

CITY OF ANN ARBOR PARKS & RECREATION

NATURAL AREA PRESERVATION STRATEGIC PLAN



Parks & Recreation
CITY OF ANN ARBOR



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OVERVIEW



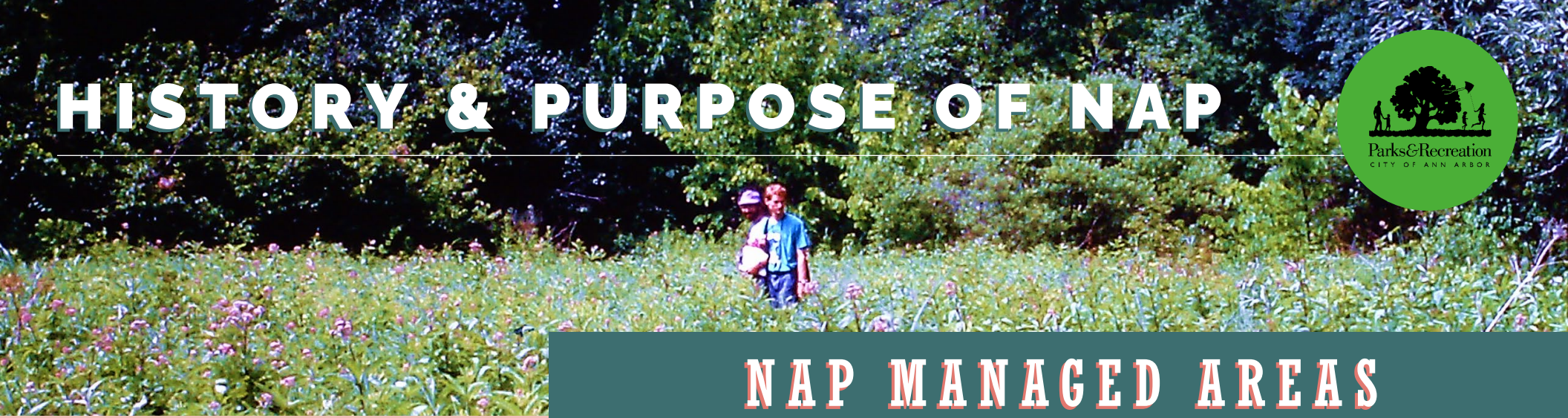
The City of Ann Arbor's Natural Area Preservation division celebrated its 30-year anniversary in 2023.

In the context of this important milestone and in recognition of the rapidly changing social and ecological world around it, NAP embarked on its first formal strategic planning effort.

The following document highlights the history and strengths of existing NAP programs and identifies a clear vision and strategic goals to guide the division as it advances across its next 30 years.



