

PROTECTING MINNESOTA'S NATURAL TREASURES

One of a series of case studies showing how Minnesota communities have used ecological information to protect their natural heritage

Sandhill Crane Natural Area ANOKA COUNTY



SUMMARY

A new natural area managed cooperatively by four different agencies is named for the stately sandhill crane that graces its lake shores. This innovative approach to open space protection, marked by its reliance on ecological information and collaboration, has earned two national awards.

Division of Ecological Services

The Ecological Services Division of the Minnesota DNR houses over 20 programs that collect and deliver ecological data on Minnesota's native plant and animal populations and their habitats. Four of these programs survey, map, interpret, and protect locations of significant native plant communities, rare plants, and rare animals. Local governments, landowners, and resource managers are among the many Minnesotans who have used this information to guide planning and land use policy and to protect some of the state's best natural areas. The four programs are:

- Minnesota County Biological Survey
- Natural Heritage and Nongame Research Program
- Nongame Wildlife Program
- Scientific and Natural Areas Program

These case studies provide detailed examples of how these programs work with partners to accomplish important conservation projects throughout the state.



A Collaborative Approach

The Sandhill Crane Natural Area is an inspiring example of what can happen when government agencies and area citizens become dedicated to a common purpose. In retrospect, the creation of this unique natural area in the city of East Bethel, Minnesota seems improbable at best. The 495-acre protected area comprises separate parcels of land owned by four different agencies at three levels of government: the City of East Bethel, Anoka County [Parks], the MN Pollution Control Agency, and the MN Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Over a period of six years, these government entities with their wide-ranging goals and responsibilities came together in recognition of the importance of safeguarding the area's biodiversity. As agency representatives worked side by side with area residents, a central vision for the future of the land became clear. Now, while the land continues to be held under divided ownership, it is united by collaborative management and by a name chosen in honor of one of the prominent members of the community.

Ecological Underpinnings

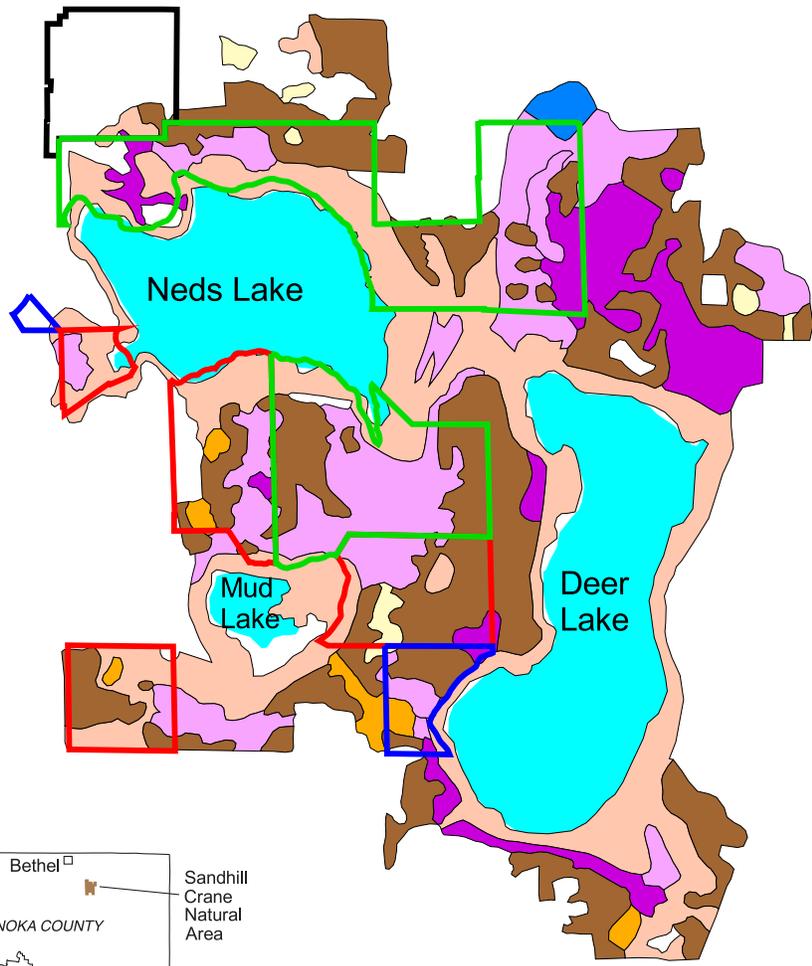
The **Minnesota County Biological Survey (MCBS)** was a source of information for planning during the process, and helped convey the significance of the natural area to policy makers and citizens. "People realize that habitat is at a premium and development pressures are

