

Spring Creek Canyon Conservation Strategy

Executive Summary

Introduction

Benner Township, in cooperation with other local supporters, initiated this planning effort to define a comprehensive strategy for the 1,800-acre Spring Creek Canyon Site. The Spring Creek Canyon Conservation Strategy is comprised of three components: the Master Plan, the Management Plan and the Conservation Easement Framework.

- The *Master Plan* is a graphic representation and accompanying series of recommendations as related to the ways to balance Spring Creek Canyon future conservation and activities.
- The *Management Plan* identifies completed assessments and a recommended structure for implementing the Master Plan.
- The *Conservation Easement Framework* presents an outline of potential policy topics for PA DCNR's, ClearWater Conservancy's and property future owners' consideration as they prepare Conservation Easements for the Site.

With the project's site analyses beginning in late June 2008 and final publication of the Conservation Strategy summary report in April 2009, the 10-month process encapsulates the primary building blocks for promoting future restoration, education and site appreciation. The Conservation Strategy seeks to develop a responsive, coordinated and multi-disciplinary action plan for the Site's future. People have different concepts of what activities should be permitted on the Site, who should own the Site, how the Site should be managed as well as how planning and management recommendations could be funded.

Goals, Objectives and Principles

The Conservation Strategy's components build upon a series of goals, objectives and principles. All three components were evaluated and shaped throughout the planning process by Committee comment.

Goals

Goals describe future expected outcomes or desires. They provide programmatic direction and focus upon "the ends" rather than "the means." Two goals, laying the groundwork for initiating the Township's planning effort, were defined in former proposed legislation applicable to the Site (Senate Bill No. 740) and as part of the project's original Request for Proposal. These two goals are:

- To preserve the property's unique natural resources, including the biological resources, native species and their supporting habitats which include native species that are uncommon in Pennsylvania; and
- To preserve the integrity of Spring Creek, currently designated as a high-quality cold water fishery which requires the protection of the property's groundwater recharge value and its springs, wetlands and floodplains, consistent with the master plan to be developed for the property by Benner Township and the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

As the planning process progressed, members of the project's Committees as well as the general public identified it would be logical and appropriate for these goals to ultimately be expanded to reflect other equally significant aspects of the Site including:

- To recognize the Site's equally significant cultural resources as well as
- To provide opportunities for research, education and recreation.

Objectives

Stemming from the project's goals, site analyses and input received throughout the project public participation process, *objectives* were identified by the project's Committees as clear, realistic, measurable statements of action which when completed will achieve a goal. Objectives describe the general nature of activities to be accomplished as part of a particular initiative. Objectives include:

1. Enhance the Site's ecological values and natural diversity.
2. Define a range of activities or uses that conserve the Site's unique ecological and cultural value, offer educational and interpretive experiences, accommodate limited public access and promote healthy habitats.
3. Identify appropriate buffers and transitions between uses or activities to protect sensitive landscapes and natural resources both within and adjacent to the Site.
4. Recognize and interpreting the Site's past uses and past human activities.
5. Advance the knowledge and science of resource management within the context of natural and cultural resource conservation.
6. Utilize sustainable natural resource, recreation and land management protocols and strategies to maintain the Site's long-term ecological balance and optimize connections to the Site's adjacent lands.
7. Incorporate design features and principles that ensure security of the Site and maximize personal safety.
8. Nurture a cooperative dialogue between the communities within the Spring Creek watershed to achieve the Strategy's objectives.
9. Establish a responsive and realistic management structure through which the Strategy's recommendations can be implemented

Principles

As outlined below, a few principles serve to "guide" overall planning initiatives while others intended to identify specific "active" aspects of the conservation strategy's implementation.

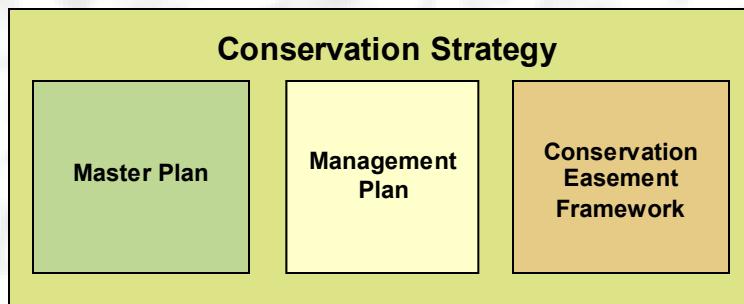
"Guiding" Principles

1. Protect the Site's natural and cultural resources by minimizing human impacts on the Site's conservation and restoration areas
2. Balance recreation opportunities with the site's capacity and sensitive environs
3. Coordinate public and private access needs and desires
4. Develop a responsive strategy for protecting on-site cultural resources

"Active" Principles

5. Expand core forest areas and eliminate fragmented forest edge
6. Promote suitable buffers in proximity to critical habitat areas
7. Restore riparian buffers
8. Maximize groundwater infiltration
9. Reduce existing invasive species and the potential for future expansion
10. Identify compatible transitions between on-site activities and surrounding land uses
11. Utilize existing infrastructure corridors and disturbed areas for future infrastructure needs and/or access

The Spring Creek Canyon Conservation Strategy is comprised of three components: the Master Plan, the Management Plan and the Conservation Easement Framework



Master Plan

What is the Spring Creek Canyon Master Plan?

