

## **Policy Priorities for the North America Policy Subcommittee (NAPS) 2013-2014 (updated annually by NAPS)**

**Executive Summary:** SCB has a long history of bridging conservation science and policy and its emphasis on using best science to inform policy and management decisions has been repeatedly supported by its Board of Governors and its membership over many years. In an effort, to better link SCB's policy focus to its funding and membership base and to leverage policy influence given limited resources and staff, the North America Policy Subcommittee (NAPS) was approved by the Board of Governors with the specific task of merging the policy programs of the North America section and the executive office. This strategic plan, to be approved by the section board of directors, provides general guidance to policy staff assigned with implementation via annual staff work plans approved by SCB's Executive Director. Here, we provide three programmatic areas for focusing SCB's policy reach on where SCB can best demonstrate its transformative role in policy influence: (1) Energy Development and Biodiversity Conservation (e.g., Canadian oil sands project); (2) Endangered Species and Scientific Integrity (e.g., US Endangered Species Act and Canadian Species At Risk Act); and (3) Climate Change and Effects on Biodiversity. We provide general strategies to help guide staff in development of these three thematic areas that overtime create a cogent policy voice for SCB. In addition, the NAPS will team with other professional societies in leveraging capacity and policy influence among societies and will work with its member chapters to look for opportunities to scale up chapter involvement in policy and identify ways to involve members in strategic plan implementation.

**Purpose and Need:** the NAPS was approved by the SCB Board of Governors on March 20, 2013 with explicit direction to merge the policy program of the North America section (volunteer board members) with policy staff of the executive office to leverage limited resources, focus on core policy priorities that exemplify SCB's value-added policy "story" to its members and funders, be more responsive to member interests, and direct funds to those policy initiatives where SCB can make a difference. This document sets policy priorities at a high level to direct policy staff in terms of what policy issues are most important to the North America section and that can be realistically serviced by staff and this committee. It is not our intent to be overly prescriptive in terms of detailed strategies and or prioritized actions, as staff will prepare those in work plans submitted annually and approved by SCB's Executive Director and priorities addressed based on staff expertise, members interest, and funding levels determined annually by the Executive Director. Instead, to guide annual work plans the staff will use this document as a means for tracking program success and for building a portfolio of valued-added SCB policy projects. It is also a living document in the sense that it needs to be updated annually as policy operates in a fluid environment. Nonetheless, SCB will have up to three core policy themes (thematic areas) that are expected to be at the forefront of long-term policy program investments in telling a coherent story overtime along with a few secondary areas where policy staff will solicit participation from the members and chapters as time and resources permit.

*Voting members of NAPS 2013:* Dominick DellaSala (chair), Carlos Carroll (global policy committee chair), Barry Noon (Colorado State University Chapter rep), Neil Lawrence (North America Section board), and Tom Sisk (North America Section board).

*Non-voting members:* Geri Unger (incoming executive director), policy director (to be determined).

\* Terms of the NAPS are covered in documents approved by the Board of Governors available elsewhere.

**Overview:** SCB has limited resources and staff capacity but brings to the policy table a membership of about 4,000 professionals, most of which reside in the United States. Membership matters in the policy world as members of congress pay particular attention to this level of influence. However, we are not the only professional society working on policy issues affecting biological diversity. Some examples of other professional societies with overlapping policy interests include: The Wildlife Society, American Fisheries Society, Ecological Society of America, and American Ornithologists' Union. Therefore, in order to achieve crosscutting program goals and elevate the policy reach of SCB and partners, we will work with other scientific societies to increase overall policy capacity, leverage policy influence, and use our expertise in collaboration with related professional societies. This could take the form of joint position papers, press releases, briefings, and sign on letters wherever possible. In this fashion, SCB will serve as a catalyst for collaboration among professional societies and build on our past history of working with others on core policy initiatives affecting biological diversity.

\* Note – SCB has a standing policy to not sign on to E-NGO letters unless approved by the board of directors as this could affect our standing as a scientific society.

## **I. Core Theme: Energy Development (renewables, citing, fracking, tar sands) and Biodiversity Conservation**

Interest in energy, especially renewables, has grown tremendously among conservation groups and professional societies over the years. Thus, the field is crowded and SCB will maintain its value-added presence by focusing on one of the largest fossil fuel development footprints in the world, where we have a vested interest in biodiversity outcomes given development of the Canadian oil sands is a cross-border initiative with great potential to engage and strengthen SCB's membership in Canada.

### ***Canadian Oil Sands***

Debate over the Canadian oil sands (or tar sands, as they are known to many) is intense, ongoing, and highly politicized. Many recognize the need for an integrated,

scientific perspective on the conservation implications of what is, arguably, the largest ongoing industrial development in North America. SCB recognizes that, while the issues are many and of grave importance, the greatest impact that our Society can have in the near term is the provision of informed and integrated science-based positions, commentary, and assessment. Many other organizations are well positioned to utilize this input and information to maximize its conservation value, over the long term.

*Goal:* Provide timely and influential commentary, positions, and analysis on key aspects of oil sands development and its impacts and implications for conservation.