mounting," says Hannah Dunevitz, Regional Plant Ecologist with the **Natural Heritage and Nongame Research Program**. "Still, it is startling to look at the map of significant natural areas and see that only 8% of land in Anoka County supports native plant communities of sufficient quality to be mapped under MCBS guidelines." The Sandhill Crane Natural Area supports six types of wetland communities, as well as prairie, oak savanna and oak forest. Besides sandhill cranes, bald eagles and Blanding's turtles have moved into the natural area in recent years. This public land lies at the heart of a larger, 1,590-acre area mapped by the MCBS. "So now," says Dunevitz, "there is this great situation in East Bethel: a protected natural area embedded within privately-owned lands that, from an ecological perspective, are of similar quality. Most important, people there recognize the value of what they have."



Photo by Harland Hienstra, MN DNR

Some of the many people who collaborated to protect the Sandhill Crane Natural Area gathered on site to celebrate the signing of the MOU.



- Public Land Ownership**
- City Property
 - County Park
 - MN Pollution Control Agency
 - State Forest
- Native Plant Communities mapped by MCBS**
- Oak Forest
 - Mixed Hardwood Swamp
 - Tamarack Swamp
 - Poor Fen
 - Wet Meadow
 - Emergent Marsh
 - Shrub Swamp
- Lakes



Sandhill Crane Natural Area

Significant native plant communities mapped by the Minnesota County Biological Survey, shown here in colored areas, formed the basis for determining areas to be protected in the Sandhill Crane Natural Area. Public land ownership is shown on this map with colored boundary lines. Only eight percent of Anoka County supports high quality native plant communities like these.

Humble Beginnings

The project has required creativity and flexibility right from the start. “This story, in part, is a story about individuals being willing to be creative, to think ‘outside the box,’” Dunevitz observes. “It didn’t begin with an intent to create a natural area of this size and scope. But that happened because people were continually willing to expand their vision of what could be”.

It began, in fact, with a request in December of 1993 by the city of East Bethel to acquire an 18-acre parcel of land on Deer Lake from the DNR. The City hoped to use the land for a nature center or preserve. The request led DNR Forestry staff to begin an evaluation involving various other divisions

within the DNR, including Wildlife, Fisheries, Waters, Planning, and Ecological Services. Upon consulting the Anoka County MCBS map, this interdisciplinary team recognized that the parcel in question was part of a larger complex of relatively undisturbed land surrounding a trio of lakes. Out of this understanding, an inter-governmental task force was formed with representation from the City of East Bethel and Anoka County, both of which were landholders in the area. A public open house generated local interest and involvement. Area residents influenced the direction of the project by holding positions on a steering committee that defined a vision statement and broadly outlined



Photo by Harland Hiemstra, MN DNR

goals and actions to be incorporated into a management plan. Residents also hold posts on the advisory board that will ensure that the plan is carried out. In 1998, the MN Pollution Control Agency became an active participant in the initiative because of the presence of a closed landfill adjacent to the natural area.

Long Term Protection

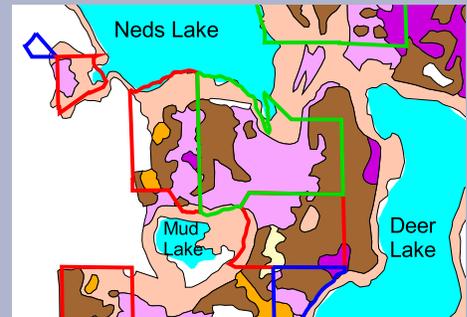
Formalizing the agreement is a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that details the intent of the signatory agencies to “protect and preserve the natural resources of the area, to provide appropriate recreational uses, and to encourage the involvement of adjacent landowners and area residents in participating in various land conservation programs and cooperatively reviewing new plans for future

“I think people support the idea of limiting some kinds of recreational use because they know that there are natural treasures in there that we’re trying to protect.”

