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1 **ISLAND COUNTY NATURAL LANDS ELEMENT**

2 **INTRODUCTION**

3 Island County has chosen to develop a Natural Lands element to its comprehensive plan as a
4 result of the strong interest in this issue expressed by county residents. The protection or
5 conservation of natural lands is perceived as having significant economic, as well as important
6 environmental and aesthetic benefits.

7 The vision expressed by residents indicates that natural lands promote a highly desirable rural
8 character and quality of life, which is important now and for future generations. Natural lands
9 are defined in this plan in a manner which closely parallels and is consistent with the definition
10 of open space found in state statute.

11 The Natural lands element identifies and introduces discussion of several important issues, such
12 as agriculture and forest areas, open space corridors, property rights, wetland and groundwater
13 protection, retention of rural character, and wildlife habitat protection. The need for conservation
14 and protection of natural lands responds to the continued population growth of the county.

15 The Growth Management Act (GMA) identifies seven goals that directly relate to the
16 development and implementation of a Natural Lands plan element. In addition to the County-
17 wide Planning Policies found elsewhere in the comprehensive plan, this plan adds nine county
18 goals, supplemented by three overall policies which support and promote the protection and
19 conservation of natural lands.

20 Agencies of the federal government and the State of Washington own or manage significant
21 parcels of land that qualify as natural lands. In addition, Island County and its cities and special
22 purpose districts contribute to the inventory of existing natural lands. This inventory is further
23 supplemented by privately-owned lands which are held, either temporarily or permanently, as
natural lands. Privately-held agricultural lands, forest lands and open spaces are encouraged by
existing county taxation policies that offer property tax reductions for conservation efforts. New
taxation policies may expand the county's ability to protect open space through a Public Benefit
Rating System.

The development and implementation of a natural lands strategy relies heavily upon the
identification of community values. These values were actively sought through public meetings
and other means of solicitation. The expression of community values has led to the identification
of sites within the county that members of the public consider to be worthy of conservation or
protection efforts. In addition, community values have been expressed by indication of the *types*
of land features that are important to the character of the county. The public outreach that led to
the identification of these values resulted in the identification of more than one hundred parcels
of land that contain characteristics or features important to the preservation of the county's rural
character.

The key to the success of a natural lands plan is its implementation. This plan lists nine general
strategies important to the implementation of the plan, and adds more detailed discussion of
issues such as financial incentives, regulatory approaches and funding strategies. The success of

1 recent collaborative efforts in the acquisition of Greenbank Farm is cited as an example of how
2 scarce resources from several sources can be pooled to acquire an important property. Finally,
the importance of continued public involvement and education is stressed.

CHARACTER OF COUNTY

3 Whidbey and Camano Islands have historically been attractive places for people to live, work and
4 recreate due to the outstanding attributes of the natural environment: clean air and water, gently
5 rolling hillsides, beautiful wooded areas, and breathtaking scenic vistas, all surrounded by a
(usually) tranquil marine environment. The protection of these natural assets is essential to the
6 continued high quality of life of county residents. However, these assets are also important to the
quality of the experience enjoyed by visitors to this special place.

7 The balance between open space and development influences the economic condition of all
8 communities, including those of Island County. Aside from traditional ecological and aesthetic
9 effects, open space and natural lands have the potential to create jobs, provide recreational
10 opportunities, enhance property values, attract customers and revenue to local businesses,
11 increase government revenues, decrease the cost of community services, and improve the local
12 quality of life. These are positive impacts that can benefit all Island County residents. The
irreplaceable land that produces our food and provides us with scenic open space, wildlife habitat
and clean water is increasingly at risk from urban sprawl and rural subdivisions. Governments
have long recognized the need to preserve certain open space lands because these lands are
important providers of goods and services such as food, fiber, recreation, and natural hazard
mitigation; or because they possess rare aesthetic, geological or biological features.

NATURAL LANDS DEFINED

13 Natural lands include any land area whose preservation in its natural or existing state would
14 conserve or enhance natural, scenic or cultural resources; protect surface waters or groundwater
15 supplies; promote the conservation of soils, wetlands, beaches or tidal marshes; enhance the
16 value to the public of abutting or neighboring parks, forests, wildlife preserves, nature
reservations or other open spaces; enhance recreation opportunities; preserve historic sites;
17 preserve working agricultural landscapes; or preserve visual quality or scenic vistas along
transportation corridors.

18 Examples of natural lands may include, but are not limited to forests and watersheds, agricultural
19 lands, wetlands, significant wildlife habitats (including corridors important for wildlife
movement or migration), complex shoreline systems (including lagoons, saltwater tidal flats,
marshes and accretion beaches), and conservation areas or reserves which have the capacity to
support complex biological communities or ecosystems.

20 The terms 'natural lands' and 'open space' are often used interchangeably by the public. While
21 'open space' is a generic term which may be applied to any parcel of undeveloped land, 'natural
22 lands' may also include lands which may contain some development activity or are "worked"
(such as agricultural and forestry uses), but which promote values consistent with environmental
23 conservation. Definitions of different types of natural lands can and quite often overlap.

1 **VISION STATEMENT**

2 Unique or distinctive natural lands, natural lands systems, and cultural and historical landscapes,
3 features and sites should be conserved and preserved in recognition of the irreplaceable character
4 of such resources, and of their importance to the quality of life of residents of, and visitors to,
5 Island County. The conservation and preservation of these lands is also important for the legacy
6 of future generations. Provisions should be made for natural lands to meet human needs
7 throughout the county in order to protect watersheds and drinking water sources, and to enhance
8 the public's enjoyment and appreciation of the environment.

9 Protection of natural lands is sound public policy. It can be promoted as an urban-shaping
10 method, and also as a means of protecting from development those areas which have significant
11 environmental, scenic or cultural value.

12 **SPECIAL ISSUES**

13 In documenting the importance of natural lands, it must be remembered that not all lands will
14 have equal value or serve similar functions. It has been the experience of many communities that
15 different types of natural lands will benefit from varying types of conservation or protection. For
16 example, areas important for providing public access to the shoreline for active or passive
17 recreation would best be acquired by a public purchase of a fee simple interest or an easement,
18 while wildlife habitat needing protection along a stream or wetland may involve a less intrusive
19 solution such as a buffer imposed by regulation or provided by agreement. Policies reflecting the
20 values of the community will help to determine the types of sites to be protected or conserved,
21 and the level of protection desired. A brief outline of some of the issues for discussion follows.

22 Agriculture and Forestry. These land types have high visual value as they create a sense of
23 'openness.' These areas experience a higher degree of human intrusion as crops are harvested.
24 However, they are recognized as a limited (and shrinking) resource which can provide a
25 community with both environmental and economic value. Each passing year more and more
26 farmable land is being converted to nonfarm uses. Today's land use decisions can greatly affect
27 future production capabilities. For this reason, the need to preserve productive farmland
28 becomes extremely important for future generations. These land use decisions and their
29 consequences raise the question as to whether present land owners have a responsibility to future
30 generations which is equal to or greater than the responsibility to their current needs. Should
31 future generations be endowed with a resource base equivalent to that which we enjoy today?

32 Agriculture plays an integral role in the history and the economy of the county. Maintaining an
33 agricultural base involves more than merely providing for the land devoted to farming. The
34 economic infrastructure needed to support agriculture must remain viable, as well. Businesses
35 which store or transport agricultural products; or which sell or repair farm machinery; or which
36 process agricultural products; all are crucial to the continued viability of the local farm.

37 In addition to agriculture's historic and economic role, vast expanses of farm land provide scenic
38 open spaces which contribute to the overall health and welfare of residents, and which also help
39 to promote tourism.

1 As development occurs, the pressure to convert agricultural land to other, more intensive land
2 uses increases significantly. To the extent that lands devoted to agriculture contribute to the
3 sense of open space within the county, its reduction is felt in many ways. Among the changes
4 experienced are the following:

- 5 • Employment patterns shift from agricultural to non-agricultural;
- 6 • Businesses and industries which support agricultural production become more marginal;
- 7 • Land use patterns change as land devoted to agriculture is converted to other uses;
- 8 • Population densities increase as agricultural areas become more urbanized;
- 9 • Local government budgets increase as urbanized areas require higher levels of service;
- 10 • The costs paid by local residents for agricultural products increases;
- 11 • Changes in the local tax base occur as land values change.

12 These types of changes serve to illustrate the amount of displacement which can occur as
13 agricultural areas become more urbanized, and as agricultural economies change. Simply put,
14 when a farm is sold not only the farmer, but the whole community, is affected.

15 Island County's policies tend to promote the preservation of agriculture. These policies may be
16 difficult to achieve, and may serve only to delay the conversion of agricultural land to other uses.
17 However, many strategies may be employed to promote the goal of agricultural preservation.
18 Among those strategies are:

- 19 • Promote local consumption of agricultural products by encouraging 'farmer's markets' and
20 by permitting roadside stands in agricultural areas;
- 21 • Adopt 'right-to-farm' regulations which discourage the infringement of non-agricultural land
22 uses in agricultural areas;
- 23 • Implement land use policies and related strategies which promote value-added activities such
as the processing of agricultural products, and which recognize the diverse nature of land
uses necessary for agriculture to succeed;
- Work with farmers and the environmental community to resolve environmental issues which
arise through the use of fertilizers and pesticides; and
- Develop property tax policies which do not penalize farmers when land values rise.

