

# Fairfax County Park Authority Natural Resource Management Plan



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# Executive Summary

This Natural Resource Management Plan (NRMP) coordinates agency-wide efforts to achieve the resource preservation mission of the Fairfax County Park Authority and implement agency Policy 201 – Natural Resources. The first agency-wide Natural Resource Management Plan was adopted by the Park Authority Board in 2004 and was revised administratively in 2009. A new plan was adopted in 2014 to clarify and update the Park Authority’s natural resource management philosophy, vision and direction moving forward and promote the stewardship of natural capital. This plan was revised administratively in 2019.

The agency’s NRMP is structured around four management themes containing 26 recommended actions:

- 1) INVENTORY AND PLANNING – *Knowing What We Have* (6 actions)
- 2) PROTECTING NATURAL CAPITAL – *Do No Harm* (9 actions)
- 3) MANAGING WILD POPULATIONS AND RESTORING ECOSYSTEMS – *Helping Our Land Heal* (4 actions)
- 4) FOSTERING STEWARDSHIP AND EXPANDING NATURAL CAPITAL – *Spreading the Word* (7 actions)

These themes can be tied back to the seven plan elements of the original NRMP: Natural Resource Management Planning, Vegetation, Wildlife, Water Resources, Air Quality, Human Impact on Parklands, and Education, as well as to Policy 201 – Natural Resources.

These management themes embody the key issues facing our natural resources. Fairfax County’s parks are isolated natural areas impacted by many stresses. Park Authority staff, volunteers and citizens are charged with protecting these remaining natural areas to preserve the county’s natural capital in biodiversity, natural communities and ecosystems. But the remaining natural areas are not enough. It will be up to many partners to expand natural areas over time in order to sustain our native species and communities and increase the ecological services and quality of life benefits they provide. The parks can provide refuge for species, act as a source of locally native species and provide the templates for natural communities for restoration efforts elsewhere.

This plan aligns with other strategic planning documents adopted by the Park Authority, including the Fairfax County Park Authority Strategic Plan, the Parks and Recreation System Master Plan, and the Fairfax County Comprehensive Plan (Parks and Recreation section of Policy Plan Element). There is broad recognition of the Park Authority’s obligation and responsibility to protect and manage the natural resources under its care and long-term funding is necessary to meet resource management goals. Securing new and alternative methods of funding and working collaboratively with partners will be critical to implementing the actions contained within this plan.

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# Introduction

## PURPOSE AND VISION

The purpose of this Natural Resource Management Plan (NRMP) is to coordinate agency-wide efforts to achieve the resource preservation mission of the Fairfax County Park Authority and implement agency Policy 201 – Natural Resources.

***Fairfax County Park Authority Mission Statement:*** To enrich quality of life for all members of the community through an enduring park system that provides a healthy environment, preserves natural and cultural heritage, offers inspiring recreational experiences, and promotes healthy lifestyles.

As the county's largest landowner with 23,890 acres in 427 parks (August 2019), much of the responsibility for preserving Fairfax County's rich natural heritage rests with the Fairfax County Park Authority. These landholdings include large, biodiverse forests along the Potomac Gorge and in the western region of the county, emergent wetlands at Huntley Meadows, a tidal freshwater marsh on Mason Neck, and nearly all of Fairfax County's stream valleys. They also include dozens of community parks and numerous lake-front parks. This plan is structured to support several guiding principles that will inform all aspects of natural resource management on parkland:

- STEWARDSHIP OF OUR NATURAL CAPITAL
- PRESERVE BIODIVERSITY AND SUSTAIN WILD AND HEALTHY ECOSYSTEMS
- PROTECT, RESTORE, AND EXPAND ECOSYSTEM SERVICES
- MANAGE RESOURCES ADAPTIVELY AND LEARN THROUGH EXPERIENCE
- PRESERVE A LEGACY OF NATURAL HERITAGE FOR PRESENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS

Natural resources can also be considered **natural capital**: living organisms; non-living components, such as air, water, and soil; the ecosystems they form; and the services they provide.



