

# **Charter: Great Lakes Region Aquatic Habitat Connectivity Collaborative**

## **Preamble –Aquatic Habitat Connectivity**

The nature and extent of habitat connectivity is a key contributor to biodiversity conservation and fisheries management for the Great Lakes Basin. Both the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement and the Convention on Great Lakes Fisheries recognize the need to protect and rehabilitate habitat. The participants in this collaborative share a common interest in furthering habitat connectivity within Great Lakes watersheds.

Over the past two centuries, dams and other anthropogenic barriers, including impassable culverts and concrete channels, have been placed into Great Lakes streams and rivers by humans for economic and societal purposes such as flood management, sea lamprey control, generating hydro-electric power, enable navigation, and provide recreational opportunities. These dams and barriers, while serving important societal needs, also can be detrimental to the functioning of aquatic ecosystems. In the Great Lakes region, barriers fragment riverine habitat and impede movement of fishes and other aquatic organisms within riverine networks, and between the lakes and the tributaries possibly reducing genetic diversity of aquatic species and impeding energy transport, nutrient flow and recycling. Conversely, some barriers provide system benefits by: assisting with the control of sea lamprey and other detrimental invasive species, thereby protecting threatened, endangered, or vulnerable native species; preventing upstream contaminant spread; and, possibly decreasing pathogen spread.

There is increasing interest from federal, tribal, provincial, state, and municipal governments, non-government organizations, and private individuals to remove or bypass barriers including dams and road stream crossings to reconnect aquatic habitats that are public trust resources regulated and managed by government. As such, agencies are reviewing an increasing number of proposals to remove or modify barriers. These proposals may originate from within agencies, by stakeholders, or other interest groups. Many of these projects are supported by documents such as watershed management plans. Locally focused and developed projects could benefit from improved coordination, collaboration, and awareness of larger-scale impacts to the ecological system, coupled with clearly stated specific objectives aligned with broader regional goals.

## **Charter purpose**

This Charter defines the mission and vision for the Great Lakes Region Aquatic Habitat Connectivity Collaborative (hereafter referred to as the Collaborative), as well as roles and decision making procedures. The Collaborative replaces the Aquatic Connectivity Focal Area within the Upper Midwest & Great Lakes Landscape Conservation Cooperative (hereafter referred to as the LCC). Throughout the Charter the phrase “aquatic habitat connectivity” will be referred to as “connectivity.”

## **Vision**

A connected Great Lakes and their tributaries optimized to: increase or maintain population levels and genetic diversity of desired aquatic species; to allow bi-direction movement of energy and nutrients by fish; prevent unacceptable population increases of detrimental species; and, meet economic and social objectives.

## **Mission**

To work collaboratively within a diverse set of governments, industries, non-governmental organizations, and the public to establish connectivity targets and decision support tools within the Great Lakes basin based on the best available science.

## **Purpose of the Collaborative**

The purpose of the Collaborative is to harness the capacities, expertise, and abilities of all partners in support of common conservation outcomes for connectivity within riverine networks and between the lakes and the tributaries in the Great Lakes Basin, and to serve as a strategic forum for collaboration, coordination, and integration. Currently, the LCC has a working group focused on conservation in coastal wetlands and connections will be made between the Collaborative and that group where overlapping interests or project work may be anticipated or planned. The Collaborative will also serve the LCC by developing, prioritizing, reviewing, and recommending LCC-funded research that supports the Collaborative mission and applied management actions on connectivity. The Collaborative is an extension of existing partnership efforts, and seeks to enhance connectivity outcomes across the Great Lakes Basin.

The Collaborative will articulate and pursue a shared vision and action agenda. This will be accomplished through, but not limited to, the following key actions:

- Establishment of shared aquatic habitat priorities and connectivity targets
  - Compile existing connectivity priorities at ecologically significant scales across the Great Lakes Basin as a basis for understanding commonalities and differences in priorities.
  - Where possible, develop consensus on Great Lakes Basin connectivity targets by first understanding existing biological, social, and economic needs and then building upon commonalities and resolving information gaps and differences.
  - Develop a shared vision for implementation of agreed upon Great Lakes Basin connectivity targets, priorities, objectives, and actions including incorporation of evolving information and tools.
  - Develop a voluntary framework for resolving conflicts over Great Lakes Basin connectivity issues.
- Support progress toward mutually agreed upon connectivity targets
  - Develop a draft strategic and tactical implementation plan for connectivity in the Great Lakes Basin.

- Elevate awareness and understanding of connectivity and build support for new funding sources.
- Identify opportunities to fully leverage funding in pursuit of shared connectivity targets.
- Promote the development and acceptance of best practices related to the design and implementation of connectivity projects
  - Develop standardized evaluation approaches, objectives, criteria, monitoring protocols, tools, and reporting requirements.
  - Share standardized monitoring protocols, data, and tools.
  - Develop and implement standardized methodologies to track progress of connectivity outcomes and outputs at ecologically significant scales.
- Stimulate research and advance knowledge for improved connectivity decision making
  - Where possible, establish research priorities, make them broadly available through outreach initiatives to other entities, and recommend research projects for LCC funding that both fill information gaps and support the Collaborative's agreed upon priorities and connectivity targets.
  - Determine the best standardized approach to share data, knowledge, and information necessary to improve decision making about connectivity tradeoffs.
  - Support and develop decision support tools and information.

