The conservation community has long recognized the relationship between people and the natural world, but only recently has it begun to recognize that understanding both social and ecological drivers of conservation challenges is necessary to achieve success. The social, economic, and political contexts that underlie conservation issues is the reality in which the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service makes decisions. The Human Dimensions (HD) Branch works to bridge interdisciplinary sciences and build a deeper understanding of this decision context in order to achieve desired biological outcomes.

The HD Branch was established in August of 2012 at the Natural Resource Program Center (NRPC) with a mission to enhance the ability of the National Wildlife Refuge System to address the human dimensions of conservation. Since its establishment, the Branch has worked to integrate social science into decision-making in the Service and beyond through research, technical support, training, tool development, and capacity building. This annual report provides an overview of some of the HD Branch’s key accomplishments over the last fiscal year.

Human Dimensions Branch Goals

- Foster social science **understanding**
- Increase social science **capacity**
- Increase **application** of social science
- Transform conservation approaches through adaptive **planning** and **evaluation**
Vision — Leading the way to improved conservation outcomes through collaboration and socio-ecological integration.

Mission — The Human Dimensions Branch supports the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s mission to conserve wildlife and their habitats for the American people by providing adaptive leadership, innovation, and social science expertise. We build agency capacity to integrate the social and natural sciences to transform conservation for improved outcomes.

From left to right: Christine Browne, Ryan Roberts, Ellen Bley, Natalie Sexton, Patti Orth, Brad Milley, Emily Neidhardt, and Danielle Ross-Winslow
As demand for social science expertise grows across the conservation community and within the Service, strategies to integrate social and natural science are increasingly central to success. In 2018, the HD Branch continued its efforts to foster social science understanding, increase social science capacity, promote the application of social science, and ultimately transform conservation approaches through adaptive planning and evaluation. In 2018, we launched the National Visitor Survey in collaboration with American Conservation Experience and The Ohio State University as part of a systematic monitoring effort to understand visitor experience across the Refuge System; 37 refuges participated in year one. We expanded our collection of human dimensions outreach and training products with spotlights on collaborative conservation and diversity in the hunting community. We provided technical social science support for natural resource management on advancing private lands conservation and aligning hunting and fishing regulations. We also led social science efforts for two Service-wide initiatives—the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program (UWCP) and the Monarch Butterfly Conservation Initiative. Thank you to those who collaborated with us and supported our efforts this past year. We look forward to continued opportunities in 2019 that support the Refuge System and Service through social-ecological integration.

Natalie Sexton, Human Dimensions Branch Chief
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This past year, the HD Branch continued to provide technical assistance to Service practitioners to identify social science tools, resources, and research needs to improve conservation decisions. Two notable assistance efforts include:

**The Longevity of Voluntary Conservation Actions** — Voluntary conservation efforts undertaken by landowners participating in the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program on private lands are essential for accomplishing landscape-scale wildlife conservation. The Service undertakes these conservation efforts on private lands with the condition that these conservation practices will be maintained a minimum of ten years, but has found that many endure well beyond the minimum agreement terms. Headquarters, the Pacific and Southwest Regions, and the HD Branch have worked with the Partners Program to guide research on the motivations of private landowners to initiate and continue conservation actions on their lands. The study includes a comprehensive literature review that identifies social factors that may predict persistence of landowner conservation practices, policy and program implications of conservation behavior persistence, and research needs for the future. In early 2019, a survey of 400 past Partners Program landowner participants was administered. Results from this study provide insights about landowner post-agreement conservation actions, satisfaction with the program, conservation preferences, and more. Ultimately, the information from this study can be used by the Partners Program to help identify landowners, conservation practices, and program characteristics that will result in the greatest conservation impacts through increased persistence of voluntary private lands conservation.

