

**Planning for Biodiversity: Strategies for Developers and Municipalities**  
**Marist College, April 29, 2008**

**Habitat Assessment Guidelines**

**Background**

1. Development patterns affect rural character and ecosystem functions.
2. Environmental impact assessment typically focuses on one parcel or site, and divides ecological information into many 'separate' pieces (e.g. one endangered species, a pond, a portion of a small stream). However, natural resources exist in relationship to each other- they are connected and interrelated and impacts to them cannot be effectively evaluated in fragments.
3. Environmental protection challenges include consideration of:
  - Human dependence on habitats and healthy ecosystem functions
  - Protection of quality habitat as well as scenic views
  - Need for both protection of habitat and biodiversity and encouragement of well planned development /economic viability
  - True cost: It is usually more expensive to restore or replace damaged ecosystems (if this is even possible) than to protect them in the first place
  - Effects of climate change on habitats and biodiversity
4. Habitat assessment guidelines were first developed by the town of Milan in response to the need for:
  - More complete information on habitats during environmental impact and site plan reviews
  - Consideration of more than threatened and endangered species to fully understand impacts and develop effective mitigation
  - More consistent and fair project review policy
  - Streamlined review process.

**Characteristics**

5. Examples of how Habitat Assessment Guidelines provide a different approach to the assessment of impacts on plants, animals, habitats, and ecosystems:

Comprehensive evaluation of species:

- Expands species consideration beyond only threatened and endangered species to include species of conservation concern and the habitat conditions they require
- Based on basic assumption it may be more effective to base mitigation on protecting high quality habitat (or improving existing habitat), especially habitat known to be of importance to rare species. Rare species are generally not easy to find; searching for them can be costly and time consuming.

- Habitat Assessment Guidelines recognize that if appropriate habitat is present and in good condition, species known to use that habitat could be present, or use the site in the future. It is often hard to prove that a species that may be present is not using a particular site, now or in future.
- NYS Comprehensive Wildlife Strategy has documented habitat changes and effects on animal Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN); its goal is to ensure that these species continue to thrive, and that common species remain common. Habitat Assessment Guidelines support that same goal.

Consideration of interrelationships between species and the habitats (or habitat complexes) they need to survive.

Evaluation of all habitats: aquatic, wetland, upland (forested, fields and shrubland).

Consideration of habitats adjacent to a particular project site including water resources that lie downstream, so that impacts to larger systems (e.g. watersheds) can be described, and necessary habitat connections can be protected.

Impacts: Relate specific development activities to specific habitat characteristics or species' habitat needs using tables (samples include in the Guidelines); this aids mitigation planning by identifying specific impacts that affect specific resources.

Proactive approach: Habitat assessment can be applied proactively, outside the regulatory process, to provide guidelines for creation or improvement of attractive, functional and sustainable habitats

### **Application**

6. Habitat assessment guidelines are being used by a number of towns in Orange, Dutchess and Ulster Counties. Shawangunk Ridge Biodiversity Partnership's Green Assets Program has provided several townships with assistance in developing Guidelines.

Towns use the guidelines in a variety of ways:

- Most of them modify guideline details to best meet specific local needs.
- Guidelines may be adopted as planning board policy.
- Portions of the guidelines may be used during SEQRA or site plan review,
- Some towns are considering converting guidelines into local laws for greater clarity, consistency and fairness.

7. Habitat protection and well-planned development are not 'either-or' issues. We need both.

8. Overview of a sample Habitat Assessment Guidelines annotated table of contents is presented in a separate handout.

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*Habitat Assessment Guidelines*

*Annotated Sample Table of Contents*

**1. Authority-** *Federal, state laws, municipal codes*

**2. Purpose/ Regulatory Basis for Habitat Assessments-** *To describe existing environmental conditions, identify sensitive resources and potential impacts, federal/ state regulatory requirements*

**3. Habitat Assessment in the Planning Sequence (Timing)-** *When and how to apply the Guidelines*

**4. Creating the Habitat Assessment Report:**

**A. Introduction-** *Report provides standard methods in a consistent format*

**B. Methods-** *Sources of information, field observation conditions and methods, species surveys*

**C. Habitat map-** *Includes wetland and stream delineation, existing structures and roads, habitat boundaries*

**D. Identification of wetlands and water resources-** *Includes aquifer recharge areas*

**E. Habitat description and evaluation:**

i. Description of existing habitats- *Includes aquatic, wetland and upland habitat onsite and adjacent to site; tables including habitat type, size, vegetation, extent of impacts.*

ii. Species associated with habitat types- *overview of species associated with habitats described in report*

iii. Species of ‘Conservation Concern’- *Defines ‘conservation concern’; identifies species likely to be present in habitats described above and their habitat needs. Table may include species, habitats and habitat quality. If appropriate habitat is present and in good condition, it is assumed that species known to use that habitat are present or could be present in the future.*

iv. Evaluation of habitat quality and condition- *Includes biodiversity value*

**F. Potential impacts-** *May use tables illustrating potential impacts of development by associating specific development activities with specific habitat components. This aids mitigation planning by identifying specific impacts that affect specific resources.*

**G. Summary, Quality Control-** *Town review of habitat assessment information*

**5. Appendices:**

Habitat list- *Habitats on any particular site may include but are not necessarily limited to listed types*

Species of conservation concern lists