

NCC Quarterly

Homeowner Associations and Wildland Urban Interface

Homeowner Association properties which border the “edge” of the Nature Reserve of Orange County are considered part of the wildland/urban interface (WUI). WUI zones are often noted for their spectacular views, elevated property values and access to nature. The homes, condominiums and apartments which are located near or adjacent to the WUI do however share a heightened risk from wildfire and exposure to native wildlife (such as coyotes, bobcats, skunks and racoons).

Fire and Vegetation Management

According to the Orange County Fire Authority’s (OCFA) 2020 Unit Strategic Fire Plan, vegetation management remains at the forefront of fire prevention efforts in Orange County. As future water conservation measures become mandatory, irrigated landscapes may actually be problematic, particularly if watering intervals are reduced and existing landscapes become drier. OCFA recommends landscaping and replanting with native species, which are drought tolerant and fire resistive.

As part of its effort, OCFA promotes and actively engages in fuel reduction projects. OCFA is currently working with Southern California Edison, California State Parks, OC Parks and other large landowning entities. In addition, OCFA’s Community Risk Reduction/Special Operations Pre-Fire Management Risk Reduction/Special Operations Pre-Fire Management section interfaces with homeowner associations to engineer fuel modification zones and landscaping. The point of contact for Community Risk Reduction/Community Wildfire Mitigation is Assistant Fire Marshal Nick Pivaroff, who can be reached at (714) 573-6256 or by email at NickPivaroff@ocfa.org. If you have general questions, please call (714) 573-6774 or email at rsgoc@ocfa.org

OCFA also conducts annual defensible space inspections in high-risk areas to help ensure vegetation management guidelines are maintained. Residents can refer to online guidelines, flyers and other useful resources at



<https://ocfa.org/RSG/VegetationManagement>. OCFA will meet any resident for a free home assessment within high fire risk areas in Orange County. Go to <https://ocfa.org/RSG/HomeAssessment> for more information and to schedule a home assessment.

Wildlife Interactions

Per the Urban Wildlife Working Group, wild animals are increasingly coming into contact with people as cities continue to sprawl. Public parks and open spaces not only increase habitat and connectivity for urban wildlife, but also expose people to nature in their own backyards. Urban environmental education can help foster a greater appreciation for conservation among residents along the WUI and enhance the lives of all people in the community.

Some of the animal communities within the Nature Reserve of Orange County consist of species that utilize human dominated

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ecosystems. Some examples of native species which often make their way onto HOA properties include coyote, raccoons, striped skunks, hummingbirds and California mule deer. Non-native species reliant on human ecosystems include rats, house mice, and the common pigeon.

Natural Communities Coalition has assembled a guidebook titled "Living Close to Nature," which highlights the native species, fire prevention, gardening and safety concerns associated with living close to the Nature Reserve of Orange County. In addition, California Department of Fish and Wildlife "Keep Me Wild" campaign shares how wild animals are falling victim to unnecessary conflict and even death for a surprising reason – increasing access to human food and garbage. The Keep Me Wild campaign provides tips for keeping deer, coyotes, mountain lions, wild turkeys and other various species of wildlife away from your home, and offers advice on what to do if you encounter a wild animal. The "Living Close to Nature" brochure may be downloaded by clicking [here](#) and the "Keep Me Wild" campaign can be accessed by clicking [here](#).

A few tips to prevent or minimize unpleasant human-wildlife interactions are included below:

- Never attempt to feed a wild animal
- Regularly dispose of fallen fruit from trees
- Remove sources of water and pet food
- Don't leave small children or small pets outside unattended
- Keep cats indoors as much as possible
- Use birdfeeders specifically designed not to spill
- Install motion sensitive lighting around house or condo

Outdoor/Nature Programs and Referrals for HOA

The opportunities to experience nature in Orange County are endless. Please share the websites below to any individuals who may be looking for health, fitness, stewardship or nature-based programs, activities and volunteer opportunities.

- [Irvine Ranch Conservancy](#)
- [Laguna Canyon Foundation](#)
- [Crystal Cove State Park](#)
- [OC Parks](#)

Natural Communities Coalition Initiates Ecological Health Study

The Natural Community Conservation Plan/Habitat Conservation Plan (NCCP/HCP) of Central and Coastal Orange County encompasses a preservation area totaling 37,378 acres. Within this vast natural landscape are an assortment of interconnected habitats and ecosystems whose ecological health is vital to promoting the long-term recovery of species, protecting habitat and natural communities, and enhancing the diversity of species at the landscape-level. The 75-year permit upon which the NCCP/HCP is based is dependent on maintaining these essential attributes and functions.

