



Washington State's Natural Areas Program

'FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS'

What is the Natural Areas Program and why is it important?

The Natural Areas Program within the Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is responsible for managing a statewide system of conservation lands. The program protects some of the best remaining examples of natural Washington, including native ecosystems, plants and animals—the “blueprints” of Washington’s natural history. In addition to contributing to region-wide biodiversity conservation, natural areas serve as baseline reference sites to guide the management and restoration of less pristine lands. The mission of the Natural Areas Program is: “Conserving Washington’s native species and ecosystems, today and for future generations.”

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What is the difference between Natural Area Preserves (NAPs) and Natural Resources Conservation Areas (NRCAs)?

Both designations protect native plants, plant communities and animals, and both are used as outdoor classrooms for environmental education and scientific research. NAPs protect the highest quality native ecosystems and generally host more sensitive or rare species. NRCAs often include significant geologic features, archaeological resources or scenic attributes. NRCAs often have developed public access facilities, while some of the more sensitive NAPs have limited, or guided, access to protect resources.

Can't we just purchase these lands and let nature take care of them?

All natural areas require some form of active management due to the disruption of natural processes and disturbance regimes, such as wildfire, and due to the recent introduction of invasive weeds or other species. Lack of hands-on management would mean the loss of native biodiversity.

Weed control for dozens of invaders including Himalayan blackberry, English ivy and scotch broom is necessary because these non-native species thrive in the absence of natural competitors from their home lands. Invasive species often outcompete and smother native plants, resulting in the loss of plant communities and animal habitat. Only a fraction of all non-native species in Washington are invasive. However, those that are can have profound impacts to native ecosystems, as well as severe economic consequences. English ivy, for example, can invade large areas of forestland smothering wildflowers and other understory plants, preventing the regeneration of native trees and shrubs and damaging mature trees. Invasive species are second only to habitat loss as the greatest threat to biological diversity.

Also, decades of fire suppression have allowed some native species to displace other native plant species or communities. For example, without recurring natural fire disturbance, oak savannas become overtopped by fire-sensitive Douglas fir trees that shade out the shorter, fire-tolerant Garry oaks and native grasses and wildflowers, leading to the eventual demise of the prairie ecosystem and the species that thrive there. At several prairie NAPs, the state Natural Areas Program is reintroducing fire in the form of controlled burns.

Finally, before they became natural areas some lands were modified, damaged or degraded and require restoration. For example, forests that were cleared for pasture land are being replanted to shade streams and provide native habitat for fish and wildlife. Abandoned forest roads are being re-vegetated to prevent sediments from running into streams and to restore the original hydrology throughout the landscape.

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Considering the many threats to native species and ecosystems, without active management the network of natural areas would look and function very differently than it has for millennia, resulting in a loss of Washington State's natural heritage—the loss of our biological legacy.

Why is it important to protect biodiversity?

Each species is an important part of an ecosystem. Plants and animals are intimately tied to one another in ways that we are just beginning to understand. For example, many plant species rely only on one or a few insects to pollinate their flowers. If we lose these pollinators we lose the plants that depend on them, and then we lose the larger animals that depend on the plants for habitat—the process of loss continues throughout the “web of life.”

To use an airplane as a metaphor for an ecosystem, we can remove a few nuts and bolts and the plane will continue to fly, but if too many parts are removed eventually the plane will fall from the sky.

Can the public visit natural areas?

What activities are allowed on natural areas?

Yes, all natural areas offer some form of public access. Each is evaluated for the types of access that will not harm sensitive features. Some natural area preserves are highly sensitive and access is limited to guided tours, educational use and scientific research. Others, such as Mima Mounds NAP and the Chehalis River Surge Plain NAP, have interpretive trails where the public can enjoy and learn about these important ecosystems. Natural resources conservation areas also are open to low-impact activities such as hiking, bird watching or wildflower viewing, and camping is allowed at several NRCAs.

How are natural areas acquired?

Can DNR condemn private property or force a landowner to sell their land?

DNR does not condemn land. Natural areas are acquired through gifts, land exchanges or purchase from willing sellers at market value. Usually acquisition funds come from state and federal grants. Some natural areas are former state-owned trust lands, and when they are transferred into natural area status, the trust is compensated at market value. Following this, the trust purchases replacement assets that will be managed to earn revenue for public schools or other trust beneficiaries.

What is a natural area boundary and what implications will it have on my property?

A proposed natural area boundary is a designation of lands eligible for inclusion within a state-owned natural area. Lands located within the boundary only become part of the natural area if they are acquired by DNR. The boundary is simply an administrative tool to indicate where DNR will work with willing property owners to create the natural area. A proposed natural area boundary imposes no change in land use zoning, development code requirements, or any other restrictions on landowners. Land is purchased only from willing sellers at market value, which is determined by an independent, third-party appraisal.

How many natural areas are managed by the Natural Areas Program?

DNR's Natural Areas Program is the single largest conservator of native ecosystems, plant communities and habitat for rare species in Washington. Currently, the program protects more than 132,000 acres in 83 natural areas throughout the state.

How can I help protect natural areas?

Volunteers play an important role as site stewards and environmental education interpreters. They also may take part in work parties to help control or map invasive weeds or restore habitat. Visitors to natural areas can help by staying on approved trails, not littering and not picking flowers or removing any other natural resource. Neighbors of natural areas can voluntarily help by not planting invasive plants, keeping cats indoors and dogs out of the natural area, and notifying DNR staff about inappropriate activities on the site, such as garbage dumping or theft. If you are interested in volunteering with the Natural Areas Program, please contact the region office nearest you. Go to www.dnr.wa.gov or call (360) 902-1000 for office location information.