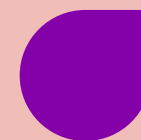
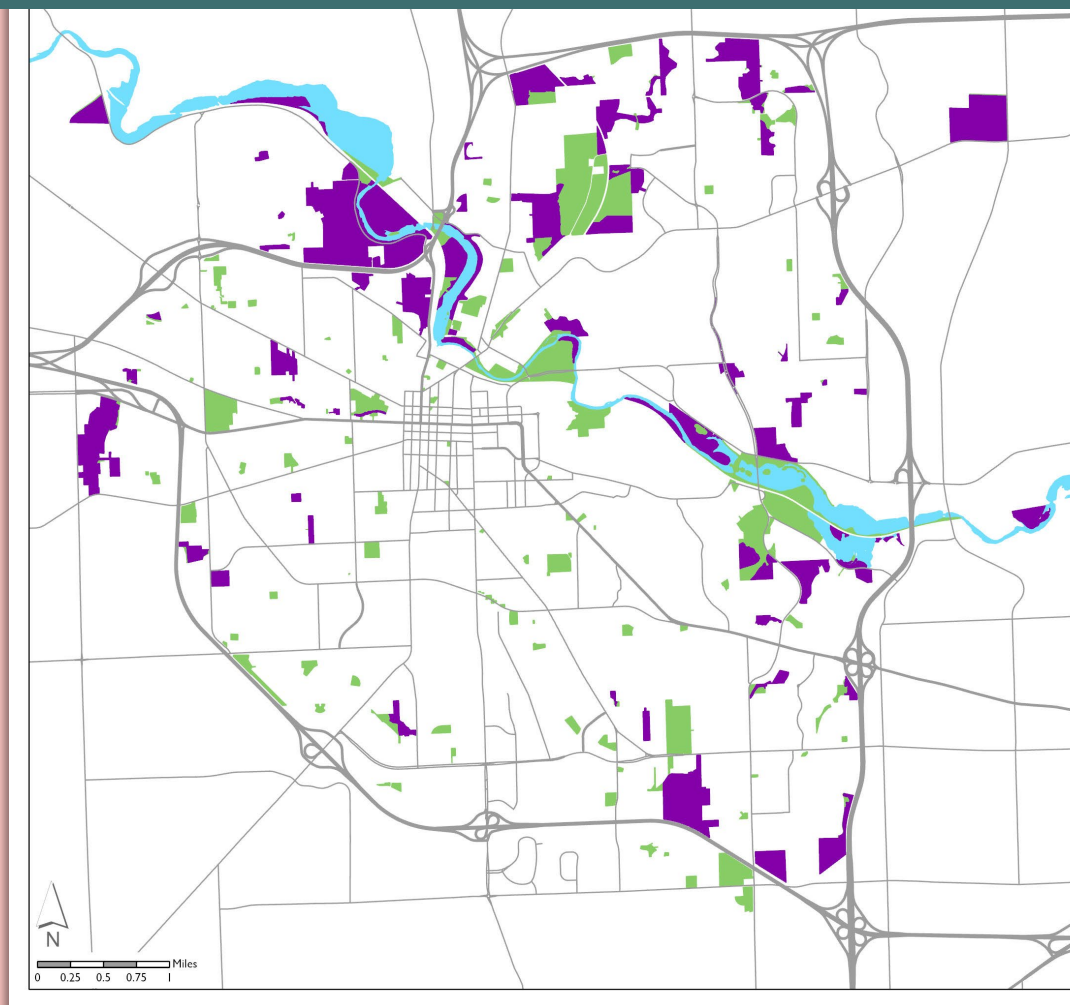
HISTORY & PURPOSE OF NAP



NAP MANAGED AREAS

FORMED IN 1993

NAP is a division of the City of Ann Arbor's Parks and Recreation Services, which oversees more than 160 parks, spanning over 2,200 acres of land. The NAP division is specifically responsible for the management and care of approximately 1,400 acres of natural areas, including woods, wetlands, prairies, and other natural communities.



Parks
Natural
Areas
managed
by NAP



Recreation
spaces
within A2
Parks

HISTORY & PURPOSE OF NAP



NAP is almost entirely funded by
the **City of Ann Arbor taxpayers.**

The voter-approved Parks Maintenance and
Capital Improvements millage provides NAP the
operating budget to enact its **MISSION**

to **PROTECT AND RESTORE ANN ARBOR'S
NATURAL AREAS**

and to **FOSTER AN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC
WITHIN THE COMMUNITY**

HISTORY & PURPOSE OF NAP



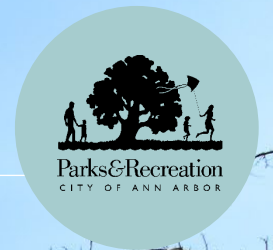
© Bob Walters



While the NAP team is **honored to lead** the stewardship of these natural resources, they recognize that their work builds upon a **long history of community-driven conservation** in Ann Arbor and an even longer history of Indigenous communities who stewarded this land long before the City of Ann Arbor was established.

NAP'S WORK is founded on the understanding **that biodiverse natural systems are resilient natural systems.** The division works to safeguard the biodiversity and ecological function of the natural communities in Ann Arbor's parks, protecting and restoring diverse plant and animal communities, in order to **promote overall resilience to current and future ecological changes that emerge locally or globally.**

STRUCTURE



NAP currently organizes its work into four key pillars



**STEWARDSHIP
AND
RESTORATION**



**ECOLOGICAL
ASSESSMENT
AND
INVENTORY**



VOLUNTEERISM



**EDUCATION
AND
ENGAGEMENT**

STEWARDSHIP AND RESTORATION



**INVASIVE
SPECIES
REMOVAL**



**SEED
COLLECTION
AND DISPERSAL**



**TRAIL
MANAGEMENT**



**CONTROLLED
BURNS**

NAP'S internal Conservation Crew and robust volunteer community work to remove invasive species in the parks, collect and seed native plants, build or maintain trails, and conduct controlled burns.

FOR MANY, this pillar of NAP's work is the most visible and tangible entry point for engaging with our mission. Both among its staff and its volunteers, NAP has built an exceptional reputation for fostering skilled, experienced conservation practitioners that have gone on from the City's park system to lead a multitude of other public and private conservation efforts.

