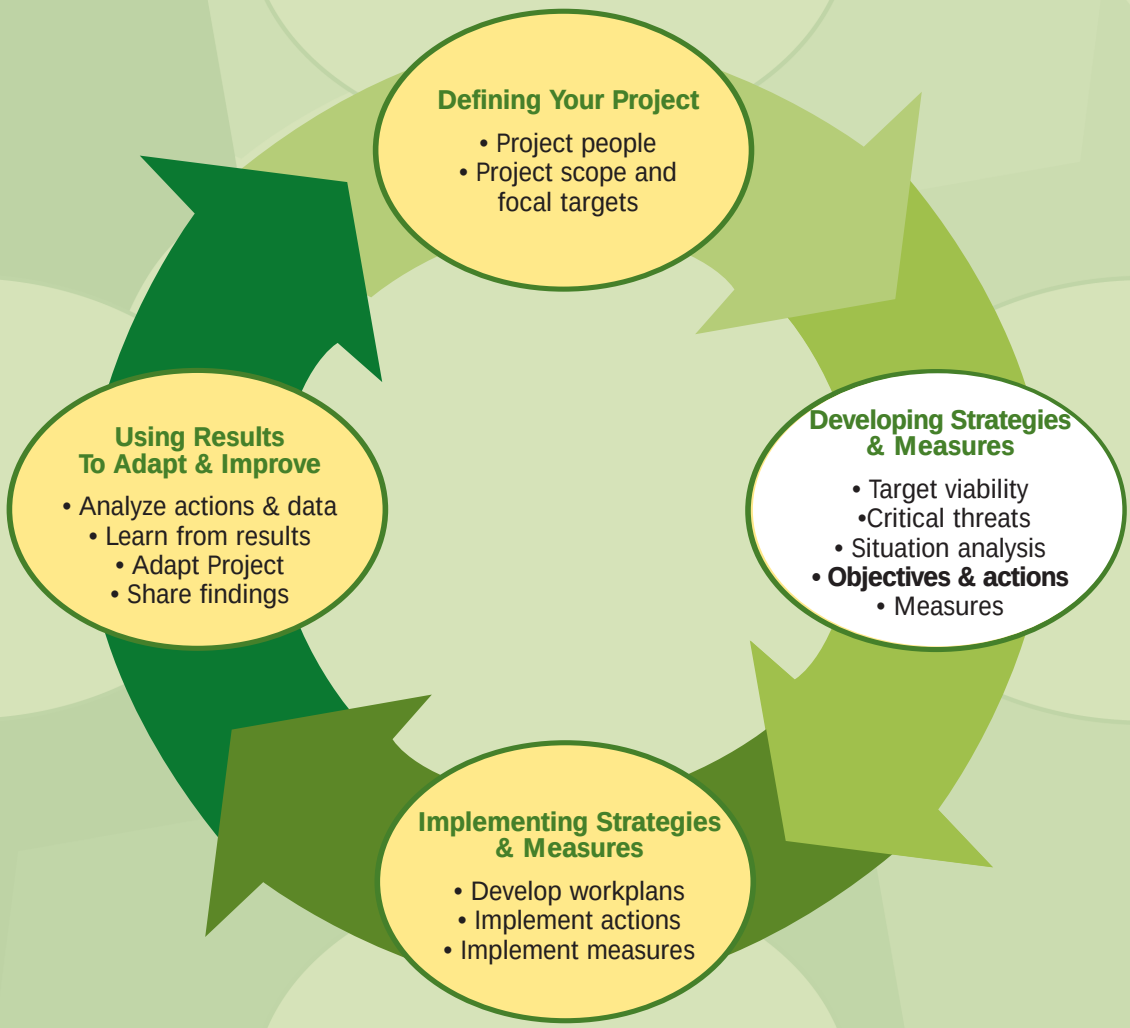
6. Develop strategies



Basic Practice Six

This document is a chapter from the Conservation Action Planning Handbook. The complete Handbook is available online at http://conserveonline.org/workspaces/cbdgateway/cap/practices.

The CAP Handbook is intended as a guidance resource to support the implementation of The Nature Conservancy's Conservation Action Planning (CAP) Process - a powerful instrument for helping practitioners get to effective conservation results. The CAP process is a key analytical method that supports Conservation by Design, the Conservancy's strategic framework for mission success.

Suggested citation: TNC, 2007. Guidance for Step 6: Develop Strategies: Objectives and Actions in Conservation Action Planning Handbook. The Nature Conservancy, Arlington, VA.

