

Comments submitted to the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy
Shedd Aquarium, Chicago, Illinois
September 25, 2002

By

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Admiral Watkins, ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. My name is John Rogner, and I am here as Chair of the Chicago Region Biodiversity Council, which is sponsoring the region-wide biodiversity conservation effort known as Chicago Wilderness. My purpose is to describe this successful model for collaborative conservation, to specifically underscore the important role that the federal government has played in its success, and to suggest its use as a model elsewhere.

Testimony presented yesterday described two very different modes of governance to achieve conservation results – the first is to create entirely new units of government, vested with sufficient authority to accomplish specific goals. The second is to work collaboratively across and within existing organizational structure, to horizontally integrate government agencies in support of locally-driven efforts. Chicago Wilderness has chosen this latter route, but has gone beyond simply coordinating government agencies. It has attempted to unify the entire conservation effort in the Chicago metropolitan region with a consensus-based vision and strategy. It is perhaps the only approach with promise of successfully dealing with conservation problems in complex urban environments.

The problem addressed by Chicago Wilderness is a global one – the loss of biological diversity. It is a problem perhaps most manifest in tropical regions but which is no less real in the Great Lakes region. Chicago Wilderness is the local approach to solving a global problem.

Contrary to public perception, the metropolitan region at the southern end of Lake Michigan harbors globally rare and significant habitats scattered throughout 200,000 acres of protected land, from the lake itself to inland tallgrass prairies and dunes, oak savannas, woodlands, and wetlands. These include some of the best and most diverse representatives of their type.

The region also contains nine million people that collectively create a huge footprint. And so these rare communities face many threats, including direct loss from urban and suburban development, habitat fragmentation, altered hydrology, contaminated urban runoff, invasive species, lack of proper management of public lands and waters, and an

urban populace disconnected from nature and unaware of the threats facing their natural heritage.

For years, dozens of conservation partners worked rather independently on various aspects of the problem. But the efforts were disjointed, sometimes duplicative, sometimes at odds, never on a scale that promised to capture the attention of local decision makers and the general public.

A coalition of thirty-four public and private conservation organizations sat down in 1994 to begin discussing how to work more effectively on the problem of biodiversity loss. These organizations included federal, state, and local governments; museums and other scientific and cultural organizations including Shedd Aquarium, public landowning agencies, and not-for-profit conservation organizations. There were many debates over the structure of this collaboration, there were suspicions to overcome, there were competitive cultures that had to be subverted. But Chicago Wilderness was launched and has since grown to over 150 organizations. A single unified vision and strategy document was developed by the members in 1998 called the Biodiversity Recovery Plan – a plan that won the American Planning Association’s annual top award in 2001. This year, the Lake Michigan Federation is engaging Chicago Wilderness partners in developing a step-down of the plan to the Chicago portion of Lake Michigan coastline.

The plan calls for protecting more land, better managing existing public lands, influencing local development policies and land use decisions, developing better science in support of land protection and management, and creating a citizenry that is both informed and engaged in the regional conservation effort. The ultimate goal is to make conservation a fundamental part of the region’s culture.

What the coalition has found that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Because of its collaborative approach, the coalition has become a model for similar programs around the nation and around the world. Federal support for Chicago Wilderness has been essential to launching and building this partnership and continued federal support is crucial to its ongoing success.

With respect to federal involvement, the model is one of federal agencies aligning their existing authorities, programs and resources and getting behind a locally driven consensus-based effort. It is not driven by regulation and it is not federally mandated, but federal agencies have brought key resources to the table including some dollars, staff assistance, and a broad national perspective. Federal support has enabled the creation of an organizational core of the Chicago Wilderness coalition. This core helps to mobilize member institutions and has been able to leverage members to contribute in-kind contributions and private dollars that equal more than twice the total federal investment in the program.

With federal support as a catalyst, Chicago Wilderness members have completed dozens of projects in support of the Biodiversity Recovery Plan. These include

- Developing curricula for thousands of school children,
- Involving inner-city children in educational nature and science activities,
- Mobilizing thousands of citizen volunteers to work to improve public lands,
- Conducting research on maintaining biodiversity in the face of continued development,
- Developing more efficient means of controlling invasive species,
- And working with federal, state and local governments to develop plans for sustainable land use.

Federal agencies in Chicago Wilderness are not acting altruistically. They benefit in some very important ways. They are working within existing authorities and congressional mandates to accomplish their own organizational missions, but also leveraging their resources against those of dozens of other state and local organizations in pursuit of common objectives, from endangered species conservation to wetland restoration to water quality protection. Local conservation groups often have a much better and more complete sense of local resource conditions. Federal support bring local groups together so that they can see the big picture, and develop the best possible long-term preventative health plan for the region's environment.

As federal agencies increasingly take on the challenge of managing natural resources in urban areas, Chicago Wilderness offers an innovative model for urban resource management and helps federal partners accomplish their missions in this important metropolitan region. These federal Chicago Wilderness partners are the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. These agencies realize that collaboration is working in the Chicago region, and they are using Chicago Wilderness as a model to develop similar partnerships in other parts of the country.

Chicago Wilderness is many things--a partnership, a model for consensus building, and a regional approach to problems solving. Nation-wide, federal support for this and other *local* conservation programs can help move us towards a healthy *national* and *global* environment. Land management choices we make in the Chicago region – and Milwaukee and Detroit and Buffalo and Duluth - have profound effects on water quality and biological diversity in the Great Lakes--our nation's remarkable freshwater, inland seas. Aligning federal resources and programs with local and regional consensus-based approaches offer a promising model for effective conservation and will help ensure that the human community thrives in a mutually beneficial relationship with a region's lands and waters.