In the effort to carefully understand and report the ecological health of habitats and ecosystems within the Nature Reserve of Orange County, the Natural Communities Coalition (NCC) along with its many partners has embarked on a scientific assessment using the most current data and expert input. This project is one of the more ambitious and essential undertakings of NCC through its 25 years coordinating the NCCP/HCP. The assessment's findings are expected to provide a scientific measurement which informs management actions through the duration of the 75-year permit. According to NCC Executive Director Jim Sulentic, "Significant baseline information was collected in the 1990s and used to determine which species and natural communities were most threatened and needing conservation protection. Tracking the conditions on the Reserve of these same key indicators will serve as a report card for the Reserve against which the Wildlife Agencies, landowners and the community can judge the success of the plan as well as current and future management actions."

Mendel Stewart, Resource Management Coordinator at Natural Communities Coalition, serves as the NCC staff lead for the project. Mendel has spent the past year examining similar projects conducted in Marin and San Diego Counties and said, "the 39 target and identified species receiving regulatory coverage under the NCCP/HCP (of Central and Coastal Orange County) will be carefully monitored as part of the study in addition to landscape scale and adaptive management processes." He further stated, "we also expect to uncover some data gaps which in turn will focus ongoing areas of study to provide all of us a much greater understanding of the overall health of the Reserve."

Through the 2022 calendar year, NCC staff, partners and contractors will be compiling data for the inaugural ecological health study. The final report detailing the study's findings is expected to be presented to the NCC Board of Directors in Spring 2023.



Aliso and Wood Canyon



Shady Canyon

Systems Thinking and the NCCP/HCP

The Natural Community Conservation Plan/Habitat Conservation Plan (NCCP/HCP) of Central and Coastal Orange County is a thought-provoking approach to species protection and recovery. On the surface, the NCCP/HCP vision of embracing future development and enabling compatible public use on habitat protected lands may seem counter-intuitive to the primary function of species protection and recovery.

The sophistication however behind the NCCP/HCP is the systems thinking approach its founders integrated as part of the plan. According to the Northwest Earth Institute, systems thinking is a way of approaching problems that asks how various elements within a system influence one another. Rather than reacting to individual problems that arise, a systems thinker will ask about relationships to other activities within the system, look for patterns over time, and seek root causes.

The confluence of species protection, future development, and public recreational access to protected landscapes were packaged in the NCCP/HCP planning process back in the 1990's and motivated through the emergence of three notable issues taking place Orange County. The first was the increasing loss of coastal sage scrub habitat; the second was fear the Endangered Species Act (and listing of the gnatcatcher) would extensively curtail existing and future development; and the third was appealing to the heightened public demand for trails, open spaces and connectivity to nature.

As the NCCP/HCP of Central and Coastal Orange County recently celebrated its 25th year of implementation, a wealth of positive outcomes have been realized through systems thinking and other planning processes. Species protection and recovery efforts have remained ongoing, particularly in areas unaffected by fire. Development interests and the commitment to early planning for large-scale projects has enabled the acquisition of Reserve properties and accrual of mitigation revenues to fund the NCCP/HCP. Public recreational use, which peaked during the pandemic, continues to grow and is met with a high level of satisfaction, as determined through a research study recently conducted by Utah State University.

With 50 more years remaining on Orange County's NCCP/HCP permit, climate change is perhaps the greatest threat to the protection and recovery of multiple species. How development interests and continued recreational use of protected lands will factor into mitigating the impacts of climate change remains to be seen, but will certainly be part of the future systems thinking and planning approaches.

Arboreal Salamander

The arboreal salamander is an amphibian which is listed as one of the 39 identified species receiving regulatory coverage under the NCCP/HCP of Central and Coastal Orange County.

As their name implies, arboreal salamanders are excellent tree climbers. They have large triangular heads and thick bodies which can reach 7 inches in length. Arboreal salamanders are typically brown or gray in color with white or yellow spots.

Within the Nature Reserve of Orange County, arboreal salamanders commonly live in coastal oak woodlands. As an amphibian, they like to be near some form of moisture and are often found among leaf piles on the ground or in tree cavities.

Arboreal salamanders eat insects which it finds on the forest floor at night. They are nocturnal and catch prey on their tongue. Arboreal salamanders are also known to latch on to and hang on tenaciously to a human fingers when prodded.

Perhaps the most extraordinary trait of the arboreal salamander is their ability to breathe through the skin and membranes in their mouths and throats. They have no lungs.

In late spring to early summer, arboreal salamanders breed, with females laying 12-24 eggs at a time. The eggs hatch in 3-4 months, without going through a larval stage. Thus, newly hatched salamanders look like a miniature replica of an adult. Arboreal salamanders have an average life expectancy of five years.



Arboreal salamander

Alamy