— Brad LeTourneau
Public Works Supervisor
City of East Bethel

developments adjacent to the Sandhill Crane Natural Area.” Although the memorandum is legally nonbinding, it nevertheless represents a serious commitment by the participating agencies. “I consider it every bit as meaningful as a binding contractual agreement,” says John VonDeLinde, Director of Anoka County Parks and Recreation Department. “As a group, we chose to use an MOU because it would give us a degree of flexibility, allowing us to adapt to situations and make changes as needed without undue delay.”

Mapping Makes a Difference



For the Anoka County Parks and Recreation Department, the Sandhill Crane Natural Area is just one of many projects in which the use of Minnesota County Biological Survey data has played a vital role. According to Director John VonDeLinde, “Since the Survey information has been made available to us, we have definitely put more emphasis on incorporating biodiversity issues into our planning. It wasn’t our only source of natural resources information, but MCBS data basically set the framework for our comprehensive plan, guiding development and redevelopment on park land. It enhanced our understanding of high quality natural features within the 800-acre Anoka County Park system, which actually contributed to creation of a Natural Resources Management Unit.”

Jeff Perry, a Natural Resources Specialist in Anoka County’s Natural Resources Management Unit, has been an instrumental player in the working group for the Sandhill Crane Natural Area project. The group is now directing its attention to the development and implementation of a management plan. A preliminary management plan developed for the site in 2001

establishes the intent to “manage it as a remote natural area in which native plant and animal communities remain intact and undisturbed.” Where needed, management will work to restore and enhance native plant communities. “We’ve just completed our first prescribed burn on a remnant of native prairie,” Perry enthused. The plan also calls for limiting recreational



The Sandhill Crane Natural Area’s namesake takes flight from one of the wetlands next to Ned’s Lake.

Photo by Hannah Dunevitz, MN DNR

development to a level consistent with the goal of maintaining ecological integrity. MCBS data will be supplemented by additional survey work to identify the most ecologically sensitive areas. Impacts of public use will be evaluated on a continuing basis, and adjustments in policy made as needed. The plan calls for trail development to be minimal, and for trails to remain unpaved, to promote natural water infiltration as well as to minimize the kind of high-intensity use and associated disturbance of wildlife that can accompany paved trails.

The involved agencies have shared expenses and contributed labor to projects. “For example,” says Perry, “the City of East Bethel paid for the new entrance sign, the DNR paid for the costs of surveying the boundary of the natural area and artwork for the sign, and the County has provided



Photo by Hannah Dunevitz, MN DNR

Oak forests in the Sandhill Crane Natural Area provide important wildlife habitat.

labor for clearing associated with the boundary, installing the sign, and conducting the prairie burn. It’s been very equitable; at our meetings, we look at what needs to be done, and the various agencies take on what they are able to handle.”

The partners in this effort are expanding their vision even beyond the Sandhill Crane Natural Area. They are working with the local Soil and Water Conservation District and others to determine how this natural area fits into the larger landscape by mapping potential wildlife corridors and other open space.

Countless meetings, reams of paper pored over, coffee downed, wrangling over

document language—all have led to a promise that a natural area will stay pretty much as it is. For adjacent landowner and Citizen Advisory Committee member Lorraine Bonin, the status quo is just fine. “We hear the sandhill cranes; it’s such a wild sound. There are loons here, and egrets. Walking once, in winter, I met a fox on the trail. A developer could come in here so quickly and destroy it all. I’ve seen it happen again and again in areas near here. However long it took to put this agreement together, it was worth it.”



Photo by Carol Hall, MN DNR

Blanding’s turtle (*Emydoidea blandingii*), a rare turtle that occurs in the Sandhill Crane Natural Area.

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