*General Strategies:* 1) Help to assemble and sustain an interdisciplinary team of Canadian scientists that is committed to providing an ongoing voice for conservation science related to oils sands development, from direct impacts of extraction and refining in Alberta to pipelines and alternative bitumen transport proposals and global climate implications.

2) Develop close ties between the interdisciplinary group and the emerging SCB organizational entity in Canada, ensuring that SCB's program work is well integrated with its growing institutional presence.

3) Work with other scientific and conservation organizations to continually assess the most effective role for SCB in what is an exceedingly complex set of issues at the science-policy interface.

*SCB value added:* SCB can maximize its marginal contribution to oil sands issues through the pursuit of a public role as science provider. The science regarding biodiversity impacts of oil sands development is growing, and presents numerous reasons for concern and caution. Integration of the emerging science and its implications is an unfilled niche, currently, and one that SCB is clearly able to fill in a credible manner.

## **II. Core Theme: Endangered Species and Scientific Integrity**

The US Endangered Species Act (ESA) is among the nation's bedrock environmental laws passed with bipartisan support in 1973. In the four decades since the Act's passage, the public has continued to support the Act's goal of preventing species extinctions. However, the Services' (FWS and NMFS) implementation of the Act has often suffered from political interference, and policy development has often lagged behind advances in conservation science. Similar issues are evident in implementation of the Species at Risk Act (SARA) in Canada. SCB can help address these two strategic policy initiatives through a) reviewing and integrating insights from recent conservation science and communicating their relevance to the Services, policymakers, and the public, and b) working to ensure that scientific integrity policies are effective in allowing use of such best science in ESA implementation.

Many regulations and policies affect implementation of the ESA. Thus, SCB needs to carefully determine its value-added role. Specifically, we are interested in examining those policies pertaining to the Services' definitions of both endangered/threatened status and recovery, particularly the application in listing and recovery determinations of a) the SPR ("significant portion of a species' range") concept, and b) concepts such as "ecologically-effective" population size that support the ESA's goals for ecosystem restoration. To support these initiatives, SCB will also focus strategically on reviewing listing decisions, recovery plans, and critical habitat determinations for a few high profile species determined annually by staff particularly those species that involve issues with broader relevance for ESA implementation.

Although the listing and recovery planning processes differs somewhat in Canada under SARA, SCB will also engage strategically in those processes to promote application of best science and scientific integrity. SCB will also address crosscutting issues in which the other policy priority areas (e.g., energy development) affect endangered species implementation (e.g., development of best practices for consideration of climate change in recovery planning) in both the US and Canada.

*Goal:* Ensure use of best science in enabling effective recovery efforts for listed species in the US and Canada, including protection of sufficient critical habitat and maintenance of ecologically effective populations and ecosystems.

*General Strategy:* Review of recovery plans, critical habitat, and listing determinations for select species; comments on proposed regulatory revisions; petitions for regulatory reform; affects of high profile projects (e.g., Canadian oil sands) on listed species.

### **III. Climate Change and Effects on Biodiversity**

Climate change and land-use practices represent unprecedented threats (often acting synergistically) to biological diversity in North America and around the world. SCB has a unique role in demonstrating how climate and other anthropogenic stressors impact biological diversity, especially rare and imperiled species and ecosystems. We have many members involved in climate adaptation and mitigation, as often reflected in our global and regional congresses and published in our journals. In addition, there is a paucity of sound science on land-use planning for conventional and renewable energy citing in relation to cumulative effects (NEPA) on biological diversity.

*Goals:* (1) translate science to decision makers regarding risks of climate change to biological diversity and suggest best practices for climate adaptation in land-use planning; (2) provide best science on identification of carbon storage potential (climate mitigation) and climatic refugia in ecosystems and best practices for maintaining and restoring these areas; and (3) develop and assess methods and best practices for assessing cumulative impacts of energy development (renewable and

non-renewables) on biological diversity and large landscapes and use this science to inform decisions on energy development.

*General Strategies:* act on carbon and forest conservation recommendations in Obama's Climate Action Plan by seeking new forest protections (federal lands), conduct outreach to Landscape Conservation Cooperatives, National Research Council on need for climate change report (initiate NRC report by seeking out congressional champion), recommend best practices for cumulative effects analysis in NEPA documents and state level planning (Western Governors); adoption (e.g., by CEQ) of an administrative program to make decisions on cumulative effects; and determination of whether existing regulations under NEPA are adequate and being implemented/enforced.

*SCB's Value-Added:* SCB is a leader in publishing articles on climate change; however, we have not fully utilized our abilities to translate this science into policy recommendations. Given limitations of resources, this is an area where SCB can leverage additional capacity by working in cooperation with other scientific societies to issue joint statements and initiate peer reviews of climate policies. In addition, it is an area where we can tap into our broad expertise on-the-ground with chapters and members working on adaptation projects by example. This particular program theme has great potential to crossover with the other two policy themes – ESA and Canadian oil sands, thus, contributing to our ability to leverage policy reforms and tap into our extensive membership base.