
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 implementation is not effective without enforcement. Furthermore, a program that focuses only on regulations, or “the stick,” will find public support dwindling. 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 Environmental 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 designated around the Kenmore Great blue heron rookery, 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 subdivision 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 managed 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 specifically targets certain wildlife habitat values. The program, called the Public Benefit Rating System, has been effective in slowing the pressure to convert habitat lands to more intensive uses.

The King County Wildlife Program also administers the Urban Reforestation and Habitat Restoration (URHR) grant program. URHR grants are competitive grants to community groups and public agencies for habitat restoration projects. The funds for the grants come from the interest generated from a large endowment 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 comprehensive 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, naturesscaping (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 naturesscaping. 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.