Part I – Introduction & Overview

1 Introduction

This "Existing Conditions and Resources Assessment" report is one of several background studies that have been prepared to support a countywide parks master planning effort in Yolo County in 2004. The purpose of the Yolo County Parks Master Plan is to set a policy framework and provide guidance for management, uses, and future acquisition and development of County park properties individually and system-wide.

1.1 Scope & Objectives

An important step in preparing a parks master plan which looks to the future is the objective assessment of the existing resources and assets from the standpoint of what they provide and contain, as well as what they potentially could provide with improvements or modifications. This background report describes the general status of County's park properties as they existed in 2004 with respect to certain physical attributes, recreational activities, major improvements and infrastructure, and selected environmental resources. The current set of County park properties consists of 15 units.

In this report, these park properties are first described collectively in Part I as an overall set of properties, then on an individual basis in Part II. Attachment A provides a summary of current use fees at the County park sites. Attachment B is a set of drawings

This report identifies and assesses facilities and resources to the extent necessary to provide a general inventory of assets and resources and to provide a baseline for the countywide Parks Master Plan. It is not intended to be comprehensive in describing every aspect of the County's park properties. Park improvements and resources are characterized generally to the extent that they were readily observable at the park sites, as supplemented by information from Planning and Public Works staff; detailed inventories (including investigation of subsurface features) were beyond the scope of this project.

Resource inventories and evaluations are based on reconnaissance-level site investigations, consultation with staff from Yolo County Planning and Public Works Department, document reviews, aerial imagery interpretation, available maps and drawings, and queries to relevant natural resource data bases. Observations are based on limited field investigations that did not cover all areas of all sites. Additional field studies and more detailed inventories are recommended to supplement this report and to provide additional information, as indicated in this report.

2 Countywide Overview

This overview addresses the collection of County park properties as a set, in terms of such characteristics as total acreage, range of sizes and types of park units, and range of activities. While the overview is divided in two sections that address park and recreation resources and natural resources, it must be realized that the two types of "resources" are closely related, particularly for areas that provide outdoor recreation.

2.1 Parks & Recreation Resources

As part of this background study, the Consultant Team compiled information on various attributes, infrastructure, amenities, recreational activities, and other resources of existing County park properties. This compilation is presented in Table I-1, Existing Resources Inventory. Consultants also compared the types of recreational activities available at Yolo County park properties with Statewide recreational activities, ranked in order of most to least participation. This activity summary and comparison is presented as Table I-2, Yolo County Parks Matched Against Statewide Preference Ranking.

2.1.1 Land Inventory

The current set of parks, open space areas, and other assets owned or managed [1] by Yolo County are a diverse collection of properties. As shown in Table 1, they range in size from one or two acres to approximately 700 acres. Excluding the County Historical Museum property as a unique case, there is a total of 1,423 acres of parks and open space lands in the entire current inventory. Of this total, approximately 251 acres are considered to be "developed" areas. Seven of the 14 (non-museum) County park properties are under 10 acres in size, three are between 40 and 100 acres, and three are larger than 100 acres in size.

Setting parkland goals and assessing levels of service on park acres per capita basis has been a common practice in park planning over the past decades. Recent guidance from the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA), however, suggests that level-of-service standards for parks and recreation – such as the commonly used 10 acres per 1,000 population standard, which achieved considerable popularity nationwide over the past 30 years – cannot be applied universally by all local governments. However, at the county jurisdiction level, the obligation for furnishing park and open space to the public is not specifically defined and varies widely among California counties. In the continuum of park providers from federal to State to local, the niches that generally fall under county-level park service are the "regional" and specialty type parks. The regional park is generally thought to be natural resource oriented with various passive day uses and occasionally overnight type functions.