**Increasing and Improving Hunting and Fishing Opportunities** — This Service effort aims to catalog and analyze the current hunting and fishing opportunities on all Service stations and, where appropriate, use that information to inform alignment of opportunities between stations and with their respective state(s). The HD Branch participated in the initial design and delivery of the Service Hunt Fish Opportunity Tool (SHOT tool) and guided internal and external communications strategies.
PLANNING & EVALUATION: MONARCH CONSERVATION PROGRAM

The Service’s National Monarch Butterfly Conservation Initiative continued to be a high priority this year with significant strides made in developing a formal evaluation plan for assessing monarch conservation strategies. As part of the Natural Resources Program Center’s leadership in monitoring and evaluation efforts, the HD Branch continued its collaboration with consultants from Foundations of Success to apply the Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation (http://cmp-openstandards.org/) framework to our monarch initiative.

We convened two workshops, bringing together representatives from multiple programs, regions, and areas of expertise. The first achievement of the workshops was the development of theories of change that make explicit how strategies are expected to lead to desired outcomes.

The HD Branch is managing the production of the final plan and implementation will begin in 2019. Evaluation results will enable the Service to share monarch conservation success stories and, in support of Strategic Habitat Conservation, identify where improvements are needed so that we can adapt our strategies and activities appropriately.

THE URBAN WILDLIFE CONSERVATION PROGRAM

FY 18 saw significant growth in the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program (UWCP). U.S. Congress designated Urban National Wildlife Refuge Day (https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/interior-celebrates-national-wildlife-refuges-urban-areas) in September, recognizing the contributions urban refuges make to improving conservation stewardship and increasing public access to outdoor recreation. We also made progress on efforts to evaluate the UWCP. Over the year, we analyzed and synthesized assessments completed by 16 refuges. The assessments examined how we are meeting the Standards of Excellence (https://www.fws.gov/urban/soe.php) and helped identify where we are making progress, where there are gaps, and what is needed to address those gaps. Stations also shared successes and challenges—we have, and continue, to share these in order to continue learning from one another across the Service. UWCP leadership is drawing on what we learned from the assessments to develop a strategic plan for the next five years of the program. The UWCP Progress Report (https://ecos.fws.gov/ServCat/Reference/Profile/108429) based on this work is now available. We continue to make progress toward evaluating the outcomes and impacts of the UWCP—focusing on the efforts of our flagship refuges.
FOSTERING SOCIAL SCIENCE UNDERSTANDING THROUGH TRAININGS & OUTREACH

One of the HD Branch’s goals is to foster an understanding of social science within the Service and beyond. Once practitioners have an understanding of social science concepts and methods, they are better suited to begin identifying and addressing the social science issues they might encounter. This year’s informational broadcasts and podcasts honed in on topics such as collaborative conservation and barriers to hunting for certain demographics. In the last broadcast of FY 18, we collaborated with Wylie Carr (Southeast Region Social Scientist), Heidi Keuler (Fish Habitat Biologist and Fishers and Farmers Partnership coordinator), and Todd Sutphin (Iowa Soybean Association) to discuss key concepts for successful collaboration and perspectives from the field. Our most recent podcast, “Challenging Stereotypes: Diversity in the American Hunting Legacy,” addresses the complex culture of hunting with researcher Dr. Lincoln Larson and Black Wolf Hunting Club founder Eric Morris, who is dedicated to increasing diversity in the hunting community. You can find these training and outreach products, along with others, on HDgov (https://my.usgs.gov/hd/FWS-training).

THE NATIONAL VISITOR SURVEY

The National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Survey is underway! Implementation of the visitor survey effort began in March 2018, with 37 refuges participating in year one. The survey is a Refuge System-wide effort to monitor visitor characteristics, experience, and satisfaction with refuge experiences, as well as visitor economic contributions to local communities. Refuges that have at least 50,000 visits will be surveyed on a rotating basis every five years (approximately 36 stations per year). The survey is led by the HD Branch in cooperation with American Conservation Experience (ACE) and The Ohio State University (OSU). Visitors are contacted onsite, and the survey is administered by mail (with web option) once visitors return home. This effort will provide refuge professionals with reliable baseline information and trend data that can be used to plan, design, and deliver quality visitor experiences, communicate the value of wildlife refuges to different audiences, and set future priorities.