Island County's physical isolation from the mainland provides a unique benefit for some
agricultural pursuits. The isolation, coupled with the area's climate, provides a measure of
protection that allows seed crops to develop with relatively little danger of contamination from
other activities. Companies that need such isolation to develop pure strains of seeds find the
county to be an attractive area. Thus, this unique feature means that protecting or preserving
agriculture within the county can have important benefits outside the county.

1 A portion of the county's agricultural base also comes from the cultivation and harvesting of
2 timber and other forest products. Unlike other agricultural pursuits, the harvesting of timber
3 crops are perceived to have a greater impact upon the community. Among the reasons for this
4 differing impact are the following:

- 5 • The life cycle of a timber harvest can take more than a generation, so that people come to
6 view wooded areas as a more permanent part of the local landscape;
- 7 • The harvesting of timber can create significantly more noise than the harvest of more
8 traditional crops;
- 9 • The weight of logging trucks can significantly degrade pavements;
- 10 • Wooded areas can provide significant and sometimes critical habitat for wildlife;
- 11 • Trees improve air quality by absorbing carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen in significant
12 quantities;
- 13 • The root systems of trees stabilize soils, and thus help to prevent or minimize soil erosion;
14 and
- 15 • Wooded areas can promote groundwater recharge.

16 Wetland Protection. Wetlands provide a variety of functions which are important. However,
17 wetlands vary significantly from site to site in terms of their values, functions and quality. The
18 quality of a wetland must be taken into consideration in determining its priority status for
19 conservation or protection.

20 Groundwater Protection. The geologic development of Island County has resulted in the reliance
21 on limited sources of groundwater. The physical presence of saltwater surrounding the islands
22 creates threats to groundwater quality which are not experienced in other areas. Typical
23 measures to protect groundwater include ensuring adequate recharge of rainfall and other surface
waters, and minimizing the threat of pollutants. In Island County, measures must also include
careful monitoring of the level of groundwater extraction, in order to minimize the threat of
saltwater intrusion into fresh water aquifers.

Wildlife Habitat Management. Certain locations in Island County are home to several regionally
and locally significant native plant populations. Some of these species are identified in federal
and state listings as threatened, endangered or sensitive. Some of these important species are
Blue Flag Iris (*Iris missouriensis*), Blue-Eyed Grass Widow (*Sisyrinchium bellum*), Shooting
Star (*Dodecatheon pulchellum*), Prairie Goldenrod (*Solidago spathulata*), Chocolate Lily
(*Fritillaria lanceolata*), Golden Indian Paintbrush (*Castilleja levisteca*), and White Topped Aster
(*Aster curtus*). Local habitats for these species include old growth forests, prairies, wetlands,
riparian corridors, saltwater marshes and shorelines. Many of these species are already afforded
protection through federal and state regulation, local protection strategies will also be important.

Rural Character. The conservation or protection of natural lands is an important strategy that can
help to maintain the rural character of much of Island County. While the elements that make up
"rural character" may be debated, it is generally agreed that large expanses of open spaces,

1 interspersed with forest lands and working agricultural landscapes, are important elements.
2 These rural landscapes also include “country roads” which typically don’t meet current
3 engineering standards for width of pavement or shoulders, or safe sight distances. Even if funds
4 were available to cover the high costs associated with “improving” these roads, such action
5 would result in significant and unwelcome changes to the character of the countryside. This
6 issue has relevance not only for the county’s road maintenance and improvement budget, but also
7 for those regulations that may be imposed on property owners who propose to develop land
8 within rural areas. The county may wish to evaluate the feasibility of establishing separate road
9 construction standards for rural areas.



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16 *Country roads have a special character that should be maintained.*

17 Property Rights. Any restriction on an owner’s reasonable expectations regarding the use of his
18 property can carry the risk of a claim of ‘regulatory taking.’ The concept of regulatory takings
19 has evolved in cases before state and federal courts for approximately eighty years, and is
20 perhaps best summarized by the determination of the United States Supreme Court that the
reasonable regulation of land uses falls within a community’s police powers, but that “if a
regulation goes too far, it will constitute a taking” of land.

21 The conservation of natural lands can be accomplished in many ways, from regulation through
22 land use ordinances to purchase of the property. In all cases, the preferred method of
23 conservation should include the voluntary participation of the property owner. When
conservation occurs through land use regulation, efforts must be made to ensure that the owner is
left with a reasonable use of the property.

Open Space Corridors. The protection or conservation of individual areas of wildlife habitat are not sufficient for the protection of many species. These species require areas sufficient to permit migratory patterns, access to water, and access to seasonal forage areas. The preservation of natural and man-made corridors can serve this purpose. Conversely, seemingly minor intrusions into existing corridors can have significant unforeseen impacts. Natural lands corridors also serve important functions for humans, providing walking, jogging or cycling paths, or scenic vistas.

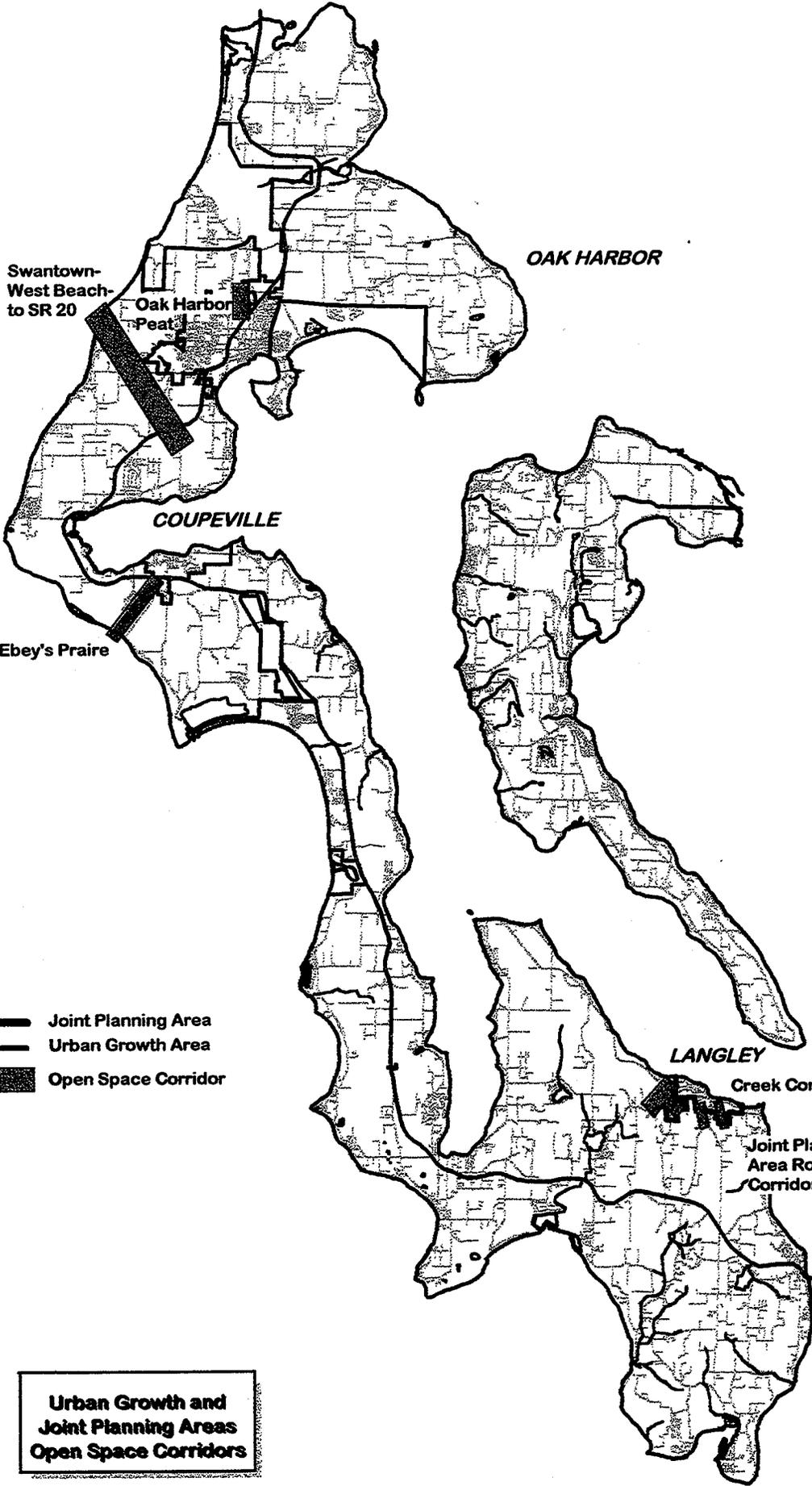
The identification of open space corridors within cities and Urban Growth Areas is of particular importance in meeting the requirements of GMA. Such corridors will include streams and their associated buffer areas, shorelines and intertidal areas, utility transmission paths, non-motorized trails, and scenic roadways. The comprehensive plans of several incorporated areas within the county have identified areas that may be important as open space corridors. These corridors may be located within city limits, or within UGAs, or within the broader Joint Planning Areas cooperatively identified between the county and the various communities. *Map 1* identifies the open space corridors for the Urban Growth Areas of the cities of Langley and Oak Harbor. The town of Coupeville does not have an Urban Growth Area.

