

Minutes of the Natural Heritage Advisory Council Meeting

June 10, 2009

Anacortes Public Library
1220 10th Street
Anacortes, Washington
9:50 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.

Voting members present: Alan Black, Peter Dunwiddie, Janelle Downs, Cherie Kearney, Bob Meier, Cheryl Schultz. Ex-Officio members present: Gretchen Nicholas for the Department of Natural Resources, Elizabeth Rodrick (Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife), Jim Eychaner (Recreation and Conservation Office), and Rob Fimbel (State Parks and Recreation Commission)

Members absent: Merrill Peterson, Wade Troutman; Jeanne Koenings (Department of Ecology)

DNR staff present: Pene Speaks, John Gamon, Curt Pavola, Anna Jones, David Wilderman, Kelly Heintz, Stan Kurowski, Alison Hitchcock, Don McIvor, Craig Calhoon

I. Introductions

Chair Black called the meeting to order. All present introduced themselves.

II. Minutes of the March 11, 2009, Meeting of the Council

Chair Black called for a motion regarding the Minutes of the previous meeting. Kearney moved and Downs seconded that the Minutes of the March 11, 2009, Meeting of the Natural Heritage Advisory Council be approved as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

III. and IV. Natural Areas and Natural Heritage Programs Update

Speaks talked to the Council about the budget and the cuts to the Natural Areas and Natural Heritage Programs. There were specific line item cuts to both programs in the General Fund budget, as well as items in other programs that the department was required to fund. There have been nine full time equivalent (FTE) employees cut from the two programs. The Northeast and Olympic Regions of DNR will not have natural areas staff, and the Southeast Region has been cut from 3 to 1 natural areas staff, with that person being at risk of losing their job to someone with more seniority. There may be more cuts in the future. The programs are looking at what the highest priorities are in the state, and how to manage most effectively. There was discussion as to how the Council might be able help with raising awareness of the need for the programs and rebuilding the programs as funds become available.

V. Old Business

Progress on Past Recommendations: Acquisitions Report

Calhoon presented the Council with the acquisitions update (report attached).

Stavis Natural Resources Conservation Area (NRCA) – This site has Douglas-fir–western hemlock / evergreen huckleberry forest community, and rhododendrons. Most of the forest is 40-50 years old. In the developed area in the boundary, there are only 6-8 low-value residences. Two new houses have been built since the boundary was established. DNR acquired 6 of the 8 properties, thus precluding potential residential development.

Woodard Bay NRCA – DNR owns tidelands in the area that is in natural area status. There was discussion about the maintenance of the log rafts, bat housing, replacing creosote logs, etc. The 8 acres just acquired border the saltwater of Chapman Bay. This acreage has 70-80 year old forest and adjoins the NRCA property on the north. DNR will remove structures; hopefully, through deconstructing and recycling the materials.

Klickitat Canyon NRCA – The boundary expansion is in process, but has not gone to the Commissioner of Public Lands yet. There are 70–110 acres under a purchase and sale agreement within 30 days of approval of the boundary. The area includes sand hill cranes foraging in wetlands.

Cypress Island – Secret Harbor tidelands are under a purchase and sale agreement.

North Bay Natural Area Preserve (NAP) – Also under a purchase and sale agreement is a 114-acre inholding, forested, with freshwater wetlands. DNR teamed with Cascade Land Conservancy, which acquired property to hold for DNR. Other organizations have worked with DNR toward completing this landscape.

Natural Areas Association Conference Update

Pavola distributed a handout about the guest speakers (George Divoky, Robert Pyle, and Pat Pringle), with a conference overview and field trips for the national 2009 Natural Areas Association Conference. Registration is not yet open, but will go live anytime soon. There will be three pre-conference and some post-conference field trips. The conference will be at the Vancouver Conference Center and Hilton Hotel, Vancouver, Washington, from September 15–18, 2009.

One other guest speaker is being recruited for the Friday lunch meeting – Jane Lubchenco, the new head of NOAA, whose aim is to engage scientists in policymaking and better communication with the public. Friday evening, after conference close, a trip to Portland is planned for those wishing to stay over.

