



## Meeting of the Washington State Natural Heritage Advisory Council

June 9, 2021 • 9:30 am – Noon

Remote Web-based Meeting

**Councilmembers in Attendance (all via conference call):** Peter Dunwiddie (Chair), Becky Brown, Heida Diefenderfer, Kathryn Kurtz, Cheryl Schultz, Ian Sinks, Laurie Benson (DNR) Adam Cole (RCO), Janet Gorrell (WDFW), Heather Kapust (ECY), Andrea Thorpe (State Parks)

**Councilmembers Absent:** Janelle Downs, Maynard Mallonee, Claudine Reynolds, Randi Shaw

**DNR Staff in Attendance:** Tim Stapleton, Joe Rocchio, Curt Pavola, Jake Kleinknecht, David Wilderman, Raine Frost

**Visitors:** None

Chair Peter Dunwiddie called the meeting to order at 9:35 a.m. The agenda was accepted without changes.

### Approval of the Minutes for the March 11, 2021 Council Meeting

The minutes were moved by Kathryn Kurtz and seconded by Heida Diefenderfer. Council approved the meeting minutes unanimously, with a note to correct a typographical error.

### Introduction of New Council Member

Laurie Benson introduced herself as the new DNR representative on the council in her role as acting division manager for the Conservation, Recreation and Transactions Division.

### Carry-Forward Items from Previous Meetings

- Report from NHAC member visits to Natural Areas: Ian Sinks visited land adjacent to Willapa Divide NAP on land the Columbia Land Trust is hoping to acquire that includes older Willapa Hills forest community. Becky Brown visited Pineroft NAP and said the site looks to be in good condition, and she will visit Steptoe Butte proposed-Natural Area tomorrow. Chair Dunwiddie was working in the San Juan Islands and used the app created by Natural Heritage staff to find Point Doughty NAP, however he didn't have time to visit on that trip. He also found old growth shown on Mount Picket next to Mount Constitution, and Andrea Thorpe said Mount Picket may be an NAP. Cheryl Schultz hasn't been on a natural area per se but has been on the Oregon coast a lot,

noting that habitat improvements in the region may bring Monarch butterfly populations up enough that they may, in future years, return to eastern Washington.

- Update on funding for Natural Heritage Program and Natural Areas Program: Laurie Benson summarized funds approved during the recent legislative session, noting that DNR's typical "carry-forward" level of funding was the same as in the past for Natural Heritage and Natural Areas received a small enhancement tied to past capital projects. She noted the Natural Areas capital projects funded through Recreation and Conservation Office grants and the program's capital budget, which are shown in the program report delivered to the council.
- Recommendation Update – Steptoe Butte: Tim Stapleton noted that DNR Transactions Section staff are continuing to work with landowners on the acquisition, with the anticipated outcome being that DNR will have site ownership. Andrea Thorpe noted she had also recently spoken with one of the landowners.

#### Pincroft NAP Educational Access

Curt Pavola introduced the topic of an educational access trail under consideration for Pincroft NAP, which is one of only a few DNR natural areas being within a city boundary, adjacent to Mirabeau Point Park owned by the City of Spokane Valley. Prior to the pandemic, DNR staff had worked with city staff on the concept of developing, and jointly managing, interpretive access at Pincroft. DNR presented the concept to the city council, whose members supported the idea of a management partnership. The intent of today's discussion is to review a conceptual design and receive guidance from the Natural Heritage Advisory Council before re-engaging with the city later this year.

David Wilderman presented a PowerPoint about the history and features of Pincroft NAP. The preserve was established to protect high quality examples of four ponderosa pine plant communities that occur across most of the site. The preserve also supports a number of breeding bird species, including the pygmy nuthatch which is declining in Washington and is closely associated with ponderosa pine habitats. The Natural Areas Program has conducted restoration in portions of the forest communities (thinning) and in grasslands on the site. The site also has a history of educational use by a local high school, as well as academic research.

Raine Frost of DNR's Recreation Program shared her preliminary, conceptual design with council members for discussion. Council discussion followed and is summarized below.

Heida Dienfenderfer noted she would like to visit the NAP to experience the potential access routes. Pavola noted that all currently impacted paths within the NAP are either historical or unsanctioned use. Frost added that future trail development can steer people away from unsanctioned trail segments or sensitive areas.

Becky Brown said she visits the adjacent site often with students, near the YMCA on the city's trail. She suggested connecting preserve tails to existing trails to enhance their educational value. Pavola noted that one of the proposed entry sites is at the city park at the northern end of the city trail.

Kathryn Kurtz views the project as good for area schools, which may be able to walk to the site (avoiding the need for buses), potentially including an elementary school. Suggested that when thinking of interpretive site design along the trail, consider the space needs of classes of 30 students, or 15 if in two groups. At Pacific Education Institute (PEI) they work to include

photo-point designations for students to input images to see the changes over time. PEI would like to partner on this project. If the participating schools are outside the immediate area then amenities such as parking and porta-potties would need to be provided.