These services include cleaning our air and water, supporting biodiversity, and providing healthy, open spaces to enjoy nature that contribute to a high quality of life for residents. Environmental services provided by Fairfax County parks are valued at a minimum of \$10 million annually (Fairfax County Park Authority Natural Capital Project, 2010).

Natural capital is an asset that requires active management to retain its function and value. In urbanized areas like Fairfax County, factors such as disturbance from human land uses including development, encroachments and recreation, over-browsing by white-tailed deer and competition from non-native invasive species place tremendous stress on natural areas and impact their ability to function as high quality ecosystems. Identifying and removing stressors is the first step towards helping the land heal. The Park Authority must seek and commit resources for the protection, assessment, monitoring, planning, restoration, and management of natural capital in order to fully achieve its policy vision for natural resource preservation.

Residents expect and rely on natural areas to provide recreational opportunities as well as environmental services and benefits. Many residents may not understand that natural capital is not self-sustaining and requires management in order to provide benefits for future generations. The Park Authority must continue to cultivate a broad understanding of the issues that are impacting natural resources and build support for greater stewardship as outlined in this and other plans. Communication with staff, residents and partners will be a critical factor in the success of preserving natural capital and achieving effective natural resource management.

## BACKGROUND

The first agency-wide NRMP was adopted by the Park Authority Board on January 14, 2004, and was administratively revised on September 9, 2009. Between 2004-2014, many of the strategies were implemented, some were completed and some were not addressed. The original plan was written at multiple levels to include both strategic elements and specific projects.

A new plan was adopted in 2014 to clarify the Park Authority's natural resource management philosophy, vision, and direction moving forward. The revised plan was designed to be more strategic in nature and focuses on higher level, evergreen actions that address the stewardship of our natural capital.

This plan was developed with input from key stakeholders including Park Authority staff, the Park Authority Board, advisory groups including the Fairfax County Environmental Quality Advisory Council (EQAC), staff from partner agencies and neighboring jurisdictions with environmental oversight, and local non-profit organizations. The project team solicited input at the outset of the revision and incorporated comments from stakeholders throughout the revision process.

This plan aligns with other strategic planning documents adopted by the Park Authority, including the Fairfax County Park Authority Strategic Plan, the Parks and Recreation System Master Plan, and the Fairfax County Comprehensive Plan (Parks and Recreation section of Policy Plan Element).

## PLAN STRUCTURE

The agency's NRMP is structured around four management themes containing 26 recommended actions:

- 1) INVENTORY AND PLANNING – *Knowing What We Have* (6 actions)
- 2) PROTECTING NATURAL CAPITAL – *Do No Harm* (9 actions)
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- 4) FOSTERING STEWARDSHIP AND EXPANDING NATURAL CAPITAL – *Spreading the Word* (7 actions)

These management themes can be tied back to the seven plan elements of the original NRMP: Natural Resource Management Planning, Vegetation, Wildlife, Water Resources, Air Quality, Human Impact on Parklands, and Education, as well as to Policy 201 – Natural Resources. The management themes are logical groupings of actions that are intended to help staff and partners focus on when and how we manage resources.

The actions are those tasks that staff and partners must undertake to inventory, plan, protect, and manage natural capital and foster stewardship among stakeholders. Underneath many of the actions are nested concepts that provide additional issues that must be considered and addressed in order to comply with this plan and Policy 201 – Natural Resources.

## IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation of the NRMP will be through the agency’s annual work plans as well as through the agency five-year strategic plan goals. Although the Natural Resources Branch (NRB) in the Resource Management Division has the lead role implementing the NRMP, all divisions, sites, and staff are responsible for implementation and for ensuring that Park Authority policies and practices support natural resource protection. Staff will report on accomplishments and plans to the Park Authority Board annually.

