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STRATEGIC CONSERVATION ASSESSMENT OF  
GULF COAST LANDSCAPES

**W I L D L I F E  
M I S S I S S I P P I  
U S E C A S E S T U D Y**

*December 2021*

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# WILDLIFE MISSISSIPPI

*Conservation Geography: Mississippi*  
*Primary Stakeholder: Robert Smith*

**Wildlife Mississippi**, and their sister organization the Mississippi Land Trust, are non-profit organizations with a vision of securing the state's quality of life through the conservation of Mississippi's lands, waters, and natural heritage. Wildlife Mississippi's work is focused in four main areas: 1) Habitat Conservation, 2) Conservation Policy, 3) Conservation Education, and 4) Outdoor Recreation. Over the past 20 years, their dedicated staff has worked throughout Mississippi to protect, restore, or enhance almost 500,000 acres of lands and waters.

Wildlife Mississippi met several of the Strategic Conservation Assessment of Gulf Coast Landscape's (**SCA's**) Use Case Study selection criteria (see below), and was valuable in representing Mississippi and local land trust efforts. The primary stakeholder was **Robert Smith**, Wildlife Mississippi's Coastal Program Coordinator.

## Use Case Study Selection Criteria

- ✓ focuses on the acquisition or easement of land (land conservation; not restoration)
- ✓ exhibits a transferable issue that could be experienced by other areas in the region
- ✓ represents an application scale that fits into the hexagonal framework of the SCA project
- ✓ represents a diversity of agency type / mission
- ✓ fits within the existing RESTORE Council goal framework
- ✓ focuses in an area that complements the geographic diversity of the SCA region
- ✓ has planning or funding decisions going to be made within the SCA project timeline



### Use Case Study Purpose:

*Ranking parcels for potential agricultural easements around Mississippi Sandhill Crane National Wildlife Refuge.*

The SCA Team (hereafter we) launched this Use Case Study with an initial scoping call in August 2020. In describing his main goal for this Use Case Study, Robert said:

*“My primary goal was to demonstrate how we can use the SCA tools to help determine the order to work with individual tracts in a world with limited funding, i.e. which properties do we need to work on first.”*

Robert was already familiar with the tools from previously learning about them during the SCA charrette series. Although we only had one formal session working together for his Use Case Study, we stayed in contact with him over the past year to learn more about how he was using the tools for his real-time conservation efforts. **Robert quickly became a super user and has been an important advocate for the tools**, including providing recommendations for use of these tools to various places and projects, such as USFWS Southern Mississippi Plan, Partnership for Gulf Coast Land Conservation’s Conservation Vision document update, and USFWS Coastal Program. Robert’s recommendations may assist in the further diffusion of the tool suite.



With the focus on ranking and prioritizing parcels for potential agricultural easements, we expected to spend the majority of our time using the Conservation Prioritization Tool. However, Robert contributed valuable time and effort reviewing and using the additional tools in the SCA Tool Suite. For example, he has used the **Conservation Planning Inventory Tool** to identify plans that support certain actions, such as easements or protection for endangered species, as well as to identify potential partners or supporters for projects, such as various NRCS Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) projects. Regarding the use of the tool, Robert said:

*“We’ve used the plan inventory to identify plans that support our conservation efforts and are then able to cite those plans in funding requests. This is very important for USDA Agricultural Land Easement program applications where one of the requirements is that the conservation of that parcel/area be identified in a state or local plan - this tool makes it easy to identify plans that support easements in a particular geography. We have also identified partners who then provided a letter of support for a funding request. The plans have also been used to identify potential funding streams.”*







Robert has also used the [Conservation Visualization Tool](#) to go “up periscope” to aid in selecting geographies to target certain efforts or to see where opportunities exist, such as with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) Southeastern Aquatics Fund, Southern Mississippi Land Conservation Outreach and Assistance, and USDA NRCS Regional Conservation Partner Program Application for Upper Pearl. Although he uses this tool the least of the three, it has still provided value as he explained here:

