

**REPORT TO REGIONAL PARKS COMMITTEE
MEETING OF WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 2021**

SUBJECT Ecological Values and Biodiversity in Regional Parks

ISSUE SUMMARY

This report provides an information update on ecological values and biodiversity in Regional Parks in response to a Notice of Motion.

BACKGROUND

At the June 23, 2021 Regional Parks Committee meeting, the following Notice of Motion was introduced and carried:

Whereas one of the two goals of regional parks is “protecting the region’s extraordinary biodiversity in perpetuity” and whereas the existing Regional Parks Acquisition Strategy prioritizes acquisition of park land to protect ecological values: therefore be it resolved that staff be directed to report on how ecological values and biodiversity are protected and monitored in regional parks and on the CRD’s staffing and resource capacity to evaluate the effectiveness of ecological protection in the regional parks system, including consideration of wildlife habitat and disturbance, biodiversity, impacts of new infrastructure, and the CRD’s declared climate emergency.

At its meeting of July 14, 2021, the Capital Regional District (CRD) Board approved the Notice of Motion with an amendment that “mitigation of fire risks” also be considered in the staff report.

The Regional Park system is comprised of regionally significant landscapes, which are classified by management focus. Depending on its predominant characteristics and purpose, a regional park falls into one of four distinct management focus classifications: Recreation Area, Natural Area, Conservation Area, and Wilderness Area. These park classifications are supported by management planning documents that provide strategies to protect the natural environment and define appropriate levels of activity.

In 2009-2010, as a precursor to the development of a conservation strategy, staff worked with consultants to review ecological and organizational literature, analyze ecological information, identify key factors (known as stressors) impacting native species and ecosystems, and outline strategic approaches to address those factors.

In 2010, the draft *Conservation Strategy for Capital Regional District – Regional Parks: Providing strategic direction for parkland stewardship* was prepared. A companion framework document that summarizes the larger document is attached (Appendix A).

The draft conservation strategy outlines a practical, science-based approach to reduce negative impacts to ecological values within regional parks. The draft conservation strategy was meant to initiate the development of a program that would include developing more detailed action plans to address specific ecosystems, species, issues and/or parks.

The draft strategy was presented to the Regional Parks Committee in March and September 2010. Both times, the conservation strategy was referred back to staff for further work. In September 2010, staff addressed the five main points raised by the Regional Parks Committee in March 2010, which included the concerns: 1) that the conservation strategy could be used to exclude some recreational uses; 2) that additional funding would be required to implement the strategy and may not be available; 3) that more information was needed about strategic choices and about balancing recreation needs versus conservation needs; 4) that First Nations needed to be consulted; and 5) that some land acquisitions are not immediately available for public use.

In November 2010, as part of the General Manager's Report, it was determined that the conservation strategy would be revised but put on hold until the Regional Parks Strategic Plan was adopted. Although the Regional Parks Strategic Plan was adopted in March 2012, the conservation strategy was deferred with no specific deadline. The current Regional Parks Strategic Plan is set for an update and conservation and recreation strategies will be developed and included in the strategic plan.

The challenges of the conservation program that Regional Parks is currently facing are: 1) staffing and resources; 2) lack of conservation strategies pertaining to condition and monitoring of regional parks; and 3) the rapid increase in the size of the system in terms of area and visitation.

Regional Parks has one staff member dedicated to conservation. The Environmental Conservation Specialist (ECS) role and responsibilities include preparing and delivering conservation plans and projects, providing technical advice for planning and operations, terrestrial and aquatic ecosystem management, restoration and invasive species management, program administration, land acquisition and collaborating with community and partners. In addition, the ECS is often asked to address urgent requests from the public or CRD staff.

Regional Parks primarily protects ecological values through the application of various bylaws, policies, plans and other tools, including park management planning, policy and guideline development, best management practices, annual operating plans, park use permit conditions, park stewardship agreements, ecological restoration, habitat mapping, species surveys, interpretive and educational activities, and compliance and enforcement. Significant effort is also spent on invasive species removal, especially through volunteer and partner efforts. Regional Parks is also piloting an Impact Assessment process to evaluate management actions that may impact park values and to aid in identifying appropriate mitigation measures, if required.

