



Metro Conservation Network (MCN)

Enhancing stewardship through collaboration & coordination

Working across boundaries for healthy ecosystems

Introduction and Background

The greater Twin Cities region has bountiful natural resources in many treasured places. Generations of private and public conservation efforts have created a nationally renowned system of parks, trails, greenways, and protected natural areas. As the Region continues to grow and change, a strong conservation ethic, ongoing commitment, and continued investment in our precious natural resources must be a priority today and in the future. Without it, our irreplaceable natural areas can become fragmented and degraded — lessening their ability to provide life-sustaining services, health, and well-being for all people, as well as for delivering resilient, functional wildlife habitat.

Need for a Collaborative Network

Our Region has no shortage of dedicated natural resource professionals who work within agencies, non-profit organizations, and for-profit entities. While individual agencies and organizations have accomplished much in their own right, we believe that we can produce a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts by coordinating our efforts. If done in geographic isolation, even significant steps are often too small and disconnected to fully protect and enhance healthy natural systems and the services and benefits they provide.

The desire to coordinate efforts among natural resource professionals and the geographies within which they work is not a new concept. More than twenty years ago, the Minnesota DNR launched an innovative initiative to take a region-wide approach to conservation. Known as Metro Greenways, it was a collaborative effort among agencies and organizations that focused on protecting, connecting and improving natural areas in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. Although these early efforts showed promise, the initiative did not receive the sustained funding and support needed to continue. Yet, conservation professionals continue to acknowledge that more conservation success could occur if there were a greater degree of coordination among individuals, groups, organizations, agencies, jurisdictions, and others engaged in this vital work.

Why now?

In December of 2019, a group of 100+ individuals from various agencies and organizations assembled to discuss the Metro Greenways Collaborative's legacy and future opportunities for conservation in the fast-growing Twin Cities metropolitan area. There was broad support among this group for greater collaboration among natural resource stewardship entities working in the region.

Moreover, we recognized our conservation work needs to focus on doing two things better and more deliberately:

1. factor climate change into natural resource stewardship decision-making; and
2. include traditionally underrepresented communities in natural resource protection and stewardship initiatives.

Note: Traditionally underrepresented communities include people who experience barriers to participating in natural resource conservation and outdoor recreation activities due to economic, racial, cultural, disability or LGBTQ+ identification.

Participants noted that the effort should be expanded outside of the seven-county Twin Cities metropolitan area. Rather than creating a new organization, the concept of a value-added “Conservation Network” emerged as a way to more effectively harness and leverage existing interests, energy, activities, knowledge, and resources. At the same time, we recognized that a minimal number of dedicated staff would be necessary to facilitate this Network to avoid the shortcomings that come by relying exclusively on volunteers.

What has happened?

A small group of natural resource planners, managers, and practitioners assembled as a steering team, with planning assistance provided by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. The team's goal was to synthesize the results of the December 2019 event and begin developing the framework for the Conservation Network. Five topical workgroups were also organized in 2020, and together with the steering team, began functioning collectively as the Metro Conservation Network (MCN). A draft vision with goals and strategies integrating climate change and embracing diversity, equity, and inclusion was developed. The steering team continues to discuss the organizational structure that will best meet the needs of the Network. Work completed by the steering team and the workgroups was presented at a follow-up event in December 2020.

Next Steps

During the next two years, the MCN will operate on a trial basis, with individuals and organizations participating at the level of in-kind effort and financial contribution that is feasible for them. This document, including the following Vision, Goals, and Actions, will be used to solicit interest from private and public funding sources to support the work of the MCN. A top priority will be to fund a Coordinator, in addition to the projects described below, and others that will be further detailed. Interested individuals and groups will continue to refine and advance priority action items identified during preceding strategy sessions.

MCN Vision

To facilitate collaborative, and advance individual efforts to plan, protect, restore, and maintain ecosystem resiliency, biodiversity and connectivity throughout the greater Twin Cities metro region for the well-being of all people and the changing natural environment.

Goals and Actions

Six working groups developed goals, strategies, and actions around specifically identified themes:

- Communications and Engagement
- Data and Technology
- Land and Water Protection
- Restoration and Stewardship
- Social Dimensions
- Organizational Structure and Implementation

On the following pages, each theme includes a statement on *climate resilience* and a statement on *diversity, equity, and inclusion*, together with a table of actions that outlines anticipated next steps. The Metropolitan Council defines climate resiliency as responding, adapting, and thriving under changing climatic conditions. The MCN represents diversity, equity, and inclusion as all people belong and deserve fairness, justice and inclusivity.

