

## **Pittsburgh Business Times, May 30, 2003**

### **Pa. Biodiversity Partnership invites industry input on conservation plan Nonprofit works to conserve state's native species, habitats**

By Christopher Davis

SOUTH SIDE -- Formulating a plan to conserve the state's diverse natural resources and species requires the input of a diversity of voices, according to Sue Thompson, president and CEO of the Pennsylvania Biodiversity Partnership.

And the South Side-based nonprofit environmental group that Ms. Thompson heads has spent the better part of this year soliciting the opinions and concerns of industry, environmental, recreational and government leaders that will serve as the backbone of a plan aimed at conserving Pennsylvania's native species and their habitats.

The partnership, charged by the state with formulating such a conservation plan, has also sought input from public focus groups and surveys filled out by individuals at Earth Day and other environmental events.

"I see everybody in the state as potentially a stakeholder," Ms. Thompson said. "It's an urban issue, it's a rural issue, it's a suburban issue. It's about the economy. It's the essence of sustainability, using natural resources wisely in the present, so future generations have the same benefit.

"Right now we're at the stage of deciding what's going to be in the plan. There's discussion and debate. It's an evolving process."

#### **'UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION'**

The Biodiversity Partnership's roots extend back to former governor Tom Ridge's administration. In 1998, Mr. Ridge, now head of the Department of Homeland Security, authorized a blue-ribbon panel, called the 21st Century Environmental Commission. That commission recommended the formation of an independent, public-private partnership to oversee the compilation of a comprehensive plan for biodiversity conservation.

Biodiversity is the variety of species found in a specific area, the genetic makeup of those species and the natural communities in which they occur.

The Biodiversity Partnership was formed in 2000. The organization is funded with a mix of private foundation money and public money from the state and federal governments.

Rather than basing the organization in Harrisburg, which was "too close to state government," Ms. Thompson said Pittsburgh was selected partly because of its proximity to a number of environmental organizations, as well as research and educational institutions affiliated with the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University.

In 2001, the first Biodiversity Partnership board was formed. It included, as it does today, representatives from conservation organizations, such as The Nature Conservancy of Pennsylvania, the state chapter of The Wildlife Society and the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy; business and industry groups, including the Pennsylvania General Energy Corp., the Hardwood Lumber Manufacturers Association of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Farm Bureau; as well as educational institutions, such as the Carnegie Museum of Natural History; and outdoor recreational agencies, such as the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission; among others.

That board and the Biodiversity Partnership compiled a "snapshot" report in 2002 summarizing the status of Pennsylvania's wildlife and their habitats, laws, policies, funding and educational resources relevant to biodiversity.

According to the report, Pennsylvania is home to more than 25,000 species of known organisms -- more than 800 of which are considered rare, threatened or endangered.

Animals, plants and wildlife are being lost each year because of natural forces, human activities, neglect and a lack of coordination between regulatory agencies and conservation groups. Information about the state's biodiversity is scattered among various state regulatory agencies and environmental organizations, often in formats that are incomplete, out-of-date or inaccessible, the snapshot report contends.

Through a statewide biodiversity conservation plan, the Biodiversity Partnership hopes to correct those problems, while marking out a clear path for conservation efforts in the future.

#### IMPROVING THE SITUATION

By the end of June, Ms. Thompson said the Biodiversity Partnership plans to have a blueprint in place that will serve as the basis for an eventual formal statewide Biodiversity Conservation Plan, which is expected to be completed in 2005.

The conservation document will be promoted at public meetings around the state and issued to state lawmakers.

The plan will identify funding sources for implementing new conservation policies, as well as environmental education programs, and make recommendations for measuring conservation progress, among other initiatives.

"It's going to try to improve the situation," Ms. Thompson said. "It may not solve all the problems, but if you improve the situation, you've made a major step forward."

In addition to seeking the input of industry, environmental and government sources in Pennsylvania, Ms. Thompson said she has also attended conferences and events in other states to speak with officials about how they've compiled similar conservation plans. She said in most states, government or regulatory agencies have formulated such plans and then have gone out to solicit input from other sources.

The effort to conserve biodiversity, however, cannot be achieved solely through regulatory means, Ms. Thompson said. That's why the Biodiversity Partnership has also tried to involve groups such as farmers and other private land owners who hold the bulk of Pennsylvania's land.

"Whether it's someone who owns a city lot or a thousand acres of forest land," Ms. Thompson said, "these people have to have sort of the will and the skills to practice biodiversity."

William Adams, director of natural resources for the Pennsylvania Farm Bureau and a member of the Biodiversity Partnership board, said he's noticed an emphasis from the partnership's members on cooperation to conserve the state's resources, rather than regulation.

"So far, I've had a very positive relationship with all the members," Mr. Adams said. "They seem to be concerned about the farmers' point of view."

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