Low intensity wildfires were once the dominant disturbance regime in the region and fire suppression over the past century has contributed to the loss of biodiversity and ecological values. Fire risk mitigation within the regional park system takes on two forms: prevention and suppression activities. Prevention activities reduce the risk of wildfire in regional parks and include strategies such as: prohibiting smoking in all regional parks; permitting campfires only in designated facilities (i.e., no open fires) and prohibiting all campfires when a provincial fire ban is in effect; limiting high-risk activities in accordance with the BC Wildfire Act requirements; and patrolling worksites to monitor for potential flare-ups. Regional Park rangers undertake wildfire patrols as conditions warrant as per the MOU between BC Wildfire Service and the CRD. In terms of suppression activities, Regional Parks trains staff in mop-up responsibilities to augment municipal fire departments and the BC Wildfire Service, who respectively have primary responsibility for initial attack and related fire suppression activities inside and outside of municipal fire protection areas.

Local climate models predict increases in temperatures, dry conditions, storms and sea levels that will impact ecological values. Ecosystems will likely shift toward more drought tolerant systems. Despite these changes, regional parks will continue to serve as critical natural assets for carbon storage and sequestration.

A systematic regional parks monitoring program does not currently exist. However, monitoring of specific species, such as the endangered contorted-pod evening primrose and invasive species such as carpet burweed, does occur. Development of a comprehensive monitoring program would benefit the environmental health of regional parks.

IMPLICATIONS

Environmental & Climate Implications

Improving the understanding of ecological values and biodiversity in regional parks will benefit overall ecological integrity and environmental health and contribute to climate change resiliency. The availability of data to identify sensitive or rare species and ecosystems and critical wildlife habitat is variable and often limited. When resources permit, studies are conducted but there are still gaps in the understanding of ecological values within the regional parks system.

Social Implications

The capital region is a unique part of Canada. The climate, influenced by wet and warm coastal air and the rain shadow from the mountain ranges, along with its complex geography spanning from sea level to mountaintops, means that a diverse range of ecosystems and species occur, many of which do not occur elsewhere in Canada. This combination of climate, geography and uniqueness also makes the CRD one of the fastest growing communities in Canada and a popular travel destination. Regional parks are part of a protected areas system that helps regulate our climate, purify the water, provide habitat for rare and endangered species and provide opportunities to engage in a wide range of recreational activities. Regional parks and trails continue to see significant growth in visitation, which puts pressures on the regional park system and can make protecting and monitoring regional park values and biodiversity challenging.

Financial Implications

Additional staff and resources would be required to allow for an ecological monitoring program. A proposal for service level adjustments in this area has been brought forward to this Parks Committee agenda as part of the 2022 Service Planning report.

Service Delivery Implications

In spring 2021, staff were asked to complete a comprehensive budget review exercise to identify staffing and resource needs that are required to meet core service levels. For the conservation program, this included identifying resources required to support the protection of ecological values and biodiversity in regional parks. Key gaps that were identified during the budget review process for the delivery of the conservation program included the need for a conservation strategy, improving understanding of the ecological values in regional parks through baseline inventories and a “state of the parks” assessment, and monitoring and action planning in all three major program areas (terrestrial ecosystem management, aquatic ecosystem management, and

restoration and invasive species management). The lack of an ecological monitoring program was also identified as a key gap in the delivery of core conservation program services.

Alignment with Board & Corporate Priorities

Strategic Board Priorities identified in the 2019-2022 Corporate Plan that apply to the Regional Parks conservation program include ensuring appropriate funding for parks and trails by updating the Regional Parks Strategic Plan with consideration of ecological, recreation and reconciliation principles, land acquisition capacity, and expanded partnerships with First Nations and park user groups.

Alignment with Existing Plans & Strategies

The 2012-2021 Regional Parks Strategic Plan includes a number of strategic goals that pertain to the conservation program, including protecting and conserving biological diversity; maintaining and restoring healthy, viable ecosystems in regional parks; and undertaking management activities that improve the understanding of park ecosystems and the ability to sustain them.

CONCLUSION

Increased size of regional parks and visitation over the years has outpaced Regional Parks' ability to comprehensively assess and monitor ecological values and conditions. Regional Parks utilizes its existing resources to protect known ecological values through the application of bylaws, strategies and other tools. Additional staffing and resources would enable Regional Parks to better manage ecological values and biodiversity, mitigate fire risks, address the impacts of new infrastructure, and respond to the CRD's declared climate emergency.

RECOMMENDATION

The Regional Parks Committee recommends to the Capital Regional District Board:

That this report be received for information.

Submitted by:	Jeff Leahy, RPF, Senior Manager, Regional Parks
Concurrence:	Larisa Hutcheson, P.Eng., General Manager, Parks & Environmental Services
Concurrence:	Robert Lapham, MCIP, RPP, Chief Administrative Officer

ATTACHMENT

Appendix A: Draft Conservation Strategy Framework for Capital Regional District Regional Parks
– March 2010