

**REPORT TO ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES COMMITTEE
MEETING OF WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2025**

SUBJECT **Potential UNESCO Urban Biosphere Reserve Nomination Process**

ISSUE SUMMARY

To report back to the Environmental Services Committee (ESC) on a Notice of Motion from the July 9, 2025 Capital Regional District (CRD) Board meeting directing staff to consider a potential UNESCO Biosphere Reserve application and outline the related service implications.

BACKGROUND

In February 2025, the Capital Regional District (CRD) Board established a regional Biodiversity and Environmental Stewardship Service (the “Biodiversity Service”) through Bylaw No. 4575, enabling the CRD to play a regional role in the preservation of biodiversity and protection of natural assets. The service initially converted the sub-regional invasive species program from an internal allocation model to a municipal requisition and expanded it to have a regional scope. The service also has the potential to support biodiversity and ecological asset research and inventories and collaborative partnerships and projects to protect, restore and enhance key biodiverse habitats and ecological assets across the region. During service establishment, staff clarified that additional capacity and operational funds would need to be considered in the 2026-2030 budget cycle to achieve a regional approach to biodiversity and protection of ecological assets.

Subsequently at the June 18, 2025 ESC, the Victoria Biosphere Project Group proposed that “in consultation with appropriate local Indigenous, political, academic and civil organizations the CRD compile a set of supporting documents, as required, and forward same to the Canadian Commission for UNESCO and the International Coordinating Council to nominate the Victoria Region as an Urban Biosphere Region”. Staff were directed to report on a potential Urban Biosphere Reserve application and outline related implications.

Biosphere Reserves are designated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). They are special places where people and organizations have made a commitment to live and work more in harmony with nature and with one another. The people living in these areas realize and demonstrate how to achieve a sustainable balance between conserving cultural diversity, natural ecosystems and biodiversity, and fostering sound economic development. These reserves share a commitment to meaningfully engage Indigenous peoples, and have a mandate to support research, learning, education and capacity building in their regions. Appendix A contains more detailed information about Biosphere Reserves; Urban Biosphere Reserves are a relatively newer component of the larger UN program.

There is substantial work required to develop a nomination package and to receive a designation, and the process can take several years (Appendix B). The nomination process requires a rigorous collection of ecological data and extensive public consultation. It also requires research and inventories as well as coordination and collaboration across multiple levels of government, First Nations, environmental organizations, key stakeholders and landowners, and residents of the region. There is significant alignment between the actions and staff capacity required to apply for

and support a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve designation and those required to establish a strong regional biodiversity strategy and protection of natural assets (Appendix B, Table 1).

ALTERNATIVES

Alternative 1

The Environmental Services Committee recommends to the Capital Regional District Board: That the matter of a nomination for a UNESCO Urban Biosphere Reserve designation for the Capital Regional District be referred to the 2027-2031 Board strategic planning process for consideration and potential inclusion in the 2028 service planning process.

Alternative 2

The Environmental Services Committee recommends to the Capital Regional District Board: That staff bring the matter forward as part of the 2027 service and budget planning process for Board consideration

Alternative 3

The Environmental Services Committee recommends to the Capital Regional District Board: That staff maintain the Biodiversity and Environmental Stewardship Service at the current level of service.

Alternative 4

That this staff report be referred back to staff for additional information.

IMPLICATIONS

Service Delivery Implications

The nomination process itself, and the work to maintain the designation in future years, is beyond the scope of the current Biodiversity and Environmental Stewardship Service.

To be successfully designated, Biosphere Reserve nomination applications (Appendix B) must:

- fulfill conservation, development and logistical support functions;
- demonstrate extensive public consultation and engagement of multiple interest holders, government agencies, academia and institutions, stewardship groups, landowners and the public;
- encompass a strong research component, and a robust, region-wide, long-term monitoring program;
- have a defined governance model that works for the local area and ideally involves First Nations, governmental and non-governmental organizations, and
- implement a strong education program and foster engagement in environmental protection and sustainable development.

There is a series of programs, projects and initiatives within existing CRD services that could form components of a biodiversity strategy and which could, in turn, form part of a program that supports a UNESCO Urban Biosphere Reserve designation. These efforts could be consolidated into a broader framework that considers federal, provincial, and local government efforts, along with private initiatives, to develop a regional strategy. Alternatively, the CRD Board could consider going further by supporting a process to achieve and maintain the UN Urban Biosphere Reserve designation. There is significant alignment with existing CRD and local government programs,

projects and initiatives, and the framework for an Urban Biosphere Reserve in the capital region. An expanded service could play an important coordination and support role in advancing overall biodiversity objectives either within or outside a UN declaration:

- Promoting more environmentally conscious actions, such as ecosystem restoration and protection, watershed protection, planting trees and native species, and removal of invasive species to enhance and protect biodiversity and ecological assets in the region
- Preserving regional biodiversity and protecting natural assets
- Providing efficiency of service through partnerships with First Nations, federal and provincial agencies, local and regional governments, environmental stewardship groups and residents
- Restoring, protecting and enhancing healthy ecosystems by building on the existing invasive species program
- Supporting biodiversity activities that promote healthy ecosystems, and
- Delivering education, outreach, and other promotional activities to support biodiversity.

