

## **5. Wildlife Habitat**

Comprehensive Plan policy regarding the City's approach to the conservation and restoration of land for purposes of protecting and providing wildlife habitat.

### **Summary of Comments**

General comments emphasized 'protect the natural environment and increase open space;' specific comments expressed a desire for updated and stronger policy language on preserving wildlife habitat and open space:

- Protect/acquire more wildlife and wildlife habitat than is currently being done
- Protect priority species and locally important species and their habitat (e.g. herons and heron rookeries) like Thurston County
- The Wildlife Habitat Study that formed the basis for the draft policy is outdated
- Update the 'Open Space' Map to reflect best available science; and
- Reexamine the habitat value of the forested areas surrounding LBA Park

Comments received on this issue were often in combination with those regarding issue **#6 Critical Areas and Species Protection**.

### **Council Direction of August 12, 2014**

Council directed staff to provide clarification for draft policy PN2.6 in the Draft Comprehensive Plan, specifically regarding the preservation of wildlife habitat as a series of "islands," in addition to already existing corridors.

### **Staff Analysis**

With implementation of the 1990 Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA), Olympia was required to incorporate critical areas into our comprehensive planning process, and planning for wildlife habitat was encouraged to be addressed as well.

Olympia already had a strong interest in planning for the preservation of wildlife habitat, and up until this point, it was believed that corridors were the most effective means for accomplishing this. However, in 1994, the City commissioned Shapiro & Associates to produce a Wildlife Habitat Study that would provide specific direction to the City on wildlife habitat preservation. The study considered current scientific literature on the topic of wildlife habitat preservation, while also mapping and rating the existing wildlife habitat in the City.

In 1994, findings from the study demonstrated that approximately 2,128 acres of wildlife habitat were significant for preservation. This number was a conservative, minimum amount needed to maintain a broad and diverse range of habitat types. The study also highlighted that a minimum amount of connections existed among the significant parcels

identified due to the already-extensive road network, already developed parcels, and agricultural land. In addition, the literature review found that narrow corridors are not conducive to supporting wildlife beyond what's already adapted to impacts from urbanization.

The result was text and policy language in the 1994 update of the Comprehensive Plan that emphasized preserving significant wildlife habitat in units (or parcels). Policies also outlined the tools for preservation, primarily the Critical Areas Ordinance and City acquisition. The following paragraph in the Plan Overview outlined the approach:

*The most important new feature in the Environment Chapter of the Plan is the proposal to set aside major wildlife habitat sites. These sites would be preserved in their natural condition. The Plan sets a goal of acquiring five key sites with significant value for wildlife. These areas were determined by a wildlife habitat study conducted by a team of biologists during 1993.*

In 2001, a Comprehensive Plan update established a new land use district for residential low impact development to protect aquatic habitat in the Green Cove Basin, a designated sensitive drainage basin. Included in the amendment was also new and revised language that further confirmed the existing policy direction to acquire significant parcels of habitat through critical areas regulations, tree tracts, and City acquisition. The 2001 amendment also revised the goal statement addressing wildlife to include not only preserving and protecting wildlife habitat, but also species.

A subsequent Comprehensive Plan amendment in 2007 included some minor revisions to policy language addressing habitat, but none of which impacted the direction. The amendment primarily removed policies that outlined ways in which to implement preservation. However, the 2007 amendment did eliminate specific reference to the 1994 Wildlife Habitat Study, in addition to several other scientific and government publications.

When *Imagine Olympia*, the name given to the major Comprehensive Plan update currently underway, completed its visioning and scoping process in 2010, wildlife habitat was not included in the adopted scope of the update. However, in 2012 the Utility Advisory Committee (UAC) inquired about preservation, and asked Public Works staff to consider land acquisition as a viable strategy for meeting aquatic habitat goals. After having received a history of the City's land acquisitions for aquatic habitat purposes, UAC asked staff to develop a strategy to evaluate remaining habitat citywide.

In 2013, Public Works staff completed a Habitat and Stewardship Strategy. The primary objective is to identify and classify the remaining habitat in Olympia and its growth

boundaries in order to develop a strategy for land protection, enhancement, and stewardship to meet the storm and surface water utilities aquatic habitat goals.

In keeping with the methods used to develop the original 1994 Wildlife Habitat Study, the Strategy was developed using the follow three approaches: 1) a scientific literature review, 2) a habitat rating system, and; 3) mapping/classifying remaining habitat. This analysis was performed at a coarse (citywide) scale and a medium (basin) scale, and used the habitat rating system from the 1994 Wildlife Habitat Study. The map from the 1994 Wildlife Study served as the baseline data against which to compare current conditions.

Using the rating system and a map of areas not already preserved, such as critical areas, the Strategy prioritizes habitat preservation, enhancement, and stewardship based on its value ranking and where it is most at risk to be developed. In some parts of the City, priority sites may occur in corridors; however, degree of interconnectedness was only one factor in a series of characteristics that contributed to high habitat value rating.