Communications and Engagement Goals and Actions

Goal: Develop information platforms for natural resource stewardship professionals, decision-makers, landowners, and the public.

Climate Resilience and DEI Relevance

Having a central repository of resources will be helpful to local natural resource managers seeking to learn about best practices to cope with new flood seasons, new invasive species, and other climate change impacts. A network website can be a repository for resources and training to connect with diverse audiences and recruit a more diverse workforce.

Strategy/Action	What and Why it is Needed
Develop a communications plan.	A communications plan identifies objectives, key messages, audiences, and action steps. The MCN has identified a need to communicate our regional success in protecting and restoring metro natural areas and the need for future action. Marketing, message framing, and language are essential for success. Exemplifying empathy, flexibility, good listening, persistence, and patience are critical.
Create an MCN online presence for internal and external audiences.	The group has an immediate need for an online presence with information about the MCN and its activities to add events and resources. There is no existing communication vehicle in the greater metro region that speaks to all the natural resource professionals in the Region, including counties outside of seven counties that traditionally defined the metro area. Longer-term, based on the results of the communications plan, an externally focused online presence is needed. The Region has become more diverse and grown beyond seven counties. We must make more significant efforts to broaden accessibility for all. There is no single online source of information on local, state, federal lands and other natural areas open to the public. The current system requires a person to know who owns the property and then seek information from respective websites. It is a confusing, ineffective system that makes it difficult for current and new residents and visitors.
Create and distribute an electronic newsletter or provide content to existing newsletters.	An electronic newsletter will be directed to our e-list (currently at 200+). It will feature conservation stories (successes, issues), upcoming events of interest, MCN updates, and links to resources that may be of interest to members. Regular communication will keep participants informed and engaged.

Data and Technology Goals and Actions

Goal: Utilize new technology, data, and analytical tools to update information critical for planning, communicating, protecting, and improving healthy natural resource systems.

Climate Resilience and DEI Relevance

Changing climate regimes means changing habitats, particularly where land and water interface. More accurate land cover information can identify habitat and water projects where new or broader and more robust habitat restoration and protection are needed to facilitate easier migration of plant and animal species. Land cover information identifies where corridors and natural area gaps occur in urban regions and correlated with census tract information and other data layers.

Strategy/Action	What and Why it is Needed
Support upgrades to the Minnesota Land Cover Classification System and mapping.	The Minnesota Land Cover Classification System (MLCCS) is a critical tool that provides essential information for natural resource managers and planners to identify and prioritize non-developed areas that may have habitat protection and restoration value. It identifies and categorizes developed and non-developed sites by land cover rather than land use, focusing on classifying the existent vegetation of undeveloped land. Some of these classifications may need updating. This system was initially completed for six of the seven core metro counties. Although Dakota, Hennepin, and Washington counties have kept much of this information updated, this information is outdated for the other core counties and never undertaken for the “collar” counties.
Explore the feasibility and utility of developing a user-friendly Greater Metro Region Conservation Map	A Greater Metro Region Conservation map would assemble all federal, state, regional, county, and local protected areas and priorities for future protection. While there are individual maps that document public land ownership and protected private land in the greater metro area, there is no single data layer or source that provides comprehensive information on the conservation efforts of the diverse public and private entities involved in these efforts. Moreover, existing sources do not document natural resource management status. Having both a single internal and external source for comprehensive and integrated conservation information will make it easier for traditional and non-traditional users to access these areas and assist staff in determining where there are critical collaborative conservation needs and opportunities.
Update the Regionally Significant Ecological Areas Model (RSEA) .	The RSEA is a GIS-based analysis of ecologically significant terrestrial and wetland areas that is available in the MN Geo-Spatial Commons. The model is based on MLCCS land cover data and was last updated in 2008. The model needs to be reviewed by a landscape ecologist to ensure the indicator species and other assumptions are still valid. In addition, the model scripts also need to be updated.

Land and Water Protection and Planning Goals and Actions

Goal: Develop resources for local land and water protection planning efforts.

Climate Resilience and DEI Relevance

How local governments prepare and plan for climate change varies significantly across the metro. More research on the effects of urbanization that has taken place in the last 20 years would be beneficial. It might provide data to support preemptive rather than reactive protection actions. New data and climate change modeling, incorporated at the sub-regional and regional planning scale, must sustain plant and animal communities that cross-jurisdictional and watershed boundaries. Plans are forward-thinking documents, and without engaging the next generation of conservationists, it will be more challenging to achieve understanding and buy-in for these plans. Engaging a more diverse group of people in developing these plans will make plans more relevant and equitable.

