

Natural Community Conservation Planning

— The first 10 years

As the trustee agency responsible for protection of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources of California, the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) has been working to create a vision for the state that will protect California's natural diversity far into the future. The rapidly growing human population in California has led to conflicts between land use and resource protection. DFG's Natural Community Conservation Planning strives to find a balance between conservation and appropriate human use of the land.

DFG and the Resources Agency formed the concept for the Natural Community Conservation Planning (NCCP) program in the late 1980s: planning for whole ecosystem conservation rather than relying on conservation of single species which had been the historical practice. The program design focused on conserving

plants and animals at a broad landscape scale, while at the same time contributing to the recovery of listed species, and preventing declines in species populations that might cause them to be added to the

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threatened and endangered lists. To accomplish this, the new approach needed to accommodate and plan for appropriate and compatible development through a proactive locally driven collaborative approach.

The Natural Community Conservation Planning Act was enacted in 1991. The California Legislature agreed to initially fund a program for protecting the coastal sage scrub ecosystem, which occurs across the coastal portions of five

Southern California counties - Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and San Diego. By the early 1990s, rapid urban expansion in this area had caused several species to decline to the point where DFG and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) were considering adding them to the threatened and endangered species lists. One small songbird, the California gnatcatcher, had become the focal species of the increasingly contentious arena of competing land uses - urban development and conservation. The time was ripe for a new approach. In comes NCCP.

DFG and city and county governments started working closely together on an NCCP for the coastal sage scrub ecosystem. The first step provided a sound scientific foundation for the process. A team of independent, widely respected conservation biologists convened to



Pricklypear cactus around coastal sage scrub.

Photo © Gary S. Meredith

provide scientific guidance. The guidance they developed led to the identification of biologically based planning subregions. Knowing that a plan of this magnitude would take several years to complete, they recommended interim measures to be applied to new development during the planning phase that would protect sufficient habitat to assure that a robust preserve could be designed. The team also identified conservation goals, providing a scientific foundation that could guide the participants through the rest of the planning process. To formally launch the planning efforts, DFG and USFWS entered into agreements with individual local jurisdictions.

Since then, seven plans have been approved and permits issued, with several others nearing completion. The partnerships that formed during the planning phase proved crucial in moving plans into the implementation phase. These plans do not just go on the shelf: DFG, USFWS, and local plan participants make a commitment to an ongoing partnership that will last the life of the permits, anywhere from 20 to 75 years.

Implementation of the plans is multifaceted. The local jurisdiction ensures that all projects follow the NCCP plan's mitigation requirements. As habitat is protected, a caretaker must be identified

to carry out management and monitoring. Each caretaker develops management plans to integrate monitoring and research results into management actions that can be adapted to meet the needs of the covered species. The local jurisdictions must track each plan's condition and provide the information to DFG, USFWS, and the public at regular intervals. In the areas with completed NCCPs, a partnership approach has proven to be the most effective way to accomplish management and monitoring. Sharing monitoring data, expertise, equipment, management responsibilities, and public outreach strengthens the parties' united commitment to the success of the plan. Even the resulting reserve systems are a partnership of different landowners, both public and private, working together to meet the conservation goals.

The experiences from the Southern California efforts have refined the NCCP approach into a viable conservation tool that DFG now makes available to the rest of the state. The lessons learned have shown five key features that attract people to the process.

Locally Driven

One of the key features of NCCP is that it is a locally driven process. Typically

championed by a local government and designed to address the needs of the local community, an NCCP addresses conservation of biological diversity as an important part of the infrastructure that supports the community's quality of life. Just as every community must plan for roads, schools, and utilities, it also plans for open space and greenways which add desirable characteristics to a community's esthetic sense of well-being. Those same open spaces can provide significant wildlife benefits if protected and managed properly. An NCCP also functions as an integral part of the existing land use planning process, not as a new layer of regulation. This ensures that the local land use planning agency (city or county) holds the responsibility for applying the conservation program on a day-to-day basis.

Regional Perspective

Although each plan is structured locally, an NCCP strives ultimately to realize conservation at the broader regional scale. Wildlife species do not recognize jurisdictional boundaries, and the natural communities in which they live often occur over a much broader geographic area. DFG and USFWS keep the broader perspective in mind when working



Photo © Gary S. Meredith

Left, female California gnatcatcher. Above, Belding Savannah sparrow.

Photo © Brad J. Haney

with individual jurisdictions to assure that each plan contributes toward the larger goal of protecting biological diversity and recovering declining species. The plan should “act locally, but think globally.”

Each NCCP plan identifies a set of conservation goals that are aimed at long-term protection on the scale of ecosystems. Although the plans often are initiated in response to conflicts concerning endangered species, the NCCP tries to be more proactive by planning across a larger landscape.

This approach covers all the vegetation communities, wildlife species, and ecological processes (such as wildfires, sediment movement, or sand transport for dunes) necessary to sustain a healthy, functioning ecosystem. A landscape perspective provides more flexibility in identifying regionally unique resource areas while at the same time accommodating landowners’ needs. Conservation strategies, including preserves or other equivalent protective measures, are often accomplished through long-term partnerships for protection and management in perpetuity. These partnerships can also allow the local jurisdictions to meet other goals they may have such as protection of agriculture, viewsheds, or urban greenspace buffers.