In addition to meeting GMA requirements, the identification, protection and possible restoration of stream corridors can have significant positive impacts in adding or maintaining habitat for several salmonid species, including Coho, Chinook, Chum and Cutthroat Trout. Several streams on Whidbey and Camano Islands have been identified as having high or moderate potential for salmonid habitat, subject to appropriate restoration efforts. *Figure 1* lists streams that have been identified as suitable candidates for stream restoration efforts.

Figure 1 Streams Recommended for Restoration

LOCATION	STREAM	EST. LENGTH (MI.)	RESTORATION POTENTIAL
<i>Camano Island</i>	Chapman Creek	1.8	high
	Kristoferson Creek	2.6	moderate
	Carp Lake Creek	1.6	moderate
	Cavalero Beach Creek	1.1	moderate
	Madrona Beach Creek	1.7	moderate
<i>Whidbey Island</i>	Glendale Creek	2.4	high
	Cultus Bay Creek	1.9	high
	Maxwelton Creek	4.25	high
	Randall Point	1.1	high
	Deer Creek	1.6	high
	Swantown Creek	2.8	high
	Lone Lake Creek	4.1	high
<i>Coupeville</i>	North Bluff Creek	1.7	moderate
<i>Oak Harbor</i>	Crescent Harbor Creek	2.5	moderate

Source: State of Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife



Swantown-
West Beach-
to SR 20

Oak Harbor
Peat

OAK HARBOR

COUPEVILLE

Ebey's Praire

LANGLEY

Creek Corridors

Joint Planning
Area Roadway
Corridors

-  Joint Planning Area
-  Urban Growth Area
-  Open Space Corridor

**Urban Growth and
Joint Planning Areas
Open Space Corridors**

1 **PLAN DEVELOPMENT**

2 Island County contains significant amounts of natural lands, despite having one of the highest
3 population densities of any Washington county. Many people believe that the existence of these
4 large areas of natural lands form the greatest contribution to the county's quality of life. Natural
5 lands planning emphasizes the maintenance of these areas, and the protection of people's lives
6 and properties through responsible land management. This plan advocates the early
7 identification of important natural land areas, and the use of proven management and
8 environmental protection techniques to maintain and improve environmental quality by
9 preventing unwanted environmental consequences. This approach is both environmentally and
10 fiscally responsible, as the costs associated with remediation or correction of environmental
11 problems are always significantly higher than costs for prevention.

12 The identification of natural lands should not occur only in rural areas, for many properties in
13 urban and urbanizing areas may contain characteristics which would make them valuable to the
14 county's inventory of natural lands. While existing development patterns make it unlikely that
15 large sites of natural lands will occur in urban areas, efforts may be made to designate natural
16 lands in sizes and patterns which will maximize their benefit to the community. In addition to
17 the many other characteristics that may identify natural lands, those located in urban areas may
18 also perform the valuable function of acting as a buffer between differing land uses.

19 Continued growth in Island County is likely to increase the pressure for conversion of natural
20 lands to more urbanized uses. While recognizing that some conversion to higher intensity uses is
21 both necessary and appropriate, this plan will seek to identify those lands which are important for
22 preservation. It will also seek to identify those values held by county residents which, when
23 applied to specific parcels of land, will recognize and quantify those public priorities as
24 properties are analyzed. Finally, the plan will suggest implementation strategies intended to
25 ensure that citizen's values are put into action. Such implementation strategies are likely to
26 include incentives for voluntary participation by property owners, as well as strategies for the
27 public financing and purchase of important sites.

28 Planning for the protection of natural lands is also good public policy because it contributes to
29 the following outcomes:

- 30 • Enhancing resident's quality of life;
- 31 • Maintaining economic vitality;
- 32 • Providing recreational opportunities;
- 33 • Promoting tourism;
- 34 • Stabilizing the county's tax base;
- 35 • Increasing property values;
- 36 • Improving air and water quality; and
- 37 • Protecting groundwater supplies, wildlife habitat and other natural resources.

1 **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

2 The citizens of Island County have a long history of activism in working toward the
3 identification and protection of lands important to their quality of life. The county was an early
4 proponent of the concept of transfer of development rights, a technique which has the potential to
5 preserve important open spaces while protecting the rights of property owners. Island County
6 was also among the first to utilize an excise tax on real estate, with the proceeds used for the
7 purpose of acquiring lands for conservation. County leaders have also actively pursued the use
8 of tax benefit programs to encourage private landowners to protect natural lands.

9 In the development of this plan, county residents and interest organizations have been especially
10 active in establishing the values important to land preservation, and in identifying specific
11 properties worthy of protection.

12 In three separate public meetings held in different parts of the county, citizens indicated the high
13 priority they place on the conservation and protection of important open spaces. They discussed
14 their values in terms of the types of lands they would want to see preserved. They identified
15 specific parcels of land throughout the county that embody the attributes that they deem worthy
16 of protection. More importantly, they helped to outline the strategies that they would support in
17 pursuit of the conservation goals that they espoused. *Figure 5* summarizes the priorities
18 indicated by participants in the public meetings.

19 In addition to the public meetings held as a part of the development of this element of the plan,
20 the entire comprehensive planning process has resulted in numerous meetings and hearings
21 intended to afford significant opportunities for public discussion and debate of all of the issues
22 involved. Because the different elements of the plan are necessarily interrelated, the public
23 comments made in the drafting of each element have affected the drafting of other elements, as
24 well. Also, the Trust for Public Lands has provided the county with the results of a survey of
25 county residents where responses to questions related specifically to the importance of natural
26 lands were solicited. The results of that survey were instrumental in the decision to draft a
27 separate natural lands element for this plan.

28 Also in an effort to maximize opportunities for comment, written comments were solicited from
29 interested local, state and federal public agencies, as well as other interested groups, both public
30 and private. This outreach effort resulted in the receipt of dozens of letters offering specific
31 comments on the development of the natural lands element of the plan.

32 **GOALS**

33 The implementation strategies encouraged by this plan must be based upon a recognized set of
34 goals and policies adopted by the county. The County-wide Planning Policies related to the
35 natural lands element are found in this section of this plan. To be effective, these goals must also
36 be consistent with the requirements of state law, and must be compatible with the values of
37 county residents.

38 Goals of the Growth Management Act. A natural lands plan is not specifically required under the
39 state's Growth Management Act (GMA). However, the development of such a plan does require

1 conformity with certain goals set forth in GMA, and requires this plan to be consistent with other
2 elements of the county's comprehensive plan.

3 Under GMA, the State of Washington has identified several goals, not listed in any order of
4 priority, which may apply to this plan. The applicable goals are:

- 5 • *Reduce sprawl.* Reduce the inappropriate conversion of undeveloped land into sprawling,
6 low-density development.
- 7 • *Property rights.* Private property shall not be taken for public use without just compensation
8 having been made. The property rights of landowners shall be protected from arbitrary and
9 discriminatory actions.
- 10 • *Open space.* Encourage the retention of open space and development of recreational
11 opportunities, conserve fish and wildlife habitat, increase access to natural resource lands and
12 water, and develop parks.
- 13 • *Environment.* Protect the environment and enhance the state's high quality of life, including
14 air and water quality, and the availability of water.
- 15 • *Citizen participation and coordination.* Encourage the involvement of citizens in the
16 planning process and ensure coordination between communities and jurisdictions to reconcile
17 conflicts.
- 18 • *Historic preservation.* Identify and encourage the preservation of lands, sites, and structures,
19 that have historic or archaeological significance.
- 20 • *Shoreline management.* The goals and policies of the state's Shoreline Management Act are
21 also incorporated as a GMA goal.

22 Island County Natural Lands Goals and Policies. The goals and policies established by the
23 county are intended to build upon the foundation created by the state. These goals and policies
expand upon the state's goals by reflecting the values identified by county residents.

Goal 1 - Conservation of Natural Lands: To conserve a variety of natural lands, in both public
and private ownership, for the enjoyment and economic benefit of current and future residents of
Island County.

Goal 2 - Rural Character: To retain the county's rural quality and character.

Goal 3 - Maintenance of Ecological Functions and Values: To maintain the important
ecological functions and values of natural landscapes such as wetlands, stream corridors,
shoreline systems and forests.

Goal 4 - Historic Preservation: To protect historic or archaeological sites, structures and
landscapes which are important to local culture.

Goal 5 - Agricultural Protection: To conserve agricultural lands for the continued profitable
production of crops, timber and livestock.

1 **Goal 6 - Recreation:** To enhance recreational opportunities for county residents.

2 **Goal 7 - Protection of Community Assets:** To protect natural scenic, cultural and historic
3 resources as community assets.

4 **Goal 8 - Public Involvement:** To continue to promote active public involvement in decisions
5 concerning the conservation or protection of important natural lands.

6 **Goal 9 - Collaboration:** To continue an open dialogue between Island County, incorporated
7 jurisdictions, special purpose districts and other interested individuals and organizations working
8 toward the conservation or protection of natural lands.