Strategy/Action	What and Why it is Needed
Develop an effective case statement for local land and water planning and protection and management.	The cumulative impact of land protection projects during the past 20 years is impressive and continues to grow. Public and private land protection continues to be challenging, especially in light of renewed residential development, conventional agricultural practices, mining pressures, and structural [political and taxation] failures that often present communities with a false choice between improving tax base and natural resource protection.
Develop a list of prioritized plant communities, habitats, and natural resource areas in the most critical need of protection to inform local land protection efforts.	There are many different natural resource plans and priorities, but they cover different geographies – watersheds, counties, cities, park districts, etc. The distribution of wildlife and native plant communities within these geographies does not follow jurisdictional and ownership boundaries. Often, there are geomorphic areas or habitat complexes required to support viable resident plant and animal communities and migrating species. Working as a group or geographic subgroups, natural resource professionals can more effectively work across boundaries to achieve clean water, improved habitat for target species, and other goals.
Assess gaps and opportunities to plan and implement conservation projects across jurisdictional and ownership boundaries to protect and improve functional natural systems.	MCN teams will analyze the proposed Greater Metro Conservation Map data to highlight where collaborative work can be focused so that the sum is more significant than individual efforts.
Develop a compelling case statement for more expansive state and local government natural resource planning that includes the need for more significant commitment and investment in long-term stewardship.	To achieve desired natural system protection, natural resource planning needs to take place at various scales. MCN will develop a practical and inspiring case statement explaining that as communities grow and develop, they must also include comprehensive natural resource planning. Without having a natural resource information and implementation plan that articulates data, goals, priorities, strategies, and action steps that are fully integrated with a city’s or county’s comprehensive plan, opportunities may be missed to protect or restore critical waterways and habitat and other ecosystem services. Completion of natural resource protection and management plans also provide a means to access additional funding.

Restoration and Stewardship Goals and Actions

Goal: Advance the practice of on-the-ground natural resource restoration and address long-term management issues, emphasizing climate change adaptation.

Climate Resilience and DEI Relevance

The metro Region is unique in representing the state’s three major ecological biomes: prairie, eastern broadleaf forest, and northern (mixed) forest. Seasonal phenology and rainfall regimes are rapidly changing the interactions between plants and animals in our region. All 3.4 million people in the region are part of this equation. Whether they are natural resource owners, users, or bystanders, through effective and authentic engagement, they can be inspired and empowered to be good stewards.

Strategy/Action	What and Why it is Needed
<p>Serve as an information hub to share lessons learned and training opportunities for both professionals and landowners.</p>	<p>This hub, as part of the communications platforms described above, will share:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lessons learned and training related to natural resource restoration and management. • Research comparing restoration practices, including opportunities to collaborate with researchers in establishing management units with experimental techniques for monitoring and statistical analysis. • Information on Keystone Species* and related management strategies for ecological sub-sections and processes that provide an umbrella to rare species. *Needs to be developed. <p>Without comparing notes, experiences, successful techniques, and failures, we will repeat mistakes and not benefit from shared knowledge. Without common standards and metrics, we won’t be able to assess success and failure.</p>
<p>Develop and promote a stewardship plan template</p>	<p>A stewardship plan describes the existing and proposed work area, proposed actions, and a work plan for initial implementation, long-term stewardship, and monitoring. A typical template (utilizing the Dakota County effort as the starting point) would streamline and create joint stewardship planning and monitoring expectations across ownership and jurisdiction boundaries for both natural and working lands.</p>
<p>Develop a case statement for long-term maintenance provisions.</p>	<p>This case statement will articulate a compelling rationale for ensuring that long-term maintenance is a critical component of stewardship plans, funding, and implementation, one of the most vexing challenges to this work. While funding may be available for acquisition and restoration/enhancement and capital projects that provide access, funding for long-term maintenance is much more challenging to secure, threatening initial restoration investments and the health of protected natural resources.</p>

Organizational Structure and Implementation Goals and Actions

Goal: Create an inclusive, sustainable organization to facilitate MCN activities.

Climate Resilience and DEI Relevance

Our region has the largest and most diverse population in the state and with three biomes converging, and an intricate mosaic of natural resources stewardship entities to manage them. This multi-faceted complexity creates the opportunity for MCN partners lead the way to develop and implement effective, sustainable, inclusive, and resilient solutions to the challenges we face together on all fronts; social, political, institutional, and scientific. We have an opportunity to support new leadership and an obligation to engage a diverse next generation of conservationists.

