



Edmonton Natural Areas Advisory Committee

Annual Report

July 2009

2008-2009

MEMBERSHIP

Citizens at Large

Irl Miller
Barbara Sander
Dr. Guy Swinnerton
Dr. Paul Tiege
Dr. Peter Vogels
Ben Willson

NAAC Purpose:

Identify, prioritize and advise on policy and operational issues for consideration by Natural Areas Policy Implementation Committee (NAPIC) and Council on table land conservation and restoration issues.

NAAC Membership:

Province of Alberta

Gerry Haekel

The committee consists of twelve appointed members comprised by seven citizens-at-large and representatives from the University of Alberta, the Government of Alberta (currently Sustainable Resource Development), the Urban Development Institute, and nongovernment organizations (currently the Wildlife Rehabilitation Society of Edmonton). The Edmonton Natural Areas Director is an ex-officio member and resource person.

University of Alberta

Dr. Colleen Cassady
St. Clair (Chair)

Urban Development Institute

Brian Charanduk

NAAC Vision:

In January 2006 the NAAC adopted the following vision:

Wildlife Rehabilitation Society of Edmonton

Cheryl Feldstein

We envision a system of conserved natural areas, ecologically and effectively managed, connected to the ravines and river valley, linking natural and restored green spaces and regional natural areas, recognized and supported by the community of Edmonton as a valued asset.

City of Edmonton (Ex-Officio)

Grant Pearsell
Angela Hobson

We have defined a natural area as "An area of land and/or water especially dedicated to the protection and maintenance of biological diversity, and of natural and associated cultural resources, and managed through legal or other effective means."¹ Areas such as groomed parks, recreational areas for sports, and schoolyards are not included in this definition.

NAAC Strategic Advisory Areas:

NAAC has identified four key long-term objectives, which guide annual activities and priorities:

1. Ensure the development and implementation of an overall conservation plan for the tablelands, river valley and ravine systems that links to other key civic initiatives.

¹ Based on the definition of a protected area adopted by The World Conservation Union (IUCN).

2. Support the development of tools to achieve conservation of natural areas.
3. Ensure that planning policy, process and practice support conservation priorities.
4. Enhance public awareness and education about conserving natural areas.

NAAC Process:

The NAAC meets monthly, every first Monday, in City boardrooms. Meetings are led by agreed co-chairs and decisions are by consensus. Due to limited capacity, NAAC endeavours to focus its efforts on priority matters, including initiatives of the Office of Natural Areas (ONA). For the most part, information on City of Edmonton policy and practice are obtained through briefings by the ONA and on request from City Administration and external experts.

2. NAAC Initiatives and Activities for 2008 - 2009

NAAC Key Initiatives:

1. Municipal Development Plan and Transportation Master Plan

NAAC fully supports the Administration to integrate Natural Connections Strategic Plan into the Municipal Development and Transportation Master Plan. We spoke in support of the plans at the public hearing on 12 November, 2008, but also offered some caveats to that support. In brief, we recommended a no net-loss approach for natural areas to maintain and increase existing connectivity among natural areas. We also suggested that areas already known to be ecologically sensitive should be highlighted for protection prior to expansion of either the transportation network or municipal development. We emphasized that this is a critical time for securing the remaining natural areas. Our position statement is attached (Appendix A).

2. Top of Bank Policy

Members of NAAC participated in public consultation sessions concerning the City's renewed Top of Bank Policy over the last 16 months. Throughout these sessions, we encouraged city planners to make use of all available science, including social and ecological sciences, in drafting their plans. We offered a letter of support for the new draft policy, which was scheduled for a public hearing on May 6th 2009 (Appendix B). Although we had some qualms about the obligate use of a top of bank roadway in that plan, we believed it to be the best tool available to support a wider area for wildlife movement. This is a critical and oft-overlooked function of top of bank habitats and we continue to be concerned about how this habitat will be provided.

3. ICLEI

Several NAAC members serve as representatives on the City of Edmonton's ICLEI World Congress 2009 Boards and Committees. They also participated in events during the ICLEI conference in June, 2009, most notably a mobile workshop on June 16th. This conference provided an excellent opportunity to showcase Edmonton's extraordinary river valley and the progressive, ecologically-based approach to managing it that was approved with last year's Policy and Plan.

