

FINAL
Increased Recreational Access within the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve
(02-08-2008)

On November 28, 2007, the Balcones Canyonlands Conservation Plan (BCCP) Coordinating Committee directed City and County staff to develop a trail and public access master plan for the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve (BCP). This plan is to be completed within one year with access to begin in 2009. It should be noted the Travis County Commissioner's Court rescinded the County's involvement in this process on January 08, 2008. Unless directed otherwise, the City's Wildland Conservation Division will continue with this endeavor.

The policy statement and other information received directs that this master plan is to be consistent with the current conditions identified within the BCCP and associated Federal permit. To ensure this, the master plan must be consistent with the BCCP Final Environmental Impact Statement and Habitat Conservation Plan (Also referred to as BCCP). BCP staff has identified the following key statements in the BCCP as critical guiding policy regarding public access, all of which are taken directly from the "Land Management Plans and Guidelines" section of the BCCP (pages 2-31 to 2-39). Any deviations from these key statements may require an amendment to the Federal permit and/or BCCP. As part of the stakeholder process, all stakeholders would be challenged to also provide their interpretations of existing policy. The sum of this information would then be considered with specific resource information to develop alternatives and make decisions for new trails.

- The BCCP preserve system is to be managed to permanently conserve and facilitate the recovery of the populations of target endangered species inhabiting western Travis County. This priority objective will govern preserve management activities to improve target species habitat, while protecting preserves against degradation caused by urbanization of surrounding lands and increased public demand for recreation usage within preserves.
- The welfare of target species (species of concern) will be the overriding influence on all decisions regarding activities on preserve lands. Decisions about activities within preserves should be made cautiously, so as to meet biological objectives to protect and enhance target species and minimize risk of damage to their habitat.
- No activity will be allowed which results in a "take" of an endangered species, or which degrades or in any way harms the preserve.
- A multiple-use management approach may be appropriate on some tracts, whereby other uses may be compatible with the primary habitat protection and species management goals, as long as these uses either benefit or have no negative effects on species of concern and do not significantly compete with other management efforts for personnel or financial resources. (Note: This is also consistent with the November 28, 2007, policy statement which states, "funding for acquisition of preserve habitat or species management within the preserve shall have priority over funding for recreational access within the preserve.")

- Long-term monitoring of both the environmental quality of the preserve and the health of its populations of endangered species is a necessary part of this endeavor.
- The preserve system may offer public access and recreational opportunities within the Austin and Travis County area where possible and manageable. Public access may be allowed where and when such access does not threaten the welfare of the target species of concern, which is the overriding goal of the preserve system, nor cause the degradation of soil, vegetation, or water resources.
- The key to allowing public access which is non-threatening and non-damaging to preserve lands is implementation of effective management strategies to control such access and use. Demonstration over time of effectively implemented management strategies on a preserve tract may justify increased public access opportunities. Demonstrated non-effectiveness or habitat degradation may justify less public access for a particular tract.
- Creation of new roadways, trails, and cleared right-of-ways that open the canopies of woodland and shrubland communities, create additional impervious cover, or facilitate public use of preserve interiors or high quality sites occupied by target species should be discouraged.
- It is necessary to avoid, detect, and reduce the types of localized detrimental impacts associated with human activities associated with human activity on the preserves. The following types of outdoor activities may be allowed if they do not conflict with conservation of target species as described in the individual preserve land management plans. (Note: BCCP identifies 11 activities, some of which are prohibited or restricted, pages 2-37 to 2-39.)

The BCCP is the primary guidance document with respect to complying with the terms and conditions of the Federal permit and should form the basis for all other subsequent documents, such as Land Management Plans. While the statements above are specific to the BCCP, there are several other pieces of correspondence that provide further guidance regarding public access. Many of these are letters from Fish and Wildlife Service that help clarify certain points within the BCCP, but all are consistent with the statements above.

Goals and Objectives

Prior to developing the Trail Master Plan, the Convening Committee must identify what the goals and objectives of the Trail Master Plan are. To ensure compliance with the permit is maintained, and the Trail Master Plan process is focused and expedited, it is recommended the Convening Committee reach consensus on a set of goals and objectives. The City offers the following goals and objectives that it believes are consistent with the current guidelines contained within the BCCP.

Goal – To identify opportunities to increase recreational access within identified Preserve land consistent with existing conditions of the Balcones Canyonlands Conservation Plan and associated permit.

Objective – Complete a Trail Master Plan that would identify public access locations and activities within less sensitive areas of the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve and ensure adequate monitoring and adaptive management, as identified below.

Trail Master Plan Process

The COA has identified the following process components that it believes will be necessary to complete the Trail Master Plan. The COA envisions stakeholders as being an integral part this process.

