

Natural Area Preservation
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NATURAL AREA PRESERVATION

What is Natural Area Preservation?

Natural Area Preservation (NAP) is a division of the City of Ann Arbor Field Operations. NAP was created in 1993 to care for, or steward, Ann Arbor’s natural areas. Our mission is to protect and restore Ann Arbor’s natural areas and foster an environmental ethic among its citizens. The program is funded by Ann Arbor’s voter-approved Repair and Restoration Millage.

What are natural areas?

Natural areas are undeveloped parcels of land, such as woodlands, wetlands, and prairies. The City of Ann Arbor has over 1,200 acres of natural area set aside to preserve natural features and open spaces within Ann Arbor and create a green corridor for wildlife. These parks are open to the public, and most contain trails excellent for walking, jogging, and quiet nature study.

Where are Ann Arbor’s natural areas?

Natural areas are located throughout the city. Some of these are part of developed parks that have recreational facilities. Some parks are entirely natural and thus are termed “Nature Area.” Refer to the map in the Parks and Recreation Programs and Facilities brochure (mailed to every Ann Arbor resident) visit our website <http://www.a2gov.org/> click on Parks and Recreation, then maps, or call NAP to find the city natural area nearest you. There are also natural areas in Ann Arbor owned by Ann Arbor Public Schools, Washtenaw County, and the University of Michigan. While NAP is concerned about all natural areas, we work primarily in natural areas that are part of Ann Arbor’s park system.

Why do natural areas need protection and restoration?

There are a number of threats to our natural areas. Most of these arise from the disruption of natural ecological processes. For example, fire was historically a common feature of our southeast Michigan landscape. As a result, many of our local woodland, wetland, and prairie plants are fire-adapted and these ecosystems are vitally linked to fire. As areas became more densely settled by people, fires were extinguished before they could spread, enabling non-native and fire-intolerant species to “move in.”

Many non-native species are invasive, meaning they significantly disrupt native plant communities, which in turn disrupts animal communities. Invasive, non-native plants can take over a site, turning areas of pristine woodland, wetland, or prairie into thickets of shrubs or weeds with very little species diversity. Local loss of native biological diversity is part of a larger, worldwide problem of species loss.

The mission of Natural Area Preservation is to protect and restore Ann Arbor’s natural areas and to foster an environmental ethic among its citizens.

F A C T S H E E T

NATURAL AREA PRESERVATION

It is more difficult for non-native species to take over healthy, intact natural areas, but many of our natural areas are neither healthy nor intact because of fragmentation. As the human population of southeast Michigan has increased, we have developed much of the land, preserving only small, disconnected natural areas. This isolates plant and animal communities, leaving them especially vulnerable to changes in their environment. Larger, connected natural communities tend to be more stable and better able to withstand disruptions such as the introduction of non-native species.

How does NAP fulfill its mission?

Protection and Restoration

NAP staff and volunteers work to protect natural areas with high species diversity from degradation and to restore, or repair, severely disturbed natural areas, such as those that have been taken over by non-native plants. First, inventories are conducted to determine which species inhabit a natural area and to assess the overall health of the natural area. Based upon this information, NAP develops a plan outlining the stewardship activities necessary to protect or restore the site. Then the plan is put into action. Some stewardship activities, such as prescribed ecological burning, are used to mimic absent natural processes (in this case, wildfire). Other stewardship activities, such as manually removing invasive plants, do not mimic natural processes but still favor native species diversity by limiting competition to native plants. Monitoring is an ongoing part of any stewardship plan. NAP conducts annual inventories of breeding birds, salamanders, frogs, toads and now mud puppies, to monitor the effects of our stewardship activities on natural communities. NAP also uses photo-monitoring (taking periodic photographs from set points) to document changes in our natural areas over time.

Fostering an Environmental Ethic

NAP works to foster an environmental ethic within the community through public education and participation. Community involvement is an important component of the work done at NAP. Volunteers assist in most aspects of our programs. NAP also publishes a quarterly newsletter filled with information about Ann Arbor's natural areas and issues which threaten them. We distribute fact sheets, such as this one about natural areas, and others about prescribed ecological burns, non-native species, wildlife, and volunteering. NAP staff often present displays about our natural areas at local festivals and workshops. We work with individuals, school groups, and community organizations doing hands-on restoration projects. Finally, NAP has developed 5 brochures about using native plants in landscaping, and a book, *Along the Huron*, about the natural communities along the Huron River Corridor.

How can I help?

Follow park regulations when you visit city natural areas. Dogs off leashes can damage sensitive vegetation and disturb wildlife. Biking off-trail can compact soil and cause serious erosion problems. Dumping yard waste into the parks will overload the natural system, disrupt restoration efforts, and may smother native plants. You can also help by landscaping your home with plants native to southeastern Michigan. Many non-native plants invading natural areas were originally planted in yards and gardens as ornamentals. Participate in NAP's Volunteer Stewardship Workdays where we engage in restoration activities such as erosion control, seed collecting and sowing, and removing invasive, non-native plants from city parks. Volunteer for NAP's breeding bird, salamander, or frog and toad inventory. All you need is a willingness to learn, desire to wander the parks, and keen observation skills. Join our prescribed burn crew. Burning is done in the spring and fall on weekday afternoons; training takes place in early March. Become a steward for your neighborhood park and organize your neighbors to help with restoration projects coordinated through NAP. Other volunteer projects, both long and short term, are available. Please call 734•794•6627 for more information.