4. Program and Policy Support

NAAC additionally provided advice to the ONA and the Administration on a number of policy and program initiatives, participated in City future planning processes, and endorsed private initiatives for conservation of natural areas and biodiversity.

- a. We reviewed and offered opinions on the type of protected area designation for the south Whitemud Area.
- b. NAAC representatives participated in an "executive interview" and a workshop in connection with the development of the principles, policies and practices associated with the preparation of the Land Use Plan of the Capital Regional Board (October 2008 and February 2009).
- c. We provided a written message from NAAC in support of the EcoVision annual report.
- d. NAAC offered sincere support for the activities of the Natural Areas Office by writing letters of reference for the 2009 Emerald Award and Canadian Institute of Planners Award for Planning Excellence. The nomination letters (Appendix C) emphasized the important work accomplished last year with the new Policy C-531, *Natural Area Systems Policy* and the associated *Natural Connections Strategic Plan: Edmonton Integrated Natural Areas Conservation Plan*.

5. Improved Communication and Coordination

During the past 18 months NAAC extended invitations to organizations with potentially common purposes to discuss respective mandates and the potential for cooperative efforts including the Edmonton Area Land Trust, the City's Principle of Forestry, and the River Valley Alliance. We succeeded in meeting with the new City Forester (Jenny Wheeler) and (Pam Wight) of the Edmonton Area Land Trust, but we were not able to schedule a meeting with the River Valley Alliance. Instead, we offered a letter (Appendix D) outlining ways we believed the vision of this organization could complement the city's vision to secure and manage Natural Areas while engaging Edmontonians.

6. Master Naturalist Program

NAAC member Cheryl Feldstein was one of the instructors for the program and her Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre (of which she is executive director) will offer opportunities for volunteer involvement following course completion.

2009 - 2010 Priorities

- 1. Work to prevent further loss of natural areas.** The most important goal for the immediate future is to prevent the loss of the remaining natural areas. NAAC will look for opportunities to help promote support for securing priority areas, perhaps by identifying additional tools for protection.
- 2. Encourage regional cooperation in the securement and management of natural areas.** We will continue to engage with the Edmonton Area Land Trust and the Capital Region to encourage a regional approach to conservation. We think long-term conservation interests are best served by active integration of civic and Capital Region conservation initiatives.
- 3. Support the development of communication strategies to convey the importance of natural areas within a broader mandate of environmental education.** We will begin by defining the outcomes by which natural area conservation could be advanced in the public domain and identifying key mechanisms for achieving them. We plan to begin this work early in the fall of 2009.
- 4. Support policy development.** NAAC will continue to offer perspectives and recommendations concerning new civic policies with implications for natural areas.

3. NAAC Recommendations:

Progress on 2008/09 Recommendations:

Last year, NAAC provided four recommendations that would mark significant progress in conserving Edmonton's natural heritage.

Recommendation 08-1 Implement the Conservation Strategy

NAAC recommended priority attention and a budget allocation to implement the *Natural Connections Strategic Plan* to secure, manage and engage.

As a host for the 2009 ICLEI congress the city took big steps to engage Edmontonians, new projects have been initiated through the Community Partnership Program. We were delighted to learn that the City has authorized borrowing as a mechanism for purchasing natural areas. We think this move will dramatically increase the potential to secure natural areas before existing opportunities for purchase are lost.

Recommendation 08-2 Institute Measures to Assess and Report on Progress

NAAC recommended measures to monitor, assess and publicly report on actions taken to implement the Natural Connections Strategic Plan for natural areas conservation as recommended in the approved Natural Area Systems Policy. Consistent with the approved Policy, we further recommend that Administration direct all City Departments and Agencies to describe in their interim and final Council Reports how they have supported both the policy and the plan.

We were very pleased with the numerous performance measures relevant to natural areas contained in the Ecovision Report and we encourage the City to continue to monitor and improve performance on these indicators. We also recognize the important work achieved with the Biodiversity Action Plan for the City.

Recommendation 08-3 Expedite Land Purchase and Designation

NAAC recommended that the Administration purchase or set aside lands and/or facilitate the donation of private lands, consistent with the objectives expressed by the TPW Committee in approving the Natural Connections Strategic Plan.