Context

Lessons learned from past collaborative efforts remind us that it is not feasible to accomplish the conservation vision or achieve a fraction of the initial goals without formalizing the structure of the MCN and having more resources dedicated to the effort. Currently, the MCN is a loose affiliation of agency, non-profit, and for-profit natural resource professionals, with a common interest in advancing natural areas protection, restoration, and planning in the greater Twin Cities metro area. People are participating in the context of their work time availability. The DNR Central Region Planner is coordinating the effort as a small part of a more extensive work portfolio. A steering team of eight people continues to meet monthly to define further how the MCN can move forward in the future. They also serve as liaisons to five working groups that have been meeting throughout the year to develop future priorities and provide input into this document.

Strategy/Action	What and Why it is Needed
<p>Seek stable operational funding for staff and technical support to develop further and sustain the MCN.</p>	<p>Only a limited amount of work can be accomplished with the existing structure. Based on collective experience with past collaborative efforts, without funding and staff dedicated to organizing meetings, maintaining the database of participants, writing or coordinating grants, and performing communications tasks, such a collaborative effort is not feasible. A coordinator whose sole focus is on this effort is required. However, for the MCN to fully function, more than one staff person is needed. It is also critical to make the metro conservation community more inclusive and provide leadership opportunities, staffing, and mentoring.</p> <p>Staffing recommendations include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full-Time Coordinator • Mid-level GIS/Data Analyst/Technician • Mid-level Communications (social media and web) • Interns, with an emphasis on on applicants from underrepresented communities.
<p>Seek a sponsoring organization that is willing to provide space and administrative and fiscal services on a contractual or in-kind basis</p>	<p>Based on several factors, the Steering Team has concluded that it is not desirable or necessary for the MCN to be an independent, separate organization. Like other conservation networks, the goal is to identify an existing organization that is willing to provide space and administrative and fiscal services on a contractual or in-kind basis.</p>
<p>Develop an interim and long-term MCN governance structure</p>	<p>Establishing basic governing by-laws for the acting and long-term will clarify roles, responsibilities, and commitment levels for participants. This structure will provide for succession and continuity as people come in and out of the Network.</p>

Social Dimensions Goals and Actions

Goal: Learn, respect, and adopt the perspectives of, and participation by, traditionally underrepresented communities* in natural resource conservation and outdoor recreation.

- Recruit and sustain the involvement of people from traditionally underrepresented communities in MCN leadership and activities.
- Improve relationship building with traditionally underrepresented communities to increase awareness and use of public natural areas.
- Amplify the efforts of each member to diversify the conservation profession.

* Traditionally underrepresented communities include people who experience barriers to participating in natural resource conservation and outdoor recreation activities due to economic, racial, cultural, disability or LGBTQ+ identification.

Climate Resilience and DEI Relevance

Enjoying the great outdoors has been a critical strategy in maintaining physical and mental health – vividly demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. This priority includes providing information on how to adapt and mitigate the effects of climate change with a particular emphasis on underserved communities. Natural area protection, restoration, and management can be critical tools in providing greater community resilience while also remedying higher air and water pollution impacts and exposures in often low-income communities.

Strategy/Action	What and Why it is Needed
Recruit and sustain the involvement of people from under-represented communities in MCN leadership and activities.	Natural resource stewardship entities across the metro are engaged in becoming more inclusive in how they identify and serve their clients, and recognize that it is critical for staff to represent the increasingly diverse demographics they serve. Professionals in the local conservation field are predominantly white and many are approaching retirement. More recruitment, retention, and outreach to traditionally underrepresented communities in hiring staff and contracting is needed. MCN can have a direct and essential role in igniting the interest of youth in natural resource careers, and the support of their families to pursue those dreams through internships and education.
Improve relationship building with underrepresented communities to increase awareness and use of public natural areas.	We will not achieve different outcomes if we continue to conduct outreach in the same way that has been done in the past. We need to listen, be guided by, and work with the people we are trying to reach.
Amplify the efforts of each MCN organization and member to diversify the conservation profession.	The MCN could pool resources to hire and learn from consultants and experts from underrepresented communities to guide on outreach, recruitment, retention and training. Many agencies and groups have independent, non-coordinated internship programs focused on increasing diversity. MCN’s role as a convener could bring that cohort together, reducing the isolation and “otherness” that can be a barrier to continued interest in a natural resources career.

