

The California Interagency Wildlife Task Group and the development of the California Wildlife Habitat Relationships Program (CWHR)

The **California Interagency Wildlife Task Group (CIWTG)** was a consortium of wildlife biologists and ecologists that developed and managed the CWHR program from 1981-1993. In 1993, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) assumed the daily operations and management of the CWHR system, and CIWTG continued in an advisory role until 2004. CIWTG members included representatives from state agencies, federal agencies, and universities, including the California Department of Fish and Game (now the California Department of Fish and Wildlife), the US Forest Service, the California Department of Forestry (now CalFIRE), the US Geologic Survey, UC Davis, UC Berkeley, and others. The CIWTG had several major goals including: (1) increasing understanding of relationships between wildlife and their habitats; (2) guiding research and conservation efforts involving wildlife resources; (3) developing standardized information sources for California wildlife nomenclature, habitat relationships, habitat classification, and impact assessment; (4) developing and promoting a variety of analytical methods and tools for use in wildlife resource management, conservation, and research; and (5) providing guidance on the operation, management, and development of the CWHR system.

CWHR History

A major impetus for California's CWHR program was the standardized wildlife information system developed by Thomas (1979) for the Blue Mountains of Oregon and Washington. This system modeled the habitat needs of wildlife by grouping them into guilds based on similarities in feeding and nesting.

California's CWHR system differs from that of Thomas (1979) by modeling the distribution, life history, and habitat relationships of each species individually instead as part of a guild. This allows more precise analyses of impacts to individual species and communities (Grenfell et al. 1982, Airola 1988).

The initial California CWHR efforts were conducted by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) for five different geographic zones in the state during the late 1970's and early 1980's (Airola 1988): western Sierra Nevada (Verner and Boss 1980, Hurley and Asrow 1980); north coast/Cascades (Marcot 1979); northeast interior (Airola 1980a, 1980b, 1980c; Laudenslayer 1982; Laudenslayer et al. 1982; Shimamoto and Airola 1981); Lake Tahoe Basin (Osaki 1980); and southern California (Loe and Keeney unpubl. rept.).

Although there were many benefits to the USFS zone approach, certain deficiencies became evident when attempts were made to apply the systems statewide. These deficiencies included: (1) incomplete state geographic coverage; (2) inconsistencies in naming and classifying habitats; (3) an incomplete statewide habitat classification system; and (4) a primary focus on forested habitats and wildlife. These deficiencies limited the utility of the zone systems as land use planning tools in California.

The statewide CWHR system was initiated in 1981 to overcome the deficiencies and incorporate the strengths of the USFS zone systems. The major advances of the statewide system were a uniform

statewide habitat classification system, complete coverage for the entire state, and a multi-agency organization to manage and operate the system known as the California Interagency Wildlife Task Group (CIWTG). Four volumes on species and habitats in California were published (Mayer and Laudenslayer 1988, Zeiner et al. 1988, Zeiner et al. 1990a, Zeiner et al. 1990b).

Initially, the CWHR database was primarily used to predict lists of species potentially occurring in given areas and habitats. This use continues today, along with other uses such as impact assessment, habitat suitability modeling, education, and research. The habitat classification system was used to describe, delineate, and quantify wildlife habitats in management and project areas. Current information on classification and mapping of terrestrial vegetation is available from the Vegetation Classification and Mapping Program (VegCAMP), CDFW Biogeographic Data Branch. Field sampling for CWHR habitat stages has been incorporated into the CDFW-CNPS Rapid Assessment and Releve Protocol, to increase the utility of the resulting vegetation maps for wildlife modeling and conservation. Crosswalks to the CWHR habitat classification scheme are included in all of California's major vegetation and land cover mapping efforts.

Excerpted from the California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System Training Manual. California Wildlife Habitat Relationships Program, Biogeographic Data Branch, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, December 2017.

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