We absolutely commend the City for allocating funds to expedite the purchase of lands and permitting borrowing to accelerate securement. We also acknowledge the current economic situation makes it difficult to acquire more land. Nonetheless, because of ongoing loss of natural areas, we suggest the timeframe for acquiring the remaining priority natural areas should be shortened from the current target of 20 years to 10. Additionally, we suggest that acquisitions be balanced across the city to maximize connectivity for biodiversity and the availability of natural areas for all Edmontonians.

Recommendation 08-4 Encourage Regional Cooperation for Natural Areas Protection

NAAC recommended that the current regional development and cooperation initiatives include consideration to cooperate to acquire, designate and manage natural areas.

The City has been involved in the Capital Region Land use Planning on several levels. We are hopeful that there is a widespread acknowledgement of the importance of connecting natural areas on a regional level. We suggest that this regional-level connectivity needs a higher profile at the early stages of the Capital Region Land Use Plan.

Recommendations for 2010

1. **Prevent the further loss of Natural Areas.** For every 2 ha gained in natural area protection in the tablelands, 5 ha are lost. The remaining Natural Areas in the periphery of Edmonton are under tremendous threat as the transportation network expands and new neighborhoods are developed. We acknowledge the difficulty of compensating developers for the cost of natural areas and the challenge of equitability among developers. Nonetheless, the city needs to identify further mechanisms to reduce the rate at which natural areas are lost. A goal of no-net-loss, which has been used to mitigate wetland loss, might be applicable. The window of opportunity for protecting the remaining natural will close within 10-15 years.
2. **Secure the core natural areas immediately.** Use the current opportunity to secure land (\$20 Million) to target the largest remaining natural areas in the tablelands. This is an excellent opportunity to maximize ecological connections with existing protected areas. Four or five such areas are currently available in diverse parts of the city. These areas should be targeted as the highest priority for securement of the remaining natural areas. These large areas would provide important anchors in a connected system of natural areas consistent with the goals of the Natural Connections Strategic Plan.
3. **Revisit Committee Structure.** During the presentation of our 2008 report, a committee of council (TPW) asked if the current structure of NAAC is the best one for advancing its vision to protect natural areas. One councilor wondered if a standing committee of council might be more appropriate. We considered this question carefully this year and provided our opinion to the Office of Natural Areas as a draft of a letter that could be provided to members of council (Appendix E). In sum, we suggest that the City retain NAAC and the equivalent committee (Environmental Advisory Committee) for the Office of the Environment, and that it add a new standing committee with a broad environmental mandate and expertise. Several levels of government around the world are increasing their environmental science capacity; such a committee could help Edmonton lead the transition to a more responsible sustainable society.

4. **Increase public education about the value of natural areas, particularly in the tablelands where there are relatively few natural areas.** We note that our own recommendations of 2008 and the City's performance toward them (above) addressed two of the three goals in the conservation plan; the secure and manage natural areas. However, except for the hosting of ICLEI and the Master Naturalist Program, there was little development of the third goal which was to engage Edmontonians. Without widespread public support for natural areas, it will be difficult to protect the areas that remain. Thus, we recommend that the City develop a **communications strategy** to better engage Edmontonians and to help them appreciate how they are positively affected by natural areas. Such a strategy would ideally involve related issues of public health and environmental sustainability. For example, the City could promote the value of natural areas as repositories of biodiversity, contributors to clean air, opportunities for aesthetic and recreational enjoyment, and components of sustainable communities. The city could **expand outreach opportunities** for conveying these messages by linking with diverse interest groups who support natural areas. We liken this kind of education to the proactive approach taken for other forms of public health (e.g., at risk children) and believe this approach will offer the best opportunity to secure and manage natural areas in the long term.

5. **Encourage information exchange concerning the securement, management and engagement for natural areas at regional, national and international levels.** This information exchange will help the city to appreciate the contribution it is making to global initiatives to preserve biodiversity and protection of natural areas. It also provides a means of measuring our own progress and the contribution we are making towards these global goals. The Duban Commitment signed last year provides an excellent example of this approach. NAAC has sought interaction with a variety of related groups (above) and will continue to do so as a way of fostering information exchange concerning natural areas.