*“I’ve used this tool to help identify areas that I might be overlooking and areas that are ripe for more attention as a general reassessment of how I spend my time. I’ve also used this tool to specifically target a geographic area for a NFWF grant application - where can we best spend time on upland land conservation to positively impact water quality in a portion of south Mississippi.”*



Through his use of the **Conservation Prioritization Tool** to compare tracts for potential actions in Mississippi, Robert has been able to dig deeper into single areas of interest and use information provided in the single project mode to generate reports to help with writing proposals and land management plans for applications, such as NRCS ALE projects, USFS Forest Legacy Program, and Landowner Plans and Donations. Robert explained the various ways he uses this tool in his conservation efforts:

*“Yes, we use this tool when selecting properties for application for funding programs. We take the properties of interest and run the comparison tool to see which one(s) the SCA tool ranks most highly. This has been very helpful in not only making sure we get the most out of the limited time and funding, but also in identifying ancillary conservation outcomes. We sometimes attach the report to a funding request showing why we selected one property over others (and also letting the funding agency know that there are more acres out there!). We also use this tool to more deeply investigate an individual property of interest once we have our top candidate(s). Running this tool on a single property and generating a report helps explore that property in a little more depth. We often attach that report as an appendix to a management recommendations letter or management plan developed for an individual landowner. We also attach that report to some of our grant requests.”*



Stakeholder input has been central to the entire SCA project and associated efforts, and these Use Case Studies are no exception. Through these efforts, **we were able to support Robert's efforts and incorporate the valuable feedback provided to improve the tools for current and future use.** To ensure a co-production approach through the completion of the Use Case Study, Robert was asked to answer several questions regarding the overall process.

**Why were you interested in becoming a Use Case Study?**

*"Because the SCA tool has been helpful in a way to both explore potential properties of interest, identify key (and supporting) benefits from tract conservation, more rigorously rank potential acquisitions, and generating output to support funding requests."*

**What did you enjoy about this process?**

*"Interacting the with SCA team was always enjoyable. I think the most enjoyable thing was looking at ranking properties different ways, and generating reports that might have a little factoid in them that resonated with the landowners we are working with."*

**How do you think this process could be improved?**

*"The flexibility of applications within the tools was amazing in the ability to select, rank, weight different factors/layers. Adding additional layers within the tool would have been extremely helpful (however, the absence of that data across the Gulf in a consistent format hinders those additions). As always, expanding the tool beyond the "Gulf zone" to include the entirety of the area we work in would make the tool more useful."*

**Do you think your Use Case Study was a success?**

*"Yes. I think the simple analysis of which tracts should receive priority for conservation based on the tool outputs was very successful. While we chose to go out of the order the tool recommended for one tract, that decision was based on information not available in the tool (higher site-specific threat of development than indicated by the tool and density of endangered species of interest (rather than the presence/absence indicated by the tool))."*

**Can you think of anything that would have made your Use Case Study more successful?**

*"Having somebody else run the analyses for me so I could do other things?" (In jest!)*

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There were many lessons learned and valuable accomplishments for both sides of this Use Case Study collaboration. Robert provided incredibly valuable feedback regarding tool user-friendliness, functionality, and extent. For example, he combed through the Conservation Planning Inventory Tool and recommended almost thirty additional plans to be added to better represent the ongoing efforts in Mississippi. Additionally, we were able to quickly see the tools being applied in real-time conservation efforts, which **generated both ground truthing and opportunities for improvement**. When asked what his most valuable lesson from this effort was, Robert said:

*“I think the most valuable lesson for me was to continue to encourage thought processes that are outside the box - to look for other partners and look at complimentary benefits to the primary reason for conserving a particular parcel.”*

Robert concluded by saying he believes the major accomplishment of this effort was:

*“More robust conservation of important properties in coastal Mississippi.”*

This Use Case Study is currently considered complete, though we are still working with Robert through his participation in the Partnership for Gulf Coast Land Conservation Use Case Study and will update him in the future on tool improvements.



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## PHOTOGRAPH CREDITS:

All photographs are courtesy of Robert Smith

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