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February 7, 1992

ALERT

All Members:

Please read the enclosed information concerning the Natural Heritage Program. We need your help to save this important program in our state. Contact your legislators, send in the enclosed form letter (it's a good idea to copy your local newspaper as well as Mr. Joe Herring, Secretary, LDWF and others), and help wherever you can. Addresses you'll need are:

The Honorable Edwin Edwards
Governor of Louisiana
P.O. Box 94004
Baton Rouge, La. 70804

Mr. Joe Herring, Secretary
La. Dept. Wildlife & Fisheries
P.O. Box 98000
Baton Rouge, La. 70898-9000

Mr. Gary Lester
La. Natural Heritage Program
P.O. Box 98000
Baton Rouge, La. 70898-9000

Ms. Nancy Jo Craig
La. Nature Conservancy
P.O. Box 4124
Baton Rouge, La. 70821

Sincerely, your President,

John Mayronne

Natural Heritage Program

Eighty-seven percent of the 895 vertebrate species in Louisiana are nongame. That is, they are not hunted, fished, or trapped. The Louisiana Natural Heritage Program (LNHP) conducts ongoing research on these species, with specific emphasis on rare, threatened and endangered (R/T/E) plant and animal species, and significant natural areas. Data concerning the status and distribution of R/T/E species, and natural areas are maintained in computer and manual files, indexed by numerous fields, creating a flexible database system that can respond to a wide variety of user needs. The Natural Heritage Program provides information and management suggestions to public and private policy-makers, and is consulted prior to Department decisions on Coastal Management Division, Corps of Engineers, Department of Transportation and Development, etc. permits. The Natural Heritage Program works closely with the Louisiana Nature Conservancy to protect priority sites throughout Louisiana. The primary objectives of the LNHP are:

- 1) to gather information systematically and on a continuing basis on the occurrences of rare, threatened and endangered (r/t/e) species and significant ecological features of the state, including outstanding examples of native ecosystems, and critical areas benefitting the environment;
- 2) to assemble and store this information efficiently in our data management system;
- 3) to make data retrieval utilitarian and cost-effective so that the potential impact of various activities on identified lands can be evaluated; and
- 4) to set rational conservation plans to conserve the state's biological diversity.

Of the 3,983 computerized occurrence records of R/T/E species and significant natural areas, 1,369 are special animal occurrences, 1,683 are special plant occurrences, and 574 are outstanding locations of natural plant communities. Additionally, some 357 records are of waterbird nesting colonies and state and national champion trees.

Map files, manual files, and computer files keep information well-organized and easily accessible. Records are indexed by name, location, status, watershed, and land ownership, creating a flexible user-request system. The LNHP provides practical, up-to-date information to public and private policy makers. Applications of the database have been used in virtually every aspect of biological conservation.

The database also includes information on 251 managed areas within the state as well as over 2,500 source abstracts. In previous years the LNHP developed the first statewide natural community classification system with seven natural community systems containing 75 distinct communities. The LNHP has located high quality examples of more than 85 percent of the communities with a state rank of S1-S3 (endangered-rare). Over 1,800 sites statewide have been surveyed for r/t/e species and unique natural communities by the Heritage staff. These sites represent habitat for over 200 state-r/t/e species of plants and animals. Of the 3,983 computerized records in the database, 1,369 represent occurrences of r/t/e animal species, 1,683 records are r/t/e plant species occurrences, and 574 represent occurrences of unique natural communities. Additionally, the location of more than 300 wading and seabird colonies are mapped in the database.

Besides nongame inventory work and research, the LNHP staff has reviewed for their effects on nongame wildlife thousands of proposed federal, state, parish, municipal, and privately funded projects. In doing so, they have protected numerous sites housing r/t/e species and unique habitats statewide, and, at the same time, saved industry money through early planning of proposed activities. In addition to reviewing projects that require permits, the LNHP is responsible for issuing permits for scientific collecting, nuisance animal control, and raptor rehabilitation.

Land protection efforts of the LNHP have also been very productive. Act 324 of the 1987 legislative

session created the Louisiana Natural Areas Registry Program, the purpose of which is to protect through a voluntary agreement significant areas throughout the state. The owner voluntarily agrees to manage the area according to a management plan developed by the LNHP staff. The Louisiana Nature Conservancy has been contracted to administer the program. To date, some 48 sites incorporating more than 32,375 acres in 24 parishes have been registered as important natural areas. This includes over 4,900 acres of public lands and more than 32,300 acres of privately owned lands. The LNHP has also been responsible for the purchase by the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries of nearly 600 acres of the Tunica Hills, home to numerous rare plants and animals, including the Louisiana black bear. Currently finalizing purchase of a pine savannah, which houses some 15 rare species of plants.