Citation for complete document: TNC, 2007. Conservation Action Planning Handbook: Developing Strategies, Taking Action and Measuring Success at Any Scale. The Nature Conservancy, Arlington, VA.

This is a living document that will adapt and change as new information becomes available and as we hear from you about how to improve it. The most recent version will always be available at: http://conserveonline.org/workspaces/cbdgateway/cap/practices

For more information on Conservation Action Planning visit www.conservationgateway.org/cap.

Conservation Action Planning

Step 6: Develop Strategies: Objectives and Actions

As summarized in TNC's CAP Overview of Basic Practices:

This step asks you to specifically and measurably describe what success looks like and to develop the specific actions you and your partners will undertake to achieve it. In particular, you want to try to find the actions that will enable you to get the most impact for the resources you have. Specific questions that this step answers include:

"What do we need to accomplish?"
"What is the most effective way to achieve these results?"

Expected Outputs

- At a minimum, good objectives for all critical threats and degraded key ecological attributes that your project will take action to address.
- If useful, good objectives for other factors relevant to project success.
- One or more strategic actions to accomplish each conservation objective.

The Importance of Developing Strategies

Developing conservation strategies involves deciding how your project team can overcome critical threats and restore degraded targets, including what specific objectives need to be achieved and what specific actions need to be taken to achieve those objectives. Your team also will want to consider strategies that secure needed project resources and support. High leverage strategies are those that achieve the greatest results for the least amount of investment. Every project is challenged to develop specific strategies-objectives and associated actions-and to describe why these strategies were selected.

A project team typically has a range of conservation actions it can use to achieve its goals, each having different effectiveness in different situations. Resources available to invest in conservation action are limited, so the project team needs to identify and implement actions that will most efficiently achieve desired outcomes given the circumstances they are working within. However, there will always be some uncertainty about the potential effectiveness of any action in a given situation. Taking action in the face of such uncertainty requires a clear statement of the intended outcome for each action in which the project team invests, and an explicit mechanism for measuring the effectiveness of actions at achieving their intended outcomes (*Step 7: Establish Measures*). In this way, the project team can determine if the return on investment is acceptable, and adapt the project as necessary-identify effective actions for continued investment, ineffective actions to discontinue, and possible new actions in which to start investing. Clearly linking actions to outcomes enables the effectiveness of conservation action to be measured, assumptions to be tested, and the project to adapt and learn.

If successfully implemented, the project's conservation strategies collectively should result in accomplishing the project's goals and realizing the project vision (*Step 2: Define Scope & Focal Targets* and *Step 3: Assess Viability*).

The Elements of Conservation Strategies

A conservation strategy is a broad course of action intended to achieve a specific objective (i.e. outcome) that abates a critical threat, enhances the viability of a conservation target, or secures project resources and support.

There are two fundamental components to conservation strategies: Objectives and Strategic Actions (Box 1).

Terms at a Glance

Strategies - Broad courses of action that include one or more objectives, the strategic actions required to accomplish each objective, and the specific action steps required to complete each strategic action.

Objectives - Specific statements detailing the desired accomplishments or outcomes of a particular set of activities within a project. A typical project will have multiple objectives. Objectives are typically set for abatement of critical threats and for restoration of degraded key ecological attributes. They can also be set, however, for the outcomes of specific conservation actions, or the acquisition of project resources. If the project is well conceptualized and designed, realization of all the project's objectives should lead to the fulfillment of the project's vision. A good objective meets the criteria of being: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time limited.

Strategic actions - Interventions undertaken by project staff and/or partners designed to reach the project's objectives. A good action meets the criteria of being: linked to objectives, focused, strategic, feasible, and appropriate.

Objectives

Objectives are specific and measurable statements of what you hope to achieve within your project. They represent your assumption as to what you need to accomplish and as such, become the measuring stick against which you will gauge the progress of your project. Objectives can be stated in terms of reducing the status of a critical threat, enhancing or maintaining the status of key ecological attributes of focal targets, securing project resources, and/or the outcomes of specific conservation actions (Box 2 for an example). A typical project will have multiple objectives. Ideally, realization of all the project's objectives should lead to fulfillment of the project goal.