9 **Policy 1. Maintaining natural land/open space is good public policy: natural land/open space
10 helps everyone.**

11 a) Open space protects our health and welfare. Green space and working
12 landscapes are essential for recharging our aquifers, preventing pollution of
13 surface and ground waters, filtering sediments, limiting air pollution, and
14 maintaining wildlife habitat and other natural systems whose benefits to our
15 health are just beginning to be understood.

16 b) Open space enhances our quality of life. People of all beliefs and means value
17 open spaces for recreation, education, and aesthetic and spiritual enrichment.

18 c) Open space preserves our heritage. When we maintain open land, we sustain
19 the magnificent forests, prairies, lakes, beaches, streams, farmland and
20 community resources that have uniquely shaped the character of our county
21 and its people.

22 d) Open space makes economic sense and is good for business. Open space, and
23 the rural character it promotes, is a major factor behind the tourism industry
and a major attraction for retirees and new businesses that want a higher
quality of life for themselves and their employees. Study after study shows
that communities with protected open space enjoy greater economic vitality
than communities that fail to provide the productive resource lands, parks, and
natural places that make possible economic activity in such industries as
agriculture, forestry, and tourism.

e) Open space helps local governments work efficiently. When agricultural land
near a city is developed, government must pay for more than the substantial
initial costs of roads, sewers, schools and other infrastructure. The long-term
demands of sprawling development on government resources can be
exceedingly costly. Preserving open space means that government services
will be better focused, tax dollars will be saved, and vital productive resources
will be conserved for the future.

1 *Policy 2. Good public policy fosters voluntary land conservation.*

- 2 a) Public incentives for conservation of private lands are essential. The vast
3 majority of the community's open land is in private ownership. While many
4 owners of natural land would like to keep their land in open space, few can
5 afford to do so by philanthropy alone. Incentives such as income and estate
6 tax benefits, technical assistance grants, matching grants, and programs to
7 purchase partial land interests can encourage private land protection without
8 public ownership or management, reducing cost to the public treasury of
9 ensuring that valuable open space resources are protected.
- 10 b) Permanent conservation is the best public investment. Public investments in
11 perpetual conservation measures are the best for the land, the landowner, and
12 the taxpayer. It rewards landowners for long-term conservation vision while
13 achieving cost-effective conservation goals. Modest expenditures for short-
14 term measures can appropriately address short-term issues; however,
15 investment in enduring conservation means that tomorrow's tax dollars can be
16 used for other public purposes, rather than to solve today's problems all over
17 again at likely higher cost.
- 18 c) Public land ownership and management must complement private
19 conservation. While privately owned open space is of critical importance,
20 some lands clearly need to be in public ownership in order for the public to
21 fully benefit from their natural and recreational resources. Publicly owned
22 beaches, wildlife preserves, and forest lands are sound long-term public
23 investments, ensuring the availability of resources for future generations and
24 complementing the conservation of privately owned lands.

25 *Policy 3. Public and private interests in land can and should be balanced.*

- 26 a) Public policies should balance open space and land development. Public
27 policies that encourage open space protection on private lands are no less
28 critical to the public good than are incentives for land development. Any
29 imbalance must be corrected through sound incentives for land conservation
30 and careful analysis of the equity and real costs, both financial and
31 environmental, of subsidizing development.
- 32 b) Public land is capital to be preserved, not squandered. Publicly owned open
33 lands and resources are valuable community assets that should never be
34 divested lightly, and then only if careful analysis shows that they contain little
35 value as public conservation or recreational land. If such lands are sold or
36 traded, the proceeds should be reinvested in conservation of land and
37 resources, either directly or through a dedicated fund that yields continuing
38 income streams devoted to land conservation. Ultimately, it is our duty to be
39 good stewards of this inherited capital so that it can benefit future generations.

- 1 c) Respect for property rights is essential to land conservation. Private property
2 owners are the backbone of the natural land preservation movement. It is they
3 who ultimately decide the use or disposition of their land.

3 **INVENTORY**

4 The ownership and extent of protection afforded to natural lands within the county is as varied as
5 the many different types of natural lands which exist. Publicly-owned lands which may qualify
6 as natural lands may be owned or managed by state or federal agencies, local governments,
7 special purpose districts, or a combination of interest groups. Most recently, lands acquired
8 through “joint venture” arrangements have protected significant sites by combining the resources
9 of both public and private entities. The success of these efforts will determine the model for
10 many future acquisitions. A general description of publicly-owned and privately-owned natural
11 lands follows.

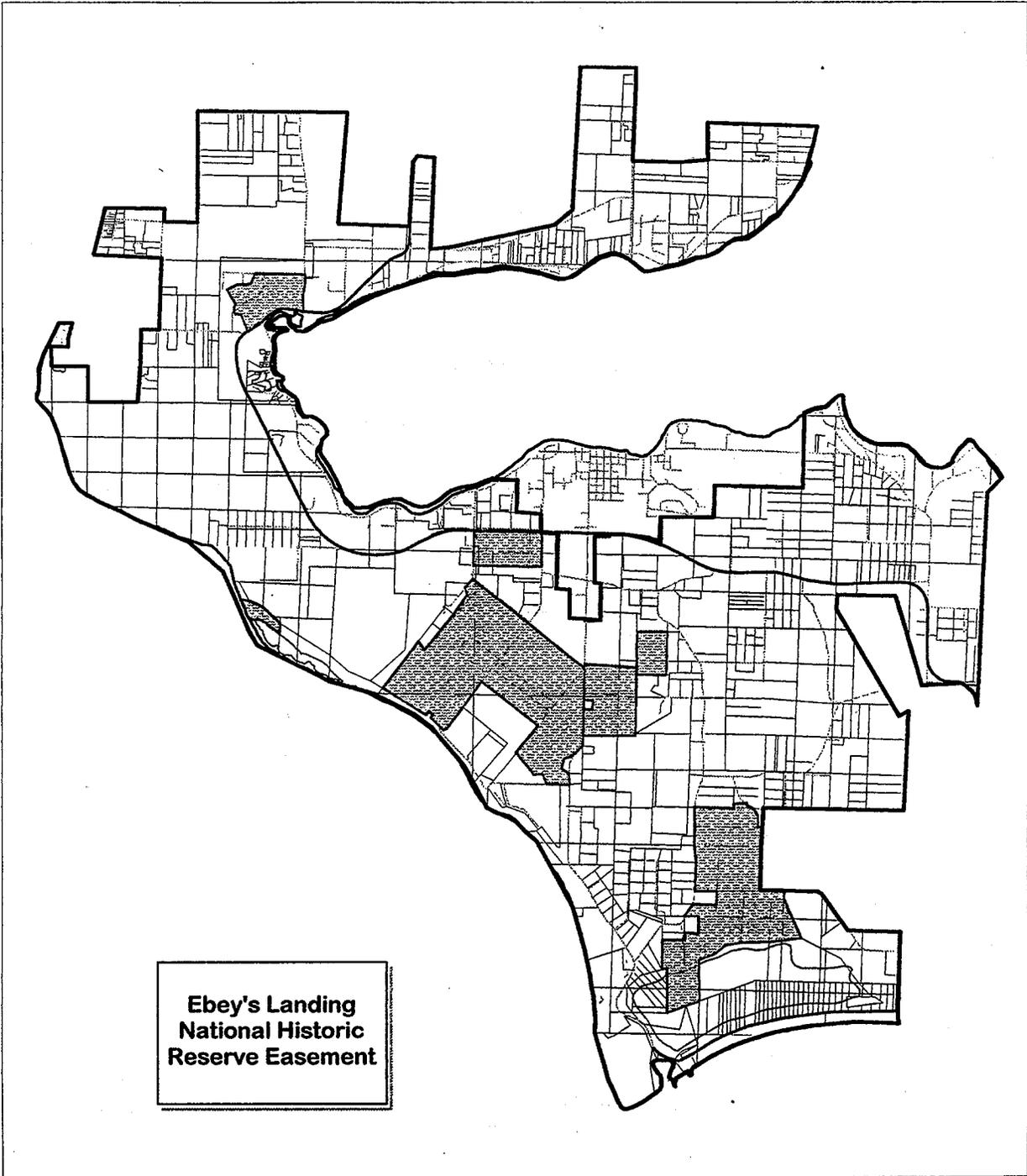
12 Federally-Owned Lands. Two units of the Federal government either own or manage significant
13 areas of land in Island County. The National Park Service has jurisdiction over Ebey’s Landing
14 National Historical Reserve, while the U.S. Navy owns four major land areas that make up the
15 Whidbey Island Naval Air Station.

16 Ebey’s Landing is managed by the National Park Service, although much of the land within the
17 reserve remains in private ownership. In the 1984 reprinting of the 1980 Ebey’s Landing
18 Comprehensive Plan, this National Historical Reserve is described as “an area of scenic beauty
19 and historic integrity.” The stated goal of the park service is “to protect the open
20 space/agricultural lands of the reserve through exchanges or donation of development rights, with
21 outright purchase as the last alternative. The National Park Service does not intend to become a
22 major land owner within the reserve.” The long-term goal of the reserve is to own a small
23 amount of land (150 to 200 acres) for interpretive facilities, and to control through the purchase



of easements or development rights a total of 2,000 to 2,500 acres of land in central Whidbey Island. To date, development rights have been purchased or conservation easements have been established for approximately 1,420 acres of land within the reserve.