1. COA and stakeholders will identify and secure necessary funding/staffing resources needed to develop the Trail Master Plan, construct, manage, monitor and enforce the additional public recreation, and provide for additional public outreach/education.
2. With the assistance of the identified stakeholders, COA will develop a GIS database with the following data layers to identify endangered species habitat, non-endangered species habitat, and other sensitive areas:
 - a. All existing City BCP properties
 - b. All existing authorized trails and their current uses
 - c. All existing and known unauthorized trails and their current uses
 - d. All other authorized and unauthorized uses (e.g., camp sites, dumps, etc.)
 - e. Current oak wilt locations
 - f. GCWA habitat and observations, BCVI habitat and observations, rare plant locations, JPS locations, sensitive cultural resource sites, and sensitive karst features or karst geology. (Note: concerned about including karst feature locations because of possible release of this information)
 - g. Creeks and other water features
 - h. Topography, geology, and soils
 - i. Other factor that must be considered when planning for specific trail access modes
 - j. Other factors necessary for a meaningful trail experience

These data would be gathered and compiled through the stakeholder process. In this portion of the process, sharing of data will allow stakeholders to understand more about each other's needs as well as helping everyone understand any challenges with meeting the goals and objectives.

3. With the information above, the COA and stakeholders would identify the most appropriate site(s) to consider for providing increased public access through trails while ensuring compliance with the terms and conditions of the Federal permit, and the species and preserve needs are met. The goal of this effort would be to focus stakeholders on existing non-endangered species habitat areas and other less sensitive sites, while also meeting the needs of trail users.
4. COA would collaborate with stakeholders on a literature search and review of potential effects of recreation on natural resources (soil, vegetation, water, wildlife, species of concern), and contact other Federal/State agencies to determine how public

recreation is being managed in preserves with endangered species. Stakeholders would also be expected to contribute literature pertaining to recreation in sensitive natural areas. This could include beneficial uses from trails, methods to minimize impacts of trails, and methods of managing access.

5. All stakeholders would identify logistical constraints (physical access, parking, topography, public access/recreation on tracts with hog and deer management, etc.) for each site identified above.
6. COA and stakeholders would identify appropriate types of public uses for the identified sites.
7. To ensure impacts from the additional public recreation have insignificant impacts to the preserve and permitted species, it would be necessary to develop peer-reviewed scientific studies to test for potential adverse effects of recreation from:
 - a. Proposed trails within non-habitat areas. Monitoring should include baseline (pre-trail) conditions, control (no trail in similar area), and post "treatment" (post-trail) conditions to document any changes in soils, vegetation, water, and wildlife resources
 - i. Monitoring of vegetation should include at a minimum introduction of exotics, oak wilt, effects of trampling, species composition and cover, and regeneration of native woody species.
 - ii. Monitoring of soils should include at a minimum measures of soil compaction and erosion, and changes in amount and composition of litter.
 - iii. Monitoring water quality should include at a minimum turbidity/suspended solids, dissolved oxygen, temperature, nutrients, algal/plant communities, and introduction of pathogens and exotic species.
 - iv. Monitoring of wildlife species should include at a minimum changes in abundance of known predators (snakes, jays and crows, squirrels, red imported fire ants) and likely predators (free-roaming cats) to species of concern and avian communities. Should also include changes in abundance of species, such as deer and feral hogs that are known to be detrimental to the habitat of endangered species and species of concern.
 - b. Existing trails within habitat areas. Although monitoring baseline conditions is not possible, a research plan should be designed to isolate the effects of public recreation from the overriding influences of habitat loss from surrounding urbanization. At a minimum, monitoring in current habitat areas should include:
 - i. Effects on territory size, distribution, and productivity of GCWA and BCVI

- ii. Effects on abundance of karst invertebrates and species upon which they depend
 - iii. Direct disturbance of rare plants and karst features
 - iv. All monitoring identified in #7a, focused on areas of public recreation and known locations of species of concern
- 8. Additionally, it would be necessary for stakeholders to collaborate to develop a monitoring plan to quantify the type and level of activity for all areas with public recreation to document the extent of authorized and unauthorized use.
- 9. Information from the scientific research in #7 and public recreation monitoring in #8 will be used to ensure that no activity results in a “take” of any species of concern, or degrades their habitat (soil, vegetation, water). This information would also be utilized to develop an ongoing adaptive management process, thus ensuring insignificant impacts to the preserve over the long-term. As identified in the BCCP, this must be adequately demonstrated prior to considering access to known endangered species habitat sites
- 10. COA and stakeholders would develop a trail system(s) for additional public access within non-habitat areas utilizing the best available knowledge to provide for increased trail access while avoiding, minimizing, and mitigating potential adverse effects of recreational activities.