A biologist’s place is in city hall: the King County wildlife program

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Abstract
Local governments directly affect the quality and quantity of wildlife habitats on the urban fringe through their activities, such as, land use zoning, parks and open space acquisitions and management, incentive programs to slow residential conversions, stormwater management, transportation planning, and educational programs. Decisions about these types of programs rarely include consideration of wildlife habitat needs. The King County Wildlife Program places a wildlife professional in the middle of these local land use activities in order to more directly protect the wildlife resource. Direct action at the local government level can be more effective than traditional wildlife management approaches.

The King County Wildlife Program was established in 1992 in response to citizens’ concerns about the loss of wildlife and habitat. It is still the only comprehensive local government program of its kind in the nation. The program’s activities include regional planning, regulation development and enforcement, habitat management, and education and incentive programs. This unique program can serve as a model for other local jurisdictions in their efforts to integrate the needs of wildlife with the interests of the human community and private landowners.

INTRODUCTION
Local governments, cities and counties, directly affect the quality and quantity of wildlife habitats on the urban fringe through their activities. These activities include land use zoning, parks and open space acquisitions and management, incentive programs to slow conversions, stormwater management, transportation planning, and educational programs. Decisions about these types of programs rarely include consideration of wildlife habitat needs. The King County Wildlife Program places a wildlife professional in the middle of these local land use activities in order to directly protect the wildlife resource. Local governments have direct control over available habitats, and therefore, could be more effective than other levels of government in managing wildlife.

The King County Wildlife Program was established in 1992 in response to citizens’ concerns about the loss of wildlife and habitat. The Wildlife Program is the first comprehensive, local level program in the U.S. Since land use decisions that affect habitat are made at the local level, it is critically important for wildlife planners to participate in local planning decisions.

The Program’s activities include regional planning, regulation development and enforcement, habitat management, and education and incentive programs. The Program works to integrate the needs of wildlife with the interests of the community and private landowners. This unique program can serve as a model for other local jurisdictions in their efforts to maintain wildlife diversity in their communities.

The King County Wildlife Program is comprehensive in two ways. First, the Program is involved with landowners from all of the different parts of the County landscape. Over the years the program has worked in both urban and rural areas and in the forests, farms, parks, schoolyards, commercial sites, and residential neighborhoods of the County. Since wildlife is found throughout the County, and since wildlife does not respect jurisdictional boundaries, the Wildlife Program also has had to respond to issues throughout the County. The Program has coordinated activities with cities within the County and with adjacent jurisdictions.

Secondly, the Program uses a comprehensive range of tools to protect wildlife including policies, regulations, education, and incentives. Policies are

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not effective without implementation. The imple-
mentation is not effective without enforcement.
Furthermore, a program that focuses only on regula-
tions, or “the stick,” will find public support dwinn-
dling. On the other hand, public education and
incentives alone are probably not sufficient to
achieve the goal of wildlife protection without the
power to reinforce the objectives through legal
enforcement of restrictions. Local government is the
level of authority where all of these components of a
comprehensive wildlife habitat protection program
can come together.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Policy Development

Comprehensive Plan policies have been developed
to protect species and habitats. The policies are the
critical foundation for all other program activities.
Specific wildlife policies allow the County to defend
its positions in legal hearings. They also provide the
legal basis for mitigation measures required on
projects subject to review under the State Environ-
mental Policy Act (SEPA). SEPA typically applies to
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mental Policy Act (SEPA). SEPA typically applies to
larger projects that might be presumed to have the
largest impacts on wildlife and habitats.

Regulatory Implementation

Regulations to implement the policies have been
developed to address some specific issues. For
example, a special district overlay zone was design-
nated around the Kenmore Great blue heron rook-
ery, which includes critical feeding habitat within 4
miles of the rookery. There are a number of different
development conditions that all projects, including
single-family residential development, must comply
with, depending on where the project is in relation
to the rookery. Conditions include a restriction on
development close to the rookery, and increased
buffer widths in critical heron feeding habitat areas.
State wildlife management agency authority rarely
extends beyond nest protection. State agency
biologists seem reluctant to become embroiled in the
day-to-day review of developments that only need
local permits. This is an example of how a local
jurisdiction may be more effective at protecting
wildlife habitat than other levels of government.