Ian Sinks asked whether the conceptual trails fit with the site's conservation objectives; and are the ecologists comfortable with the design? Wilderman affirmed his comfort with structured access due to the existing, already impacted paths that are being utilized. This would provide ecological benefit by directing use to built trails away from sensitive areas and reducing dispersed use across the site.

Brown raised a question about the fence surrounding the NAP and any impact on moose using the area. She noted a surprising amount of wildlife along the river corridor. She agrees that use within the preserve needs to be guided, and education about the site would be valuable. Wilderman acknowledge the point about wildlife use even among the surrounding development, however his last recollection of a moose at this site was 15 years ago.

Pavola reported that the discussion with city staff did not get very detailed as to what form a management partnership might take; nor about how frequently the educational trail might be open to the public, such as daily or on some other schedule, sunup to sunset as with the park, with or without docents? Wilderman said that consistent, managed use would decrease inappropriate uses (such as current homeless encampments) and allow for invitation of students to the site again.

Chair Dunwiddie observed some likely entrances through the fence. Frost acknowledged incursions through the fence or at gates and said part of the eventual design should dissuade such localized use. Pavola said this site has been a constant source of reaction to breached fences, which require funds to rebuild and control access. One notable recurring breach in the fence is from neighbors who use the site as a "dog park."

Diefenderfer suggesting looking at adding a dog opportunity as part of the project, and Kurtz agreed with the concept to focus the use. Brown added that Mirabeau Point Park has dog walkers all the time. Chair Dunwiddie suggested making a distinction between a park and this preserve to educate about conservation. Frost said the project focus is to provide a different experience for the public, and our signs can definitely educate about the reasons and the need for conservation. Frost said we will be raising these types of issues with city officials.

Chair Dunwiddie offered that this proposal stretches customary use of NAPs, to tolerate or encourage another use; a higher level of use than most NAPs get. What consideration was given to NRCA designation versus NAP? Pavola replied that the management actions and goals don't change for rare features due to a different conservation designation. If something is rare or high quality, we manage for the benefit of those conservation features regardless of the designation. Brown stated that with conservation values in high population areas, the use needs to be managed.

Chair Dunwiddie said his focus was on whether this project would set a precedent for allowing uses that will impact our management at other preserves. Diefenderfer observed that in this 100 acre preserve, this use may have the effect of increasing pressure on our conservation management. Tim Stapleton noted that our ability to manage impacts, at any site, is limited to

the resources we have available, and since we've been unable to fully close this site then we want to take whatever action we can to solve current problems.

Diefenderfer suggested documenting this use as an exception because this will not be the last time populations will increase around our sites. Pavola added that these kinds of pressures are rare for DNR's natural areas since most are remote. Brown said the site currently looks like a fort and steps should be taken to assure DNR has community support for conservation. She suggested community outreach to educate about the local ecosystem and help control inappropriate use of the site.

Chair Dunwiddie concluded with his concern that DNR's actions be captured in the historical context of NAP management for conservation, and with this as an exception. He suggested that public use pressures will grow and he sees the need for a bright line for conservation with NAPs to protect them. Diefenderfer agreed that this proposal seems like a change. Pavola noted other sites with non-typical public uses, which are located on previously impacted areas on the sites, including Mima Mounds NAP, Chehalis River Surge Plain NAP, Selah Cliffs NAP, and Trout Lake NAP; and Wilderman added another, the road access at Columbia Hills NAP. Wilderman views this proposal as one management tool to protect the features of Pinecroft NAP and assure future use for education and research.

#### Natural Heritage Plan Development Update

Joe Rocchio presented (1) proposals to redefine the list of ecosystem elements or features within the Natural Heritage Plan and (2) the specific protocols proposed to assign Plan conservation status and natural area representation priorities.

With regard to ecosystem elements in the Plan, Rocchio noted that in past Plans, all ecosystem types were considered to be coarse-filter elements in the Plan. However, the scale of ecosystems included in past Plans varied from coarse ecosystem concepts (e.g. "Montane Herbaceous Bald") to fine-scale ecosystem concepts (i.e. Ponderosa Pine / Long-Stolon Sedge - Roemer's Fescue Woodland) and represent both coarse and fine-filter ecological functions. NHP staff propose to clarify the purposes of the various ecosystem scales in the Plan by separating ecosystem classification units into explicit **coarse-filter priorities** (i.e. U.S. National Vegetation Classification Groups) and **fine filter priorities** (i.e. rare U.S. National Vegetation Classification Associations). For the 2022 Natural Heritage Plan, staff propose to create two ecosystem lists reflecting those (1) coarse filter elements and (2) fine-filter elements-- for both conservation and representation priorities.

