



# Background

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## **New conservation society rallies Edmontonians to save City's largest and most complex natural area**

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*Edmonton*—The newly-incorporated North Saskatchewan River Valley Conservation Society today unveiled an ambitious plan to save Edmonton's largest remaining and most complex natural area.

Edmontonians had the foresight to see the importance of preserving our natural areas many years ago. This has been reflected in the many City of Edmonton projects and initiatives that reduce our impact on the environment. Signing this Commitment [to preserve biodiversity] positions Edmonton as a global leader in supporting the highest standards of environmental preservation and sustainability.

Mayor Stephen Mandel. "Edmonton signs historic biodiversity commitment." City of Edmonton news release, 29 August 2008.

The North Saskatchewan River Valley is the most critical component for wildlife movement and ecological processes in Edmonton. It also represents a significant biological corridor for the region connecting Edmonton to the east and west. Accordingly, it has been identified as a regional biological corridor. Overall, the ecological connectivity of the North Saskatchewan River Valley must be protected and should be restored where it has been degraded. It is important to note that the river itself represents a barrier to most wildlife movement and that connectivity is required along both sides.

*Natural Connections: Edmonton's Integrated Natural Areas Conservation Plan, page 21.*

### **The Woodbend Natural Area**

Located in Edmonton's southwest corner between Winterburn Road (215 Street) and the North Saskatchewan River, the Woodbend Natural Area covers an area of approximately 280 hectares, much of it privately owned. It includes the City of Edmonton's Significant Natural Area NW394 (known as "Sand Dunes/White Birch Woodlot") and lies within a larger eco-region of some 350 hectares that includes Big Island.

The Woodbend Natural Area is Edmonton's largest and most complex natural area, containing:

- a rich environment for numerous wildlife species, including the Capital Region's largest population of white-tailed deer, and mule deer, moose, porcupines, pocket gophers and other mammals; amphibians; and at least 20 species of birds

– more –

- a distinctive riparian complex of wetlands and springs, an important staging area for migratory birds and habitat for song birds and amphibians;
- critical fish spawning area and *refugia* in a fish biodiversity hotspot that features 27 different species and an important backwater channel in the river;
- Edmonton's only intact sand dunes, including a parabolic ("blowout") dune;
- a large white birch woodland, one of Edmonton's few birch-dominated stands;
- a dense white spruce forest, rich in mosses, on the north facing slope, and a south-facing slope containing Edmonton's only known natural occurrence of common juniper;
- habitat and many ecological features uniquely suited for scientific research and conservation; and
- ecologically vital connectivity to ravines and woodlands, Big Island, and the City of Edmonton's "Sand Dunes/White Birch Woodlot" natural area.

### **The Proposal**

The North Saskatchewan River Valley Conservation Society proposes to preserve the Woodbend Natural Area, in perpetuity, for its intrinsic value and for the purposes of public enjoyment, conservation education, and scientific research.

Because a considerable portion of the area is currently privately owned, the Society will endeavour to secure the non-public land under conservation trusts by working with existing owners, government bodies and other entities, including local and regional land trust organizations.

### **The Rationale**

To an increasing extent, urban citizens have fewer opportunities to enjoy an unmitigated wilderness experience. Edmonton is one of the few cities in the world in which such an experience is easily accessible, and has been recognized by ICLEI, the international partnership for local government sustainability. ICLEI recruited Edmonton as one of 21 international partners – and the only Canadian city – to participate in an international urban biodiversity initiative that is profiled in Edmonton's 2008 *Biodiversity Report*.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, Edmontonians risk losing one of the most important, and last remaining, large undisturbed natural areas within municipal boundaries. This same area has been proposed for gravel extraction – heavy industrial mining that would destroy the area's natural attributes beyond recovery. Though it has been proposed that the area would be reclaimed for programmable parkland when the mine is closed, the prime wildlife habitat would have been destroyed and the wetlands, fisheries and biodiversity irreparably damaged.

The Woodbend Natural Area presents a unique opportunity to preserve natural lands in the river valley that are largely unchanged since Edmonton became a gathering place for fur traders and Native Canadians. Protecting the Woodbend Natural Area would:

- represent a significant commitment by the City to its own conservation goals;
- provide an economical and accessible wilderness experience for the public's pure enjoyment of nature within the City of Edmonton; and
- preserve an environmentally significant and vulnerable area for conservation education and scientific research.

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<sup>1</sup> Other cities include Amsterdam, Barcelona, Bonn, Cape Town, Johannesburg, Nagoya, São Paulo, Zagreb and more ([www.iclei.org/lab](http://www.iclei.org/lab)).

