

Natural Heritage Committee

April 2016

Annual Report of the Natural Heritage Committee

Committee Members: Devin Floyd, Lonnie Murray, Rochelle Garwood, Nancy Weiss, Peter Hatch, Peggy Cornett, Jeremy Glode, Manuel Lerda, Ari Daniels, Christine Putnam

Meeting Frequency: The committee met the first Tuesday of each month during 2015, for twelve meetings. A number of site visits involving various committee members were also conducted.

Summary:

The Natural Heritage Committee (NHC) is proud to report on its milestones and achievements during the calendar year of 2015. We look forward to making a presentation to the Board of Supervisors in the fall of this year.

Grant project with Green Infrastructure Center:

In August, Albemarle County applied for a green infrastructure community planning grant with the Green Infrastructure Center Inc. (GIC). The county was one of ten localities in the state to be awarded funding for technical assistance to help map, evaluate, and develop plans to conserve natural resources. The project completion date is September 2016. The NHC is serving as a resource and advisory committee to GIC, supporting and assisting with data compilation, analyses, and review as needed. A Grant Subcommittee of the NHC was formed in December to work closely with GIC.

The community planning project will identify and map many elements of the county's green infrastructure, including biological/ecological, cultural, and economic assets. Risks to these assets will be identified and assessed. Opportunities for protection, conservation, and restoration of green infrastructure will also be identified. Completing these steps will lead to strategies and projects for implementation. Completion of the project will produce data and analyses that will support many of the county's day-to-day and long range planning activities, and will be of great importance as the NHC begins developing a Biodiversity Action Plan.

Flag Layer for Project Review:

In November, a "Flag Layer" procedure was implemented as a first step in the county's project review process. The Flag Layer is a GIS dataset that combines the NHC's Important Site locations with data on environmental features that indicate higher habitat value (e.g., steep slopes, hydric soils). Once a week, an automated process compares new development projects with the Flag Layer. Any tax parcels containing proposed new projects that overlap geographically with the Flag Layer are documented, and the lead reviewer of the project in the Community Development Department is notified and advised of potential environmental issues.

Site Assessments:

The NHC conducted several site assessments during the year. These included:

- Assisted the City of Charlottesville on a “bioblitz” of the Ragged Mountain Natural Area, and identified several natural resources of significant importance during the process. The observations provide important information and the process served as a good test run for a future bioblitz of the Hedgerow property further south in the Ragged Mountains (and site of a future county park).
- Worked with Piedmont Environmental Council to help assess a potential new conservation easement property in the Batesville area. The NHC made observations about the property including specific land management suggestions (e.g., potential recreational uses for some portions) and promoting sound conservation practices (e.g., control of non-native invasive species).
- Visited a system of vernal pools under threat from both new development and VDOT construction. Worked with local developers and VDOT to develop detailed plans on portions of a project site to minimize impacts and help protect the salamanders and other species in the vernal pool system.
- Visited a new location for great rhododendron (*Rhododendron maximum*) in the county, as reported by Supervisor Liz Palmer.

Volunteer Contributions:

The NHC enlisted and organized volunteers to update important data about rare species and site occurrences in the county. Volunteers made many positive contributions, including:

- Participation in local discussions about controlling invasive species through the newly formed Blue Ridge Partnership for Regional Invasive Species Management (PRISM).
- Discovery and formal report of a new occurrence of climbing fern (*Lygodium palmatum*) in the county.
- Continued monitoring and surveying of sensitive areas in county parks, including Preddy Creek Park and Old Mills Trail.

Other Notable Achievements:

- Participated in the first ever in vitro propagation of a rare local orchid species, *Platanthera peramoena*.
- Formally recommended a proclamation honoring the work of the local naturalist Charles “Mo” Stevens. The proclamation was issued by the Board of Supervisors before Mo died in October, 2015. Much of the text of the proclamation was included in *The Daily Progress* obituary, demonstrating its importance to his friends, family, and the community at large.
- Published a very popular and informative guide book, *Piedmont Native Plants: A guide for landscapes and gardens*. The guide included significant contributions from NHC members and was based on data the Committee gathered to create the Piedmont Native Plants database. NHC support for the guide was part of the Committee’s education and outreach to the community to promote native plants and biodiversity.
- Began an initiative to update, enhance, and expand the Important Sites and Species lists.

Conclusion:

Natural Heritage Committee Goals for 2016

Re-establish an active Education Subcommittee with specific goals and mission.

Continue working with Green Infrastructure Center (GIC), largely through the Grant Subcommittee, to help complete the green infrastructure community planning grant by September.

Begin developing a Biodiversity Action Plan for Albemarle County. Use results and analyses from the GIC planning grant as appropriate. Create subcommittees or work groups and consult with other organizations and professionals as needed.

Thoroughly review and update the original list of Important Sites developed by the Biodiversity Work Group in 2004 to reflect the status of those sites and the addition of newly discovered sites. Conduct site visits to selected locations.

Formalize ecosystem assessments and biological inventories so the Committee's treatment of county level data aligns with state and national level conservation ranking and recommendation schemes. This will frame our resources within a regional context and enhance credibility of the Committee's work and recommendations.

Improve working knowledge and communication between various county entities to prevent the accidental loss of important biological sites. Provide information and materials to county staff to facilitate review of projects (e.g., list of native species for plantings). Determine methods for the Committee to review certain plans or development activities, particularly in the rural area of the county, before project approval and construction begins.

Working with other volunteers, complete the synthesis and organization of field data from the late Charles "Mo" Stevens. Visit many of the sites that Mo described.

Ensure Committee membership stays strong (minimum of 10 members) and active.

Make a presentation to the Board of Supervisors in the fall to provide updates and results of the GIC grant project, the Biodiversity Action Plan, review of Important Sites data, and other timely information.

Again, we look forward to making a presentation to the Board of Supervisors in the fall of this year.