



NatureServe and USDA Forest Service: Partnership Opportunities

CONNECTING SCIENCE WITH CONSERVATION

NatureServe is a non-profit conservation organization dedicated to providing the scientific information and technology necessary to guide effective conservation and resource management. Together with its network of state natural heritage programs, NatureServe is the leading source for detailed information on the nation's rare and endangered species and ecosystems, carrying on a nationwide effort initiated nearly 30 years ago by The Nature Conservancy. By improving understanding of the nation's ecosystems and making this information easily accessible, NatureServe helps government agencies, conservation groups, industry, and private citizens to make informed decisions about managing natural resources and conserving biological diversity.

The **USDA Forest Service** is a natural resource agency dedicated to the sustained management of the nation's natural resources and service to people. Managing public lands in national forests and grasslands, it is the largest forestry research organization in the world, and provides technical and financial assistance to state and private forestry agencies. The Forest Service is responsible for managing habitat to maintain populations of threatened, endangered, sensitive, and other species of plants and animals on the national forests and grasslands. The agency is involved in acquiring, developing and disseminating up-to-date information on the status, distribution, population trends, ecology, conservation needs, and stewardship of these species and habitats to accomplish needed management and conserve these natural resources.

MUTUAL GOALS, MUTUAL BENEFITS

The Forest Service and NatureServe have a long history of partnership, and have collaborated on a broad range of projects. NatureServe and its natural heritage member programs have a proven track record of working with the Forest Service in such areas as forest planning, sensitive species inventory and assessments, ecological classification and mapping, and data sharing and technology development.

Recognizing the opportunity to expand on these collaborations, in December 2003 the Forest Service and NatureServe signed a service-wide Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The MOU provides a framework for cooperation between the two organizations, to help achieve our mutual goals of ensuring the sound management of the nation's national forests and grasslands, and protecting the biological resources these lands and waters sustain.

A TRACK RECORD OF COLLABORATION

- **Online Access to Information: NatureServe Explorer**
The Forest Service has been a strong partner in the creation of the highly regarded NatureServe Explorer web site (www.natureserve.org/explorer), which provides easy access to information on more than 50,000 species and ecological communities of the United States and Canada. This "online encyclopedia of life" is used widely by Forest Service staff to help plan for and manage wildlife resources.
- **Understanding Landscapes: Ecological Classification and Mapping**
Understanding how ecological patterns vary across the landscape is essential for informed planning and land management. NatureServe lead the development of the U.S. National Vegetation Classification, and is currently working with the Forest Service to link Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) plots to these vegetation types as a way of better understanding the changing nature of forest ecosystems.

- **Assessing Viability: Sensitive Species Inventories**

State natural heritage programs routinely work with national forest staff to develop sensitive species lists and conduct field inventories and viability assessments. In Region 8, NatureServe staff recently carried out species viability assessments throughout the Southern Appalachian and Alabama National Forests, providing planners with information on nationally, regionally, and locally rare species across 15 forests in 8 states.

- **Forest Planning: Identifying Ecologically Significant Areas**

By integrating high quality data, extensive field expertise, and sophisticated software, NatureServe scientists focus on identifying areas of high ecological significance. Conservation planning assistance to the Forest Service has led to development of a Research Natural Area (RNA) framework across the East (Region 9), and alternative land use scenarios in the Utah High Plateaus (Region 4).

PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

The new MOU between the Forest Service and NatureServe envisions many areas for expanding collaborations related to the management of habitats and ecosystems, and the conservation of biological diversity.

- NatureServe's databases on the distribution and condition of species, together with its habitat classification and mapping capabilities, are particularly well suited to assessing the broader landscape context in which National Forests lands exist and are being managed.
- Meeting the needs of Forest Service planners, land managers, and researchers will also depend on deepening our knowledge by gathering additional data in both traditional areas—such as inventory, assessment, and mapping of species and ecosystems—and in new areas, like invasive species detection and monitoring.
- Innovative technologies for gathering, analyzing, and sharing biological information are essential for ensuring that Forest Service staffs have timely access to the data they need. Opportunities exist to advance and link data systems used by the Forest Service and the NatureServe network of state natural heritage programs.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Like the Forest Service, NatureServe has offices at national, regional, and local levels. Partnership opportunities exist at each level and interested Forest Service staff are encouraged to contact the most appropriate office. NatureServe national and regional offices are listed below; contact information for the NatureServe network of state natural heritage programs can be found at [Visit Local Programs](#) on the NatureServe web site (www.natureserve.org). Forest Service national forest, research laboratories, and state and private forestry offices are located in most states; contact information is available at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/aboutus/national.shtml>.

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Contacts for Service-Wide MOU (USFS# 04-SU-11132424-017)

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