

# Conservation Element





environmental characteristics and are compatible with open space use. Open space may have utility for: primarily passive park and recreation; conservation of land, water, or other natural biological resources; historic or scenic purposes; visual relief; or landform preservation. San Diego's many canyons, valleys, mesas, hillsides, beaches, and other landforms create a unique setting that fosters biodiversity, a sense of place, and recreational opportunities. Designated parks and open spaces are shown on the General Plan Land Use and Street System Map (see also Land Use Element, Figure LU-2). San Diego has a long history of planning for open space preservation and protection, including:

- 1868 – The City Board of Trustees set land aside for a City park, later named Balboa Park.
- 1908 – John Nolen's comprehensive plan for San Diego called for development to conform to and respect the natural environment.
- 1972 – The City amended the City Charter Section 103.1a to establish the Environmental Growth Fund, two-thirds of which is to be used to pay principle and interest on bonds issued for the acquisition of open space lands, with the remainder to be used to preserve and enhance the environment of the City.
- 1978 – San Diego voters approved Proposition C which authorized the sale of bonds to purchase open space.
- 1979 – The Progress Guide and General Plan, Open Space Element called for providing an open space system.
- 1987 – The City's Residential Growth Management Program included a policy recommendation to allow topography and environmentally sensitive lands to define the City's urban form.
- 1997 – The Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) was adopted to preserve and manage sensitive species at the ecosystem level through habitat protection.
- 2017 – The Vernal Pool Habitat Conservation Plan (VPHCP) was adopted to provide comprehensive preservation and management of vernal pools and seven state and federal threatened and endangered vernal pool species.

The City's Environmentally Sensitive Lands (ESL) regulations help protect, preserve, and restore lands containing steep hillsides, sensitive biological resources, coastal beaches, sensitive coastal bluffs, or Special Flood Hazard Areas. The intent of the ESL regulations is to assure that development occurs in a manner that protects the overall quality of the resources, encourages a sensitive form of development, retains biodiversity and interconnected habitats, maximizes physical and visual public access to and along the shoreline, and reduces hazards due to flooding in specific areas while minimizing the need for construction of flood control facilities. Steep hillsides are shown on Figure CE-1, Steep Slopes and 200 Foot Contours.



The development regulations and guidelines for environmentally sensitive lands also serve to implement the MSCP and VPHCP by placing priority on the preservation of biological resources within the Multi-Habitat Planning Area (MHPA) (see Figure CE-2, Multi-Habitat Planning Area). The goal of the MSCP and VPHCP is to achieve a sustainable balance between species preservation and smart growth by identifying areas for habitat/species protection (within the MHPA) and areas for development (outside the MHPA), as further discussed in Sections G and H.

The City's parks, open space, trails and pedestrian linkages are part of an integrated system that connect with regional and state resources and provide opportunities for residents and visitors to experience San Diego's open spaces. The Recreation Element describes the attributes of designated and dedicated park and open space lands for the provision of outdoor recreation. Some important open space areas are not preserved as dedicated park land, but are protected through regulations or other private property restrictions such as conservation or open space easements. Open space that is designated in community plans and other land use plans is an important component of the open space system because of its value in protecting natural landforms, defining community boundaries, providing natural linkages between communities, providing visually appealing open spaces, and protecting habitat and biological systems of community importance that are not otherwise included in the MHPA.

### Policies

- CE-B.1. Protect and conserve the landforms, canyon lands, and open spaces that: define the City's urban form; provide public views/vistas; serve as core biological areas and wildlife linkages; are wetlands habitats; provide buffers within and between communities; or provide outdoor recreational opportunities.
- a. Utilize Environmental Growth Funds and pursue additional funding for the acquisition and management of MHPA and other important community open space lands, and implementation of the VPHCP.
  - b. Support the preservation of rural lands and open spaces throughout the region.
  - c. Protect urban canyons and other important community open spaces including those that have been designated in community plans for the many benefits they offer locally, and regionally as part of a collective citywide open space system (see also Recreation Element, Sections C and F; Urban Design Element, Section A).
  - d. Minimize or avoid impacts to canyons and other environmentally sensitive lands, by relocating sewer infrastructure out of these areas where possible,



- minimizing construction of new sewer access roads into these areas, and redirecting of sewage discharge away from canyons and other environmentally sensitive lands.
- e. Encourage the removal of invasive plant species and the planting of native plants near open space preserves.
  - f. Pursue formal dedication of existing and future open space areas throughout the City, especially in core biological resource areas of the City's adopted MSCP Subarea Plan and VPHCP.
  - g. Require sensitive design, construction, relocation, and maintenance of trails to optimize public access and resource conservation.
- CE-B.2. Apply the appropriate zoning and Environmentally Sensitive Lands (ESL) regulations to limit development of floodplains, sensitive biological areas including wetlands, steep hillsides, canyons, and coastal lands.
- a. Manage watersheds and regulate floodplains to reduce disruption of natural systems, including the flow of sand to the beaches. Where possible and practical, restore water filtration, flood and erosion control, biodiversity and sand replenishment benefits.
  - b. Limit grading and alterations of steep hillsides, cliffs and shoreline to prevent increased erosion and landform impacts.
- CE-B.3. Use natural landforms and features as integrating elements in project design to complement and accentuate the City's form (see also Urban Design Element, Section A).
- CE-B.4. Limit and control runoff, sedimentation, and erosion both during and after construction activity.
- CE-B.5. Maximize the incorporation of trails and greenways linking local and regional open space and recreation areas into the planning and development review processes.
- CE-B.6. Provide an appropriate defensible space between open space and urban areas through the management of brush, the use of transitional landscaping, and the design of structures (see also Urban Design Element, Policy UD-A.3.o). Continue to implement a citywide brush management system.



amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals.

The MSCP is a comprehensive, long-term habitat conservation planning program for southwestern San Diego County (the planned habitat preserve is shown on Figure CE-2, Multi-Habitat Planning Area) that has been developed cooperatively by participating jurisdictions/ special districts in partnership with federal/state wildlife agencies, property owners, and representatives of the development industry and environmental groups. The purpose of the MSCP is to preserve a network of habitat and open space. The plan is designed to preserve native vegetation and meet the habitat needs of multiple species, rather than focusing preservation efforts on one species at a time. By placing priority on the preservation of biological resources within a Multi-Habitat Planning Area (MHPA), the MSCP has streamlined existing permit procedures for development projects which impact habitat.

The MSCP, and the associated subarea plans, seek to meet the requirements of the federal Endangered Species Act and the California Natural Community Conservation Program. Signatory agencies/districts administer their portions of the MSCP through the subarea plans and Implementing Agreements (IA). The City's MSCP Subarea Plan and IA was adopted by City Council and approved by the wildlife agencies in 1997.

In 2017, the City adopted a Vernal Pool Habitat Conservation Plan (VPHCP) in order to comprehensively manage and monitor the vernal pool ecosystem within the City of San Diego's jurisdiction. The VPHCP includes seven vernal pool species: San Diego fairy shrimp (*Branchinecta sandiegonensis*), Riverside fairy shrimp (*Streptocephalus woottonii*), San Diego button celery (*Eryngium aristulatum* var. *parishii*), Spreading navarretia (*Navarretia fossalis*), San Diego mesa mint (*Pogogyne abramsii*), California Orcutt grass (*Orcuttia californica*), and Otay mesa mint (*Pogogyne nudiscula*). San Diego and Riverside fairy shrimp are listed by the USFWS as endangered species. With the exception of spreading navarretia which is listed as a federally threatened species, all the plant species are federally and state listed as endangered species.

## Policies

- CE-G.1. Preserve natural habitats pursuant to the MSCP and VPHCP, preserve rare plants and animals to the maximum extent practicable, and manage all City-owned native habitats to ensure their long-term biological viability.
- a. Educate the public about the impacts invasive plant species have on open space.
  - b. Remove, avoid, or discourage the planting of invasive plant species.
  - c. Pursue funding for removal of established populations of invasive species within the MHPA and open space.



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- CE-G.2. Prioritize, fund, acquire, and manage the MHPA and open spaces that preserve important ecological resources and provide habitat connectivity.
- CE-G.3. Implement the conservation goals/policies of the City's MSCP Subarea Plan and VPHCP, such as providing connectivity between habitats and limiting recreational access and use to appropriate areas.
- CE-G.4. Protect important ecological resources when applying floodplain regulations and development guidelines.
- CE-G.5. Promote aquatic biodiversity and habitat recovery by reducing hydrological alterations, such as grading a stream channel.



## H. Wetlands

### Goals

- ◆ Preservation of San Diego’s rich biodiversity and heritage through the protection and restoration of wetland resources.
- ◆ Preservation of all existing wetland habitat in San Diego through a “no net loss” approach.

### Discussion

San Diego supports a unique assemblage of wetlands that are not specifically addressed in the Multiple Species Conservation Program (see Section G). These include tidal and freshwater marshes, and riparian wetlands and vernal pools. The Vernal Pool Habitat Conservation Plan addresses the preservation, management and monitoring of vernal pools and listed vernal pool species. Wetlands are vitally important to the survival of many fish, birds, and plants. Waterways and their riparian areas are critical habitats for a variety of wildlife. Straightening, cementing over, and otherwise altering waterways and wetlands removes the opportunities for biodiversity and also impacts important ecological processes that remove pollutants and improve water quality. The health of wetland areas is an important indicator of ecosystem health, and of the sustainability of human activity within a watershed.



*Endangered species monitoring*



*Otay Mesa vernal pool*

Wetlands protect surface water quality by slowing the erosive forces of moving water. They provide a natural means of flood control and damage prevention by reducing flood peaks, thereby protecting against the loss of life and property. Wetlands intercept and filter waterborne sediments, excess nutrients, heavy metals and other pollutants, thereby improving water quality.