

# THE CALIFORNIA CONDOR RECOVERY PLAN

Sanford R. Wilbur  
U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Ojai, California

**Abstract.** The California Condor Recovery Plan, prepared by an interagency group of biologists between 1972 and 1975, is an attempt to outline all actions required to save the condor from extermination. Having an overall plan has already accelerated condor preservation action, and the recovery planning process is considered a success. However, the condor situation is still critical.

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Fish and wildlifers throughout the United States are becoming familiar with the concept of "recovery planning" for endangered and threatened species. As leader of two recovery teams and member of a third, I spend perhaps one-quarter of my time on business directly related to recovery planning. One team, the one assigned to the California Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*), has developed a recovery plan and is well on its way to implementing it. Because many of you will be involved in recovery planning, I thought it might be of value to you to hear how one team has approached its responsibilities.

Without belaboring the discussion, we should consider a few basic aspects of recovery planning. First, the recovery plan is an overall plan to bring a species to non-endangered status. The concept improves on earlier approaches to endangered species management in that it recognizes that things can't be done piecemeal. Much good work of the past has been not good enough simply because only one part of the problem was attacked, and other equally important things continued to go wrong. Probably as much as in any environmental situation, time is a most valuable consideration. Every day's delay in correcting problems results in lost options for the future.

A recovery plan has a primary objective, usually stated numerically or in some other way that shows what non-endangered status is. It might be to increase the population to a certain size, or it might involve preserving a certain acreage of habitat. The objective for the condor is a composite

one involving both actual numbers and other parameters. It is to maintain a population of at least 50 condors, well distributed throughout their 1974 base range, with an average natality of at least 4 young per year, and the lowest possible annual mortality. The condor plan differs from others in that it does not aim at establishing an entirely non-endangered population. Considering the current size and status of the population, a completely secure status seems impossible, at least within the foreseeable future. What we do aim at is stability. There may not be a lot of birds, but those that we have should be maintainable indefinitely with proper protection and management.

After the objective is determined, the plan is outlined by a step-down approach from general to very specific, following an "if and only if rule". In other words, a primary objective can be fulfilled only if certain sub-objectives are met. These sub-objectives can be reached only if specific jobs are accomplished. To take an example from the Condor Plan, the condor population cannot be stabilized unless provisions are made to provide adequate nesting habitat, to provide adequate roosting habitat, to provide adequate food and feeding habitat, and to protect birds from mortality. Taking just one of these sub-objectives, to maintain adequate nesting habitat, we find that this can be done if certain specific jobs are done. Among the ones listed in the Plan are administrative closures of areas around nests, acquisition of some key parcels of land near nests, patrol of nesting areas, and provision of supplemental feed near nesting areas. If you take each of the sub-objectives and follow this step-down process, you end up with a plan that can be expressed as a flow chart beginning with primary objectives and ending in specific jobs. If you have done it right, every basic job must be done if you are to reach your primary objective. Not only that, but the complete accomplishment of all basic jobs must result in accomplishment of your prime objective. If it won't, then you need more basic jobs in the plan.

A recovery team is composed of two to several persons most knowledgeable of the species in question. Members can be from any agency, or may be non-government. They operate as a semi-independent body not representing any particular agency, but trying to bring expertise from various backgrounds. Because the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (Public Law 93-205) vests primary federal responsibility for endangered species preservation in the Department of Interior, the Director of Fish and Wildlife Service approves Team membership, and approves the recovery plan in concept. However, approval does not bind other agencies to support the plan, and implementation remains voluntary in most respects. This may seem a weakness if team members have done their jobs selling their respective agencies on the plan as it develops, agreement can be reached and support achieved without going through the lengthy and cumbersome process of getting 100 per cent concurrence on every minor point in the plan before it can be implemented.