Other major accomplishments of the Natural Heritage Program include:

- 1) Publications: The Natural Communities of Coastal Louisiana—Classification and Description, Plants and Animals of Special Concern in the Louisiana Coastal Zone, Atlas and Census of Wading Bird and Seabird Nesting Colonies in Louisiana, Natural Communities of Kisatchie National Forest—Winn and Kisatchie Districts, Louisiana Hummingbirds, and numerous articles in the Louisiana Conservationist. Currently working on a publication on the endangered species of Louisiana.
- 2) Developed a Cooperative Agreement with the US Fish & Wildlife Service which supplies 75% of the funding for Louisiana endangered species research.
- 3) Protected, through an agreement with the US Fish & Wildlife Service, the largest tern and gull nesting colony in the US, located on one of our barrier islands.
- 4) Completed a Nongame Plan for Louisiana, and coordinated some 37 breeding bird surveys annually for 6 years. Initiated quarterly surveys of pelagic seabirds.
- 5) Represented the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries on numerous state legislative task forces, including state GIS, Capitol Lake, Freshwater Mussel, and Reptile and Amphibian Task Forces. Also served as department representatives on Office of Forestry's Stewardship Forest Program, DEQ's Leap to 2000 Comparative Risk Program, the Black Bear Conservation Committee, and Red Cockaded Woodpecker Conservation Committee.
- 6) Completed a bog management plan for Kisatchie National Forest, currently being implemented by the national forest. Initiated a 3-year survey of the natural communities of Kisatchie National Forest and recommended a Research Natural Area be developed on the forest. Initiated a 20-month survey of r/t/e species and unique natural communities on Fort Polk Military Installation.
- 7) Initiated and currently developing a mitigation banking program with the Nature Conservancy and numerous state and federal resource agencies to mitigate the loss of wetland pine savannahs, an endangered natural community in southeast Louisiana.
- 8) Aided the La. Nature Conservancy in developing a conservation easement with International Paper for Copenhagen Prairie in Caldwell Parish.
- 9) Conducted status surveys for several plants and animals for US Fish & Wildlife Service to determine the federal status as threatened or endangered.
- 10) Currently developing an Atlas of the Flora of Louisiana.

29 January 1992

→ In addition: Helped develop sensitive species list
Provided KNF with PETS occurrence data
Conducted research on Keiffer Prairies
Proposed Natural Areas Registry sites

THE LOUISIANA NATURAL HERITAGE PROGRAM

The Louisiana Natural Heritage Program was established in 1984 through the cooperation of The Nature Conservancy and the Louisiana Departments of Natural Resources and Wildlife and Fisheries. Using a systematic approach developed by the Conservancy, the Heritage Program is identifying those natural areas in Louisiana that harbor the state's best remaining examples of indigenous ecosystem types, prime wildlife habitats, plant communities, unique animal and plant species and special natural features.

The Heritage Program has already identified many unprotected sites which contain significant occurrences of species and habitats of special concern in Louisiana, areas such as the Cheniers and prairies of southwest Louisiana, the Tunica and Copenhagen Hills, the longleaf pine savannahs and herbaceous bogs of the Florida parishes, as well as many vitally important wetland sites. Data on these natural elements are being compiled in a computer-assisted information system, providing a continuing perspective on what areas most need to be protected.

The practical uses of Heritage information are myriad. Maps are used to pinpoint specific sites where rare plants and animals occur. Information is disseminated to state, local and federal agencies so they can better plan for the accommodation of future growth. Individual property owners are notified of special plants, animals, and geologic features on their land, and advised on ways of protecting them through the Natural Areas Registry Program. Using the Heritage information, public and private groups set more meaningful priorities for the acquisition or protection of important sites.

*The Nature Conservancy
has developed a regional
data base on the
distribution of fauna and
flora that is the most
comprehensive of its kind."*

U.S. Congressional Office
of Technology Assessment



Louisiana's Natural Heritage

Louisiana's natural heritage lies within the beauty and diversity of its wildlands: the cypress-tupelo swamps, bays, marshes, mangroves, bottomland hardwoods, chenier woodlands, and remnant prairies of our southern parishes; the beech-magnolia ravine forests and the flatwoods scattered with herbaceous bogs in our Florida parishes; and North Louisiana's upland deciduous forests, longleaf pine savannas, sandhills, forested canebreaks, and piney woods.