There is broad recognition of the Park Authority’s obligation and responsibility to protect and manage the natural resources under its care. Implementation of the NRMP requires significant resources in both staff and funding. These needs will be defined over time through inventories, site-level resource management plans, periodic agency needs assessments and other processes. Securing the necessary staff and funding to meet NRMP goals and implement the recommended actions of this plan will require the education of numerous stakeholders, access to new and alternative methods of funding (including capital funding streams), and strong advocacy and support from county residents and elected officials. Working collaboratively with partners will also play a key role in accomplishing many aspects of this plan.

This plan’s management themes embody the key issues facing our natural resources. Fairfax County’s parks are isolated natural areas impacted by many stresses. Park Authority staff, volunteers and citizens are charged with protecting these remaining natural areas to preserve the county’s natural capital in biodiversity, natural communities and ecosystems. But the remaining natural areas are not enough. It will be up to many partners to expand natural areas over time in order to sustain our native species and communities and increase the ecological services and quality of life benefits they provide. The parks can provide refuge for species, act as a source of locally native species and provide the templates for natural communities for restoration efforts elsewhere.

# Inventory and Planning

## KNOWING WHAT WE HAVE

Effective stewardship begins with a fuller understanding of the natural resources under the Park Authority's care. The following actions address how the Park Authority collects natural resource data and integrates this knowledge into park planning and decision-making. A comprehensive natural resources inventory has not been conducted for all parkland, but many parks have been surveyed and areas of significance have been identified. Consolidating and streamlining this information in a Geographic Information System (GIS) database and communicating the significance of natural areas to staff, partners, elected officials, and citizens is of critical importance to preserving their long-term health.

1. Conduct natural resource inventories of vegetative communities, rare and significant species, habitats and ecological features such as wetlands and their contributing landscapes to identify, map, and monitor biodiversity.
  - a. Inventories should be conducted in advance of park acquisition, planning, projects and management activities, with the intent of protecting resources.
  - b. Develop a natural resource geodatabase built on the Fairfax County GIS infrastructure to archive natural resource inventory data, ensure uniform data management and allow for a centralized location to access natural resource information.
2. Assess the ecological significance of natural resources on parkland according to federal and state protection status, countywide occurrence, ecological function, ecosystem services and sensitivity to disturbance, and incorporate these assessments into strategic and long-range planning, general management planning, and operational planning.
  - a. Identify and protect species and ecosystems that are rare or significant on a local, regional or national scale.
3. Designate Resource Protection Zones and develop a map of parkland defining these areas in which land disturbance shall be limited and access regulated based on the needs of the resources present.







4. Assess the value of natural capital on parkland to include the ecosystem services it provides.
  - a. Integrate ecological concepts to include biodiversity, habitat structure, and regeneration into economic valuation studies to develop a more complete picture of ecosystem function and value.
  - b. Demonstrate differences in ecosystem and ecological service values between degraded and healthy natural communities.
  - c. Develop cost estimates for restoring and managing natural capital.
5. Create site-specific or resource-specific Natural Resource Management Plans and/or Natural Resource Action Plans as appropriate to guide natural resource management and protection and make these plans available to staff and the public.
6. Maintain expertise within park staff, adopt best practices, and seek innovative methods, technology and tools to proactively protect and manage natural resources.

# Protecting Natural Capital

## DO NO HARM

Impacts to parkland degrade the quality and long-term health of the county's natural capital. Some impacts can be addressed locally and internally, such as limiting encroachments from adjoining property owners. Broader impacts, such as watershed degradation, browsing by overabundant white-tailed deer and non-native invasive plant infestation, are significant, large-scale problems with solutions that lie well beyond park boundaries. The actions within this management theme address some of the most significant impacts to natural resources, including impacts that are countywide in scope and will require the cooperation of citizens and partners to address.

