

San Recreation and Park Department Natural Areas Program Frequently Asked Questions

What are “Natural Areas?”

The City of San Francisco has a diverse array of parks and open spaces, a portion of which are Natural Areas. Of the 3,480 acres and 209 parks managed by the Recreation and Park Department in San Francisco, Natural Areas approximately 860 acres in 31 parks or portions of parks.

Natural Areas are remnants of San Francisco’s historic landscape. They contain rich and diverse plant and animal communities that differ dramatically from one another. These communities include oak woodlands, creeks, lakes, grasslands, dunes, scrub and rock outcrops. In many cases these nature preserves are the only places where wildlife such as the Red-tailed Hawk, Gray Fox, Great-horned Owl, and San Francisco garter snake still reside, reproduce and play. Some parks that contain Natural Areas include Twin Peaks, Lake Merced and Glen Canyon Park. Natural Areas do not contain manicured lawns, ornamental flower-beds, and planted forests. Most of Golden Gate Park (96 percent) is not a Natural Area.

What is the Natural Areas Program?

The Natural Areas Program (NAP) is the division of the Recreation and Park Department responsible for managing Natural Areas. The NAP began in 1997 in response to concerns raised by citizen, school and environmental groups that San Francisco’s natural heritage was being lost. The NAP is a community-based habitat restoration program whose mission is to protect and preserve our natural areas and biodiversity for future generations through stewardship and citizen involvement.

What biodiversity and why is it important to preserve these sites?

Simply stated, *biodiversity* is the variety and variability of life. Biodiversity is important because it represents the web of life in which humans exist and upon which we depend. Usually, biodiversity is measured by the number of plant and animal species in an area. Due to the unique combination of natural forces (wind, climate, soils), the Bay Area is considered a biodiversity hotspot and contains some species that exist nowhere else on earth! Some of the rare or endangered species that exist in Natural Areas include the Mission blue butterfly, the San Francisco forktail damselfly and the San Francisco wallflower.

Why preserve nature in the middle of a big city?

People of all ages find refuge in these urban oases. These areas give the city a sense of place and distinguish San Francisco from anywhere else on earth. Through the Recreation and Park Department’s School Stewardship Program, urban school children have an opportunity to experience and learn about what nature exists in their own backyard and neighborhood. The Natural Areas and School Stewardship Programs give citizens an opportunity to act locally on global environmental issues.

What's so important about saving one species when the earth already has so many?

Each species of plant and animal fills a unique role in our natural world. Just as the strands of a spider web are interconnected, so too are species in an ecosystem. While a web can still function with a few missing strands, continued disruption will eventually cause collapse. In the natural world, the loss of species compromises the integrity of the ecosystem. Habitat loss, pollution, urbanization and the spread of noxious weeds are among the causes of species extinction. The integrity of the ecosystem in San Francisco is dependent on Natural Areas and the life they support.

What does the NAP do in our parks?

The staff and volunteers work to preserve and restore Natural Areas by mitigating the impacts of urbanization, fragmentation and habitat loss. The thousands of volunteers who work with the NAP each year, restore nature in San Francisco by weeding noxious weeds, growing plants, planting food and cover plants for wildlife, controlling erosion, improving trails and educating others. In addition, the NAP staff promotes environmental awareness through trainings and free education materials, conferences and presentations.

How will habitat restoration affect the appearance of our park?

Contrary to recent media portrayals, it is not the mission of the NAP to restore San Francisco to sand dunes. Just as the gardeners tending the lawns of a ball field are not attempting to convert our entire park system to ball fields, the NAP does not restore landscaped areas to Natural Areas. Most of the restoration activities that have been performed by NAP staff and volunteers in the last five years have gone relatively unnoticed by most park users. This will continue to be the case - the existing look and feel of your local natural area will remain largely unchanged.

Why do humans need to be involved in preserving our Natural Areas, doesn't nature take care of itself?

Preservation of natural areas requires the participation of people. Throughout history, humans have moved plants and animals around the globe, out of the environments in which they evolved and into different areas. Sometimes species have been introduced intentionally, like iceplant to stabilize soils, or unintentionally like the Norwegian rat. A small proportion of the plants and animals introduced, have the capability to spread and become weeds in our natural areas. Of the thousands of plants in the nursery trade, only a handful are considered to be "invasive" weeds. These plant species are capable of spreading rapidly and displacing native plants because they are adapted to similar climatic conditions, lack predators or pests and/or have other characteristics that make them successful. Today, if left alone, our natural areas would only contain these handful of invasive weeds and the animals that rely on the diversity of native plants would go extinct. At this point in human history the balance has been tipped and natural areas cannot take care of themselves.

Just as humans are responsible for introducing these species, some believe we are obliged to act as stewards of what remains of our natural heritage. This approach is not unique to

San Francisco or to this century. The NAP, in conjunction with other land managers such as the Golden Gate National Recreation Area and the Port of San Francisco, encourages such stewardship. While human management of land has always occurred, protecting our natural heritage has not always been the objective. Indigenous people around the world and throughout time have also managed land for their specific purposes. In San Francisco, three hundred years ago, the Ohlone intentionally set fires to maintain grasslands that supported the bulbs and other food plants upon which they relied. Some of these species such as Ithuriel's spear and brodiaea still persist in our Natural Areas.

Does habitat restoration involve removing and planting trees?

Natural Areas contain over 80,000 trees, some of which are indigenous, like coast live oak, most are not. A few of these non-indigenous trees are "invasive" and threaten to expand into natural areas, many are not a threat at all. *What makes a tree a threat to a natural area?* First off, the tree must have invasive characteristics. Tasmanian blue gum (or blue gum eucalyptus) has few natural predators, rapid growth rates and shades and poisons nearby sun-loving natives by exuding their own natural herbicides. Second, the tree needs to be in a place where it can directly affect a native plant community.

So, tree removal in Natural Areas is selective. To date, the Recreation and Park Department has removed approximately 60 mature (greater than 6 inches in diameter) trees. These trees were removed to encourage the growth of our native coast live oak trees, grasslands and/or shrub communities. The NAP does not clearcut, nor does it intend to remove entire groves of trees. Typically trees are thinned

Trees, both native and non-native, are important to wildlife they provide nesting sites and hunting perches for birds. So as part of the preservation of bird habitat, for both resident and migratory bird species, the NAP will continue to plant trees and diversify and manage exotic forests.

How can I experience Natural Areas?

Natural Areas are available to be explored by all. Many San Franciscan's hike, walk, jog, fish and bird watch in Natural Areas. In rare instances, portions of natural areas that support fragile plants, animals or soils will be signed and access limited. The Recreation and Park Department encourages you to visit these naturally beautiful places.

Can we bring a dog to Natural Areas?

Dogs will be allowed in most Natural Areas. Off-leash dog recreation opportunities will exist in most natural areas, permitting dogs to run free without fencing. For more information on San Francisco's new citywide dog policy, please call the Recreation and Park Department at (415) 831-2700.

How can we help preserve and protect natural areas?

As a visitor to a Natural Area you can help preserve these precious remnants by picking up trash and dog litter, minimizing soil disturbance and digging, respecting park rules and trail restrictions, not picking or planting flowers or trees or disturbing wildlife, learning about environmental stewardship and volunteering.

How can I volunteer or get involved?

The Recreation and Park Department has numerous on-going and on-time volunteer opportunities. To get involved or receive a free brochure call (415) 753-7268.