It is important to set good objectives-they are the foundation for selecting strategic actions in which to invest and for determining the effectiveness of those actions. A good objective meets the following criteria defining a "*SMART*" objective:

- **Specific – What exactly does the project team want to achieve?** The specific outcome to be accomplished needs to be described in clear enough terms that all people involved in the project have the same understanding of what the terms mean.
- **Measurable – Is it measurable?** The objective needs to be defined in relation to some standard scale (e.g., numeric, percentage, fractions, or all/nothing states) to allow progress to be measured.
- **Achievable – Can it be done in the proposed timeframe within the social and political context of the project and with available funds?** The objective or expectation of what will be accomplished must be realistic given the market conditions, time period, resources allocated, etc.
- **Relevant – Will this objective lead to the desired results?** The results need to be impact oriented and represent the necessary changes in key ecological attributes, critical threat factors, or project resources to achieve the project goal.
- **Time-Limited – When will the objective be reached?** This means stating clearly when the objective will be achieved.

Strategic Actions

Strategic actions are broad or general courses of action undertaken by a project team to reach one or more of your project's stated objectives. Collectively, the strategic actions should be sufficient to accomplish the objectives. A good strategic action meets the criteria of being:

- **Linked** - directly related to a specific objective(s).
- **Focused** - maximizes the effectiveness for achieving the objective(s).
- **Feasible** - accomplishable in light of the project's resources and constraints.
- **Appropriate** - acceptable to and fitting within project-specific cultural, social, and ecological norms.

BOX 1: Examples of Objectives and Strategic Actions

Focused on threat abatement

Objective: By 2010, reduce the percent cover of invasive species A to less than 5%, throughout the mixed grassland habitat in Conservation Area X.

Strategic Action: Implement a volunteer-based program to manually control invasive species A.

Focused on enhancing target viability

Objective: By 2010, increase the population size of juvenile chinook salmon to more than 1,000 individuals, within the lower floodplain habitat of Conservation Area Y.

Strategic Action: Improve juvenile salmon recruitment by changing watershed practices that cause a high degree of embedded sediments from excessive erosion.

Focused on threat abatement and enhancing target viability

Objective: By 2015, restore the fire regime to achieve a fire return interval of 5-10 years over at least 5,000 acres of grassland habitat at Conservation Area Z (in this case, fire suppression efforts were identified as a key threat limiting the key ecological process of periodic burning).

Strategic Action: Establish a partnership with the Bureau of Land Management fire crew to conduct annual prescribed burns.

Focused on project resources

Objective: By 2010, the project team and their program are favorably received and supported by the two key constituencies in the project area.

Strategic Action: Engage the two key project constituents in the development and implementation of the project plan.

Commonly Used Methods

The process of developing effective conservation strategies involves five main steps:

1. Review the project vision and goals;
2. Define objectives for abating the critical threats and restoring the viability of focal conservation targets and for securing project resources;
3. Using your situation analysis, evaluate the social, political, and economic context contributing to threats and supporting conservation within the project area;
4. Brainstorm potential strategic actions that might accomplish each objective, or multiple objectives;
5. Select strategic actions to implement based on benefits, feasibility and costs.

Although the ordered presentation of the steps suggests a customary sequence, in practice steps 2 through 4 are often combined, re-ordered, or otherwise intermingled.

The CAP Workbook contains spreadsheets and a Strategy Identification Wizard to facilitate the capture of necessary information relating to the development of Objectives and Strategic Actions.

1. Review the project vision and goals

The project vision and goals defines overall project success, and provides the touchstone to ensure that objectives and actions are of sufficient scope and scale to achieve the vision and goals.

2. Define measurable objectives

Generally stated, the primary conservation project objectives are to abate threats and to restore or maintain the viability of focal conservation targets. But there may not be the need, nor may a project have the resources, to take action on all threats, focal targets, and resource needs. To provide focus for the strategic actions, a project team must define specific, measurable objectives for critical threats, significantly degraded key ecological attributes and urgent project resource deficiencies-outcomes that must be accomplished in order to achieve the project goal.

Review the list of critical threats and degraded key ecological attributes, as well as the underlying causal factors for each as identified in the situation analysis. Critical threats are those sources of stress with an Overall Threat Rank of Very High or High. Degraded key ecological attributes are those that have a current rating of Fair or Poor. Describe the desired outcome that you believe will reduce threats or improve target status to your desired levels.

Generally, an objective should be set for each of the critical threats, because threat abatement typically is accomplished through direct conservation action. On the other hand, some degraded key ecological attributes may be restored through the abatement of critical threats and not need direct action. Thus, when setting objectives with respect to degraded key ecological attributes, focus on those attributes that will need direct conservation action (e.g., ecological restoration).