In regards to how we assign Plan priorities to these elements, staff propose to designate two distinct "priorities": Conservation Status and Natural Areas Representation Priority. These have been introduced in previous NHAC meetings. **Conservation Status** is intended to guide regulatory decisions, proactive management and conservation, and conservation acquisitions outside the bounds of the Statewide System of Natural Areas. **Natural Area Representation Priorities** are intended to specifically guide the establishment of new sites into the Statewide System of Natural Areas. Currently there is much confusion about how conservation vs. representation are incorporated in Plan priority-setting protocols described in past Plans, resulting in some inappropriate application of the priorities for conservation decisions. For example, a Priority 1 ecosystem, as represented in past Plans, isn't necessarily indicating an ecosystem that is the most endangered or most in need of conservation. The Priority 1 status for that ecosystem is as much an indication of the need to represent the ecosystem in the statewide

system of natural areas as anything else. Conversely, a Priority 1 species is primarily indicating the conservation needs and much less so representation needs. In other words, the priority setting protocols have historically differed between species and ecosystems. Program staff propose to address these inconsistencies and confusion by creating two separate priority lists for all the targeted elements: (1) Conservation Status and (2) Natural Area Representation and we are proposing to keep the protocols the same for both species and ecosystems.

Conservation Status will be assigned by using the Global and Subnational (State) Conservation Status Ranks—the standard Natural Heritage approach to determining rarity/imperilment—to designate rare plants and ecosystems with a status of Endangered, Threatened, and Sensitive. This is already done for rare plants, while staff are proposing some adjustments to how this is done. Designating Endangered, Threatened, and Sensitive ecosystems will be a new way of communicating conservation status of ecosystems in Washington state. With appropriate caveats regarding what these labels convey (e.g. explicitly noting they are not regulatory, etc.), we believe these labels provide a more transparent and clear means of communicating ecosystem conservation priorities. For examples, “Endangered” is a term that resonates with a much broader audience than “G1S1”, which is a wonky way to communicate conservation urgency. The Natural Heritage Program and the Plan will ensure that the labels Endangered, Threatened, and Sensitive, or more importantly the implications of those labels, are distinguished between their use for wildlife (i.e. WAC 220-610-110, 232-12-014), rare plants, and ecosystems.

Natural Area Representation Priorities are intended to guide establishment of new sites into the Statewide System of Natural Areas. These priorities are not blind to conservation concerns but they are intended to ensure that efforts to establish new natural areas are not focused on just a few very rare elements. Rocchio presented a table demonstrating how the interplay of Conservation Status and the number of occurrences currently protected within the statewide system of natural areas determines the Natural Area Representation Priority. Endangered elements would always be considered a potential priority but their representation importance decreases as their representation within the Natural Areas system increases. Conversely, elements with less conservation concern (or no concern for some coarse ecosystem targets) start with less overall priority and ultimately drop out as Natural Area Representation Priorities once a certain number of natural areas protecting them have been established.

Diefenderfer reflected on the conservation priorities chart and suggested consideration of a risk assessment layer to differentiate among plant communities or species impacted by wildfire suppression, climate change, et cetera. Chair Dunwiddie inquired whether other Natural Heritage Programs are considering the approach NHP staff are presenting, and Rocchio replied that not all Natural Heritage Programs have the same role in prioritizing natural areas like Washington does. That is, natural areas per se are not an explicit part of Natural Heritage methodology, rather they are one potential outcome of using Natural Heritage data in identifying conservation need and related actions. As such, Rocchio said it is difficult to directly answer the question. However, many state and federal natural areas programs share the same goals as Washington’s. In the past, State of Washington Natural Heritage Plan priorities were established with much more involvement by federal scientists in the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. The Plan is intended to help guide them in selecting federal natural areas as well. This coordination still occurs to some extent with rare plants but, because federal agencies have not rehired vegetation ecologists as they retire, this level of coordination is lacking for ecosystems. Many state and federal natural areas programs were

created around the same timeframe and thus were inspired by similar goals. In terms of Conservation Status, some states simply use the Conservation Status ranks (like Washington has done in the past), while others develop their own approach to creating a ranking system that attempts to convey priorities using less technical jargon (which also is one of Washington Natural Heritage Program's goals).

#### Discussion of Council Chair

Council Chair Peter Dunwiddie discussed his interest in passing along the duties of council chair. Ian Sinks inquired about the duties of the chair position, and Dunwiddie characterized them as "not a heavy lift," with occasional agenda-setting conversations with DNR staff or follow-up conversations on specific topics. He noted that most of job is running meetings, and suggested it might be useful for council members to consider their personal interests and reflect on whether they might see opportunities for changes in the work of the council, such as an opportunity to work on setting new direction. Stapleton concurred with the time commitment characterization and offered that the DNR programs are interested in hearing the council's advice or suggestions for any changes.

Chair Dunwiddie offered to contact members outside of the meeting to discuss the opportunity of serving as chair further.

#### Other Business / Comments from the Public

Tim Stapleton reviewed council terms noting that the terms of three members expire this month.

Chair Dunwiddie inquired whether any members of the public may be on the phone and would like to provide comment to the council. No one spoke.

#### Adjourn

Chair Dunwiddie concluded the conference call at 12:01 pm.

MINUTES APPROVED: October 13, 2021