Independent Scientific Input

The NCCP Act requires that the plans incorporate independent scientific input. This ensures that the decisions are based upon the best scientific information available. DFG, USFWS, and local jurisdictions work together to assemble a team of science advisors to provide guidance and foundational principles. The science advisors must have expertise in disciplines relevant to resource issues in the planning area. This could include expertise on particular species, natural communities, and ecological processes, as well as the principles of conservation biology. Early scientific guidance is especially effective in providing a foundation for the plan, and is critical throughout the process for fine-tuning conservation decisions. Building the plan on a solid scientific foundation fosters stakeholder confidence in the plan, and helps the plan withstand potential legal challenges.

Public Participation

Another key feature to the NCCP approach is public involvement in decision-making. The planning process invites public participation at all stages. A stakeholders’ group typically contains

representatives from diverse perspectives in the community. Stakeholders have an interest or stake in the outcome of the planning process. The stakeholders’ group, or a smaller work group, comprises the core people who guide the development of the plan. Outreach to the local community is critical and can take the form of public meetings, printed materials, and internet accessible information. Opportunity for public comments on draft planning documents and ample comment periods are provided. A thorough public participation process helps create better plans, builds support for the local plan approvals, and sustains the long-term funding and motivation necessary for the plans to be successful.

Certainty

Approved NCCP plans provide a significant degree of long-term certainty for both the participants and the species and habitats they cover. The plans contribute to recovery of listed species, enable compatible economic development, and decrease (and perhaps eliminate) the need to add new species to the threatened or endangered lists. Approved plans provide a regional conservation focus that effectively addresses cumulative impacts, minimizes



Photo © Steve Junak, Outdoor California Photography Award Program, 1993

Above, horned lizard. Right, burrowing owl.



Photo © Gary S. Meredith

wildlife habitat fragmentation, promotes multi-species management and conservation, identifies and ensures appropriate mitigation for impacts to fish and wildlife, and promotes the conservation of natural communities and species diversity in conjunction with the expansion of human habitation.

Stakeholders want the certainty of knowing what will be required under the plan for individual project approvals, the amount of time the approvals will take, and what their mitigation costs will be. The plan is the tool that defines how constituents in the plan area can comply with state and federal endangered species laws. The plan defines mitigation measures, processing procedures, and monitoring and adaptive management actions. It blends this compliance into the existing local land use planning process, and reduces the need for individual landowners and project proponents to interact with DFG and USFWS. A conservation strategy that meets the NCCP standard to provide for the


conservation and management of covered species will also receive assurances from DFG and USFWS that no additional mitigation will be required.

The Future of NCCP

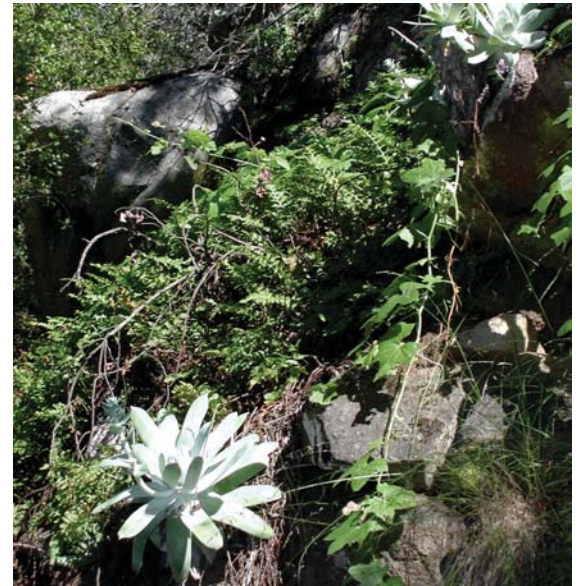
One of the biggest hurdles to completing and implementing NCCP plans is finding adequate funding. Developing a large-scale conservation plan can be costly, with the costs typically born primarily by the local jurisdiction. These collaborative approaches to conservation have been successful in receiving grant funds from a variety of sources. California has been very fortunate to receive grants from the USFWS that support conservation planning around the state. The Packard Foundation has supported these efforts as well. The competition for available grant funds is growing as more plans are initiated, so many of the local jurisdictions have learned to search out diverse private and public grant sources. If California is going to continue to reap the

benefits of locally driven ecosystem conservation planning, a task DFG and USFWS cannot accomplish on their own, it will be critical to establish additional long-term local, state, and federal financial support for planning and implementation.

Regional conservation plans that are being developed throughout the central and northern parts of California are beginning to follow the Natural Community Conservation Planning model. This collaborative tool is helping local communities plan for conservation and comply with state and federal laws, while also helping DFG meet its trustee responsibilities and shape its vision for the future of the California landscape.

More information about the NCCP program can be found on the internet at www.dfg.ca.gov/nccp. 

Gail Presley is the statewide program manager for DFG's Regional Conservation Planning Program.



DFG photos by staff



Above left, the Holly Springs property in northern San Diego County was acquired to protect coastal sage scrub and riparian habitats.

Above right, the ecosystem approach of NCCPs conserves sensitive species as well as more common species such as this

Bottom left, coastal sage scrub.

Top and bottom left photos © Gary S. Meredith