Speaks shared that Keith Lazelle, a photographer who has recently published a book on the Hoh River, will be presenting at the Wednesday night banquet.

Pavola is marketing the conference extensively in the Northwest, especially since many throughout the country who might have participated cannot now travel out of state.

Speaks indicated that the Program Committee is looking at proposals and have identified eight tracks. The Call for Papers ended in April, but the committee is still accepting submissions. Pavola said that most of the conference attendees are interested in the science and practice of natural areas.

Pavola said that NAA is trying to get TVW to record the keynote and plenary speakers. NAA has a system that syncs voice and PowerPoint presentations, but they would need eight volunteer techs to run it in each of the session rooms. He also asked that Council members send him an e-mail if they know of students who wish to participate, especially student volunteers.

VI. New Business

Middle Fork Snoqualmie Proposed NRCA

Heintz and Wilderman introduced the Middle Fork Snoqualmie Proposed Natural Resources Conservation Area (pNRCA) with an invitation to the Council to visit it. The proposed area is 8,700 acres in the heart of the Mountains to Sound Greenway, which is also proposed as a national Scenic Byway, next to Mount Si NRCA. It is also contiguous with the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest

and near Rattlesnake Mountain Scenic Area. The area has very steep slopes with high timber value and was proposed for Trust Land Transfer and is included on the 2009-11 list. There are a few small inholdings but the rest is in public ownership. Last biennium approximately 3,000 acres on the north side of the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River were added to Mt. Si through Trust Land Transfer. The proposed Middle Fork Snoqualmie NRCA would be contiguous this new portion of the Mt. Si NRCA.

The primary features for designation of the proposed Middle Fork Snoqualmie NRCA are its scenic and public use values. RCO provided a planning grant for the Middle Fork Concept Plan in 1996. There is also a Mt. Si NRCA Management and Public Use Plan (1997). There are many partners and supporters of the proposed NRCA in the Middle Fork of the Snoqualmie River Valley. Advocates have been working hard over the last ten years to remove garbage, control invasive weeds, and improve trails. Mailbox Peak Trail is used by many hikers for training for climbing Mt. Rainier. The 12-mile Middle Fork Road borders the proposed NRCA on the north side and provides access to the upper Middle Fork Snoqualmie Valley. The Federal Highways Administration has funding to pave the Middle Fork Road, which is likely to bring more recreationists to the area. The few trails within the proposed NRCA will be strictly for non-motorized use. The Federal Highway Administration has allotted over \$1 million to design and build a trailhead that will serve the Mailbox Peak Trail. There was brief discussion about interest from the biking community.

The proposed site has several areas of old growth forest, extensive talus slopes and rock features, four lakes and associated wetlands and a substantial area of younger forest approximately 15-100 years of age. The lakes are not officially stocked. Trails do not access the lakes. Some roads have already been abandoned, and more will be. Wilderman said there is no biological inventory conducted by the Natural Heritage Program yet and no documented element occurrences (EOs); the ecological values identified are based on other existing data. He described the elevation as 800-5,000 feet, with low to mid-elevation forest, as well as subalpine forest (cedar, fir, *et al.*), shrub, meadow, talus fields and bare rocks.

There are also many freshwater streams, two lake systems, Granite and Gifford, and resident cutthroat trout. The Gifford Lakes drainage has had very little timber harvest. There is scrub-shrub wetland, and the river has intact riparian habitat. The road is mostly not in the flood plain. Thompson Lake is on the western boundary. Northern spotted owls have roosting and foraging areas. Marbled murrelet are within ten miles on the north, east, and south. The area has potential for suitable murrelet habitat. Mountain goats and Roosevelt elk are in the area. Potentially, there are Cascades frogs, coastal tailed frogs, larch mountain salamanders, and eight rare plant taxa.

Connectivity is an important element. Pavola explained that in context, the concept has been talked about for many years. The Council is invited to comment, and if individuals want to see the site, the program will schedule a visit before presenting the concept to the public.