King County has also designated a wildlife
habitat network. The network is implemented
through the zoning code. The Wildlife Program staff
must review all projects on properties crossed by the
network. Projects that do not involve the subdivi-
sion of land, such as garage additions, or single
family residences, must locate the network route,
keep all clearing, building and landscaping out of
the network, and it must be shown as a notice on
the title. Projects that are subdividing parcels must
show the network in a separate tract that is man-
aged like other sensitive area tracts.

A third regulatory example illustrates the value of
a comprehensive approach. King County has
enacted a livestock management ordinance. By the
end of 1998, all livestock was required to be fenced
out of streams and wetlands. This is a regulatory
program with a built-in incentive component. If the
landowner develops a farm plan that addresses a
wide variety of farm management issues such as
manure management, pasture rotation, and
stormwater runoff, then the fencing does not have
to be as far from the stream resulting in less impact
to existing pasture space. In addition, there is
assistance available to help develop these farm
plans, and a cost-share program to help pay for
implementation of some parts of the plan, like
fencing livestock out of the streams and wetlands.
This comprehensive approach is resulting in a
whole constellation of projects that protect salmon
habitat, ground water infiltration, and terrestrial
wildlife species as well as generating a greater
understanding of the ecosystem and building public
support.

Incentives

Many of the common incentive programs that can
be offered to landowners are administered by local
governments and are not available for use by other
levels of government. For example, counties can
offer a current use taxation incentive to landowners
for habitat protection. King County has taken
advantage of changes in Washington State laws to
develop a current use taxation program that specifi-
cally targets certain wildlife habitat values. The
program, called the Public Benefit Rating System,
have been effective in slowing the pressure to convert
habitat lands to more intensive uses.

The King County Wildlife Program also adminis-
ters the Urban Reforestation and Habitat Restoration
(URHR) grant program. URHR grants are competi-
tive grants to community groups and public agen-
cies for habitat restoration projects. The funds for the
grants come from the interest generated from a large
dowment fund. A 50% match is required for each
grant, but to date, grantees have generated closer to
20 times the amount of match required.

Land Stewardship

The people of King County have invested in a
world-class system of parks, natural open spaces,
greenbelts, farmlands, and forestry conservation
areas. Responsible management of these resources
includes consideration of wildlife habitats on those
public lands. Again, the Program has taken a com-
prehensive approach from acquisition to manage-
ment. The Program has been involved in identifying critical lands for acquisition. Staffs also provide technical expertise to park master plans and community ecosystem projects such as the Waterways 2000 program and the Mountains to Sound Greenway Trust. The Wildlife Program has conducted training sessions on wildlife management techniques for County Park’s maintenance staff. In addition, there are several County-owned farmlands, which are leased back to private farmers in exchange for the installation and management of certain wildlife enhancements.

Community Resource

The Wildlife Program serves as a community resource for information about wildlife and wildlife habitats, including native species, naturescaping (using native plants to landscape for wildlife), and techniques to integrate habitats into developments. There are many ways to improve wildlife habitats on private land, even in the most urban neighborhoods. Recognizing that landowners have an important role in the stewardship of wildlife resources, the Program tries to reach landowners through a newsletter and workshops and presentations on naturescaping. Program staff responds to questions about coexisting with wildlife from the public and provide technical assistance to other agencies, jurisdictions, and community groups. In addition, the Program collects data on native wildlife species and habitats, and is currently analyzing information on black bear sightings and available habitats in a residential area. The program staff try to help people to learn how to integrate wildlife habitats into the places where they live, work, and play.

CONCLUSIONS

The King County Wildlife Program has daily interactions with residents who are enthusiastic about protecting and improving the wildlife habitats in their neighborhoods. These people, without the guidance of professional biologists, are taking on habitat restoration projects, fighting developments in their neighborhoods that would impact habitats, and they are planting native plants and feeding the birds in their backyards. These non-hunting and non-fishing urban residents are wildlife’s constituents. There are millions more of them than there are constituents for consumptive wildlife management programs. In a recent informal survey, 60 concerned urban residents were asked what they knew of the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife, the traditional wildlife management agency. Only 10 people admitted to knowing about the Department, and only 4 responded to having had a positive experience with the agency. The positive experiences reported by at least 2 of the 4 were related to experiences with the Department’s urban program.

Wildlife professionals need to get more involved in all levels of government activities because different levels have different tools available for wildlife and habitat management. Wildlife professionals also need to get more involved in all of the parts of the landscape, including those that don’t seem to offer much for wildlife because that is where they will find the human constituents for wildlife. When the professionals begin to take a more comprehensive approach to wildlife management, and “think outside of the box,” wildlife and its human supporters will benefit.