These habitats harbor a multitude of native plants and animals. Although many are common and recognizable, some are quite rare, and a few exist nowhere else on earth. The roster of our state's rare fauna and flora is long and includes such species as Bachman's warbler, the southern redback salamander, bog spice bush, yellow fringeless orchid, and the Louisiana blue-star.

Urbanization, exploration for oil and gas, industrial development, and agricultural expansion all take their toll on our natural lands. As this trend continues, it becomes essential that we identify, protect, and preserve areas of natural significance for the people of Louisiana today and tomorrow.

Our natural areas perform beneficial life-sustaining operations essential to humanity. The forests protect our watersheds, ensuring the quality of air and water and regulating floodwaters. The wetlands serve as vital nursery areas

for fish and shellfish and buffer us against hurricane damage. In addition, natural areas are living laboratories for scientific study; gene banks of wild species for agricultural, medical, and industrial use; and refuges from urban life.

We can preserve our natural heritage without obstructing necessary growth if we plan wisely for the use of our lands. The Louisiana Natural Heritage Program provides the ecological information that makes such planning possible.

The Natural Heritage Program

The Louisiana Natural Heritage Program was established in 1984 as a joint venture of the Department of Natural Resources and The Nature Conservancy, a national nonprofit conservation organization dedicated to the preservation of natural diversity. The program's goal is to identify the state's most ecologically significant natural areas. To achieve this end, the program is developing an ongoing statewide inventory of rare plants, natural communities, and other significant natural features. Similar inventories, designed by The Nature Conservancy, have been implemented in 40 states with highly acclaimed conservation results.

The heritage inventory collects information on the existence, number, condition, status, and location of all significant ecological features, so that rarity and distribution in Louisiana can be objectively determined. This information is stored in a centralized, integrated data management system. Manual files, computer files, and map files keep



the information well-organized and readily accessible. The heritage data base is unique in several ways.

- **It is element oriented.**

The inventory focuses specifically on the individual components of Louisiana's natural diversity. An "element" might be a cougar, a pitcher plant, a roseate spoonbill rookery, or a chenier woodland. Critical elements are identified and ranked to ensure that conservation efforts focus on those in greatest need of protection.

- **It is a central repository.**

The Louisiana Heritage Program gathers information from a wide range of sources throughout the state—state and federal agencies, the academic community, private conservation groups, and knowledgeable individuals. By consolidating existing data, the inventory serves as a clearinghouse for ecological information in the state. It also identifies research needs.

- **It is ongoing.**

The inventory is continuously refined and updated. Old records are checked in the field, new areas are surveyed, known sites are moni-

tored, and changes in land conservation status are recorded. Through this process, the program keeps its assessment of the state's ecological resources current and accurate.

- **It meets many needs.**

The Louisiana Natural Heritage Program is designed to provide practical, current information for public and private policy makers. The data can be applied to land protection decisions, environmental impact assessment, resource management, endangered species review, research, and education.



Striking a Balance

Information provided by the Louisiana Natural Heritage Program plays an important role in planning for the wise management of all our lands. The identification of fragile areas whose use should be limited is invaluable to sound decision-making whether the issue is nature conservation, highway routing, or commercial development. Environmental protection means not only setting aside critical areas but planning for minimal degradation of all areas. Environmental damage can be minimized and unnecessary conflicts, costs, and delays averted if we are aware of alternative courses of action and their consequences before commitments are made.



The Honorable Edwin Edwards

Dear Governor Edwards:

It has come to my attention that one of the most valuable conservation programs in state government is scheduled to be discontinued in the next fiscal year. The Louisiana Natural Heritage Program (LNHP), is the only program in state government actively working for conservation of rare and threatened species, non-game species, and outstanding or unique natural habitats. If the Program is terminated, Louisiana would be the only state in the U.S. without a Heritage Program, non-game program, or endangered species program.

The state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries is responsible for managing all wildlife, not just game species. The agency receives 5 to 8 million dollars annually from the General Fund, and the Heritage Program is one of the few parts of the agency that caters to concerns of the public at large. As shown by recent surveys, the great majority of the public, including hunters and fishermen, supports conservation of rare species and unique habitats and believes the state should be doing more in this regard.

LNHP began under your previous administration, and was claimed as an achievement during your recent campaign. The Governor's Transition Team for the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries not only recommended keeping the Heritage Program, but expanding it.

If we want to pass on to our children the natural resources that we were able to enjoy, we need to find a way to continue funding this type of program.

Sincerely,