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Statewide biodiversity, wildlife plans being developed

By Bob Frye, Tribune-Review Outdoors Editor

Hunters and anglers might soon be asked to do more to lend their voices to an effort to conserve the state's plants, animals, fish and insects.

The Pennsylvania Biodiversity Partnership -- a public-private entity working to determine what is known about Pennsylvania's natural resources and develop a plan for saving those species -- is about one year away from releasing a final statewide, comprehensive biodiversity plan.

It's only about 45 days away, though, from giving wider release to some preliminary recommendations about what needs to be done to make sure the state's 25,000 species survive into the future.

Also in 2005, the Partnership plans to draft some new members onto its board of directors, which currently features representatives of various state agencies -- including the Pennsylvania Game and Fish and Boat commissions -- conservation organizations, academia, private landowners and industry. Sue Thompson, president of the Partnership, hopes to add some more sportsmen to the board.

Those board members will have one main task: recommend ways to better conserve the state's habitat and wildlife while still allowing for economic development and recreation.

"We're trying to develop a vision of where we want to go, see what obstacles are in the way, and decide what we need to do to overcome those," Thompson said.

There's plenty of evidence that such a plan is needed, said Tom Kerr, president of the Wildlands Conservancy, a land conservancy in eastern Pennsylvania.

A biodiversity "state of the state" report released by the Partnership in 2002 showed that Pennsylvania is home to at least 25,000 species and perhaps many more. Little or nothing is known, though, about how abundant or widespread most of those organisms are or what risks they're facing.

Already, 150 species have been lost and another 130 are considered to be endangered or threatened because of the impact of continuing habitat fragmentation and pollution.

If Pennsylvania is to save what it has left, it needs some kind of plan in place to identify problems and suggest possible solutions, Kerr said.

"I'm not a doomsdayer about this, but there are some places where birds and animals once existed that don't have those species now because there's just nothing to eat there any more," Kerr said. "What we lose is the diversity of plant and animal life."

Sportsmen need not fear any effort to promote biodiversity, said Dan Tredinnick, press secretary for the Fish and Boat Commission. In fact, they need to understand the connection between things like water quality, obscure species and popular game species. That connection is biodiversity.

"The 'B' word is a bad word in some circles, but when we're talking about biodiversity, we're just talking about maintaining the abundance of species and diversity of species in Pennsylvania," Tredinnick said.

"I know some things like minnows and daces don't generate too much excitement, but they support species like trout and bass that people do get excited about. At some point, all those things coalesce.

Thompson said the plan will not dictate policy, nor will it mandate what private landowners can do with their property. Instead, it will try to pull together all of the information out there about the state's natural resources and offer ideas for addressing the most pressing conservation issues.

The biodiversity plan might also link with a separate statewide wildlife plan being developed by the Game and Fish and Boat commissions at the behest of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The commissions have to develop the plan if they want to remain eligible to receive federal funds to study "species of greatest conservation need".

"It's as much about identifying what you don't know as it is about identifying what you do know. Then, instead of just saying you need money, you can say this is what we would do with the money if we had it," said John McDonald, a wildlife research specialist with the USFWS in Hadley, Mass.

When the wildlife and biodiversity plans are done, it will be up to groups like the partnership to push to see that their recommendations are followed, Thompson said.

"The plan is not the end. It's only the beginning," Thompson said. "The Partnership wasn't created to write a plan. It was created to address a lack of coordination among stakeholders, not only in state government agencies, but at all levels.

"Unless the plan is being moved forward in future years, you've spent a lot of money and done a lot of work and come up with a wonderful plan, but you've ultimately failed."

The Partnership held its annual conference last month. Some of its preliminary recommendations -- like a call to develop a state endangered species list -- were unveiled there.

Those recommendations will be posted on the Partnership's web site, www.pabiodiversity.org by the end of January. Sometime thereafter, a series of regional meetings might be held to gather additional input.

John Rawlins, a Partnership board member and associate curator of invertebrate zoology at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, said it's important that all those who care about the state's wild places and wild things work to make sure the plan does some good.

"It matters to Pennsylvania. It matters what this little-talked-about group is doing," Rawlins said. "It's overdue. The citizenry in this state should be alarmed that so little otherwise is being done."