The California Condor Recovery Team was actually formed a number of years before we were formally designated. As a matter of fact, the Condor Recovery Plan was approved 16 days before the Condor Team was officially named! We organized first in 1965 as a survey committee to develop census techniques for the condor. Later we broadened our base to that of a "technical committee" to consider all phases of condor research and management. It was as the California Condor Technical Committee that in 1972 we prepared the first draft of what was to become the Condor Recovery Plan.

The Team is composed of five members: myself as Team leader and principal condor researcher; Robert D. Mallette, California Department of Fish and Game, long involved in the State's nongame wildlife programs; John C. Borneman, National Audubon Society, involved in educational aspects of the condor program since 1965; Billy K. Muldowney, U. S. Forest Service, because much of the condors' habitat is on National Forest lands; and William

Radtkey, U. S. Bureau of Land Management, because of BLM's responsibilities on national resource lands and particularly because of their jurisdiction over mining and mineral leasing activities. We met regularly during preparation of the Plan, and we continue to meet officially several times each year to encourage progress toward implementing the Plan and to revise the Plan as necessary.

How well has the Team approach worked? I think it has worked very well, much better than one might expect of a group representing such a diversity of organizations and interests. We have had differences of opinions at times, and there has been some confusion resulting from the slowness of bureaucratic processes, but overall I consider the Condor Team operation a real success story. Of greatest importance is that the Plan is being used, rather than being relegated to the file cabinet or book shelf. Even before the Plan was officially approved, all agencies had adopted it and were implementing it. Because the Plan shows priorities and shows all the needs in a logical framework, we have been able to get a lot done without waiting for new government appropriations or additional personnel. For example, because the Recovery Plan has a complete list of proposed land acquisitions, the Department of Fish and Game was able to select and purchase a high value parcel with some of the funds derived from the sale of personalized license plates. Two other key parcels were acquired because National Audubon Society and the U. S. Forest Service were able to pool their funds and expertise at critical times. Last summer, the Forest Service and the International Council for Bird Preservation between themselves scraped together enough money to finance a short term but important research project. They were able to get together because the project was proposed in the Recovery Plan, and both organizations recognized the value of getting the Plan implemented as quickly as possible. One more item that I think is highly significant is that some county agencies have reproduced Recovery Plan recommendations almost word for word in their local planning documents. This is getting wildlife preservation consideration at the grass roots.

I could go on with specifics but the important thing to note is that, even though the Condor Recovery Plan was not officially approved until April 1975, most of the key jobs listed in it have either been completed or are well on their way to being implemented. As noted above, this has been accomplished essentially without new personnel or appropriations. Other teams and other plans have the potential for being just as effective.

At the risk of ending on a less than triumphant note, I have to point out that all is not as well with the California Condor as it is with the Condor Recovery Plan. I mentioned before that the "if and only if" rule must apply to recovery plans. We have implemented virtually all the specific jobs in our Plan, yet we have not reached our prime objective of stabilizing the condor population. In fact, the situation is worsening at an alarming rate due to decreasing reproductive activity within the population. We now face the probability that something is wrong with the Plan.

There are two possibilities: one, that the condor situation was not attacked in time, and that the species is unsaveable; or two, that we are unaware of some vital jobs that must be done. As long as there is any hope of doing something worthwhile, we are not going to accept the first possibility, so our job now is to rethink the situation, and if possible come up with new ways to reach our objective. Thus, in this and probably many other cases, recovery planning becomes a dynamic, ongoing process that must be responsive to both initial failure and to development of new techniques and concepts. We can't say for sure that the California Condor will be saved, but it is obvious to me that the recovery team - recovery plan process gives the best chance possible.

The California condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*) is a New World vulture, the largest North American land bird. This condor became extinct in the wild in 1987 (all remaining wild individuals were captured), but the species has since been reintroduced to northern Arizona and southern Utah (including the Grand Canyon area and Zion National Park), the coastal mountains of central and southern California, and northern Baja California. Although other fossil members are known, it is the only surviving member