Gamon asked about the Council's required or preferred role. Speaks indicated usually staff have brought scientific or NRCA/NAP with primarily ecological-driven sites to the Council. This is the first one brought to the Council that is based on primarily scenic values, so staff would like to know if the Council wants to comment on the proposal. It is within the authority of the Council to recommend a scenic designation, but not required. There was discussion about the Council's position and procedure. Schultz asked why this is a new site and not an expansion of Mt. Si. Heintz and Pavola explained that it has its own identity with the public, and the program's reluctance to continue to expand the boundary of the Mt. Si NRCA. Much of the area is an actively managed forest, and the trust land forester, as well as recreation staff, helps to manage the area, informally. Dunwiddie suggested contacting the Forest Service to discuss the potential for sharing managing duties.

Kearney moved to support the proposal of the Middle Fork Snoqualmie Natural Resources Conservation Area designation to the Commissioner of Public Lands, seconded by Dunwiddie.

Discussion that followed related to “the concept,” the conservation status, USFWS requirements for spotted owl, management agreements, anticipated recreation conflicts within the proposed area with spotted owl habitat. There was a suggestion that recreation would be in the valley only.

Black called for the question. The motion carried unanimously.

Proposed Important Bird Areas (IBAs)

Don McIvor, staff for both Audubon Washington and DNR’s Natural Heritage Program, presented background information on Important Bird Areas (IBAs). Audubon, along with Bird Life International developed criteria for recognizing IBAs. The DNR Natural Heritage Program was directed by the state legislature “to officially recognize important bird areas” (RCW 79.70.110 Important Bird Areas (IBAs). McIvor summarized the status of his work for the NHP on how the Program could implement the direction from the Legislature, including the role of the Natural Heritage Advisory Council in the process.

McIvor explained that during the course of this project, the concept of IBAs began to be viewed more as a set of conservation priorities rather than as a land-use designation. Recognition would mean that the sites and data have been reviewed and vetted by the Natural Heritage Program (NH) and Audubon staff as well as the Council. NH and Audubon staff would jointly bring potential IBAs to the Council for approval. The supporting data for IBAs recognized and approved by the NHAC would be managed as part of the NHP’s information system.

McIvor also indicated that the legislature was clear that recognition as an IBA does not mean that a site or area was automatically considered to be a natural area (unless it met those criteria separately), nor did it require or create a critical area designation. It also did not confer trespass rights on private lands without the full knowledge and consent of the landowners as required by state statutory and common law.

This site review process has been a collaboration of DNR and Audubon. Audubon has identified 74 potential IBAs in Washington to date. IBA data sources include the original IBA selections, e-Bird, the Christmas bird counts, North American migration counts, electronic mail, *et al.*

Humptulips Proposed IBA

McIvor said the Humptulips estuary has about 160,000 shore birds using it during spring migration. Data sources include a variety of state, non-profit, and private organizations. There are at least 16 species known to use this Grays Harbor area. WDFW’s Priority and Habitat Species (PHS) list has contributed animal occurrences, and DNR’s Natural Heritage data has many element occurrences within the area. The North Bay Natural Area Preserve is within the proposed IBA. If approved, the IBA would become a conservation information layer in the NH database.

There was discussion about how an IBA designation would be perceived, how it might help with funding applications, especially in that USFWS adds points for IBAs in grant applications. It assures that Audubon, and the bird population, are seen at the same time as other conservation values. Gamon said that the Natural Heritage Program would be responsible for vetting the sources of data. The first two proposed IBAs being presented have good data. Speaks said the process will be developed as these two pilot sites are walked through to recognition status. There was discussion of the value of funding, recognizing and caring for things the public likes, any impacts on management of a natural area from being within an IBA, data criteria from Bird Life International and Audubon, and how designation may impact management of other areas within or near these areas (WDFW). Speaks said staff would like the Council to memorialize the process and criteria. McIvor provided a high level overview of the original

criteria for Audubon's designation of IBAs. There is an eleven-page guideline and an eight-page nomination form for recommending an area.