7. Avoid adverse impacts to natural areas, mitigate unavoidable impacts from construction and maintenance projects and require restoration and rehabilitation of impacted natural resources.
  - a. Minimize impacts to forests, meadows and other natural areas from human use.
  - b. Protect significant natural communities and species.
  - c. Require restoration of impacted natural resources when use of parkland causes damage to them.
8. Ensure that natural resource protection is integrated into all aspects of the Park Authority's practices to include land acquisition, park planning, development, management, maintenance, and interpretation.
  - a. Ensure that natural resource planning takes place and accounts for vegetation, wildlife, water resources, air quality, human impacts and education.
  - b. Ensure that park development, management, and interpretation does not conflict with site Natural Resource Management Plans.
  - c. Ensure that natural resource specialists are consulted during project planning and prior to activities that impact natural resources.
  - d. Base natural resource management decisions on science and best practices, including surveys, monitoring, and adaptive management.
  - e. Include natural resource mitigation funding as a part of all projects that impact natural resources.
9. Eliminate encroachments from park neighbors and illegal uses of parkland to prevent, remove or mitigate impacts to natural resources.
10. Protect water resources from impacts of urbanization and development such as stormwater runoff and excessive flows.
  - a. Protect water quality by minimizing impacts from park development, as well as development outside of parkland.
  - b. Support county, state and regional water quality efforts to include implementation of Fairfax County Watershed Management Plans.
  - c. Protect, enhance and restore riparian buffers.
  - d. Protect wetlands to include springs, seeps and vernal pools and the buffers that surround them (e.g. the terrestrial habitat zone).
  - e. Minimize negative impacts of stormwater facilities per Policy 212 Stormwater Management.
  - f. Work with partners to protect and restore streams on parkland.
  - g. Utilize low impact development practices (such as stormwater management, green buildings and natural landscaping) to reduce impacts to water resources and other natural resources.



- 11.** Prevent net loss of natural resources on or off parkland as a result of granting easements.
  - a.** Deny requests to place easements on parkland to offset losses elsewhere (except when required by interagency or other pre-existing agreement), when resources on parkland would not be restored to mitigate for those losses.
- 12.** Protect park natural resources from threats of urbanization, development and park operations to include noise and light pollution, degradation of air quality and other sources of pollution.
  - a.** Prevent excessive light impacts on natural areas.
  - b.** Prevent or mitigate excessive noise impacts on wildlife.
  - c.** Reduce air pollution from park management by investing in cleaner equipment, reducing mowing, and incorporating other best practices.
- 13.** Plant only locally common native plant species in natural areas, do not plant any invasive species, and use non-native non-invasive species in formal landscapes only when there are no suitable native plant alternatives.
  - a.** Use local ecotypes of native species when available.
- 14.** Site trails to minimize natural resource impacts, utilize sustainable trail building principles and avoid placing trails in sensitive natural areas.
  - a.** Consult and follow the agency's Trail Development Strategy Plan.
- 15.** Increase Park Authority ownership and buffering of ecologically valuable areas through acquisition of land, easements and other agreements that would serve to protect natural resources on or adjacent to parkland.

# Managing Wild Populations and Restoring Ecosystems

## HELPING OUR LAND HEAL

The Park Authority's natural resources must be adaptively managed to achieve positive ecological outcomes. Natural resource management should begin with clearly defined goals such as improving biodiversity, reducing overabundant or non-native invasive species, or promoting naturally-regenerating native plant communities. Natural resource management should be adaptive and experimental. Management actions should include proven as well as novel practices, and staff should incorporate measurable feedback mechanisms, such as biological monitoring, to evaluate their effectiveness and adapt strategies accordingly. The Park Authority should embrace a hands-on approach to natural resource management based on the best available science and with clearly defined management goals.