All the roles may not begin or occur simultaneously, but a fully functioning Collaborative based on the tenants of adaptive resource management will address the above objectives.

### **Structure and Governance**

Existing aquatic habitat fragmentation negatively affects aquatic resources both within river networks and between tributaries and the Great Lakes. It crosses local, state, provincial, federal, and tribal jurisdictions across two countries. Existing structures and processes like those associated with *"A Joint Strategic Plan for Management of Great Lakes Fisheries"* have evolved to collaboratively address aquatic resource challenges. These existing structures and processes will be thoroughly examined and evaluated by the Coordinators and the Collaborative members to determine the most appropriate structure and governance for the Collaborative that will enhance and/or complement the success of existing connectivity partnerships and structures. Pertaining to recommendations, decisions, and actions, the Collaborative will make decisions by consensus and clearly state and document individual member's concerns in cases where a "live-with" consensus level was reached, at minimum.

### **Relationship to other Groups and Existing Aquatic Connectivity Efforts**

The LCC is a non-regulatory and voluntary partnership comprised of natural resource agencies and organizations from the Midwest and Great Lakes region. Therefore by extension, the Collaborative is non-regulatory and voluntary. The Collaborative supports and does not abrogate or diminish the authorities and responsibilities of partners or member agencies of the LCC. It is anticipated that partners will engage in those targets, goals, and objectives that are important to them and that align those with their respective missions and resources.

## Proposed Structure

The Collaborative is established by the LCC:

- 1) The LCC steering committee shall:
  - a) Provide overall coordination, support, and guidance for the Collaborative; and,
  - b) Seek fiscal resources and contribute, within the missions and capacities of steering committee member's home organizations, voluntary in-kind contributions toward achieving agreed upon goals and their associated objectives and actions.
  
- 2) Strategic and Technical Aquatic Habitat Connectivity Coordinators shall:
  - a) Provide respective overall Collaborative coordination.
  - b) Refine the initial vision and mission statements based on Collaborative participant feedback during the first year and begin to establish mutually agreed upon priorities.
  - c) During the second year, develop agreed upon connectivity targets and their associated objectives and actions.
  - d) During the second and future years, pursue identified agreed upon objectives and actions and continue to refine connectivity priorities and targets as experience is gained.
  
- 3) As the structure of the Collaborative evolves, participation is also expected to evolve and initially will include key constituencies of connectivity restoration such as:
  - a) USFWS representative
  - b) USDA/Forest Service representative
  - c) Canadian federal and provincial government representatives (one from each agency)
  - d) Tribal representative
  - e) First Nations representative
  - f) State departments of natural resources (could be in coordination with the Lake Committees – one from each State)
  - g) GLFC representative
  - h) TNC representative
  - i) NFWF representative
  - j) Great Lakes Basin Fish Habitat Partnership representative
  - k) Hydropower representative
  - l) Navigation representative
  - m) Angling community representative
  - n) Commercial fishing community representative
  - o) Non-governmental watershed restoration organization representative
  - p) Ontario Conservation Authorities (not more than three representatives)
  - q) Strategic and Technical Aquatic Habitat Connectivity Coordinators (non-voting)

## **Collaborative Operating Principles**

### Convening of Meetings

- Coordinators will convene meetings via conference call and as needed, in-person meetings. Meetings may take the form of work groups, task forces, focus groups, willing collaborators, and similar groups.
- A call for meeting topics and agenda items from Collaborative members will occur at least one month before any meeting date. Meeting topics and agenda will be established and sent at least one week prior to meetings.

### Communication

- Coordinators will distribute draft meeting notes to all meeting participants within 1 week following the meeting.
- Comments and corrections on draft notes are to be provided by meeting participants to the Coordinators at least 1 week before the next meeting.
- Coordinators will facilitate review and approval of previous meeting notes at the beginning of each meeting.

### Meeting Conduct

- Meetings will be deferred until at least one of the Coordinators is hired.
- After all meeting agenda items have been addressed, time will be provided for all in attendance to provide additional content or considerations.
- Meetings will end with a clear understanding of expectations and assignments for next steps.
- The Coordinators will keep a permanent record of meeting attendees, key issues raised, and actions required.

### Decision Making

- The Coordinators assist the Collaborative in generating mutually agreed upon recommendations, decisions, and actions.

## **Staffing/capacity**

Immediately hire the Strategic Aquatic Habitat Connectivity Coordinator, located at the Great Lakes Fishery Commission office, Ann Arbor, MI, and the Technical Aquatic Habitat Connectivity Coordinator, located at the USFWS Green Bay Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office, Green Bay, WI. Direct supervision will be provided by the Great Lakes Fishery Commission and the USFWS, respectively.