

IDENTIFICATION AND EVALUATION OF WETLANDS OF STATEWIDE SIGNIFICANCE IN COLORADO

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through this project, we collected information on important wetland sites in the state, prioritized sites based on their conservation values, contacted landowners and evaluated the significance of wetland sites, and began efforts to recognize significant sites through natural area designation or through local protection and conservation efforts.

Based on review of available information on 230 wetland and riparian sites, 71 potentially significant sites were identified. Field visits of 35 sites were conducted during the 1997 and 1998 field seasons. Evaluations of 17 sites in seven counties are included in this report. The remainder will be included in the next annual report (Ref. Grant CD 998004040).

From our field evaluations for this and other projects, it is clear that most wetlands of all types, in all areas of the state, and at all elevations have been disturbed to some degree. Almost all wetlands and riparian areas are threatened by continued population growth, residential and commercial development, water impoundments and diversions, livestock grazing, or recreational use. There is a great need for planning to balance the impacts of growth and development with maintaining valuable wetland resources.

The greatest difficulty in ensuring the viability of natural wetlands is sustaining a natural hydrological regime. Water sources outside wetland boundaries or riparian corridors are often needed to maintain the ecological integrity of a wetland. Large-scale planning and protection efforts are needed, but regulatory efforts are often undesirable. A voluntary approach, such as natural area designation, is often an ideal path to wetland protection.

Of the 17 sites described in this report, 14 have values of statewide significance, including rare and unusual species and plant communities, and excellent examples of common plant communities. Of the 14 highest-quality sites, five are high priorities for Natural Area designation because of their outstanding qualities, imminent threats to their natural values, and interested landowners. For these sites, CNAP will work with landowners to begin the designation process as soon as possible.

Five of the South Park sites and three others are of statewide significance but are medium priorities for designation as Colorado Natural Areas (designation will be pursued as time and opportunity allow). In aggregate, the South Park sites are unique in the state because of their unusual water chemistry and species composition, but individual sites are of lower quality or landowners are unwilling to work with a state agency to protect them. CNAP will work with local citizens and government agencies to determine whether Natural Area designation or other protection strategies will best protect these sites.

Three sites were rejected for consideration as potential Colorado Natural Areas; two because of their small size or lower quality. The third site, Hart's Basin, is a wetland of statewide importance because of the number and diversity of bird species it supports; but because of its artificial nature, it does not qualify as a Colorado Natural Area. These three sites are still important on a local and regional level. CNAP will support local planning and management efforts to protect these sites. One site, Roubideau Creek, is still being evaluated as a potential Natural Area. The site will remain on the list of potential natural areas, but designation will not be pursued until adequate information is available to consider Roubideau along with comparable sites in that region of the state.

Until wetlands and riparian areas in Colorado are thoroughly inventoried and the types are classified according to a widely accepted method, wetland protection efforts will be fragmented. We hope this project will help to provide a more complete and comprehensive assessment of the types of wetlands that occur in different regions of the state, the types that are protected, the types that are most threatened, and the places where the last remaining examples of certain types can still be protected.

The following section of this report contains descriptions of each of the evaluated sites, including ecological profiles, maps and evaluation forms. The site profiles provide the most detail, describing the setting, condition, ownership, natural values, and management recommendations for each site. Following each site profile is a brief site evaluation form that summarizes the same information in an easily-read format. The table below summarizes the basic information for all evaluated sites.