Rodrick recommended that consulting with (WDFW) ornithologists be written into the process. Schultz asked about numbers – the proposed IBAs (pIBA) seem to have large numbers, but rare species are unlikely to have large numbers. McIvor responded that IBAs are based where species exist, not where there might be restoration. Black expressed concern about the possible contention of boundaries and expansions – that some might not see this as just an overlay, but might perceive it as a boundary. There was clarifying discussion about the letter and intent of the RCW (79.70.110). Meier said that the IBA status is attractive to landowners because it is not regulatory, and that it would become an issue if it became regulatory. The legislation passed unanimously, so it is unlikely to become regulatory.

Columbia Hills Proposed IBA

McIvor reviewed for the Council the features present within the Columbia Hills IBA. The area is changing with wind energy development. McIvor said that the current Audubon IBA status didn't seem to impact energy development.

Speaks said that more work is needed on the criteria, so the Council should table both IBA proposals until additional work can be done. Additional topics discussed included the importance of other wildlife in these areas, size, context and trend information for bird populations, and threats to bird populations, particularly from wind energy development. The Council also expressed interest in seeing the IBA site nomination forms being used by Audubon.

Rodrick indicated a desire to have WDFW staff work with the Natural Heritage Program on future IBA presentations to the Council.

After discussion, it was moved by Downs and seconded by Kearney, with an accepted friendly amendment to change "sites" to "areas" that "the Natural Heritage Advisory Council will review proposals for approval that are brought forward by the Natural Heritage Program and Audubon for areas to be recognized as Important Bird Areas, and that IBAs so recognized by the Council will become part of the natural heritage database." The motion was approved unanimously.

Issue Topics and Council Roles

The council received a number of draft topic documents prior to today's meeting to spark some thought and generate discussion about areas of needed guidance and policy that continue to come up in council deliberations. The first topic that was addressed is below. The intent is to begin to develop guidance and capture the council's policy direction for the future.

Role of the Natural Area System in Statewide Conservation

Several issues regarding the role of natural areas in statewide conservation efforts continue to arise as NHP and NA staff bring information and recommendations to the NHAC. Council and staff began the discussion of some of these issues. The intent of addressing these issues is to develop some resolution and consensus that can be memorialized in guidance documents for the future and so that they do not have to be debated for anew for each natural area recommendation.

Issues discussed included:

- Value of natural areas as baseline reference sites.
- Are natural areas large enough to truly represent functioning ecosystems?

- Using priorities and methodology to ensure that the best examples of ecosystems are included in the natural areas system.
- Scenic values were added to the mix of values to be considered by the NHAC when the Council was given some responsibility for NRCAs.
- How much is enough? How big do individual natural areas have to be and how many natural areas do we need? Can we measure, or set goals for, either?
- How do the features of interest (rare species or quality ecosystem) influence the size and landscape context necessary for successful conservation?
- How do NAPs and NRCAs differ? How can we best nest the two together at individual sites?
- What is the relationship of the NHAC and the purpose of natural areas to that of the Biodiversity Council?
- Proposals brought forth by the public create opportunities for partnerships, but they may also distract staff from established statewide priorities.
- How do we handle political vs. scientific input and priorities?
- How do we evaluate the conservation value of working landscapes, in particular working forests and grazing lands?
- Are the existing suite of natural areas biased toward rare species and ecosystems? Are we ensuring that we're conserving good examples of common ecosystem types and species?
- Are restoration need and restoration potential evaluated and considered when natural area recommendations are developed?
- How do we make public access decisions? Are those decisions objective? There were several comments that as we have accommodated more public access, in particular with NRCAs, there has been more public acceptance of natural areas.

Fimbel recommended committees for the next meeting. The discussion centered on the idea of working on each issue in the agenda at a rate of one per quarter, with intermediate conference calls before the next one, and to work on policy recommendations, with a set of common assumptions. Kearney proposed and it was agreed that the discussions would start with a continuation of this one in October, early in the meeting agenda. Speaks will flush out the document that includes the recommendation or policy in the conference call in August. Eychaner will help.