21 *Historic agricultural landscapes at Ebey’s Landing are*
22 *essential to the county’s cultural heritage.*



1 The Whidbey Island Naval Air Station (NAS) is comprised of four separate land units that total
2 approximately 8,200 acres in size. The four areas are Ault Field (the main operational base
3 originally constructed in 1942); the Seaplane Base (also commissioned in 1942); Lake Hancock
4 (established in 1943); and Outlying Field, also known as OLF Coupeville (constructed in 1943).

5 The natural resources located at NAS are managed pursuant to an *Integrated Natural Resources*
6 *Management Plan*, drafted in November, 1996. This plan is a component of a cooperative
7 agreement between the NAS, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Washington
8 Department of Fish and Wildlife. The plan identifies the various types of natural lands that occur
9 at NAS, such as forests, wetlands, agricultural lands, wildlife habitat, shorelines, complex
10 freshwater and saltwater ecosystems, and many types of recreational areas. The NAS areas
11 include more than 1,000 acres of leased agricultural lands, more than 1,800 acres of forest lands,
12 and more than 11 miles of shorelines.

13 Within the past twenty years, the federal government has placed increasing emphasis on
14 environmental stewardship. In an effort to promote this emphasis, many branches of the
15 government actively seek ways to recognize such activities. NAS Whidbey Island has become
16 recognized as a leader in environmental stewardship, regularly receiving awards for activities
17 such as maintaining environmental quality, conserving natural resources and preventing
18 pollution. In recent years, awards have come from the Chief of Naval Operations, the Secretary
19 of the Navy, the Secretary of Defense, and the White House.

20 Ault Field totals approximately 4,250 acres in size. It is the most highly developed of the four
21 NAS properties, featuring the main airfield, administrative and industrial buildings, a hospital, a
22 variety of housing units, and several recreational areas.

23 The Seaplane Base encompasses approximately 2,820 acres. About twenty percent (± 600 acres)
of this land area is developed, primarily with family housing. The remainder of the site is in
forest, wetlands, grasslands, and beaches, some of which is used as required open space to buffer
military uses. The base includes 10.1 miles of shoreline on Crescent Harbor and Oak Harbor.

Lake Hancock totals approximately 420 acres in size. This area was originally developed as a practice target range, but this use was discontinued in the early 1970's. Because of the potential presence of unexploded ordinance which may exist at the site, access to the area is prohibited. Lake Hancock was listed on the Washington Register of



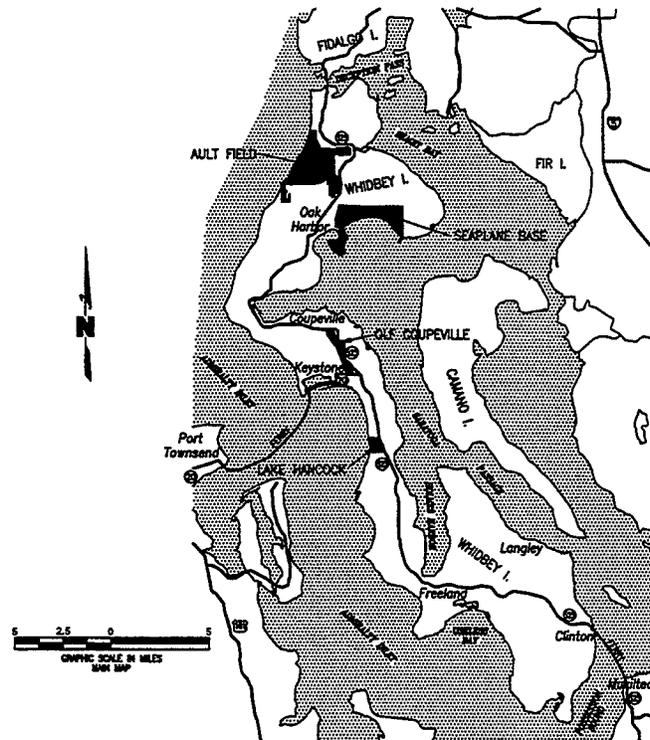
Lake Hancock, overlooking Admiralty Inlet, provides important habitat for wildlife.

Natural Areas in 1992, because the area consists primarily of a high-quality salt marsh and a complex coastal lagoon ecosystem. The area is visible from a small view vista and interpretive area located on SR 525.

Figure 2 High Quality Wetland Ecosystems Occurring at Lake Hancock

Wetland Type	Size (acres)	Dominant Plant Species	Ecological Condition	State Priority for Protection
High Salinity Lagoon	191	primarily unvegetated, except for marsh vegetation	good	high
Sandy, low marsh	80.4	pickleweed, seashore saltgrass, jaumea, seaside arrowgrass, orache, Canada sandspurry, sea plantain, saltmarsh dodder	very good	moderate
Silty, low marsh	30.1	seaside arrowgrass, pickleweed, seashore saltgrass, orache, sea plantain, jaumes, alkaligrass	very good	moderate
Transition zone wetland	4.7	cattail, Pacific silverweed	good	very high
Low elevation freshwater wetland	9.0	red alder, lodgepole pine, Sitka spruce, western hemlock, sweet gale, slough sedge	good	high

Source: Washington Dept. of Natural Resources, 1995



Immediately to the south of the town of Coupeville is Outlying Field (OLF Coupeville), a 677-acre site that is used primarily for practicing simulated aircraft carrier landings. The site is developed with a 5,400-foot runway with associated improvements. The majority of the site is undeveloped, with nearly 500 acres devoted to agricultural use under lease agreements with the NAS. Outlying Field abuts Rhododendron State Park and Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve.

The open spaces, natural areas and recreational facilities located at the NAS are generally not open to the public. However, the public may be permitted use of these facilities on a case-by-case basis, subject to the restrictions necessitated by the mission of the NAS and the permission of the commanding officer.

State-Owned Lands. The State of Washington owns and manages eight state parks in Island County, ranging in size from 112 acres at Joseph Whidbey State Park to Deception Pass State Park's 1,248 acres. A full listing of these

1 parks is shown in *Figure 4*. While those developed portions of state parks such as boat ramps
2 and active recreation areas may not typically be considered natural lands, they often provide
3 important links which promote the public's access to open spaces. In total, more than 3,900
4 acres of state park land provide shoreline access, camping, hiking trails, scenic vistas, picnic
5 facilities and boat ramps. In addition, these parks preserve two historic forts and a stand of old-
6 growth forest. These lands are managed by the state's Parks and Recreation Commission.

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In addition to parks, the state manages fishing areas and shellfish harvest areas through the
Department of Fish and Wildlife, and forest lands through the Department of Natural Resources.
These parcels range from just 0.2 acres to provide a boat ramp for lake access, to several hundred
acres of actively managed forest land.

Figure 4 State Owned Natural Lands

OWNER	PROPERTY NAME	SIZE	DESCRIPTION
<i>Parks and Recreation Commission</i>	Camano Island State Park	134.5 ac.	shoreline access, picnic units, boat launches & camp units
	Deception Pass State Park (including Hoypus Hill)	1,928 ac.	shoreline access, camping, hiking, picnic, moorage, and day use facilities
	Dugualla Bay State Park	586 ac.	shoreline access & scenic vistas
	Joseph Whidbey State Park	112 ac.	scenic vistas (limited facilities)
	Cama Beach State Park	440 ac.	shoreline access, day use facilities, cabins, wetlands, Cranberry Lake, and a coniferous forest
	Fort Casey State Park	411.5 ac.	shoreline access, boat launch, view points, camping facilities & historic fort
	Fort Ebey State Park	644 ac.	camping & picnic units, historic fort, and scenic vistas
	Fort Whidbey State Park	347 ac.	shoreline access, hiking, camping, picnic units & old growth forest
<i>Department of Fish & Wildlife</i>	Monroe Landing	0.25 ac.	shoreline access & boat ramp operated as a county park under use agreement
	Deer Lake Fishing Area	0.2 ac.	lake access, boat ramp, dock & picnic area
	Lone Lake Fishing Area	5 ac.	lake access, boat ramp & picnic area
	Goss Lake Fishing Area	0.6 ac.	lake access, boat ramp & picnic area
	State Game Farm		
	shellfish harvest areas	4.85 mi.	tidelands (some areas only accessible by boat)
<i>Department of Natural Resources</i>	Hoypus Hill	680 ac.	forest land
	Several large areas of forest lands in school trust accounts including Lone Lake, Camano Annex, and Elger Bay)		forest lands
	Rhododendron Park	153 ac.	forest lands

Lands Owned by Local Governments. Local governments and special purpose districts own and manage various sites for a variety of purposes. Island County, the cities of Oak Harbor, Coupeville and Langley, and several port, school, and parks and recreation districts each own or manage lands that have value for active or passive recreation, open space, or natural lands. A summary of these properties is shown in *Figure 5*.