Appendix A: MCN Steering Team and Work Group Participants

Steering Team

Gina Bonsignore, MN DNR Regional Planner
Betsy Daub, Friends of the Mississippi River (former)
Patricia Freeman, Scott County
Karen Galles, Hennepin County
Harland Hiemstra, MN DNR Regional Information Officer
Jessica Lee, Metropolitan Council
Chris Lord, Anoka Conservation District
June Mathiowetz, Washington County
Lisa Mueller, Friends of the Mississippi River
Al Singer, Dakota County
Angie Smith, Three Rivers Park District (former)

Work Group Participants

Group Leaders are **in bold**. (Apologies in advance if I've missed someone!)

Communications and Engagement

Theresa Friendshuh, Restoration Ecologist
Masha Hoy, Carver County
Connor Schaefer, Washington County Parks
Susan Schmidt, Trust for Public Land

Data and Technology

Alex Blenkush, Hennepin County
David Brandt, Washington County
Jason Husveth, Critical Connections Ecological Services, Inc, Data/Technology
Bart Richardson, DNR, Data/Technology
Jennifer Vieth, Carpenter Nature Center

Land and Water Protection and Planning: Natural Areas and Agricultural Lands

Adam Arvidson, Minneapolis Parks, and Recreation Board,
Adriana Atcheson, Carver County
Dan Cilbulka, Sherburne Soil, and Water Conservation District
Denis Fuchs, Stearns SWCD
Gina Hugo, Sherburne County Parks, and Recreation
Troy Kuphal, Scott Soil, and Water Conservation District
Francine Larson, Sherburne Soil and Water Conservation District
Kristen Larson, Carver County Planning

Social Dimensions: Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, Connecting People to Nature and the Outdoors

Alysa Delgado, Scott County
Lisa Mueller, Dakota County
Justin Townsend, Ramsey County
Dre Wakely, Three Rivers Park District
Eric Weiss, Trust for Public Land

Restoration and Management

Tara Kelly, Washington Conservation District
Mike Lynn, Dakota County
John Moriarty, Three Rivers Park District
Jay Riggs, Washington Conservation District
Tiffany Schaufler, Minnehaha Creek Watershed District
Karen Schik, Friends of the Mississippi
Stephen Thomforde, Stantec
John Stelzner, Dakota County Soil and Water Conservation District
Vanessa Strong, Scott County WMO

Appendix B: Metro Greenways Collaborative History

In the late 1990s, population forecasts foretold a period of population growth with 650,000 new residents projected to make their homes in the seven-county metro Region over the next twenty years. The collaborative was built around the concept of planning for nature in the face of urban growth. In 1996, DNR Regional Planner Sharon Pfeifer led the Metro Greenways Collaborative. This natural resource planning effort involved many natural resource non-profit organizations and agency staff in identifying and prioritizing natural areas for protection and improvement in the Region—the project culminated in the *Metro Greenprint*, published in 1997. The *Greenprint* described four primary elements – parks, natural areas, open spaces, and corridors as the primary building blocks for a network of interconnected greenspaces across the metro Region. The *Greenprint* Vision Statement was:

“The Twin Cities Metropolitan area is successful in protecting, restoring, connecting, and managing a metro-wide network of regionally and locally significant terrestrial and aquatic natural areas and open spaces composed of a wide array of native plant and animal species, interconnected by a system of greenway corridors. This regional network of greenspaces, by virtue of its size, quality, and connectivity, provides wildlife habitat, sustains ecological diversity, and improves water quality and ecosystem functions. It contributes to the economic well-being of the metropolitan area and provides for public enjoyment and education where appropriate while maintaining high quality natural areas.”

Following the *Greenprint* publication, a Metro Greenways program was established in 1998, with \$4M of initial state funds for planning grants, acquisition, and restoration coordinated and staffed by the DNR. A steering committee of public and non-profit conservation staff met regularly to evaluate and rank potential land protection projects and funding allocations. The program operated from 1998 until 2003. The DNR and the Trust for Public Land also organized informal, quarterly Greenways Collaborative sessions on natural resource-related topics through 2003.

In subsequent years, funding for acquisition and restoration was created through local bond referendums, such as the Dakota County Farmland and Natural Areas Program, the Washington County Land and Legacy Program, the LCCMR-funded Metro Conservation Corridors project, and various programs associated with the groundbreaking Clean Water and Legacy Amendment, passed by Minnesota voters in 2008.