Such standards therefore may be useful to some extent for neighborhood parks, playgrounds, and sports fields in urban settings (i.e., for city or local special district

[1] For three of the current County park properties, the County is responsible for providing maintenance and operations under contractual agreements with the State: Clarksburg Boat Launch facility, Putah Creek Access Sites, and Knights Landing Boat Launch facility.

jurisdictions), where public policy has been established based on planning studies and user surveys; however, application of a level-of-service standard to "passive" recreation areas, such as natural areas and open space, especially without a policy framework adopted by the responsible public agency, is generally less appropriate.

Given these considerations, judgments of whether Yolo County's current parkland acreage inventory in some way "measures up" to population-based level-of-service standards may be of limited value. Accepting the estimate that Yolo County's 2004 population is approximately 184,500 [2], there are currently 7.7 countywide parkland acres per 1,000 population and 1.4 developed acres per 1,000 population in Yolo County. Other measures of demand and level-of-service or other new policy frameworks may need to be considered to achieve an accurate picture of Yolo County parks and the adequacy of services they provided.

2.1.2 Recreational Activity Inventory

The current set of properties owned or managed by the County provides for a limited range of active and passive recreation opportunities for its residents and visitors. The overall set of available recreational venues within the current parklands, however, emphasizes certain types of recreational activities over other uses and activities; for a number of other recreational activities that are of comparatively high importance Statewide, the current set of parks does not provide opportunities at all.

As shown in Table I-1 and Table I-2, various County parks and open space areas and the County Historical Museum provide "traditional" opportunities such as stream and river fishing, boating, paddling, camping, picnicking and barbeques, swimming and wading, museum-visiting, and other activities. In addition, some parks have other, unique assets. The Middle Site at Cache Creek Regional Park, for example, is the only County park property where camping activities are currently allowed. Grasslands Park provides the venue for specialty recreational uses such as archery, horseshoes, and model plane soaring. The Yolo County Historical Museum property provides a unique cultural experience, portraying several periods of the County's Euroamerican history. Esparto Park's most important function is probably as an outdoor community gathering place.

To supplement and further assess this limited range of recreational activities, the Consultant Team used information from a California Department of Parks and Recreation-sponsored Statewide public preference survey on recreation, which is conducted every five years. In the statewide preference survey, survey respondents are asked whether they have participated in any of 55 recreational activities representing a spectrum of outdoor-related endeavors engaged in by Californians. A ranking was derived from this survey, based on the activities in which Californians were most likely to participate at the top of the list, with those activities with the least

[2] Yolo County Planning and Public Works Department; June 1, 2004 staff report to the Board of Supervisors, regarding the County General Plan Update. This estimate is consistent with a projection of 184,487 made by the California Department of Finance ("E-5 County/State Population and Housing Estimates, 1/1/2004"). The federal 2000 Census listed Yolo County's population as 168,660.

Table I-1. Yolo County Parks – Existing Resource Inventory

Table I-2. Yolo County Parks Resources Compared with Statewide Preferences

public participation at the bottom. The Consultant Team then considered the existing Yolo County facilities and resources from the perspective of the availability of these 55 recreational activities and viewed the results in contrast to the Statewide preferences.

The results, presented in Table 2, suggest that the existing set of County park properties and the facilities that they contain may be deficient in terms of meeting the public's greatest needs for certain recreation-related activities.

2.2 Environmental Resources

This Part I section is a general discussion of some of the environmental resource considerations that play a role in park planning. This particular discussion is primarily focused on natural resources; however, other environmental resources must ultimately be considered as well, including cultural resources. This section is not intended to be a comprehensive discussion, but it does begin to suggest some of the factors that may affect park and open space acquisition strategies, design, designated uses, management, and operations.

In Part II of this report, park-specific discussions include additional information on environmental resources, including major habitat types or plant associations, existing environmental conditions in the County park properties where these may be significant to parks planning, wildlife species and habitat types, and general relationships between existing uses at each County park property and habitat conditions observed in the field, including the potential for risks or degradation, as well as the potential for enhancement or public benefit.

