City of Austin
2007 BCP Outreach Program

Balcones Canyonlands Preserve Annual Report
Fiscal Year 2006-07

City of Austin –Austin Water Utility
Wildland Conservation Division
Balcones Canyonlands Preserve Program

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The City of Austin provides outreach to the community for the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve through educational and volunteer activities which, in turn, support management of the lands directly and indirectly. Volunteers provide labor that shortens task time and expertise that enhances staff projects. During their participation, volunteers develop a richer understanding of the BCP and a personal connection to its ongoing management and success. Educational presentations to community organizations and homeowners associations, informational displays at community events and guided hikes for the public are opportunities to provide information to and field questions from citizens. It is believed that better informed recreationists, neighbors, and citizen advocates will respect property boundaries, access rules, and strategies for property management. Though many outreach activities occur on specific tracts and have been mentioned previously in this report, others are conducted offsite or preserve-wide.

Volunteer Activities

The Balcones Canyonlands Preserve (BCP) program benefitted from the efforts of 146 volunteers investing 1,737 hours in many different types of projects. Volunteer activities have many forms, with some work being relatively independent of city staff, while other work takes place in large groups led by staff.

Ecological management was one of the chief activities on the BCP throughout 2007. Volunteers assisted with the removal of invasive species such as cowbirds, with 14 volunteers contributing a total of 164 hours to manage 6 traps. One individual volunteer built two new cowbird traps, increasing the program's trapping capacity. Volunteers assisted with Black-capped vireo habitat maintenance by lopping juniper and constructing fireline. In December 2006, 12 volunteers contributed 45 hours to prepare 2,310 feet of fireline on the Bohls tract in advance of a prescribed fire.

Volunteers collected data to contribute data to research projects and track changes in resource abundance. Three volunteers were trained in how to collect live fuel moisture samples so staff could better predict the effects of any prescribed fires conducted as well as anticipate conditions when wildfire is more of a danger. This data is collected every two weeks and is posted to the Division's website. Volunteers also conducted cave cricket exit counts, surveyed for golden-cheeked warblers, surveyed Jollyville plateau salamander populations, conducted vegetation transects, and assisted with white-tailed deer surveys. Much of this data is collected without the presence of WCD staff and would not otherwise be obtained.

An Invasive Species Corps (ISC) was formed for the BCP in September as a new initiative. The ISC maps invasive species infestations, with the hope that the data can be used by BCP staff to prioritize invasive control projects and/or create a management plan. The ISC is using the data collection protocol developed by the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center's Invaders of Texas program, and the volunteers attended a day-long training in September to familiarize themselves with the Invaders protocol and learn about invasive species identification. The training was conducted by Wildflower Center and BCP staff. The ISC works both individually and in groups. The first group workday was conducted September 29, with more activities planned in FY08.

Educating the public about the BCP's mission is a high priority and much of this work is accomplished with volunteers. An interpretive kiosk was designed, built, and installed at the main entrance to the Bull Creek Preserve by a volunteer. Off site educational events that required volunteers included a plant education event in the Jester and Long Canyon neighborhoods, and helping provide information about the BCP to participants of the Cave Festival in South Austin.

Two other categories of volunteer projects include recreation management, maintenance, and monitoring. Volunteers improved approximately 1,665 feet of trail on the Reicher and Forest Ridge tracts. Goat cave preserve is visited once a week to survey for vandalism or other preserve problems.

Education Activities

Efforts to educate the community about the BCP were greatly expanded in 2007 and made use of a variety of formats. Through strategic planning efforts, staff developed educational goals that included activities on BCP properties as well as community events and better communication tools to reach a broader audience. Overall, 2,791 individuals attended activities that were specifically educational in nature and learned about the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve program. (Those attending volunteer projects also received information about the BCP program, though education was not the primary focus of those events.)

