



Introduction

The City of Edmonton has a diverse network of environmentally sensitive and significant natural areas. The River Valley makes up the longest linear protected natural area in Canada, and the surrounding uplands host a large number of additional natural areas.

Development pressure in Edmonton poses a significant threat to the City's natural areas. A booming economy has resulted in a large influx of population and a wave of construction. This steady urbanization of the table lands has destroyed or seriously degraded a significant proportion of natural areas in the last several decades.

The Office of Natural Areas is working to reverse this trend through the development of a new Natural Area Conservation Plan that integrates natural areas in the table lands and the river valley and ravine system and places the ecological system in a regional context. The project will have three components: a State of Natural Areas Report, a Conservation Vision, and a Conservation Implementation Plan.

Edmonton: A Conservation Timeline

The City of Edmonton has made significant commitments to ecological protection in the last several decades.

- **1984:** A comprehensive Inventory of Resources is carried out for the North Saskatchewan River Valley (NSRV) System
- **1985:** The *NSRV Area Redevelopment Plan* (Bylaw 7188) is adopted, establishing policy and implementation directives for land uses in the river valley system and requiring Environmental Assessments for development proposed within the plan area
- **1986:** The City commissions an inventory that identifies 1049 natural sites within and directly adjacent to Edmonton
- **1990:** The *Ribbon of Green Concept Plan* is adopted
- **1992:** The City produces *Conserving Edmonton's Natural Areas*, a pivotal background study on the protection of natural areas within Edmonton's table lands.
- **1992:** The *Ribbon of Green Master Plan* is adopted, establishing guidelines for the long-term development, use and care of the river valley and enshrining 5 basic principles:

conservation, recreation, development, trails and education

- **1993:** The City commissions a second inventory targeting Edmonton's undeveloped tablelands – 246 Natural Areas, 27 Significant Natural Areas and 38 Environmentally Sensitive Areas are identified
- **1993:** Policy C-467, entitled *Conservation of Natural Sites in Edmonton's Table Lands*, is adopted, encouraging conservation and integration of as many natural areas into the urban framework of the City as is feasible
- **1998:** Plan Edmonton gives priority to *preserving and enhancing the river valley, natural areas and open space within the urban landscape; recognizing these areas as critical aspects of successful planned growth; and linking them to the extent possible*
- **2002:** The City creates the position of Conservation Coordinator to oversee implementation of Policy C-467.
- **2003:** The Natural Areas Advisory Committee and Natural Areas Policy Implementation Committee are formed
- **1999:** Council established a Natural Areas Reserve Fund of \$250,000 to purchase and protect natural areas, and has since increased it to \$1.25-million per year
- **2005:** The Office of Natural Areas develops a scope of work for preparation of an Integrated Natural Areas Conservation Plan

Conservation Plan Components

The Conservation Plan consists of three components: 1) A State of Natural Areas Report, 2) a Conservation Vision and 3) a Conservation Implementation Plan.

1. State of Natural Areas Report

This component of the project will provide a solid foundation of ecological information, analysis and presentation material which the other components can build on.

The objectives of the State of Natural Areas Report are threefold:

- Prepare a series of maps depicting information relevant to conservation within and surrounding Edmonton using existing information sources

- Analyze the landscape linkages and connectivity within the City and develop and map an ecological network for Edmonton
- Describe the state of natural areas planning in Edmonton, including the state of the science conservation planning, a survey of existing conservation policies, strategies and plans prepared by other jurisdictions, and an analysis of trends and indicators in conservation of Natural Areas in Edmonton to date.

Spencer Environmental has been retained to complete this component of the plan. The consultant will create several digitally-produced maps depicting the change in status of the City's natural areas since 1993, Edmonton's regional ecological context and natural resources and elements of the City's infrastructure (linear utilities, etc.) relevant to conservation in Edmonton. The process will include the use of GIS modeling to analyze linkages and connectivity on a city-wide and regional basis, addressing the natural areas on the tablelands and in the river valley in an integrated context.

Products will be critically reviewed by both a "lay" and a "scientific" focus group to ensure they are scientifically sound and easily understood by the general public. This is critical, as the information will feed into the second component of the project, which will be largely based on public consultation: the development of a Conservation Vision for Edmonton.

Timeframe: April – August 2006

2. The Development of a Conservation Vision

The second component of the Conservation Plan involves the creation of a Conservation Vision for the Office of Natural Areas.

The objectives of the visioning process are as follows:

- The development of a coordinated conservation vision for Edmonton articulated by City Council, stakeholders, City staff, and citizens
- The establishment of several broad conservation goals and supporting objectives that will guide the development of the Integrated Conservation Implementation Plan

The process will include a series of round table workshops or focus groups facilitated by a consultant. The City's Natural Areas Advisory Committee will be invited to provide advice to the Administration on the best way to design and manage this component of the project.

The visioning process will require concentrated community consultation and will help to define conservation problems, envision solutions, and define the direction of the conservation plan.

A short document that articulates a vision with accompanying guiding principles and conservation goals will be developed through these consultations. This document will provide direction for producing the implementation plan.

Timeframe: September – December 2006

3. Integrated Conservation Implementation Plan

The Implementation Plan will be action-oriented, will set the future direction for conservation in the City and will contain policies and strategies for conservation City-wide. The development of the plan will be guided by the information generated in all previous sections with a strong emphasis on the information contained in the conservation vision document.

Some of the key issues that the City currently faces that will be considered in the conservation plan are strategies to address: wetland and riparian areas; fish habitat; key migratory bird areas (e.g., Big Lake); Environmentally Sensitive Areas and Significant Natural Areas; ecological connectivity within Edmonton and the region including wildlife corridors, habitat linkages; ecological features such as unique landforms; and the City's role in regional conservation.

The implementation plan will address:

- Roles and responsibilities within the Administration (i.e., who does what)
- The roles of stakeholders
- Timetables for implementation
- Budgetary requirements to implement the conservation plan
- Targets, performance measures and metrics regarding acquisition
- Ongoing monitoring of the plan and direction for adjustments as required

A draft implementation plan will be circulated to stakeholders with a request for comments and a series of open house information sessions is anticipated before the plan is finalized and presented to City Council for approval. Once approved, Policy C-467, Conservation of Natural Sites in Edmonton's Table Lands will be integrated within the conservation plan.

Timeframe: 2007

The Way Forward

Edmonton is at a critical juncture with regard to the protection of natural areas. The Integrated Conservation Plan will help the Office of Natural Areas to make decisions that are based on the best available science; to allocate its budget effectively; and to act according to a vision that is supported by City Council, City staff and the broader Edmonton community.

Our ultimate goal is to protect a network of connected, healthy and sustainable natural areas for the enjoyment and benefit of all Edmontonians.

Contact Information:

Please contact the Office of Natural Areas at naturalareas@edmonton.ca for additional information about the Integrated Conservation Plan.