2.2.1 Summary of Sensitive Species Concerns

The Consultant Team conducted a focused research effort to identify sensitive species and habitat types for each County park property. The information primarily came from existing database sources; the scope of work for the Parks Master Plan effort did not include onsite investigations for sensitive species. Consultants queried the California Natural Diversity Data Base (CNNDB) listings for Yolo County and conducted a "nine-quad search" (the information is organized by USGS topographic quadrangles) within the California Native Plant Society (CNPS) database for sensitive plant species for each County park property and surrounding areas. Results from the CNNDB database query are presented in Table I-3.

Table I-3. Summary of CNDDB Listed Elements for the 7.5-Minute USGS Quadrangles That Contain Yolo County Park Properties.

Scientific Name	Common Name	Fed/Cal/DFG/CNPS
Agelaius tricolor	Tricolored blackbird	--/--/SC/--
Ambystoma californiense	California tiger salamander	FPT/--/SC/--
Ardea alba	Great egret	--/--/-- /--
Astragalus tener var. *ferrisiae*	Ferris's milk-vetch	--/--/-- /1B
Athene cunicularia	Burrowing owl	--/--/SC/--

Scientific Name	Common Name	Fed/Cal/DFG/CNPS
Buteo swainsoni	Swainson's hawk	--/CT/ --/--
Charadrius montanus	Mountain plover	--/--/SC/--
Coccyzus americanus occidentalis	Western yellow-billed cuckoo	FC/CE/--/--
Desmocerus californicus dimorphus	Valley elderberry longhorn beetle	FT/--/ --/--
Egretta thula	Snowy egret	--/--/--/--
Falco mexicanus	Prairie falcon	--/--/SC/--/
Falco peregrinus anatum	American peregrine falcon	--/CE/--/--/
Fritillaria pluriflora	Adobe lily	--/--/--/1B
Great Valley Mixed Riparian Forest	Great Valley Mixed Riparian Forest	--/--/--/--
Hesperolinon breweri	Brewer's Western flax	--/--/--/1B
Hibiscus lasiocarpus	Rose mallow	--/--/--/2
Layia septentrionalis	Colusa layia	--/--/--/1B
Nycticorax nycticorax	Black-crowned night heron	--/--/--/--
Pogonichthys macrolepidotus	Sacramento splittail	--/--/SC/--
Rana boylii	Foothill yellow-legged frog	--/--/SC/--
Riparia riparia	Bank swallow	--/CT/--/--
Thamnophis gigas	Giant garter snake	FT/CT/--/--

Notes:

FE	Listed as “Endangered” under the federal Endangered Species Act
FT	Listed as “Threatened” under the federal Endangered Species Act
FC	Candidate for listing under the federal Endangered Species Act
FPT	Proposed for listing as “Threatened” under the federal Endangered Species Act
CE	Listed as “Endangered” under the California Endangered Species Act
CT	Listed as “Threatened” under the California Endangered Species Act
SC	Listed by the California Department of Fish and Game as a “Species of Special Concern”
1B	Listed by the California Native Plant Society as “Rare, Threatened, or Endangered in California and Elsewhere”
2	Listed by the California Native Plant Society as “Rare, Threatened, or Endangered in California but More Common Elsewhere”

Because the searches included so much of the areas surrounding each specific park location, and because the County’s parks and open space properties are generally spread out across the County, nearly the entire County was included in the database information reviewed. It should be noted that, because the consulted databases are comprised of observation records, the presence of any species at a particular location at any one time does not mean that the species is currently found in that location. Similarly, the fact that no records exist in other suitable habitat locations does not mean that sensitive species (or sensitive habitats) do not exist in those locations. As a general observation, the database records on a countywide basis for Yolo County were notable for their apparently uneven distribution; records exist primarily for occurrences near populated areas, indicating that the more remote areas in the County have not been surveyed as well.

