

## BCNA Ecosystem Plan 20+ Years Later

*This is the first in a series of articles that explores the evolution of the Ecosystem Plan and the current status of the core preserves and habitat connectors. As BCNA is nearing its 25-year anniversary, it seems appropriate to take a look at some of the long-term projects that have helped define the organization.*

One of the first volunteer projects undertaken by members of BCNA in the early 1980s was to assist Boulder County Parks and Open Space with the update of the Environmental Resources Element of the Boulder County Comprehensive Plan. Members spent time in the field looking for animals and plants that were rare, restricted to a few locations, or appeared to be declining.

The result was the designation of critical wildlife habitats, rare plants, and critical plant associations within the county. But much of this is what ecologists would term a “fine filter” approach to land protection. Mike Figgs had the idea of adding a new designation to the County’s plan: larger blocks of land called “Environmental Conservation Areas” (ECAs) that tried to capture the needs of wide-ranging animals and accommodate natural disturbance processes. Three ECAs were designated in this Comprehensive Plan update, all located in the foothills.

Though the County update was completed, the idea of looking at larger blocks of land for protection was intriguing. The emerging fields of conservation biology and landscape ecology were broadening conservation efforts away from small sites often based on a single species towards recognition of landscapes and processes that maintained biodiversity, what ecologists call the “coarse filter”. Roz McClellan, then the director of the CU Environmental Center, organized several symposiums that brought in noted ecologists such as Reed Noss and George Wuerthner. They were inspirational and accelerated the learning curve.

A few years later, in the mid-1980s, BCNA mapped a countywide system of habitat core areas that were felt to be the “best of what is left” in the county. Riparian and large-mammal movement corridors connected the core areas. The relatively natural areas of the landscape needed to remain as such, and interconnected to allow for the movement of species. The “Ecosystem Plan,” as it was commonly called, is shown on the map that follows. BCNA used the plan to influence public land acquisition and management as well as foster private land preservation through the actions of landowners and land trusts. BCNA formed its own land trust, the Boulder County Land Trust. During the 1990s, three events occurred that helped achieve much of the land use plan envisioned.

The first was the passing of the County Open Space sales tax in November 1993. This allowed the County to acquire fairly significant chunks of the landscape rather than scattered, isolated parcels. Lands protected around Rabbit Mountain now total almost 14,000 acres instead of just the original 2,500, and includes not only the golden eagles’ nest but also much of their feeding grounds.

The second event was the formal inclusion of the Ecosystem Plan into the Boulder County Comprehensive Plan. Representatives from approximately a dozen agency and environmental organizations reviewed and revised the plan. The core areas were adopted as Environmental Conservation Areas. The County saw the ECAs as locations where development rights should be removed through purchase, transfer or donation. The Ecosystem Plan provided an ecological framework and rationale.

The third event was the update of the Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. Then District Ranger, Bill Anthony used several concepts from the Ecosystem Plan to influence the Forest Plan update. The Boulder District was the only area on the Forest to use the Core Habitat designation, which was done in the North St. Vrain and South St. Vrain (two BCNA Environmental Conservation Areas). Much of the North St. Vrain Canyon received a Research Natural Area designation. Most other areas that had been mapped by BCNA as core habitat received a Flora and Fauna prescription.

The primary emphasis in achieving the plan over the past 20 years has been removal of development potential from within the ECAs and connectors. The success, primarily due to the passing of the County Open Space sales tax and all the citizens of **Boulder County**, has been way beyond what we thought might happen, when conceptualizing the plan in the 1980s.

Now, mind you, whatever joy felt from the success is offset by the realities of the landscape that Boulder County is a part. The sheer volume of people now living in the urban Front Range, the continual advancement of nonnative plants and animals, air pollution, acid rain, increased nitrogen brought to the mountains from upslope storms, global warming, and altered disturbance regimes all provide a sobering reality. The core areas are still relatively small.

Wide-ranging mammals, such as pronghorn and buffalo, will never be a viable part of the plains. Even the long-term existence of prairie dogs will be tested. As the saying goes, the price of an ecological education is to live in a world of wounds.

But that knowledge also gives an understanding of what you have where you live. The magnificence, complexity, uniqueness, and beauty of our local organisms, communities, and ecosystems are astounding. You have to fight for what you have. It is home. That is what BCNA has been about! The articles that follow look at the individual core areas and connectors in detail. The map below is a key to locating the areas described in the succeeding articles. Click on the map to view a full page width PDF of the map.

-Dave Hallock