16. Manage natural resources adaptively and holistically on a landscape scale with the ultimate goal of having naturally regenerating native plant systems and healthy native wildlife populations.
  - a. Manage for landscape mosaics with diverse habitats, including non-forested ecosystems, to foster biodiversity and support different life-cycle stages for species.
  - b. Focus on areas with the best, biggest and/or most connected resources.
  - c. Protect intact soils with a rich ecological memory and restore degraded soils.
  - d. Reintroduce disturbances necessary for system recovery such as fire and canopy gaps.
  - e. Focus on removing stresses from systems to include human impacts, white-tailed deer, non-native invasive species, etc. to allow systems to recover.
  - f. Restore natural communities to improve ecosystem resilience against large scale and long-term impacts such as climate change, severe weather events, and forest pests.



- g. Consider unique or important natural communities, species and ecological features when establishing management objectives and measuring management outcomes.
    - h. Monitor results to determine change and measure success over time.
17. Control overabundant and invasive species that negatively impact natural resources to include, but not limited to, white-tailed deer, non-native invasive species, resident Canada geese, feral animals, and forest pests.

- a. Coordinate response amongst staff and with partner agencies.
  - b. Maintain capacity for Early Detection and Rapid Response (EDRR).
  - c. Be proactive in preventing new invasions.
  - d. Mitigate wildlife conflict per Policy 202 Wildlife Conflict Resolution.
- 18.** Ensure the health of existing forested areas. Where possible ensure native biodiversity and sustainable regeneration; elsewhere restore to the highest ecosystem function practicable.
- a. Ensure that forested areas are sustainable and promote regeneration.
  - b. Expand tree cover and enhance forest health to protect ecosystem services, including improving local air and water quality and sequestering greenhouse gases.
- 19.** Enhance connectivity of parkland to provide natural corridors that allow for the movement of populations over time and preserve ecosystem function and biodiversity.
- a. Focus on buffering sensitive natural resources.



# Fostering Stewardship and Expanding Natural Capital

## SPREADING THE WORD

The citizens of Fairfax County place a significant value on the county's parks, with about 80% of the population using and visiting the parks each year (Great Parks Great Communities Comprehensive Park System Plan, 2011). Many visitors participate in recreational activities that allow them to appreciate the parks' natural resources, such as walking or biking on trails, birding and nature study, visiting nature centers, and kayaking or canoeing. It is clear, however, that many park visitors lack an understanding of the threats facing the long-term health of these natural resources and the important role that visitors play as stewards and advocates both on and off parkland. The natural capital infrastructure, which provides the county with ecosystem services such as clean air and water and quality of life benefits for residents, requires active management and financial commitment to maintain. The actions under this management theme focus on engaging citizens, staff and regional partners in resource management, with the goal of fostering support for programs and initiatives and raising awareness of the need for active stewardship.

20. Partner with diverse groups to engage and educate residents and staff about their role in natural resource stewardship, and increase their awareness of conservation and resource management issues.
21. Maintain and/or enhance effective communication strategies with the public; explore new forms of outreach to engage citizens in natural resource conservation and management and overcome socioeconomic, language and cultural challenges.
22. Provide high quality interpretive opportunities that enhance awareness of natural resources leading toward the appreciation and conservation of Fairfax County's natural capital.