2.2.2 Other Environmental Resources Considerations

Natural resources are important in terms of how park visitors relate to their surroundings in parks and open space areas; the condition of the natural resources is, in part, a measure of how well the responsible agencies fulfill their responsibilities as stewards of public lands and resources. As indicated by the above section, an understanding of "sensitive" or "special status" species is one type of consideration, particularly in terms of legal requirements – i.e., it is legally necessary to avoid adverse impacts to these species and their habitats to the extent possible.

In addition to natural resources and sensitive species, various other resource values play important roles in park planning, particularly outside urban areas where the emphasis is on outdoor recreation within natural settings. The physical and natural conditions of parks and open space areas, for example, are important determinants of existing or potential recreational opportunities. While a comprehensive discussion of all of these matters is beyond the scope of this background report, several general considerations are offered here in the context for the countywide Parks Master Plan.

The physical setting of park property is an important consideration in terms of obvious topographic features that determine the type and extent of onsite recreational uses. The physical setting also is important for potential opportunities in interpretation and environmental education, such as the underlying geology of the site, relationships between soils and vegetation, or fluvial and flood processes that created the creek- or riverside landscapes. An understanding of the physical setting is also important for identifying potential sources of hazards and impacts, such as seismic activity, slumping or other forms of mass wasting, and erosional processes caused by natural conditions as well as intensive public uses.

A number of environmental resources and components are not addressed in detail in this report; however, in many cases they may be appropriate or even highly significant considerations in parkland management, acquisition, and development. Among the resources at several County park sites, for example, are wetlands, which are protected under a variety of State and federal directives. From an ecological perspective, wetlands serve many critical functions in maintaining species diversity and richness, water quality, and habitat. In Yolo County, as in other parts of the Central Valley, soil and hydrological conditions at some locations may combine to create vernal pools, which are seasonally inundated depressions that may contain specially adapted (and, thus, often special status) plants and animal species. Parklands and open space areas can also serve direct or indirect roles in maintaining fisheries and fish habitat, including native species of anadromous or resident fish.

Beyond the immediate, onsite values are broader issues that are sometimes considered under the heading of conservation biology. In terms of parks planning – particularly in the implementation of an acquisition strategy – conservation biology can play an important role in helping to identify significant resource areas, communities, and habitats that should be protected in order to maintain species or genetic diversity, or to provide critical linkages among ecosystem components, such as migratory routes and wildlife habitat corridors. The main threats to biodiversity include habitat loss and fragmentation, habitat degradation, introduced species, over-harvesting, and loss of endemic species and their habitats. Conservation biology

considerations would help ensure protection of wild lands, watersheds, and landscapes. In this light, conservation biologists at the regional, State, and federal levels seek to protect significant ecological regions and habitat types that are under-protected, as well as unique natural resource areas. A County park system can be part of that strategy. Additional information on conservation planning considerations is provided in Attachment C.

2.3 Balancing Public Uses & Resource Protection

People are often attracted to areas having high environmental values. Preferred outdoor recreation areas, such as along creeks and rivers, on terraced areas on hillsides, along ridgetops, or in seasonal depressions filled with flowering plants, are also the same areas that often have high environmental values. That people are attracted to such places is not just a modern phenomenon; these places were often used by Native American people in prehistoric times as well. Consequently, park settings that seek to protect resource values can also be associated with increased public access and use, which can have undesirable and adverse effects to natural and cultural resources.

The Consultant Team suggests that through compatible activities, proper level of use, and protection of highly sensitive areas, parks can accommodate both people and resource protection. Park system planning should foster an integrated, multi-use approach that recognizes the multiple values of open space, active recreation, and habitat conservation. Within individual park areas, lands can be designated for appropriate levels of use, including intensive use, transitional buffer areas, and restricted use. Park design should be environmentally sensitive, avoiding development in areas with high resource values, such as endangered species habitat, high quality riparian habitat, vernal pools and wetlands, and archaeological sites. Education, interpretation, and informational signage can be used to reinforce appropriate uses.

Cliff of Great Valley Formation rocks, south of creek at Middle Campground, Cache Creek Regional Park. All of this wild land is County property. (Photo R C Roberts)