Figure 5 Locally Owned Natural Lands

OWNER	PROPERTY NAME	SIZE (acre)	DESCRIPTION
Island County	Ala Spit	12	undeveloped beach and tidelands; camping for the Cascadia Marine Trail
	Ethel Taylor Property	33.0	wetlands; undeveloped
	Moran's Beach County Park	0.5	shoreline access
	West Beach Vista		
	Maple Grove	1.0	shoreline access
	Hastie Lake	0.75	shoreline access & boat ramp
	Utsalady Vista	1.0	picnic area & view point
	Utsalady #2	0.50	shoreline access & boat ramp
	Livingston Bay	0.75	shoreline access
	Camano Park	6.0	multi-purpose center, ball field, tennis court, picnic area & playground
	Cavalero Beach	0.5	shoreline access, boat ramp & picnic area
	Ivy Way Trail head		
	English Boom	6.8	shoreline access, scenic vistas, wetlands
	Walter G. Hutchinson Park	5.0	nature trails & picnic area
	Scenic Heights	0.75	picnic area
	Rhododendron Park	32.0	ball fields, picnic area & playground
	Penn Cove Park		
	Telaker Shores	0.74	shoreline access & picnic area
	Libbey Beach Park	1.5	shoreline access & picnic units
	Kettles Park		(undeveloped)
	Ledgewood Beach	0.5	shoreline access
	Lagoon Point #1	<1	shoreline access to DNR owned tidelands
	Lagoon Point #2	<1	shoreline access to DNR owned tidelands
	Dave Mackie Park (Maxwelton)	5.0	shoreline access, boat ramp, ballfield & grandstand, concession stand, picnic area
	Dan Porter Park (Clinton)	8.5	nature trails, playground, ballfield, tennis court & picnic shelter
	Hurt Property	30.0	forest land
	Double Bluff Beach Access		shoreline access to state owned tidelands, picnic area, interpretive kiosk, vistas
	Mutiny Bay	0.33	shoreline access, boat ramp, wetlands
Freeland Park	15.5	shoreline access, boat ramp, playground, picnic area, community hall	
Baby Island Heights #1	2.0	closed due to hazards	
Baby Island Heights #2	3.0	tidelands (inaccessible by land)	
Island County Fairgrounds	13.0	fairground and camping	
Still Acres County Park	unknown		

LOCALLY OWNED NATURAL LANDS (CONTINUED)			
OWNER	PROPERTY NAME	SIZE (acre)	DESCRIPTION
City of Oak Harbor	City Beach Park	28.5	recreational facilities, 2,100 feet of shoreline access & boat ramp
	Neil Park	3.5	tot lot & Holland Gardens
	Summer Park	4.0	tennis courts and picnic site
	Flintstone Park	1.5	shoreline access, pier, picnic units & float
	Tyhuis park	0.75	tot lot and well site
	Koetje Park	0.75	ball field, tot lot & well site
	Kimball Park	0.75	tot lot and well site
	Hal Ramaley Memorial Park	0.5	passive recreation site
	Well Site #11	1.5	tot lot and picnic site
	Well Site #12	0.8	tot lot and picnic site
	Shadow Glen Subdivision	0.75	tot lot, picnic site & ball field
	Oak Harbor Marina	8.0	420 boat facility & shoreline access
Civic Center	14.0	ball field & pool	
Town of Coupeville	Town Playground	0.5	recreational facilities
	Town Park	3.8	shoreline access, woods, trail, recreational facilities including picnic & playground
	Alexander Blockhouse	0.1	historic site
	Captain Thomas Coupe Park	0.8	shoreline access, boat ramp, dock, picnic site
	Triangle Park	0.11	park benches
Port of Coupeville	Coupeville Wharf	<1	shoreline access, public pier & float with moorage slips
City of Langley	Sunrise Beach	0.2	shoreline access
	Seawall/Totem Park	1.0	shoreline access & picnic area
	Phil Simon Memorial Park	0.21	shoreline access & picnic area
	Langley Small Boat Harbor	0.11	shoreline access & picnic area
	South Whidbey Island Community Center Park	43.0	community center, picnic shelter, ball fields, amphitheater & trails
Port of South Whidbey	Possession Beach Waterfront Park	11.0	shoreline access, boat ramp, nature trails & picnic area
	Clinton Recreational Pier	0.5	shoreline access & community pier w/ float
Port of Coupeville, Island County and The Nature Conservancy	Greenbank Farms	507	agricultural land; future uses to be determined

Privately-Owned Lands. Several hundred acres of land benefit from some form of protection as natural lands, while remaining in private ownership. Many of these parcels take advantage of tax benefit programs offered by the county. These programs encourage the conservation of important farms, forest lands and other open spaces by offering reductions in real estate property

1 taxes to property owners in exchange for land use restrictions. However, because these
2 arrangements are not permanent, these lands may be subject to conversion to more intensive uses
over time.

3 Since 1984, the county has offered a 'transfer of development rights' (TDR) program intended to
4 preserve open space in rural areas by permitting increased development densities in more
urbanized areas. This program is regarded as having only limited success, and is currently
inactive.

5 Other parcels of land, such as golf courses or open spaces required as a condition of approval for
development, provide open space with limited public access.

6 **ANALYSIS**

7 Levels of Service. Many elements of a comprehensive plan may establish levels of service
8 (LOS) to quantify the goals of a jurisdiction in meeting the needs or desires of its citizens. In one
9 plan element, transportation, the establishment of an LOS is mandated by the Growth
10 Management Act. In many elements, planners may compare standards established in different
jurisdictions as a rough measure of their compatibility with the needs identified within their own
area. The Parks and Recreation element of this plan contains LOS standards which reflect this
level of analysis.

11 In the case of an open space or natural lands plan, the widely divergent types of lands, land
12 features and community values make LOS standards difficult to quantify, and even more difficult
to compare across jurisdictions. Therefore, this plan does not attempt to measure or establish
Level of Service standards in any natural lands category, or in any area of Island County.

13 Community Values. With the exception of certain tracts designated as critical areas, the decision
14 to preserve tracts of natural lands is not mandated by GMA or any other state or federal
15 regulation. Rather, the decision lies with the determination of the citizens of Island County to
preserve their quality of life by identifying and protecting those natural elements of the landscape
which contribute to the scenic and open character of the community.

16 During the three public meetings that were held to discuss the natural lands plan, citizens were
17 asked in a written survey to identify and prioritize those values. The survey asked the following
two questions related to the natural lands plan:

18 1. *In order of importance, how would you rank the following classification of lands for
preservation within Island County? (1 being the highest and 9 being the lowest)*

- 19 • Watersheds necessary to protect drinking water sources and supply
- 20 • Productive agricultural and forest lands
- 21 • Significant undisturbed natural communities and ecosystems
- 22 • Critical wildlife habitats
- 23 • Wetlands which serve a variety of ecological functions including stormwater retention

- 1 • Environmental conservation areas to protect biological communities such as eagle
2 nests and heron rookeries
- 3 • Riparian ecosystems such as stream and river bank corridors, which are important
4 plant communities and wildlife areas
- 5 • Natural shoreline systems such as lagoons, saltwater tidal flats, marshes and accretion
6 beaches that serve a diversity of ecological functions
- 7 • Beach access for public use

8 2. *Identify candidate sites you think are important for protection and conservation and
9 provide a brief description of why these sites are important.*

10 In question 1, respondents described their values in prioritizing the types of sites to be considered
11 for protection. Question 2 elicited responses related to the identification of specific sites which
12 embodied the values expressed. The results of this survey, which are summarized in *Figure 6*,
13 appear to be contradictory in some respects. For example, the classification of *beach access for
14 public use* ranked at the bottom overall, but ranked first among respondents who identified their
15 residence as South Whidbey Island. Also, the classification of *productive agricultural and forest
16 lands* ranked eighth of nine overall, but many respondents identified forest or agricultural
17 properties as important candidate sites for protection in question two. Overall, however,
18 respondents were consistent in expressing their opinions that the protection or conservation of
19 natural lands is a high priority for county residents.

20 The methodology used in calculating the results of the survey involved tabulating the numerical
21 value (1 - 9) assigned by the respondents, totaling the numerical value for each response, and
22 dividing that number by the number of respondents to each question. If a respondent left an item
23 blank, then that response was not included in the total. The resulting number is the *average
response* to the given question. Because the numerical value of 1 indicated the most positive
response (and correspondingly 9 being the lowest possible response), the lower average number
indicates the most positive response, or the highest priority. The rank is thus calculated by
determining the lowest average response. Both *average response* and *rank* were determined in
each of four geographic regions of the county, and also overall for the entire county. Because the
sample used in the survey is not random, and reflected responses only from individuals who
attended specific public meetings, these survey results may not be deemed scientific. However,
the responses clearly indicate the sentiments of those members of the public who attended the
meetings.

Figure 6 Summary of Responses to Survey

The categories were listed with this question: "In order of importance, how would you rank the following classifications of lands for preservation within Island County?"