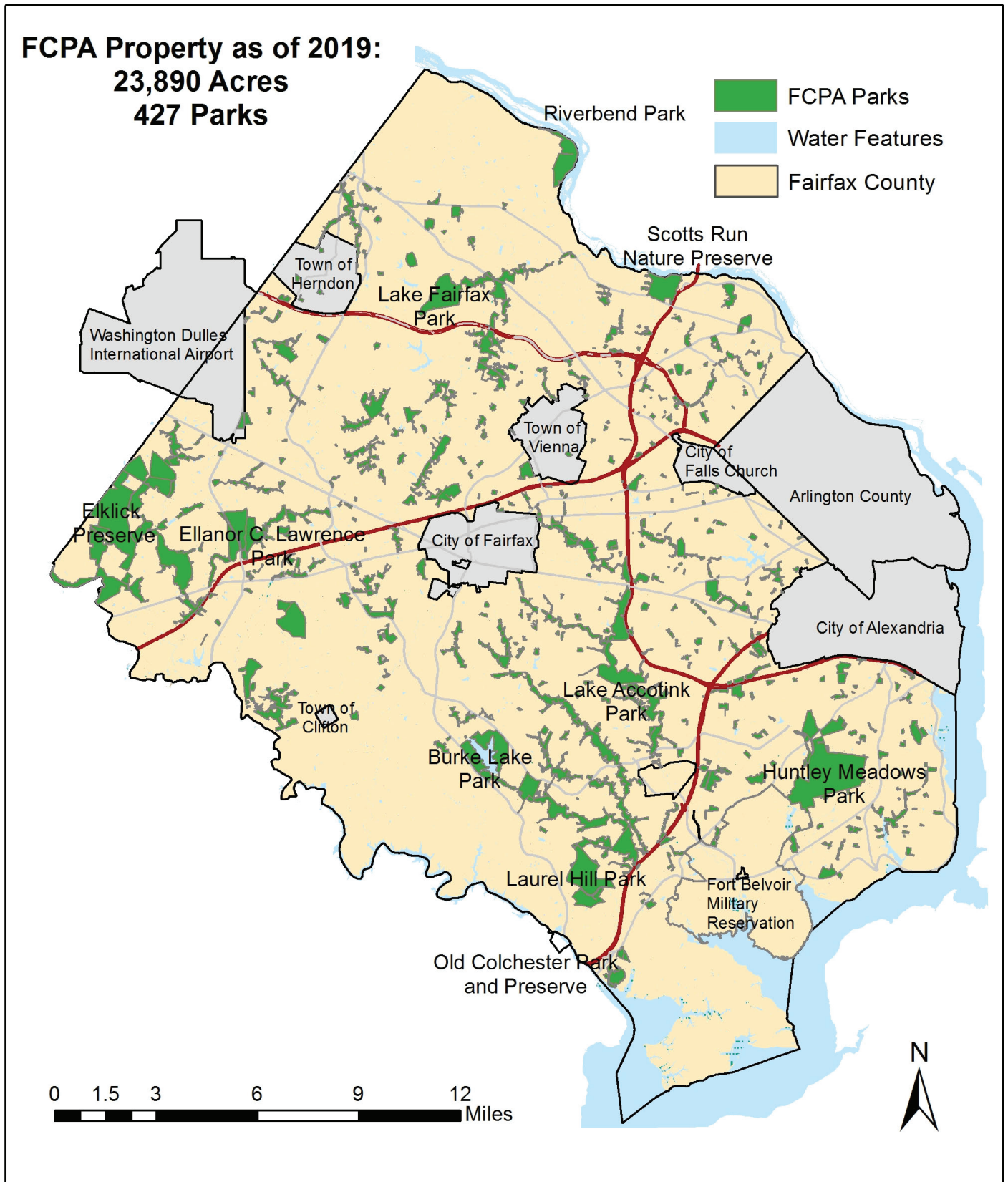


23. Work with adjacent landowners to expand natural areas beyond park boundaries through education, easements and cooperative agreements.
  - a. Encourage habitat expansion through native landscaping practices.

24. Partner with diverse groups to conduct resource inventories, formulate plans and manage resources.
  - a. Seek and develop partnerships to achieve resource management goals.
  - b. Support citizen science where appropriate.
  - c. Provide opportunities for volunteers to participate in natural resource management.
  
25. Leverage partnerships with all county agencies and entities having natural resource management responsibilities to optimize alignment of county and park policies as they relate to natural resource management.
  - a. Identify and pursue opportunities for natural resource education, protection, restoration and management countywide.
  - b. Extend natural resource management actions and benefits across property lines and jurisdictions.
  - c. Collaborate with partners to maximize available resources.
  - d. Broaden Park Authority visions and align with regional efforts when possible and appropriate.
  