Objectives also should be set with respect to project resource factors (*Step 9: Implement Plans*). These resource factors are typically assessed once your team has a solid understanding of the objectives and strategic actions related to abating critical threats and maintaining or restoring the viability of conservation targets. Objectives should be set for each of the significant project resource needs, as indicated by the resource factor scores and any limiting information or knowledge gaps that require research and development. Resource factors most in need of attention are those with a Resource Score of Medium or Low. The objective should describe the desired outcome that you believe will improve resource status to your desired levels.

The list of critical threats, degraded key ecological attributes, and resource factors for which you establish objectives can be further narrowed and refined based on the urgency, feasibility and resources required to adequately abate the threat, restore the key ecological attribute, or secure the needed project resources.

In addition to threat abatement and target viability objectives, you also may find it useful to state “intermediate results,” which are specific benchmarks or milestones that your project will work to achieve in route to accomplishing your threat abatement or viability objectives. In this case, “intermediate” typically refers to a temporal dimension.

3. Evaluate context of threats to and support for conservation

Critical threats and degraded key ecological attributes typically result from incompatible economic activities and management of natural resources. Understanding the cultural, political, and economic setting as well as incompatible human uses of natural resources is essential for developing effective actions because the context represents both the driving forces behind the critical threats and degraded viability as well as the opportunities for abating the threats, restoring viability, and securing project resources and support. Thus, before brainstorming and selecting actions, project teams must first probe deeply into the critical threats, their potential underlying causes, opportunities for action, and the linkages to focal conservation targets and other threats.

Such probing should build upon the existing situation analysis (*Step 5: Complete Situation Analysis*), and should focus on those critical threats and key ecological attributes for which objectives have been set. Some project teams use conceptual models (e.g., situation diagrams) to discover and represent the linkages. Others use probing questions looking at potential causes, the scale at which the threats and systems operate, the key constituencies that are harmed by the threat or might benefit from its abatement, etc. Using probing questions to discover underlying causes in combination with conceptual models to visually represent threat factors and their linkages is a particularly effective approach.

4. Brainstorm potential strategic actions

Based on your focused probing of the situation, consider the array of strategic actions that collectively might accomplish the objectives. Some strategic actions will apply to a single objective; others will be relevant to multiple objectives. Your understanding of each critical threat, degraded key attribute and project resource need and their underlying causes should help you identify the appropriate strategic actions and points of intervention to achieve the objectives. The most appropriate point of intervention may be at the key ecological attribute (e.g. restoration), at the critical threat, or at a causal factor more distal in the chain of causation (Box 3).

The types of actions your team might consider to achieve its objectives will be varied, depending on the specific situation of your project, but typically will include a mix of:

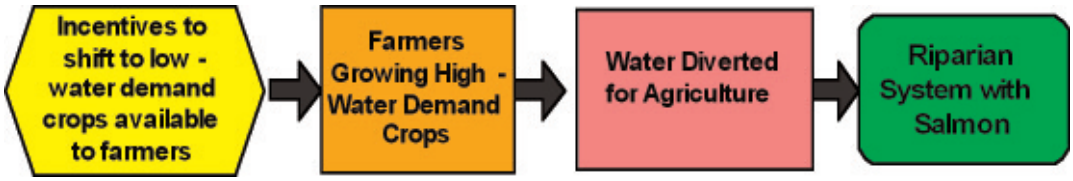
- Land and water protection
- Land and water management
- Species management
- Education and awareness
- Law and policy
- Livelihood, economic and other incentives
- External capacity building

Any action identified by your team needs to be explicitly linked to one or more objectives.

BOX 2: Setting Objectives and Selecting Strategic Actions

An objective should focus on either a critical threat or a degraded key ecological attribute of a focal conservation target. The point of intervention of strategic actions to accomplish the objective may be directly at the critical threat or at other factors further back in the causal chain.

For example, consider a riparian system target with salmon that is stressed by low river flow in mid-summer; low flow results in elevated water temperature and increased fish mortality. The low river flow is directly caused by agricultural water diversion, which in turn is caused by incompatible agricultural practices (i.e., growing high-water demand crops). The project team has set a threat abatement objective focused on the critical threat of groundwater pumping: "By 2010, reduce the amount of water from the Blue River diverted for agricultural purposes from 5000 gallons/day to 1000 gallons/day". The strategic action to accomplish the objective is to convince farmers to switch to crops that require less water through incentives or legislative mandates. In this case, the point of intervention is at the causal factor (agricultural practices), not directly at the critical threat (water diversion). The diagram shows the presumed linkages between the strategic action, causal factor, direct threat, and conservation target.



