Washington Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit Policy Overview and Recommendations for Project Fit with Unit mission August 9, 2024 (revised)

Background

On October 21, 2020, the coordinating committee of the Washington Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit (hereafter, Unit) recommended the development of a policy statement addressing the fit of state cooperator-funded projects brought into University of Washington and Washington State University through the Unit. The cooperative arrangement underpinning the establishment and functioning of the Unit is unique. This arrangement sees multiple cooperating entities collectively committing substantial resources to the Unit to meet the research, technical assistance, and graduate education mission that benefits all Unit cooperators. The spirit of the cooperative agreement then, as realized through these significant cooperative investments, is to ensure that projects benefiting from administrative contributions truly meet the mission of the Unit as established.

Need

This policy overview is necessitated by the fact that a retrospective review of some funded projects realizing significant administrative benefits, in this case reduced overhead charges provided by the host university and administrative support provided by Unit staff, may have incomplete linkages to the mission of the Unit. This statement seeks to chart a path to improve these linkages with the goal of further enhancing the true and full benefits of the Unit to all cooperators.

Goal

The Washington Unit is the most complex entity in the USGS Cooperative Research Units program, and constructively pushes the boundaries of the conception of a Cooperative Research Unit as compared to others across the country. Significant contributions and conciliations have been made by cooperators to remain engaged and realize the substantial benefits of this engagement. The coordinating committee's hope here is to document the present intent, and the importance to all to ensure the match between benefits and outcomes. The collaborations between agencies and scientists at University of Washington and Washington State University have the potential to be immense, and the Unit is designed to provide agency cooperators with access to expertise in many research areas. The goal of this policy overview is to ensure that the Unit remains strong as a cooperative effort.

Unit Mission, Vision, Values, and Expertise

The mission of the Washington Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit is to support fish and wildlife conservation in Washington and beyond through world-class research in ecology, biology, and social science. Our vision is excellence in applied fish and wildlife science, with research that is responsive to management agency needs while continuing to push the boundaries of our knowledge.

We rely on trust and respect to create effective partnerships with stakeholders and rightsholders. We frame our science in collaboration with scientists, managers, and community members. We believe in open science and communicating our findings to policymakers and the general public alike. We provide a welcoming and supportive environment that allows students and postdoctoral scientists to obtain the knowledge, skills, and abilities they need to creatively solve conservation problems.

Our scientists are experts in quantitative ecology, conservation biology, decision analysis, social science, and environmental justice. We undertake management-relevant research, support decision makers through technical assistance, and train the next generation of conservation leaders. We study a broad array of marine and terrestrial taxa, including mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles, fishes, and invertebrates, as well as the habitats that support them and the human communities with which they interact. We also facilitate research collaborations between agencies and scientists at the University of Washington and Washington State University, providing our agency cooperators with access to expertise in many research areas. We work closely with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Washington Department of Ecology, the Washington Department of Natural Resources, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and many other federal agencies.

Critical Elements

The mission statement of the Unit is reviewed periodically, but the major emphasis of the mission is unlikely to veer significantly from what is established. The inherent critical elements of the Unit's mission statement as they relate to project fit are twofold: 1) an emphasis on biological and social elements of fish and wildlife resources; and 2) expertise of Unit scientists in areas focused on the conservation of fish and wildlife populations. The role of the physical environment in framing habitats for fish and wildlife populations is clearly acknowledged. However, research on questions focused purely on the physical environment, unless directly connected to the core fish and wildlife element, are not consistent with the mission of the Unit. In this context, the connections between physical and biological elements must be direct, not nebulous (e.g., the study of air, water, and land in-and-of themselves are not adequately connected to the Unit mission).