CLASSIFICATION	NORTH WHIDBEY AVG/RANK	CENTRAL WHIDBEY AVG/RANK	SOUTH WHIDBEY AVG/RANK	CAMANO AVG/RANK	ISLAND COUNTY TOTALS AVG/RANK
Watersheds necessary to protect drinking water sources and supply	5.11/6	1.57/1	2.56/4	2.67/1	2.85/1
Productive agricultural and forest lands	4.89/5	3.00/3	3.33/9	5.88/8	4.77/8
Significant undisturbed natural communities and ecosystems	3.78/4	2.60/2	2.44/3	2.98/2	2.99/2
Critical wildlife habitats	3.44/3	5.33/6	2.33/1	3.60/5	3.57/4
Wetlands which serve a variety of ecological functions including storm water retention	2.70/1	3.29/4	2.78/5	3.96/6	3.58/5
Environmental conservation areas to protect biological communities such as eagle nests and heron rookeries	5.75/8	6.00/9	2.89/6	3.48/3	3.84/6
Riparian ecosystems such as stream and river bank corridors, which are important plant communities and wildlife areas	5.43/7	5.67/8	3.22/7	4.43/7	4.48/7
Natural shoreline systems such as lagoons, saltwater tidal flats, marshes and accretion beaches that serve a diversity of ecological functions	3.33/2	4.17/5	3.22/7	3.51/4	3.51/3
Beach access for public use*	*	5.50/7	2.33/1	6.60/9	5.92/9

* NOTE: This question was not asked in the survey distributed in North Whidbey Island

Source: Island County Survey, January, 1998

Candidate Sites for Conservation and Protection. In addition to providing an inventory of properties which are protected as natural lands by various methods, a key element of this plan is the identification of additional natural features and sites that may be appropriate candidates for future conservation or protection efforts. The methodology used to identify these potential sites included analysis of the survey responses indicated above, as well as information gained from contacts with local, state and federal agencies and interest groups with knowledge of the biology, geology, geography and history of the county.

Survey respondents, agency contacts, and members of the public who were contacted or who participated in the regional open houses were asked to identify specific sites, feature, or areas that they believed to be important to the community. In many cases areas were identified that are currently owned by a governmental agency. This collective input is represented in both a tabular and map format in the Technical Appendix of the Comprehensive Plan. No attempts were made to field validate these public comments nor should the information be construed in any regulatory context. A evaluation of these areas for consistency with the priorities and goals of the Natural Lands Plan, is deferred until and is intended to be associated with an implementing program of this plan.

1 **IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES**

2 Implementation is the key to the conservation of natural lands. Possible strategies that Island
3 County may utilize to implement the goals and policies identified in this plan are numerous and
4 varied. They range from regulatory approaches (which can be the least intrusive approach) to
5 public acquisition of properties. A variety of strategies is needed because differing
6 circumstances and attributes of specific parcels of land may require different approaches to
7 conserve or protect unique features of the land. Each of the strategies identified herein may be
8 appropriate for use in specific circumstances. In some instances, depending on the nature of the
9 property or the circumstances of its ownership, it may be appropriate to use more than one
10 strategy. In all of the implementation strategies possible for use, the voluntary participation of
11 the property owner should remain a priority.

12 There are several overall strategies to the implementation of this plan that can help to focus the
13 attention of the county and the public. They are:

- 14 • Develop and implement property tax reduction incentives for property owners to conserve
15 open space.
- 16 • Maintain existing current use taxation programs for forest and agricultural lands.
- 17 • Design and implement education programs to promote the benefits of conserving natural
18 lands, and to introduce available and proposed current use taxation programs.
- 19 • Develop land use regulations and strategies such as cluster development and wetlands buffer
20 requirements to identify and preserve important natural lands areas located on sites proposed
21 for development.
- 22 • Discourage the conversion of properties identified as having prime farmland soils to non-
23 agricultural uses. All possible strategies to protect agricultural uses and to maintain the
economic viability and sustainability of existing farms should be explored and, where
feasible, implemented.
- Develop objective criteria to prioritize public expenditures for the acquisition of fee simple or
other interests in natural lands.
- Establish and maintain partnerships with state and federal agencies, cities, private non-profit
conservation groups, port districts, school districts, tribes, foundations, corporations and
individuals for the purpose of acquiring or protecting natural lands.
- Identify funding sources for the acquisition or protection of natural lands.
- Ensure that the designation of natural lands does not infringe on individual property rights.

24 The general strategies identified above may be classified into general approaches, which are
25 described in greater detail below.

26 Financial incentives. The use of financial incentives for the conservation of natural lands can
27 take many forms. Some of these forms are described as follows:

- 1 • **Tax Benefit Programs:** State law permits counties to offer reductions in property taxes as an
2 incentive in exchange for agreements to conserve or protect farm lands, forest lands, or open
3 space. Island County has offered these incentives for many years, and the County Assessor's
4 office has developed a record of success in implementing these programs. Since the
inception of these programs in 1983, approximately 30,000 acres of land annually in Island
County have received some tax benefit. In 1996, the total value of that benefit to land owners
was nearly \$8.6 million.

5 Existing programs offered by the county provide property tax reductions for agriculture,
6 forestry, or open space. These programs take an "all or nothing" approach to open space
7 protection. If the applicant is deemed qualified under the program, he or she receives a full
8 reduction of property taxes. More recently, many counties have adopted a *Public Benefit*
9 *Rating System* (PBRs) as a more fine-tuned approach to property tax reductions for open
10 space preservation. While property owners currently in the agriculture or forestry programs
11 cannot qualify for additional tax reductions through a PBRs, farmers or foresters who may
12 not qualify under existing programs may qualify under a PBRs program. In a PBRs, an
13 applicant's property is evaluated in accordance to guidelines established by the county,
14 utilizing a rating system that reflects the values of county citizens. Thus, natural lands
15 characteristics which have been identified as priorities for protection by the county would
16 achieve a higher score during the evaluation, and would thus receive a higher percentage of
17 property tax reduction than a property with lower priority characteristics.



18 *Tax benefit programs can help to preserve farmlands*

19 The advantage to tax benefit programs is that they do not require the appropriation of new
20 funds by the county to protect unique or desirable natural lands. In addition, the PBRs
21 approach permits the county to focus on the protection of their identified priorities, without
22 providing a larger benefit than needed to a less important property. However, some view the
23 'tax shift' which occurs with these programs as a disadvantage. When a property is granted a
tax reduction, the value of that reduction is spread among all other properties within the
county. Thus, before the adoption of such a program (and also at regular intervals during its

1 implementation) an analysis of the extent of any tax shift which may occur should be
2 undertaken.

3 Perhaps the most important benefit to a PBRS program is that it would reflect the values and
4 priorities established by county residents. The use of locally-established values and priorities
5 suggests the high likelihood of public acceptance of the program. In a system where other
6 taxpayers are asked to share the burden of the resulting 'tax shift,' broad public acceptance
7 can be a significant element. (See Appendix A for details on the tax shifting consequences of
8 similar programs.)

- 9 • **Purchase or donation of easements or other rights:** In some cases, a valuable portion or
10 characteristic of a site can be protected without limiting the use or development of the
11 remainder of the parcel. In these instances, the purchase or acquisition of an easement, a
12 conservation restriction or a development right may provide the full level of protection
13 needed or desired by the public. Because the conveyance of an easement or any other interest
14 in a parcel of land will affect the value of the property, the property owner is likely to also
15 experience a reduction in property taxes. Also, the conveyance of an interest in land by
16 donation may result in an income tax deduction for the property owner.

17 The advantage to this approach is that only a portion of the value of a property is acquired,
18 thus resulting in a lower public cost than the outright purchase of a complete interest in the
19 property. Advantages to the property owner are that he or she is left with a valuable
20 remainder of the property that can still be used, as well as possible property or income tax
21 reductions.

- 22 • **Acquisition of the Property:** Perhaps the most commonly-used financial incentive used for
23 the protection of natural lands is the offer to purchase the property outright. This approach is
the surest and most permanent means to ensure the future conservation of a site.

24 The advantages to this approach are that it is easily understood, and that it provides
25 permanent protection. The most significant disadvantage is that this is the most costly
26 approach. The high costs associated with the outright purchase of a desirable property will
27 limit the ability of the county to conserve all of the sites that it may wish to protect.

28 The county's acquisitions should be between the county and a willing seller; natural lands
29 should not be acquired through condemnation.

30 Other approaches to open space conservation. This natural lands element is not intended to
31 function as a regulatory method of open space conservation, however, other portions of this
32 comprehensive plan and implementing regulations do provide methods for land conservation.
33 Examples include: buffers; cluster development; use restrictions; and density limitations

FUNDING STRATEGIES

34 Many approaches to conserve or protect natural lands will require the expenditure of public
35 funds. Traditionally, grants from state or federal agencies have been sought and utilized for this
36 purpose. However, with increasing competition for these scarce resources, exclusive reliance on
37 this type of funding sources will not succeed. In an era of limited public resources, Island

1 County will need creative approaches to locating the needed funds. Among the sources that may
2 be considered are:

3 • **Impact or mitigation fees.** The authority to impose fees to mitigate the impact of
4 development is discussed under *regulatory approaches*. Once collected, such funds may only
5 be used in a manner which will mitigate the identified impact. If funds are collected to
6 replace lost open space or recreational opportunities, they may then be used as part of an
7 overall funding strategy to acquire, preserve or protect natural lands. Mitigation funds are
8 considered by other funding sources to be local funds. As such, they can be used as a local
9 share to leverage funds from other sources. For example, many state and federal funding
10 sources will require the use of local funds to match all or a part of the funds supplied by the
11 funding source. Thus, the use of mitigation funds can have a far greater impact than if they
12 were used alone.

