

Earth Island Institute

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Nature in the city;

Significant Natural Resource Areas Management Plan, San Francisco

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San Franciscans are fortunate to live in a climate that encourages outdoor living year-round. Hiking, biking, surfing, fishing, birding, and similar activities are all available within city limits. The city is also home to over a dozen federally listed endangered or threatened species and their diverse native habitats. City planners and resource managers, working with a highly involved public, are charged with balancing urban nature and biodiversity protection with public recreation.

The City's Significant Natural Resource Areas Management Plan takes bold measures to protect San Francisco's numerous imperiled species, many of which are endemic to the region, and their habitats. The plan will guide San Francisco Recreation and Parks in conserving the city's ecosystems for the next two decades. While the plan takes steps to accommodate recreation in the city's natural areas, the Recreation and Park Department cannot protect urban habitats without some restrictions on human activity.

The plan, lauded by independent scientific reviews, is now before the Recreation and Parks Commission for final review and approval. While the peer reviewers agree that the plan "provides a sound foundation in information" and

"does an outstanding job overall" of balancing the need to protect natural resources with competing uses, they also agree that the plan could be strengthened to address risks to San Francisco's natural heritage posed by invasive species, feral cats, and off-leash dogs.

Plan reviewers Dr. Lynn Huntsinger and Dr. James W. Bartolome concluded "[g]iven the small size of the Natural Areas and populations of species of concern, it is most appropriate to enforce the existing leash regulations and to exclude dogs from some small but vital wildlife habitat ... the proposed control of dogs seems appropriate and even conservative" to protect San Francisco's endangered biodiversity. The reviewers explained that "[t]he need to control feral cats is urgent" because feral cats can "kill prey species even when populations of prey are low, increasing the chances of extinction for the prey."

Persistent detractors of urban nature conservation have attempted to derail efforts to protect and restore rare and endangered species, their habitats, and the City's own unique biodiversity. The sad fact is that not every San Franciscan thinks having nature in the city is necessary. Meanwhile, the Recreation and Park 's Natural Areas and Volunteer program was awarded the 2006 Acts of Caring Award for Community Improvement by the National Association of Counties.

San Francisco's conservation leaders are supportive of the Recreation and Park Department's natural resources program. The program owes its existence in large part to the California Native Plant Society. Said Elizabeth Murdock, executive director of the Golden Gate chapter of the Audubon Society, "This plan combines the best available science with a lengthy community process to find the best way to protect and enjoy the precious wild places that make our city so special." Brent

Plater, Bay Area director of the Center for Biological Diversity, noted, "The Natural Areas Program gives people who otherwise cannot or will not drive to distant wild lands an increasingly rare recreational opportunity: the chance to be exposed to things more than human. The Natural Areas Program provides an oasis of hope for a sustainable society."

San Franciscans have a responsibility to ensure that rare and endangered wildlife and plants are not pushed to extinction, and must recognize that urban nature conservation depends not only on land management agencies, but also on people--volunteer stewards, activists, citizens of the Earth--reconnecting with nature where they live. Ecological restoration is recreation!

Public support of the Natural Areas Program and the Management Plan is vital for the plan to be approved by the Recreation and Parks Commission. If you live or work in San Francisco, contact the Commission and urge it to adopt the plan to ensure that future generations of San Franciscans will be able to enjoy our unique biological heritage. A full copy of the plan and peer reviewer comments can be seen at

http://www.parks.sfgov.org/site/recpark_index.asp?id=1896. And there's more information at www.parks.sfgov.org/site/recpark_index.asp?id=1896.

Support and advocacy for San Francisco's natural areas, the Plan and the Natural Areas Program is a top priority for Nature in the City. For more information, contact Peter Brastow at (415) 564-4107 or www.natureinthecity.org.

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