Their collective stewardship represents NAP's continuous efforts to **safeguard and enhance the biodiversity** within the parks, as well as **maintain and improve the public's experience** of these natural communities.

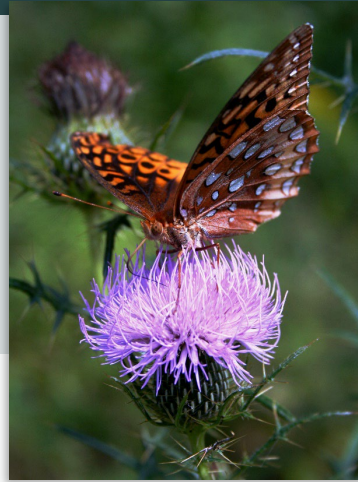
ECOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT AND INVENTORY



BREEDING BIRD SURVEY



REPTILE AND AMPHIBIAN SURVEYS



BUTTERFLY SURVEY



PHOTO MONITORING

NAP staff and volunteers inventory plant and animal species across the parks as a means of measuring biodiversity and changes in ecological conditions. NAP also runs a photo monitoring program to benchmark changes in the landscape across time.

THE TEAM identifies the highest quality natural areas from a biodiversity perspective, which helps **guide stewardship efforts**. NAP inventories animal species across the parks, including birds, turtles, salamanders, frogs, toads, and more. Many of these species are indicator species, and their presence is used to assess the ecological diversity and quality of the natural areas.

VOLUNTEERISM



INVASIVE SPECIES REMOVAL



INDEPENDENT VOLUNTEERS



INVENTORY



OFFICE AND ADMIN

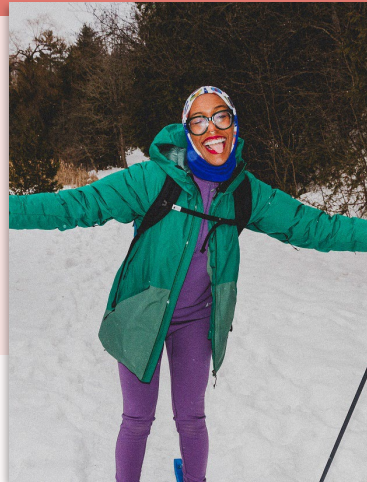
NAP achieves its mission through staff efforts combined with robust and impactful volunteer programs.

COMMUNITY MEMBERS engage in volunteer workdays, participating in activities such as clearing invasive plants or building and maintaining trails. NAP also coordinates a Park Steward program to support the ongoing stewardship needs of specific parks in collaboration with NAP staff. In addition to volunteer stewardship, community members help collect valuable data on plant and animal species and provide significant behind-the-scenes support in the NAP office.

EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT



GUIDED NATURE WALKS



GUEST SPEAKERS



KIDS NATURE CRAFTS



DEMONSTRATION BURNS

NAP offers opportunities to engage with nature in other ways—in addition to volunteer workdays and other stewardship activities—such as guided nature walks, guest speakers, nature craft programs for kids, and demonstration burns.

ALL THE WORK that NAP does, to some extent, contributes to the second half of its mission statement: to foster an environmental ethic within the community. People build appreciation and understanding of the natural world when they're engaged in its care. These activities build familiarity with the work and help to sustain and grow Ann Arbor's longstanding commitment to conservation of its natural areas.

STRATEGIC PLANNING



The strategic planning process was designed to:

- **REFLECT** on the successes and challenges of the first 30 years
- **ENGAGE** staff and community members to articulate a clear and compelling vision for the future
- **IDENTIFY** strategic priorities that will support achieving the shared vision.

STRATEGIC PLANNING



Over approximately six months, and with the external support of Bridgeport Consulting, NAP staff conducted the following:

REVIEW of relevant background information, including the City of Ann Arbor Parks and Recreation Open Space Plan 2023 – 2027 (PROS Plan)

INTERVIEWS with individual NAP leadership and City of Ann Arbor Parks and Recreation leadership

FOCUS GROUPS with ten NAP Park Stewards and ten outside experts in the field of conservation

