions or programs that would coincide with or indirectly support the Education and Research Committee efforts. For example, the inclusion of conservation issues is an important aspect of educating the public about herpetofauna. Several forums exist by which to educate the public to include (but not limited to) the Virginia Master Naturalist Program. From a research perspective, the efforts of "Snake Force One" (a group of VHS members and other volunteers headed by the Research Committee Chair, Dr. Joy Ware studying the incidence of lesions in snakes at three wildlife refuges) represent information about herpetofauna diseases that could be useful towards conservation efforts.

2. Promote research on herpetofaunal diseases.

Disease incidence among reptiles and amphibians represent potential serious factors related to conservation of such species. Loss of habitat and other anthropogenic activities represent stressors on population dynamics and may be related to increases in disease incidence. The global decline of amphibians represents one example of where diseases may have significant impact on conservation.

3. Educate the public on why herpetofauna conservation is important.

Herpetofauna represent a major component of ecosystems. Such species are critical to food webs and declines in populations would doubtless adversely affect other native wildlife both directly and indirectly. Furthermore, reptiles and amphibians represent significant indicator species that can tell us a lot about the health of our own

environment. Despite these important contributions, the public lacks an appreciation for the value of reptiles and amphibians. It's paramount that the consequences of species/population declines be understood as well as highlighting success stories. Improving the public's understanding would be a major step forward in conserving such a valuable resource.

4. Promote the creation of new and maintain existing habitat.

Availability of habitat is absolute towards conservation of any wildlife species. Without suitable habitat there will be no wildlife. Herpetofauna not only have this requirement but their habitat needs are complex. Many anuran and caudate species require both aquatic and terrestrial habitats. In other cases, loss of habitat required by prey species could affect herpetofauna that rely on the prey species. Virginia is becoming more urban and subsequently, habitat loss is a major issue. We need to seek opportunities to establish new habitat or find means to protect existing areas.

5. Discourage capture and collection of native wild reptiles and amphibians as pets or for temporary display specimens.

Native herpetofauna are often captured and retained as pets or as display items. This creates serious concerns for conservation. Removal of individual specimens removes important survival genes from the wild gene pool. Quite often, these specimens die in captivity because the collector does not know how to properly care for such species or the species does not function well under captive conditions. In many cases, people collect and retain the specimens for short periods before releasing. This greatly increases the risk of transferring disease pathogens to wild populations or could preclude specimens from obtaining suitable hibernacula.

6. Promote rehabilitation of injured native herpetofauna.

Unfortunately, many native reptile and amphibian species become injured through human contact. This can occur through numerous ways; however, in some cases veterinary intervention and subsequent rehabilitation is possible. In such cases where trained/certified wildlife rehabilitators are employed, these animals can be returned to the wild. Eastern box turtles represent a more visible aspect in that they frequently come into contact with people that can lead to injuries. This concern along with the fact that the species is experiencing population declines underscores the importance of rehabilitation.

7. Support the Virginia Wildlife Action Plan.

In 2005, the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries published its Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (CWCS). This document represents the Commonwealth's blueprint for an effective and efficient means of conserving Virginia's wildlife resources. An important aspect of this action is to draw upon various partnerships in accomplishing its goals and objectives. It is vital to note that some 32 amphibian and 28 reptile species are of greatest conservation concern in the

Commonwealth. VHS represents a partner to work with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries concerning these species.

8. Seek opportunities to partner with other agencies, other non-profit organizations and corporate sponsors interested in herpetofauna conservation efforts.

Many professional non-profit organizations share a similar opinion about conservation efforts. Examples include The Wildlife Society, Virginia Society of Naturalists and Master Naturalists. Additionally, others such as the Academy of Certified Hazardous Materials Managers represent opportunities to consider insight on environmental toxicology. Several federal and state agencies currently have membership in VHS or are working with members in various programs. Corporate sponsors represent an untapped source for more opportunities.

3. Task #2. Second task was to address the Congressional Wildlife Refuge Caucus. We posted an article in the January 2007 Newsletter describing the movement to create political support for wildlife refuges. The refuges of the National Wildlife Refuge System represent important areas containing suitable habitat for all wildlife species. Without sufficient resources our refuges could be in jeopardy. The intent was to inform the membership to consider contacting their respective Districts requesting their participation.

4. Task #3. Third task comprises the development of a standard presentation to be used for educating the public on the importance of conserving our herpetofaunal resources. Committee members agreed that the following criteria should be considered:

- a. The focus of the presentation is solely on *conservation* of reptiles and amphibians as it pertains to *Virginia*.
- b. The presentation will be made available for VHS members and Master Naturalist Chapters to educate the public.
- c. Several audiences are intended. At this point, this includes Master Naturalist Chapters, school teachers (elementary through high school) and possibly students. Other considerations might be 4-H Clubs, Boy Scouts of America, Girl Scouts of America, etc.
- d. Several versions will likely become necessary because several different audiences are expected.
- e. The maximum duration should be 30 minutes with additional time made available for questions.
- f. The final draft presentation(s) shall be submitted to the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries for consideration.
- g. Document the use and audience recipients of the presentation, and solicit feedback from audiences.

First presentation suitable for adult/teacher-related audiences is underway.

5. Task #4. Fourth task is to promote the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries' WildlifeMapping Program. VHS members who become WildlifeMappers can greatly support the program by submitting herpetofaunal observations. Dr Lou Verner from VDGIF will be a guest speaker at the fall meeting to provide information about the program.