Other topics:
NAP/NRCA Designation - Tabled
Landscape Context - Tabled
Public Access - Tabled

VII. Agency Reports

Recreation and Conservation Office

Eychaner explained that RCO has new charges from the legislature to house the Governor's Salmon Recovery Office as well as supporting the Salmon Recovery Funding Board (SRFB) and Forum on Monitoring Salmon Recovery and Watershed Health. The lead entity was WDFW. RCO is now expanding staff in order to cover these new programs. He also said that monies were lost when boating and NOVA funds were transferred to State Parks. There is no funding for the NOVA grant program which will have an impact to DNR. The Invasive Species Council will have a new Executive Coordinator by the end of the week. Eychaner's supervisor, Jim Fox, has retired. He explained the funding levels for (WWRP), Aquatic Lands Enhancement Account

(ALEA), and Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). He didn't know the SRFB funding level. There were no funds for the Boating Facilities Program.

Department of Ecology – not available

State Parks and Recreation Commission

Fimbel reported that State Parks' General Fund monies were reduced by fifty percent, but the former opt in – now opt out – license tab fee of \$5.00 will add to their available funds. It is estimated that about fifty percent of those applying for license tabs will not opt out. The stewardship program lost fifty percent of the management staff for natural resources. They now have only one FTE (full time equivalent) staff in each of their three regions.

Department of Fish and Wildlife

Rodrick reported that the WDFW budget reduction for 2009-11 is about \$22 million with 161 FTEs lost. This is less than anticipated because the legislature approved some license increases. Actual personnel laid off will be about 80 FTEs; the remaining cuts will be managed through vacancies and retirements. On habitat acquisition, DFW is doing well with a combination of \$16.9 million in WWRP grants and \$6 million in federal Section 6 grants (Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund). DNR received \$6.7 million in Section 6 grants. This represents about 1/3 of the available national funds. The funded projects include the I-90 Wildlife Corridor, Okanogan and Methow Wildlife Corridors, Ashford Forest, and Castilleja Recovery Projects.

Department of Natural Resources

Speaks reported that funding for the Trust Land Transfer projects is close to \$90 million. The agency will begin strategic planning in July. It will be working on goals for the next five years. The Sustainable Recreation Work Group is interested in access on all state lands, including natural areas. They will be making their final recommendations to the legislature in December 2009.

VIII. Other Business

Cypress Island field trip

Hitchcock talked about our field trip site, Cypress Island, which is one of the first four NRCAs established by the legislature. The island has about 5,500 acres of uplands, and in 2007, the surrounding waters became an Aquatic Reserve¹. There is a geological fault line with basalt northerly, and ultramafic (serpentine soils) southerly of the fault. This creates unique plant communities. Indian dream fern, peregrine falcons, and bald eagles are among the species found on Cypress. There is now a Cypress Island Comprehensive Management Plan.

The ongoing projects the Council will visit are the demolition at Secret Harbor, where there are the issues of hazardous waste (diesel tanks), noxious weed control, and the field station and airstrip restoration projects.

¹ The site includes the state-owned tidelands and bedlands surrounding Cypress Island, including those adjacent to Strawberry Island and Cone Islands from the mean high tide line to a water depth of 70 feet below mean lower low tide or one half mile from the extreme low tide, whichever is further seaward.

- In the waters near Secret Harbor are three net pens, covering 37 acres, where salmon smolts are raised. The lease is until 2012, and the lease will probably be renewed unless the operations cease.
- So far, staff and contractors have removed 65 structures, 2 dozen vehicles, and 4-5 miles of fence line. There is still a lot of litter and debris. The Secret Harbor School is obligated to do the clean up under the sale agreement.
- The field station renovation is intended for researchers and site stewards (currently two) to be able to stay on the island. There is a shop, woodshop and other facilities.
- Noxious weeds include scotch broom, thistle, tansy ragwort, yellow iris, and bamboo. Hitchcock said they received permission from neighboring land owners to treat their noxious weeds, too.
- There is a dike that staff would like to breach and then restore the estuary. They submitted a grant request to BLM.
- Temporary and long term management of public access to the site is an issue.
- There is an airstrip with 10 acres where nothing was growing. Staff had an excavator dig 2,000 holes and they have planted nursery seedlings, using compost from the composting toilet for fertilizer. They are trying to make the signs and symbols very visible that the area is no longer an airstrip.

Hitchcock then explained the timing and logistics for the field trip, and for dinner after the meeting.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:22 p.m.