On-site Activities/Events

The Bull Creek Preserve Entry Permit program continued in 2007. Through this program up to 80 individuals can earn a permit to access trails in the Bull Creek Preserve during the golden-cheeked warbler breeding season from March 1 and July 31. Without an Entry Permit access is unauthorized and enforceable as trespassing. Earning a permit requires

citizens to read through a content-rich online course, pass a multiple-choice test and complete a guided hike. The permit they earn is valid for three seasons. In 2007, due to last minute cancellations and a lack of follow through on those that reserved space in the process, only 57 permits were issued.

The Bull Creek Preserve was also the site selected for installation of a prototype kiosk design being developed for several City-owned BCP sites. The kiosk was designed by a volunteer in collaboration with staff. The volunteer also coordinated construction and installation. The kiosk is a new direction in BCP signage that accommodates a map of the site's trails and provides space for posting of dynamic information be it seasonally blooming plants, dates of upcoming events, or important land management information. Future interpretive panels will be in both English and Spanish.

The City's BCP program was a driving force behind a new collaborative venture by all BCP managing partners. The first BCP Hike & Lecture Series was created to run during the calendar year of 2007. Each month on the 2nd Saturday an event occurred that was either a hike hosted by one of the managing partners or a lecture relevant to the BCP. Both the City and Travis County's program hosted multiple months since each has several dedicated properties and more staff resources. Community response was overwhelming, with all hikes filling up and most maintaining sizable waiting lists, and led to partners deciding to make the series an annual event. Small changes in the schedule and registration procedures were developed based on lessons learned and responses on event evaluations. The City of Austin conducted events for January and July during FY07 towards this series and guided 54 individuals on two properties. A total of 187 people attended guided hikes among partners and 103 people attended two lectures.

In order to offer regularly scheduled interpretive hikes of City-owned BCP properties, staff recruited 19 volunteers as interpretive guides and completed a 3-day training at the end of FY07. They will provide the public with information about the BCP's mission, land management activities, and Edwards plateau ecology while providing for the participants' safety. City staff created a comprehensive training manual for this project. This program will allow the BCP program to offer two guided hikes each month from September to February of every year. Citizens can choose among four hike options on three properties that vary in length and level of difficulty. As this hiking program continues to mature, additional BCP properties will be added. The first guided hike led by trained volunteers will be conducted at the beginning of FY08.

A pilot project to encourage use of native plants in landscaping was conducted in December

2006. Unexpectedly good germination rates among seeds collected for restoration resulted in a surplus of native tree seedlings in the BCP greenhouse. In order to provide space for a new cycle of collected seeds, staff developed an event whereby native plant educational materials and seedlings would be distributed. Due to the migration of non-native and invasive plants into the BCP from adjacent neighborhoods, two neighborhoods were selected for the pilot project - Long Canyon and Jester. More than 70 households were represented and more than 120 seedlings were distributed. One testimonial relayed that adequate care and deer protection resulted in the survival of 6 out of 7 seedlings.

Off-site Activities/Events

Meaningful efforts in education also occurred in the community. Several presentations using PowerPoint were given to audiences ranging from the Lake Pointe Homeowners Association Board of Directors to the entire 3rd grade of Canyon Creek Elementary. This type of presentation allows for a virtual tour of the BCP and the ability to convey a great deal of information in an engaging format. Educational efforts also included information tables at community events such as Austin's annual Cave Festival and the Violet Crown Art Festival.

Development of Outreach Tools

The web presence of the City of Austin's BCP program was greatly enhanced by complete website redesign. The program maintains a unique set of pages specific to its mission and shares other relevant pages with its sister program with the City's Wildland Conservation Division. Significant aspects of the redesign include links to maps for properties, trails and dual-managed sites with the City's Parks Department, and a photo gallery organized as a database with pre-programmed queries and educational captions. In advance of expanding guided hike opportunities, the website also includes a dynamic calendar of events and an online registration system.

In 2007, the BCP program also benefitted from the completion of a new program brochure. Replacing two out-dated and slightly redundant brochures, the new piece provides information about protected species, color photos, a table where citizens can hike in BCP-dedicated land, and contact information for other managing partners. It was and continues to be an effective communication tool to anyone wanting more information about the BCP.