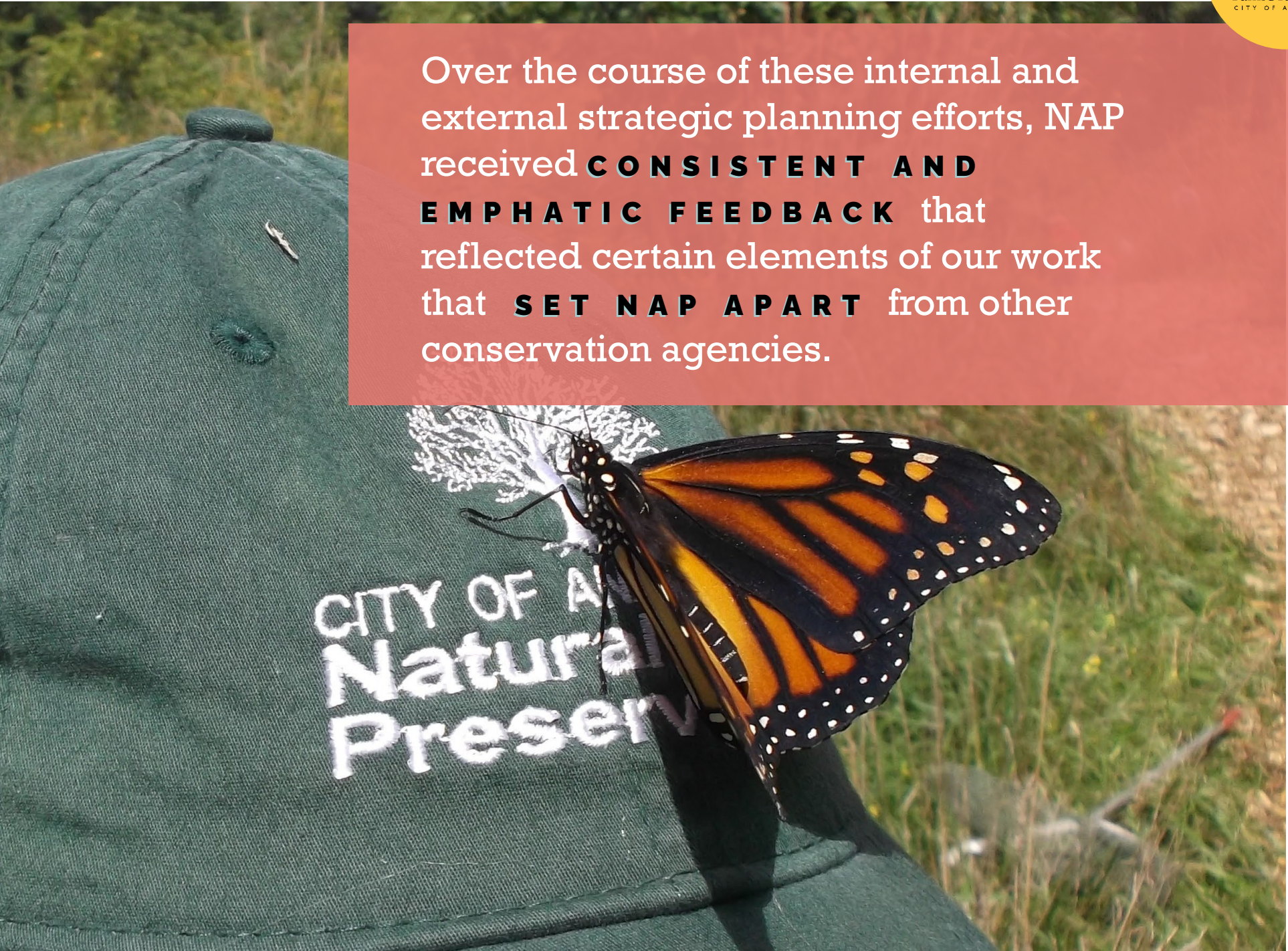
FOCUS GROUPS with all three NAP staff teams: the Conservation Crew, the Volunteer & Outreach team and Inventory team

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT through four facilitated public engagement sessions with more than thirty attendees

NAP'S DISTINCTION



Over the course of these internal and external strategic planning efforts, NAP received **CONSISTENT AND EMPHATIC FEEDBACK** that reflected certain elements of our work that **SET NAP APART** from other conservation agencies.



NAP'S DISTINCTION



Thriving

IN AN URBAN AND FRAGMENTED CONTEXT

NAP operates within a challenging landscape.

The relative fragmentation and distribution of the City's natural areas, the proximity and density of park neighbors, and concerns for noise, smoke, parking, and wayfinding all present significant challenges to NAP's programming.