5. Select priority strategic actions

The potential strategic actions identified through the brainstorming exercise should be evaluated to select those actions that, if implemented, will most effectively and efficiently accomplish the objectives. We recommend that potential strategic actions be evaluated and rated using three criteria: Benefits, Feasibility, and Cost.

- **Benefits** - The benefits of a given strategic action derive from directly achieving threat and viability objectives (direct benefit) as well as from enabling or catalyzing the implementation of another strategic action (indirect benefit or leverage). To assess the potential benefits of a strategic action, consider four factors:
  - **Scope and scale of outcome** - The degree to which the proposed strategic action, if successfully implemented, is likely to secure the desired objective(s) at a scope and scale-degree of intensity and/or spatial scale-sufficient to reduce critical threat ranks to one or more focal conservation targets to a Medium rank and/or to increase a key ecological attribute to a Good rank for one or more focal conservation targets.
  - **Contribution** - The degree to which the proposed strategic action, if successfully implemented, will contribute to the achievement of the objective.
  - **Duration of outcome** - The degree to which the proposed strategic action, if successfully implemented, is likely to secure a long-lasting outcome. Strategic actions likely to achieve enduring, long-lasting outcomes are most desirable; those with short duration less desirable, all other things being equal.
  - **Leverage** - The degree to which the proposed strategic action, if successfully implemented, will enable or catalyze the implementation of other strategic actions (and thus achieve other important objectives), either within the immediate conservation project, or elsewhere.

Note that “Scope and scale of outcome” may not be applicable to strategic actions linked to project resource objectives because such actions are unlikely to have the direct benefit of threat abatement or viability enhancement; rather, they have an indirect benefit derived from leverage.

- **Feasibility** - Overall feasibility of a strategic action is based on three factors:
  - **Lead individual and institution** - The availability of a lead individual with sufficient time, proven talent, relevant experience, and good institutional support to implement the strategic action.
  - **Ability to motivate key constituencies** - The degree to which key constituencies (e.g., landowners, public officials, interest groups) whose involvement is necessary to implementing the strategic action and their motives are understood and the action appeals.
  - **Ease of implementation** - Strategic actions that are less complex, have been successfully implemented previously, fit within the core competencies of the lead institution, and for which funding is accessible have a higher likelihood of success than other actions.

- **Cost** - Strategic action costs should be estimated for the time horizon of the strategy, but no longer than 10 years. Cost estimates should focus on the use of discretionary or unrestricted dollars (or other appropriate currency). Overall cost of a strategic action is based on four factors:
  - **One time cost** - The amount of any direct, one-time costs.
  - **Annual costs** - Other direct costs, excluding staff time, that will be accrued annually.
  - **Staff time** - The average number of staff (FTE) required to implement the strategic action.
  - **Number of years** - The number of years the strategic action will require staff time and annual costs for implementation.

The overall rank for each strategic action, based upon Benefits, Feasibility, and Cost, should serve as a guide for selecting the strategic actions to implement. The scoring system in the CAP Workbook is designed to reward strategic actions that produce very high benefits for reasonable cost. It also identifies strategic actions that are “low-hanging fruit”, i.e., lower cost actions with medium benefits that are very feasible to implement.

These rankings are not intended to provide a “perfect” evaluation, but rather to provide you with a relative assessment of an array of potential strategic actions. Your project team will still need to use good judgment and experience to decide which strategic actions to implement.

Finally, the strategic actions represent broad courses of action, but do not provide the specificity needed to take action. In order to implement your strategic actions, your team will need to identify the specific action steps that spell out the actual work to be done, including who's responsible for doing it and a timeline (see *Step 8: Develop Work Plans)*.

BOX 3: Fostering a Planning Environment Conducive to Developing Strategies

Developing effective conservation strategies typically requires a more creative approach than the more analytical process of assessing conservation targets and threats. Thus, it is important to create an environment that fosters creativity, innovation, and "out of the box" thinking. While there is no exact recipe for creativity, bringing together people with the right set of skills and competencies into a nurturing environment should facilitate the process. Here are some key ingredients to consider:

Skills, Competencies, and Personalities for Developing Strategies

- Knowledge of project area:
  - Ecology and Conservation Targets
  - Socio-economics
  - Politics
  - Culture
- Creative thinking
- Analytical thinking
- Conceptual thinking (to bring the process/outputs into comprehensible and unified form)
- Facilitation - to ensure that the process moves forward and is designed to foster new ideas to emerge through creative brainstorming and open, critical review ("tough love")
- Subject expert (to bring knowledge from relevant disciplines such as government relations, philanthropy and marketing, etc.)
- External perspective
- Influence and respect (both internally and outside of your organization)
- Responsibility for implementation