13 • **Grants or loans from foundations.** Many foundations are dedicated to environmental
14 stewardship, including the conservation of natural lands. Foundations may be established as
15 independent organizations, or as a charitable extension of a corporation. By far, the greatest
16 single benefactor in support of projects of this type in Washington has been the Bullitt
17 Foundation. Other foundations that have been active in the state include the Weyerhaeuser
18 Company Foundation, the Boeing Company Charitable Trust, the Ben B. Cheney Foundation,
19 the Foster Foundation and the Murdock Charitable Trust. These foundations and others may
20 be excellent sources of funds for local projects related to the acquisition or conservation of
21 natural lands.

22 In addition to foundations or charitable trusts, corporations will often provide direct funding
23 for specific projects if such projects can benefit them or the communities in which they do
business. For example, the large agricultural concerns operating seed farms on Whidbey
Island benefit from the isolated location and the relative lack of pollutants. Such companies
may find it in their interest to support activities related to natural lands protection.

• **Dedicated revenues from local taxes.** Subject to the approval of voters, the county may
authorize the use of local real estate taxes to pay for the costs associated with acquiring or
conserving natural lands. Some examples of uses of local taxes for this purpose are:

1 Conservation Futures Fund. Island County first implemented a Conservation Futures Fund
2 program in 1991. This program has provided a source of funds that have assisted in
3 providing long-term protection
4 of natural lands. The funds have
5 been used for acquisition,
6 protection, preservation,
7 maintenance, and conservation
8 of natural lands throughout the
9 county. Since 1993, the county
10 has expended nearly \$3 million
11 from the Conservation Futures
12 Fund. These expenditures have
13 resulted in the purchase of more
14 than \$5 million worth of
15 important properties, such as Ala
16 Spit, Double Bluff, English
17 Boom, Greenbank Farm and the
18 Amber-Kettles Trail. (See
19 Appendix B for Conservation
20 Futures Fund acquisitions.)



The Conservation Futures Fund helped to acquire and improve scenic Double Bluff

11 Real Estate Excise Tax (REET).

12 The county imposes a 0.5% tax on the conveyance of real estate. The conservation of natural
13 lands through purchase or easement is an eligible activity for funds from this source.

13 The Real Estate Environmental Endowment (TREE). This program, which would require the
14 approval of Island County voters, permits the assessment of an additional one (1%) percent
15 tax on real estate transactions, with the proceeds of the tax to be used for acquisition or
16 conservation of lands.

15 Bonds. In some cases, the revenues generated through taxation within a given year are
16 insufficient to meet the needs identified. When this occurs, one option available to the
17 county is the authorization of a bond. The proceeds of the bond sale may be used for the
18 acquisition or improvement of land, for the purchase of easements, or for other related uses.
19 The bonds are subsequently repaid over time from revenues generated through taxes or other
20 sources.

19 Voter-approved Property Tax Levy. The county could request a voter-approved property tax
20 levy increase in a specific amount that would generate revenues in the \$5 – 10 range per
21 parcel per year for a limited time, e.g. five years, with the management of the funds overseen
22 by a committee such as the Conservation Futures Advisory Board. Such a program should be
23 audited annually. The revenues derived could be used to either retire the bond specified
above or to augment the existing conservation futures funds and encumbered on an annual
basis. No purchases out of these funds should be made through condemnation.

1 **COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES**

2 Island County benefits from the presence of a diverse array of citizens, organizations and
3 agencies who are dedicated to the conservation, preservation or protection of natural lands.
4 These organizations include park districts, port districts, private land trusts, and government
5 agencies on all levels. With the escalating value of land and the increasing development
6 pressures faced by many property owners, it is often the case that no single agency or
7 organization has the resources to protect important natural lands. It is thus becoming
8 increasingly important for individuals and groups with similar interests to work together, to pool
9 their resources to protect those qualities that they determine to be important. The recent
10 acquisition of Greenbank Farm, which brought together the resources of Island County, the Port
11 of Coupeville and the Nature Conservancy, has generated strong support among Whidbey Island
12 residents. This collaborative effort may become the model for future action.

13 **CONTINUED PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND EDUCATION**

14 All of the implementation strategies previously identified will require the support of the public.
15 Public involvement has been a cornerstone in the development of this plan, and such
16 involvement should be encouraged throughout the plan's implementation. The county should
17 encourage dialogue among its citizens, and it should make every effort to enhance
18 communications between individuals, interest groups, special districts, and governments at all
19 levels.

20 Public involvement is a process. This process must begin with education. In order for these
21 strategies to succeed, they must be accepted and actively supported by the citizens of the county.
22 Experience in many jurisdictions throughout the country has shown that such support will be
23 given only when the public understands the issues.

24 Many of the funding strategies identified herein rely upon the use of local taxes. In particular,
25 implementation of The Real Estate Environmental Endowment or the approval of a bond issue
26 will require the approval of county voters. Even though recent surveys have indicated strong
27 support for the conservation of natural lands, the translation of that expressed support into
28 financial backing will require the broad dissemination of thorough and accurate information to
29 voters.

30 The public meetings held during the development of this plan were a solid beginning of a public
31 education program. The information conveyed to the citizens was presented in a format which
32 encouraged a thorough discussion and understanding of the issues. The county is now well-
33 positioned to continue its program of public involvement and education, utilizing many
34 resources.

35 The most traditional form of public involvement has been through formal public hearings. Such
36 hearings serve a useful purpose, but they are most helpful in educating the public when more
37 informal meetings or gatherings precede the hearing. The major drawback to the use of public
38 hearings is that the format of the hearing often results in an adversarial setting between citizens
39 and public officials. Less formal meetings that encourage a cooperative exchange of information
40 are almost always more productive.

1 Hearings and meetings are traditionally advertised by a public notice in the local newspaper.
2 These notices should be supplemented by an ongoing strategy of preparing newspaper articles,
3 columns and editorials, speaking before interest groups and local service clubs, disseminating
4 information through the internet, and providing informational materials to the public in easily-
5 understood formats. Also not to be overlooked are teaching opportunities in local schools, at all
6 grade levels.

7 In the preparation of this comprehensive plan, county staff has drafted and distributed 'issue
8 papers' on a wide variety of topics. These papers have done a credible job of outlining issues
9 from differing perspectives, in order to encourage intelligent debate. Other interest groups within
10 the county have distributed similar statements on issues of interest. The response to this type of
11 activity strongly suggests a public interest in gaining a meaningful understanding of these issues.
12 In short, the planning process has generated an interest in land use and conservation issues that
13 the county can build upon to the benefit of all.
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Figure 7 Natural Lands Action Plan

ACTION STEP	PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY	OTHER IMPORTANT PARTIES	TIME FRAME
<i>Develop and implement property tax reduction incentives</i>	Assessor's Office	Planning Dept.; Board of County Commission	PBRs 1998; implementation ongoing
<i>Maintain existing current use taxation programs</i>	Assessor's Office	Planning Dept.	Ongoing
<i>Design and implement education programs</i>	Planning Commission	Planning Dept.; Board of County Commission; other local interest groups	Ongoing
<i>Develop land use regulations and strategies</i>	Planning Dept.	Planning Commission	1998-1999
<i>Discourage the conversion of properties identified as having prime farmland soils to non-agricultural uses.</i>	Planning Dept.	Planning Commission; Board of County Commission; Assessor's Office	Regulations 1998; tax incentives ongoing
<i>Develop objective criteria to prioritize public expenditures</i>	Board of County Commission	Planning Dept.; Public Works Dept.; voters	Concurrent with CFP
<i>Establish and maintain partnerships</i>	Board of County Commission	All interest groups; gov't agencies; special purpose districts	Ongoing
<i>Identify funding sources</i>	Planning Dept.; Public Works Dept.	Other interest groups	Establish inventory 1998
<i>Protect property rights.</i>	Board of County Commission	Planning Comm.; Planning Dept.; property owners	Ongoing

Figure 8 Relationship Between Natural Lands Plan Acquisition Priorities and Public Benefit Rating System Priorities

NATURAL LANDS PLAN PRIORITIES	PUBLIC BENEFIT RATING SYSTEM DESIGNATIONS	PBRS PRIORITY
1. <i>Watershed Protection</i>	Significant Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Area, Special Plant Sites and Category "A" Wetlands	High
2. <i>Productive Agricultural and Forest Lands</i>	Resource and Rural Agricultural Lands, Rural Forest Lands/Woodlots	High
3. <i>Natural Communities and Ecosystems</i>	Significant Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Area, Special Plant Sites and Category "A" Wetlands	High
4. <i>Critical Wildlife Habitats</i>	Significant Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Area, Special Plant Sites and Category "A" Wetlands	High
5. <i>Wetlands and Riparian Ecosystems</i>	Significant Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Area, Special Plant Sites and Category "A" Wetlands	High
6. <i>Natural Shoreline Systems</i>	Natural Shoreline Environment	High
7. <i>Beach Access</i>	Privately Owned Trails and Corridors	High
8. <i>Open Space Corridors</i>	Urban Growth Area Open Space	Medium
9. <i>Scenic Vistas</i>	Scenic Natural Resource, Viewpoint or View Corridor	Medium

