

# Planners Determine Future of Oregon and Washington Fish and Wildlife

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## **Professional planners and local land use officials make decisions and recommendations daily that affect fish and wildlife habitat.**

Each time local planning staff, the city council or the county commission approves a building permit; changes code language and zoning maps; modifies a plan; or expands an urban growth boundary, the resulting changes on the landscape affect fish and wildlife habitat.

Perhaps you haven't thought about your profession that way. Consider this: Biologists agree that destruction and fragmentation of habitat are the greatest threats to biodiversity. Habitat destruction is caused by activities such as land conversion for development, road building, water development, outdoor recreation, agriculture, and resource extraction such as mining and logging. Planning decisions determine the location and extent of many of these activities.

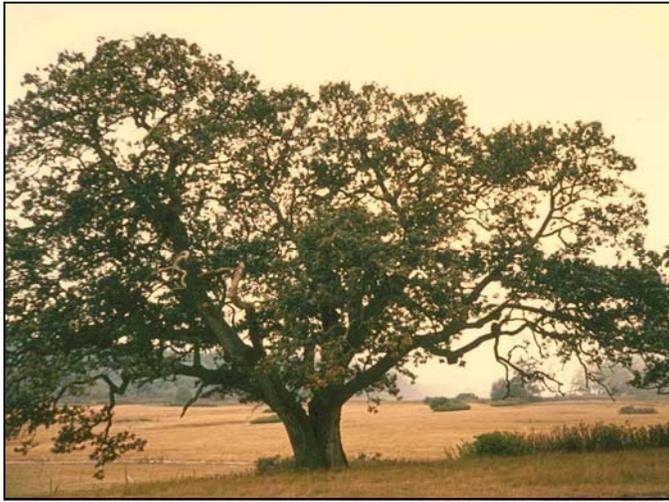
Over the past 150 years, as European Americans settled the West, people have significantly modified the landscape. On farms, in forests and in towns and cities we've cut trees, tilled earth, and built structures. As a result, we've greatly altered the natural habitat of the Pacific Northwest. In the Willamette Basin, since the 1850s we've lost 99 percent of native prairies and oak savannas. In Oregon, 96 percent of the original coastal temperate rainforests have been logged; in Washington, 75 percent. Between the 1780s and 1980s, wetlands in Oregon have declined by 38 percent and in Washington by 31 percent. And as we contemplate the future, we can expect the population to nearly double by the year 2050.

According to the Environmental Law Institute, good land use planning and zoning at the local level is critical for protecting biodiversity and minimizing habitat loss and fragmentation. Seemingly incremental decisions about how land is developed and the pattern of that development may have a greater impact on biodiversity than any other type of land use decisions. Numerous, small projects that in themselves may not contribute to significant habitat loss, degradation, or fragmentation, may cumulatively have severe consequences.

Habitat *fragmentation* is a significant threat to biological diversity wherever human activities dominate the landscape. Habitat becomes fragmented when large areas of habitat are reduced in size and separated into discrete parcels. As roads are built, houses erected, fences built and agricultural land cleared, a patchwork of habitat fragments is left behind. The fragments are often isolated from one another by a vastly changed landscape that is no longer hospitable to native species. Poorly planned land development is a prime contributor to the loss of America's natural heritage of animal and plant diversity.

In the Willamette Valley of western Oregon, an extensive research project traced the history of change to the landscape, then evaluated three alternative future scenarios that accommodated increased population with varied degrees of conservation and development. Researchers found that if citizens were willing to maintain or increase urban density, cluster rural development, increase water conservation measures, and restore river floodplains and other high priority habitat areas, they could accommodate nearly double the 1990 population without significant loss to biodiversity. Community planners are key to pursuing this future.

# What can professional planners and local officials do?



## Get to know your area

Citizens of Oregon and Washington treasure their natural systems and biodiversity. In your local planning decisions, consider habitat and biodiversity as key elements of quality of life.

Both Oregon and Washington are developing statewide strategic habitat plans. Ask your state fish and wildlife agency to keep you abreast of these plans. Support these efforts and make use of their results as the larger context in which to evaluate your local projects.

Make use of data resources to build a better understanding of the habitat values within your community. Both Oregon and Washington have established Natural Heritage programs that provide information on ecosystems and sensitive species in your jurisdiction.

Work with your local watershed council or make a date with environmentally knowledgeable citizens to explore your area and learn about its key features, sensitive habitats and treasured sites.

Develop a wildlife habitat map for your community. Identify habitat connections and links to the surrounding landscape. While it is important to manage areas for threatened and endangered species, there are endangered *systems* that have no formal protection such as native prairies and oak savannas. Locate ecosystems in your area. No funding? Recruit knowledgeable citizen volunteers to help.

Incorporate conservation and restoration of habitat into your economic development plans. Restoration is good business. Proximity to nature is among the prime reasons people and businesses move to the Pacific Northwest.

## Ask important questions. Make smart decisions

**Manage urban and rural housing development.** People love to live in the country. But low density rural residential development spreads human activities across the landscape, increasing sprawl and fragmenting habitat. Use comprehensive plans and zoning ordinances to cluster rural residences to conserve native habitat on large parcels planned for development. Use incentives to encourage developers to conserve habitat areas in rural residential designs.

**Don't build in the floodplain!** This seems like a no-brainer, but houses are sprouting mere feet from rivers and streams all over Washington and Oregon. Rivers and creeks are wild systems and need room to move in order to function normally. And then there's that pesky issue of flooding. Make every effort to keep new development out of 100-year floodplains and find opportunities to remove existing buildings and other structures.

**Take advantage of programs and funding that are already in place.** Make creative use of sources like federal transportation funding (ISTEA/TEA-21) that can be used for natural habitat and wetlands mitigation efforts on local transportation projects. A provision added in 1998 includes "transportation enhancements" like wildlife underpasses and environmental mitigation to reduce vehicle-caused wildlife deaths while maintaining habitat connectivity.



Use your open space program to strategically protect biologically important lands through easements or purchase from willing sellers. Make the opportunity to leave a natural resource legacy for your community.

Want more information? To learn more about specific Willamette Basin conservation opportunities and other Pacific Northwest conservation information, visit the new Willamette Basin Explorer Website being developed at Oregon State University's Digital Library:

<http://www.willametteexplorer.info>

Or contact us: **Willamette Restoration Initiative**

[www.oregonwri.org](http://www.oregonwri.org) (click on Willamette Basin Conservation Project)

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