Creating the Right Environment for Developing Strategies

- Importance of place (e.g., inspiring location, comfortable meeting room)
- Good set up (clear expectations and compelling agenda for meeting/process)
  - Build in down time - this is when innovative thinking and synthesis often occurs
  - Field trips to see targets, threats, situation
- Right mix of skills, competencies, and personalities (see above); often times, critical strategic thinkers will not have been deeply involved in the assessment of targets and threats, and will need to be brought into the process for developing strategies.
- Iterations - a single planning meeting may not be sufficient to design good strategies; often, inspiration and creativity are the products of cumulative and increasingly more informed assessments of the conservation situation.

Opportunities for Innovation

- **Developing Strategies of Sufficient Scope and Scale to Achieve Objectives** - As discussed above in the section on selecting priority strategic actions, one of the criteria for rating the benefit of a strategic action is the degree to which it is of sufficient scope and scale to achieve the desired objective. The current procedure in the CAP Workbook for evaluating the scope and scale of impact of a strategic action is based on the number and current rank of the threats and/or targets that the strategic action will affect. Strategic actions that are expected to change the current ranking by at least one ranking category for a greater number or Very High or High ranked threats and Poor or Fair ranked targets receive a higher benefit score. This procedure provides a very coarse and relatively subjective assessment of the scope and scale of impact. Innovations that consider more explicit definitions of the scope and scale of impact, perhaps linked to spatial analyses of targets and threats, yet are easily applied and incorporated with other strategy ranking criteria, are encouraged.

- **Building Links to Situation Analysis** - To identify and select the most effective strategic actions, we must understand the system that drives the critical threats and degradation of conservation targets-the biological, political, economic, and socio-cultural context within which our targets. A good situation analysis allows you to make explicit your assumptions as to what specific factors are behind each critical threat and degraded target so as to provide insights and prompt discovery of effective points of entry or courses of action.

  As noted above, conceptual models are one tool for depicting the conservation situation and being explicit about where to intervene, what sort of intervention is called for, and what is the desired outcome. The existing CAP Workbook does not support this type of conceptual modeling, but tools that do are in development (see *Resources and Tools*).

  The Conservation Strategy Development tool outlined in Low (2003) covers a good deal of ground that is covered in a situation analysis. The tool essentially "works the problem from the other side" using a conceptual model. It begins with the strategy that you will employ and uses probing questions to determine the situation to which you will apply this strategy. It would be interesting to see if that tool can be explicitly extended to map out the situation before the project team takes action.

- **Developing and Ranking Project Resource Objectives and Strategic Actions** - The guidelines for developing conservation strategies suggest that, like critical threats and degraded key ecological attributes, project resource factors can serve as a focus for objectives and strategic actions. And, that strategic actions linked to resource objectives can be rated based on benefits, feasibility, and cost, with the noted exception that resource-related actions derive their benefit from leverage rather than direct impact on threats or targets. Logic and initial experience support the inclusion of project resource strategies within the domain of conservation strategies, but further refinement of the similarities and differences between direct threat abatement and viability enhancement strategies, on one hand, and resource or enabling strategies, on the other, is warranted.

Resources and Tools

Basic guidance and examples of developing conservation strategies can be found in the following sources:

Low, G. 2003. Landscape-Scale Conservation: A Practitioners Guide. The Nature Conservancy.
http://conserveonline.org/docs/2003/09/Landscape_Practicitioners_Handbook_July03_--_NEW.pdf

Standardized list of possible strategic actions:

IUCN & CMP. 2006. Classification of Conservation Actions.
www.conservationmeasures.org

References related to situation analysis and its link to developing strategies:

Margoluis, R. and N. Salafsky. 1998. Measures of Success: Designing, Managing, and Monitoring Conservation and Development Projects.
www.IslandPress.org (English in hardcopy only)
www.FOSonline.org (Spanish online)

WWF. 2000. WWF Assessing Root Causes Guide.
http://assets.panda.org/downloads/rcuser.pdf

Software that can be useful for building conceptual models incorporating objectives and strategic actions includes:

Miradi Adaptive Management Software.
www.miradi.org

Microsoft Visio.
www.office.microsoft.com/visio/