Embedding the work required to coordinate a Biosphere Reserve nomination application into the regional Biodiversity and Environmental Stewardship Service would support significant advancement of two key board priorities: Climate Action and Environment (regional approach to biodiversity and protection of ecological assets) and stronger relationships with First Nations.

Environmental, Social and Climate Implications

Nature is a cornerstone of the region's identity and is a foundation of our daily lives, yet biodiversity is declining faster than at any time in human history. Loss of biodiversity jeopardizes key ecosystems functions that people rely on such as clean air and water, flood regulation, food security, pollination, and the foundation for much of the region's economy. Although biodiversity is under pressure in some areas, the capital region still retains high aquatic and terrestrial biodiversity and is considered a biodiversity hotspot in British Columbia. A designation as an Urban Biodiversity Reserve would support efforts to protect and enhance the region's natural environment.

Intergovernmental and First Nations Implications

Biospheres in Canada must recognize responsibility to engage Indigenous communities as rights holders and hosts and recognize that sites are located within their territories. Significant Indigenous representation in biosphere governance and management is a criterion for designation. The CRD and some municipalities have recently established Memorandums of Understanding (MOU's) with several local First Nations. These include agreement to collaborate on priorities such as environmental protection and restoration; stormwater and source control; water monitoring and management; parks, protected areas and trails; consultation; docks and foreshore stewardship; land use strategies, management and decision-making.

Through these agreements, the CRD is well-positioned to work and collaborate with First Nations partners to gain their support for Biosphere Reserve status and to determine their level of involvement in long-term management, governance and operation of a biosphere reserve in this region.

Additionally, several local governments have identified the need for biodiversity inventories and strategies within their Official Community Plans and staff are keen to collaborate with other jurisdictions and groups to conduct this work at a regional scale. Partnerships and collaboration

with First Nations and local governments are central to the delivery of the Biodiversity and Environmental Stewardship Service, to the designation and operation of Biosphere Reserves and are core to the CRD's vision.

Financial Implications

Maintaining the new Biodiversity Service with its current mandate to provide regional invasive species management would not require any further resources at this time. The current budget for the regional Biodiversity and Environmental Stewardship Service, allowing the CRD to play a regional role in the preservation of biodiversity, with a focus on invasive species, and protection of natural assets is approximately \$230,000 for 2026 with a maximum requisition of \$500,000.

Support for the development of the UN nomination and/or expansion of the Biodiversity Service to develop a Biodiversity Strategy for the capital region would require additional resources (a 4-year 1.0 Full Time Equivalent term position and program resources) to facilitate regional discussions, data collection and reporting. This could be considered for the 2027-2031 budget and service planning process.. The initiative would focus on submitting an application for a biosphere reserve designation. This approach and timeline would also allow staff to estimate the full cost of any long-term commitment to the UN designation and provide options for future Board consideration, if the application is accepted.

Neither UNESCO nor the Government of Canada provide core funding support for the biosphere program. Federal and provincial agencies may occasionally provide project-based funding to support biosphere activities that are aligned with government priorities.

CONCLUSION

The Environmental Services Committee requested a staff report to consider a nomination application for a UNESCO Urban Biosphere designation. The nomination could complement current environmental stewardship efforts across the capital region and coordinate the current patchwork of programs, initiatives and projects across all levels of government, stakeholder groups and the private sector. Additional resources beyond the current service level for the existing Biodiversity Service would be required to pursue a nomination application and to make meaningful progress toward regional biodiversity goals and protection of natural assets. Considering current fiscal constraints and financial implications of expanding the existing service, staff recommend that this matter be considered as part of the 2027-2031 Board Strategic planning process.

RECOMMENDATION

The Environmental Services Committee recommends to the Capital Regional District Board: That the matter of a nomination for a UNESCO Urban Biosphere Reserve designation for the Capital Regional District be referred to the 2027-2031 Board strategic planning process for consideration and potential inclusion in the 2028 service planning process.

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ATTACHMENTS

Appendix A: General Information on Biosphere Reserves

Appendix B: General Process to Nominate an Area as a Biosphere Reserve