Despite those obstacles, NAP has garnered a reputation for effective, safe, and considerate programming and operations. Even more, we're looked to as a successful model for leveraging community support for engaging with the natural world and for maintaining relatively high-quality ecosystems in a landscape of disturbance and change.

Hyper-Local

SPECIES KNOWLEDGE

Tracking biodiversity across the city.

Looking broadly across Michigan or even the nation, NAP's detailed inventories of our park's natural communities are an exceptionally rare effort led by municipalities. These species inventories often drive the stewardship needs within those spaces. NAP has invested considerable resources to understand and track the conditions and diversity of the natural areas that we are responsible for managing and has fostered community interest in the plant and animal communities across the park system. These insights and understandings make us better stewards and educators and help us fine-tune our management priorities across time.

NAP'S DISTINCTION



Burning

IN A CHALLENGING LANDSCAPE

Navigating the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI).

Prescribed fire is as recognizable a feature of NAP's toolkit as it is laudable. NAP has worked for decades to build community trust and support for our burn program. We train volunteers to join us on the burn line, and we thoroughly communicate our plans with the wider community. Conservation agencies that learn of NAP's burn program are impressed with our execution of the program, given our context within the WUI. Smoke and fire are not familiar sights for many, but NAP has done exemplary work cultivating confidence in our practice.

Depth & Breadth

OF VOLUNTEER OFFERINGS

Meaningful and impactful.

Across the strategic planning process, time and again, we were reminded of NAP's enviable portfolio of volunteer opportunities. For decades, NAP has created meaningful and impactful volunteer opportunities at all levels of interest and experience. We continually seek to expand mission-driven offerings that can be performed safely. Whether it is invasive species management, species inventories, backend administration, or trail maintenance, our successful harnessing of community support is well known. NAP is also known for managing exceptional volunteer volumes while providing enriching experiences for all participants, a testament to the ease of access NAP creates in its volunteer programming.



OUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Throughout the strategic planning process, staff and stakeholders were asked to consider the long-term future of NAP by imagining **what success would look like 30 years into the future**. The following ideas emerged as central themes to our collective vision...



In anticipation of **climate changes** that are likely to result in intense shifts in weather patterns, the introduction of new invasives, and the spread of new diseases, we work to support **RESILIENT URBAN NATURAL AREAS**

WE ARE CLIMATE RESILIENT

We envision natural areas across the city providing refuge not only for a diverse ecosystem of plants, animals, fungi, and other organisms but also for our diverse community of people.

Management of natural areas will evolve with a focus on biodiversity for resilience, successful climate adaptation, and benefits for our human community.



As our community continues to **grow and change** over time, we will continue to cultivate a strong and lasting **ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC**

COMMUNITY COMMITMENT ENDURES

We will build on the first thirty years of NAP, carrying forward the legacy of land stewardship that came before us.

*As one of our partners so aptly said, we will “**reinvigorate the cultural will for this work**” by expanding connections between our diverse community and our diverse ecosystems.*



We know that **NATURE DOES NOT RECOGNIZE** park boundaries, trail maps, or county lines.

WE ARE A MODEL FOR STEWARDSHIP IN AN URBAN CONTEXT

Building on a history of innovation and deep expertise, NAP strives to share our wisdom with others in the conservation field while continuously challenging ourselves to innovate and evolve over time.

We are committed to collaborating with, and learning from, others who share our vision.



STRATEGIC GOALS & OBJECTIVES

NAP's strategic plan is comprised of three distinct yet interconnected high-level goals, each with its own set of more specific objectives, that encompass the division's existing work and provide direction for our future efforts. **Prioritizing these goals will be an ongoing, evolving, and iterative practice.** All goals and objectives are dependent upon funding parameters and short-, mid-, and long-term operational priorities.

STRATEGIC GOALS & OBJECTIVES



Steward *for*

STRENGTHENED BIODIVERSITY and ECOLOGICAL RESILIENCE

- Use goal-driven management practices informed by science.
- Help pilot and shape emerging best ecological management practices.
- Seek balance in managing ecological and recreational resources.

Support *our*

COMMUNITY WELL-BEING and INCLUSION

- Improve park access, safety, and belonging.
- Promote quality park user activities and experiences.
- Deepen the community's appreciation for and understanding of the natural world.

Strive *for*

AWARENESS and LONGEVITY

- Pursue new funding opportunities.
- Nurture partnerships that advance conservation.
- Build transparency and context for the work among volunteers and staff.