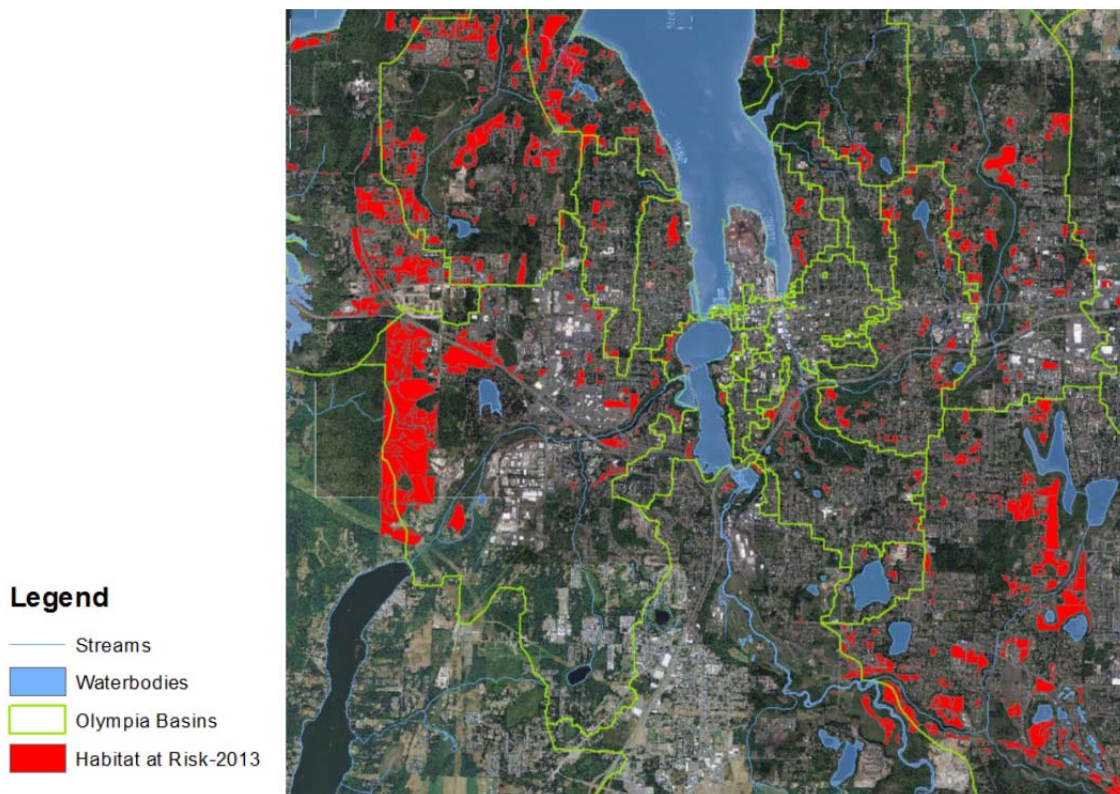


Figure 4.2.6. Habitat at Risk (Protection Priorities) City of Olympia 2013 Habitat and Stewardship Strategy

### **Text of Public Hearing Draft**

*Policy PN2.6 Conserve and restore wildlife habitat as a series of separate pieces of land, in addition to existing corridors.*

### **Proposed Clarification**

Staff proposes revising Policy PN2.6 to state:

*PN2.6: Conserve and restore wildlife habitat in both existing corridors and high-priority separate sites.*

The revised language helps clarify that the policy direction is to continue to pursue the conservation and enhancement of existing wildlife life corridors, in particular those identified on the Open Space and Environmentally Sensitive Areas Map, and that future conservation efforts will focus on high-priority sites.

Secondly, staff proposes additional text (underlined below) in the introduction to the Natural Environment Chapter sub-section “Using Our Land Wisely” to more accurately reflect the City’s policy direction on and role in habitat preservation and better explain the intent behind the Open Space and Environmentally Sensitive Areas Map:

*As a key land steward, the City’s role is to encourage and regulate new development and land management practices in a way that minimizes negative environmental impacts by:*

- *Carrying out the state’s Growth Management Act’s requirement that cities plan for anticipated population growth by accepting the need for denser development so that larger expanses of rural land can be preserved*
- *Encouraging low impact development and green building methods that include using renewable or recycled materials*
- *Constructing developments that have a low impact on soil and site conditions*
- *Treating stormwater run-off on-site*
- *Using building materials that require less energy, which public and private groups are now working closely with the City to explore new and reliable methods*
- *Ensuring that public land is preserve and cared for*
- *Identifying land at greatest risk for preservation, enhancement, and stewardship to support a diversity of wildlife habitat and species*
- *Continuing the City’s role as caretaker of Olympia’s urban forest, a diverse mix of native and ornamental trees that line our streets, shade our homes, and beautify our natural areas.*

The Open Space and Environmentally Sensitive Areas Map reflects those areas in the City and UGA that are already preserved as open space, or that may be good opportunities for future preservation as open space.

Shown on the map are environmentally sensitive areas, such as steep slopes, flood plains, wetlands, and significant wildlife habitat. Many of these areas are protected by Critical Areas regulations, so the map serves to highlight those areas for further evaluation prior to any new development project.

The map also reflects locations where there may be a greater potential for creating or enhancing existing open space corridors for recreation or wildlife habitat. These areas may still be undeveloped, owned or managed by the City, connected to other nearby open space areas, or have environmentally sensitive areas present.

**Alternative(s)**

- 1) Revise the policy language to be less specific about the method by which habitat will be conserved and restored.
- 2) Substantially revise the policy to reflect a different or new approach to wildlife habitat preservation.