**The Woodbend Natural Area comprises a sensitive ecological system that is unique in the City of Edmonton. The Society proposes to work with funding agencies and conservation groups to protect the Woodbend Natural Area through a land trust arrangement so that its potential for public enjoyment, conservation education and scientific research can be realized today and by future generations.**

Natural areas throughout Edmonton are threatened by intense development pressure as the City responds to rapid economic growth and corresponding population increases. Development pressure is particularly heavy in the southwest, as has been noted in *Natural Connections* and other City reports and documents. Edmonton's natural areas network and its ecological connectivity are at risk as a result of rapid urban development.

A central tenet of conservation science is "network connectivity," which recognizes that natural areas should be managed within the context of the surrounding landscape and their relation to one another. Connectivity is a measure of the extent to which plants and animals can move between natural areas or the degree to which the landscape facilitates or impedes movement among resources, promoting genetic exchange to maintain viable populations. The most important activities toward which conservation must be directed are the preservation of core areas and connectivity, both essential to maintaining biodiversity. The North Saskatchewan River valley, and in particular the southwest reaches of the river valley, were identified by the City in its 2006 *State of Natural Areas Project* report as a "primary core area" requiring special attention ("Executive Summary," page 19).

The Society's vision is entirely consistent with that of the City's *Natural Connections Strategic Plan*: "A system of conserved natural areas, ecologically and effectively managed, connecting the river valley with tableland natural areas, restored green spaces and regional natural areas, recognized and supported by the community of Edmonton as a valued asset" (*Natural Connections*, page 27).

The Society will work with the City of Edmonton, the River Valley Alliance and other stakeholders to achieve the common goal to "preserve nature at its best."

## **Definitions**

**Biodiversity:** Biodiversity, or biological diversity, refers to the variability among living organisms - within species (genetic diversity), between species (species diversity), and in ecosystems (ecosystem diversity).

**Conservation:** The wise use and stewardship of natural area systems and the processes they support from the direct or indirect impacts of urban development or harmful recreational use.

**Ecological Services:** services that humans derive from ecological functions such as photosynthesis, oxygen production, and water purification.

**Natural Area:** An area of land or water that is dominated by native vegetation and relatively undisturbed by human activity. Such areas could include grasslands, forests, wetlands, peatlands or riparian areas. Areas such as groomed parks, sports fields and schoolyards are not natural areas.

**Natural Area System:** A network of natural and/or semi-natural landscape elements that is configured and managed with the objective of maintaining or restoring ecological functions as a means to conserve biodiversity while also providing appropriate opportunities for education, research and passive recreation.

**Restoration:** the re-establishment of habitat in order to improve ecological processes or connectivity.

**Riparian:** Relating to the banks of a natural course of water.

**Uplands:** The elevated, typically forested lands beyond the lowlands that border rivers or wetlands.

### **North Saskatchewan River Valley Conservation Society**

Founded in 2008, the North Saskatchewan River Valley Conservation Society was created to protect and enhance biodiversity inherent to the North Saskatchewan River Valley and its adjoining ravines and bench lands in Edmonton.. The group seeks to foster public awareness of the unique interrelationships between wildlife, habitat, and aquatic environments, and to advocate for appropriate balance in land-use decisions involving competing demands of industry, residential development, recreation and ecological values in the North Saskatchewan River Valley.

Late in 2007, residents of the Woodbend community learned a large gravel project was proposed for the river valley in the environmentally significant Woodbend area. As concern grew, the “Community Gravel Pit Opposition Committee” was formed. This citizens’ group initiated a petition advocating a thorough environmental assessment. The petition has since been signed by approximately 7,000 Albertans.

Organizers soon concluded that the potential adverse impact of such a precedent setting land-use issue put at risk the entire North Saskatchewan River valley. Though Edmonton had been admirably served by the Edmonton Nature Club, Legacy Lands Conservation Society and others, it quickly became apparent there was no organization with the express purpose of advocating for the conservation of the river valley. Organizers incorporated the North Saskatchewan River Valley Conservation Society to intervene on behalf of Edmontonians regarding land-use policy issues concerning the river valley and tributary ravines. Membership in the Society has to date reached approximately 250 and includes members from across the Capital Region and other parts of Alberta.

The Society is actively supported in its work by a number of conservation organizations, many of which are represented on the Board of Directors. The supporting organizations are listed below:

- Alberta Wilderness Association;
- Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society;
- Edmonton Nature Club;
- Legacy Lands Conservation Society;
- Sierra Club of Canada, Prairie Region;
- Water Matters Society of Alberta; and
- Western Canada Wilderness Committee.

The Society intends to actively raise monies to support conservation initiatives in the North Saskatchewan River Valley. In this regard it will work with governments and other groups with similar interests and mandates.

**For more information, contact:**

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