



2008 ASLA Utah Awards Spotlight



Natural Areas Land Management Plan for Salt Lake County

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SALT LAKE COUNTY

Natural Areas Land Management Plan Standards and Operations Manual



Salt Lake County owns and manages a diverse array of developed parks and undeveloped, open space lands. Of the approximately 5,250 acres of land currently managed by the County's Division of Parks and Recreation, approximately 2,250 acres are managed as undeveloped open space or "natural areas." Residents, communities, and land-management agencies throughout the County have become increasingly concerned about the preservation of natural areas, which are quickly disappearing as rapid development continues in Salt Lake Valley. The County's mission is to preserve, restore, and enhance these natural areas for multiple community benefits ranging from aesthetics to wildlife habitat to low-impact recreational opportunities.

In order to more effectively manage natural area lands, Salt Lake County hired BIO-WEST, Inc. to help develop a Natural Areas Land Management Plan: Standards and Operations Manual. The manual is intended to guide the County's Division of Parks and Recreation staff in identifying, monitoring, and maintaining



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Coyote running across the Great Salt Lake playa

natural areas under their jurisdiction. It also provides guidance and procedural direction for reclamation and restoration of natural areas that have been disturbed. While not intended for specific land parcels, these general guidelines are applicable to all natural areas throughout the Salt Lake Valley, including those managed by private organizations, municipalities, and land-management agencies. The manual establishes standards and guidelines for defining natural areas, classifying natural areas by vegetation cover type, monitoring and maintaining natural areas and open spaces, rehabilitating disturbed natural areas, and fire management of natural areas. The manual also identifies native plant species to use in various landscape types, provides landscape enhancement and restoration techniques, suggests water management and erosion control methods, details weed management techniques, and establishes fire management policies.



Vegetation Cover Types at the Rose Canyon Natural Area

Natural areas are scattered remnants of Salt Lake Valley's pre-settlement landscapes. They contain rich, diverse plant and animal communities that differ dramatically from one another and range in size from a few acres to hundreds of acres. Natural areas are minimally developed and do not contain manicured lawns, ornamental flower-beds, or formal landscape plantings. They are often only slightly disturbed or undisturbed and may be used for passive, low-impact recreational activities. Many of the County-owned natural areas have trails that are used by both residents and visitors for hiking, bicycling, skiing, and snowshoeing activities.

Natural areas provide several quality of life values for Salt Lake Valley residents and communities. These include providing for open space and passive recreational opportunities and protecting viewsheds, wildlife and native plant habitat, water resources, and important geological features. In addition to the County's existing natural areas, more properties are anticipated to be purchased through the Open Space Trust Fund, which was established by the Salt Lake County Council in 2005.



Trail use at Redwood Natural Area

Natural areas are found throughout the County and fall under the management jurisdiction of numerous private and governmental organizations including municipalities, Salt Lake County, the state of Utah, and the U.S. Federal Government. Of the approximately 515,000 total acres in Salt Lake County, some 280,000 acres (or 55 percent) are considered natural areas (i.e., currently not disturbed, developed, or active agricultural lands). Of this amount, over half (142,000 acres) are in private ownership.

In the manual, County natural areas have been classified into a series of vegetation cover types. These vegetation cover types vary throughout different elevations, from the lower valley bottoms near the Great Salt Lake to the upper mountains in the Wasatch Range. They are determined through identification and classification of plant species found in each area, which vary depending on soil type, slope, soil moisture, aspect, and elevation. The vegetation cover types established in the manual are based on information and data contained in the Southwest Regional GAP Analysis Project. Some of the classifications in the GAP project were lumped together to simplify the vegetation cover types described in the manual.



Equestrian use at Yellowfork Canyon Natural Area

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Monitoring is an essential component in the proactive, effective management of natural area lands. The information gained through site monitoring allows for focused management activities to occur on the areas of greatest need, and evaluates the success of restoration projects. The monitoring techniques chapter in the manual provides annual monitoring forms, work plan development forms, monitoring schedule guidelines, and post-restoration monitoring forms.

Maintaining natural areas in Salt Lake County is a challenging endeavor, but this can be accomplished by developing and implementing a comprehensive maintenance program. The natural area maintenance program described in the manual focuses on maintaining healthy native vegetation, stabilizing soils, minimizing disturbance, and controlling recreational activities in an effort to reduce weeds and erosion. Weed infestations and soil erosion are less likely to occur in healthy plant communities. The manual guides managers to reduce new and controlling existing weed outbreaks. It also guides managers in employing appropriate erosion control methods on disturbed sites. The chapter that covers maintenance techniques addresses weed management, erosion control, revegetation, vegetation cover type seed mixes, and maintenance resource requirements.

The manual will aid Salt Lake County and other communities throughout the Salt Lake Valley in sustaining the integrity and value of existing natural areas and in mitigating problems that have developed over the years.

This project was a collaboration between Salt Lake County Parks and Recreation staff and key members of the BIO-WEST Planning and Landscape Architecture Section, Water Resources Section, Wildlife Section, and Vegetation Section. In addition, a stakeholders group was formed and met regularly to provide input and expertise on issues pertaining to management of natural areas in Salt Lake Valley. This stakeholder group consisted of many city representatives and County employees, as well as representatives from the Unified Fire Authority, state of Utah, and Federal land managing agencies. Copies of the manual can be downloaded from Salt Lake County's website at: <http://www.recreation.slco.org/planning/natural.html>

Recipients of the 2008 ASLA Merit Award in the categories of Communication, and Planning and Analysis for the Salt Lake County Natural Areas Land Management Plan include the following:

- Christopher Sands, ASLA (BIO-WEST Principal and Project Manager)
- Andrea Moser, ASLA (BIO-WEST Landscape Architect)
- Jill Grams, (BIO-WEST Planner)
- Bridget Atkin, ASLA (BIO-WEST Botanist)
- Sandy Davenport, ASLA (BIO-WEST Landscape Architect)
- Aaron Crookston (BIO-WEST CADD Specialist)
- Sandra Turner (BIO-WEST Executive Editor)
- Emery Crook (Salt Lake County Director of Planning and Development)
- Lynn Larsen, ASLA (Salt Lake County Project Manager)
- Wayne Johnson (Salt Lake County Director of Park Operations)