26. Participate in and support regional natural resource management planning and management efforts to better identify gaps and opportunities in natural resource protection and management.
  - a. Protect and restore ecosystems on a regional and national scale.
  - b. Encourage individuals and organizations to expand their vision beyond their own properties, neighborhoods and counties.
  - c. Collaborate and cooperate with partners in order to establish and achieve regional ecological goals.



# Fairfax County Park Authority Property





Appendix B

# Site-Specific Natural Resource Management Plans and/or Forest Treatment Plans

Huntley Meadows Natural Resource Management Plan (2019)

Ossian Hall Forest Treatment Plan (2005)

Elklick Woodlands Natural Area Preserve Natural Resource Management Plan (2009)

Laurel Hill Natural Resource Management Plan (2011)

Old Colchester Park and Preserve Natural Resource Management Plan (2011)

Fitzhugh Forest Treatment Plan (2011)

Riverbend Natural Resource Management Plan (2012)

# Glossary of Terms

**Adaptive Resource Management** Adaptive management [is a decision process that] promotes flexible decision making that can be adjusted in the face of uncertainties as outcomes from management actions and other events become better understood. Careful monitoring of these outcomes both advances scientific understanding and helps adjust policies or operations as part of an iterative learning process. It is not a ‘trial and error’ process, but rather emphasizes learning while doing.

(Adapted from Williams, B. K., R. C. Szaro, and C. D. Shapiro. 2009. Adaptive Management: The U.S. Department of the Interior Technical Guide. Adaptive Management Working Group, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, DC.)

**Biodiversity** The variety of life in the world or in a particular habitat or ecosystem.

**Citizen Science** A project that enables citizen volunteers to gather data that will be analyzed by professional researchers. Citizen volunteers may have no specific scientific training but can perform or manage research-related tasks such as observation, measurement, or computation.

**Contributing Landscape** Ecological features which are critical to support species and their lifecycles or the proper functioning of natural systems. For example, field complexes which provide over-wintering habitat for short-eared owls and forested zones around vernal pools which protect hydrology and support breeding populations.

**Early Detection and Rapid Response (EDRR)** An approach to preventing new invasive species infestations that requires regular monitoring of managed lands and a prompt and coordinated containment and eradication response. These actions result in lower cost and less resource damage than implementing a long-term control program after a species has become established.

**Ecological Memory** The collective genetic biodiversity remaining in a given landscape locked up in living things and their roots, seeds, spores, and eggs. In terrestrial systems, the ecological memory cannot be separated from the soils.

**Ecosystem Resilience** The capacity of an ecosystem to absorb disturbance without shifting to an alternative state and losing function and services.

**Landscape Mosaic** A metaphor describing the intricate pattern of different habitats or land use types that comprise a geographic region.

**Local Ecotype** Plant material and seeds that originate from a defined geographic area and carry genetic adaptations to the environmental conditions of the area.

**Natural Capital** Includes living organisms; non-living components such as air, water and soil; the ecosystems they form; and the environmental services they provide, including cleaning air and water, supporting wildlife and contributing to the quality of life of our citizens. Natural capital is not self-sustaining, but requires deliberate care and investments to enhance, protect and preserve it.

**Natural Resource Management Plan(s)** A plan to identify, protect and manage natural resources that can be written to be agency-wide, site-specific, or resource-specific.

**Natural Resource Action Plan(s)** An operations plan that summarizes the critical natural resources of a park and sets goals for their management based on available resources. These plans are intended to be brief.

**Resource Protection Zone(s)** Areas of natural resource significance in which land disturbance shall be limited and access regulated based on the needs of the resources present. RPZs will generally be defined by the specific resources present.

**Terrestrial Habitat Zone (for wetlands)** The terrestrial upland areas surrounding a wetland that influence the wetland's hydrology and contain the habitats necessary for various amphibian species to complete their life cycle.



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