The first component of the Spring Creek Canyon Conservation Strategy is the Master Plan. The Master Plan includes a map and series of recommendations which should occur within a geographic area. Recommendations are specific, concise and discrete actions. Some recommendations are physical in nature; others relate to various policies. This Master Plan does not identify any recommendations related to the Site's future ownership.

The Spring Creek Canyon's overall Master Plan concept is that this 1,800-acre site serves as a world-class landscape for resource management. Such a landscape presents the opportunity to establish a contemporary model for how public and private partners can practically and responsibly restore environs rich in sensitive natural resources as well as to educate the public about conservation-oriented agriculture and the landscape's cultural significance. The Master Plan builds upon the many conservation values identified as part of this project's Planning Process.

The Master Plan concentrates on outlining potential activities and policies related directly to resources within the Site's defined boundary. However, the fact is that, it is imperative to recognize that an equally important aspect of Spring Creek Canyon's health is the activity that occurs on lands surrounding the Site and in the greater region and Spring Creek Watershed.

The Life of the Spring Creek Canyon Master Plan

At a minimum, it is advised that a review of the Master Plan be completed every seven to ten years following the implementation of initial projects. Over time, these reviews will progressively enable the Site' stakeholders to re-examine past recommendations, identify short-comings and appropriately fine-tune management strategies. In completing the periodic re-examination of the Site, opportunities for learning and improving the effectiveness of conservation emerge.

The Master Plan Elements

The Master Pan is composed of four elements: site activities, capital projects; policies; and additional needed assessments. Site activities are recommended future uses. Capital projects are the primary physical improvements recommended for the Site. Policies are courses of action. Additional needed assessments are studies which, when completed, can enable stakeholders to understand the Site's resource capacity in greater detail.

Overall Site

- Construct road and parking area cartways and ADA accessible parking with materials to enable 4-season access
- Install interpretive signage at parking area/trailhead to emphasize the Site as a system of exceptional natural resources to be enjoyed and protected
- Install gates at road entrance/parking areas as a management tool for Site access
- Promote stormwater infiltration in parking areas
- Eradicate invasive species throughout the Site
- Mark trails with blazes

Northwestern Uplands

- Designate Barns Lane as a trailhead entrance
- North of Spring Creek: Establish barrens communities to maximize potential groundwater recharge; Promote seed germination of barrens species found on Site
- Designate the North Uplands Trail within the Site's former orchard area

• Introduce native species to supplement existing woodland areas within Lands for Conservation

Existing Fish and Boat Commission Facility

Spring Creek Corridor

- Delineate the stream-side Spring Creek Trail
- Explore feasibility of on-site canoe/kayak put-in in conjunction with construction of off-site take-out
- Existing Fish and Boat Commission Facility

Rock Road Access

- Rock Road should serve as a trailhead access
- Promote fishing access at Rock Road entrance
- Explore feasibility of on-site canoe/kayak put-in in conjunction with construction of off-site take-out

• Rock Road should serve as a trailhead access

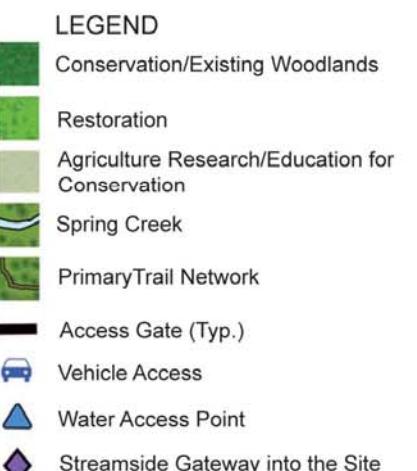
Shiloh Road Access

- Identify Shiloh Road as a trailhead access and as an access for landowners
- Promote fishing access at the Shiloh Road entrance
- Formalize the lands for agriculture research/education for conservation by physically defining their extents on the Site

Paradise Road
Pedestrian Trail continues to Fisherman's Paradise

Northern Uplands

- Designate Paradise Road as a trailhead entrance
- Establish a pedestrian connection between the South Fields Trail and Paradise Road trailhead
- Formalize the lands for agriculture research/education for conservation by physically defining their extents on the Site
- South of Spring Creek: Restoration to include the planting of warm-season grasses and successional species in appropriate areas



ILLUSTRATIVE MASTER PLAN

SPRING CREEK CANYON MASTER PLAN

Prepared for: Benner Township
Prepared by: Environmental Planning and Design, LLC

Date: April 15, 2009
2049.09.11r1

0 500 1000 Feet

NORTH

In context of this Strategy's goals, objectives and principles, suitable Site activities include:

- Conservation;
- Restoration;
- Agriculture research/education for conservation purposes; and
- Recreation.

Conservation

Conservation is the careful management of existing habitats to improve and sustain native biodiversity and to address threatened resources. Areas for conservation generally follow the Site's existing woodlands.



Restoration

Restoration is the establishment and enhancement of natural communities and associated physical attributes where these characteristics are absent.

Agriculture research/education for conservation purposes

As part of the Spring Creek Canyon Site, Agriculture Research/Education for Conservation is the science, art, or occupation concerned with the cultivation of crops (i.e., food, fiber, biofuels) for the purposes of research and education using sustainable, organic, or permaculture methods with minimal impact to surrounding natural resource areas. As part of the Master Plan, three (3) areas totaling approximately 380 acres are located on the Site.

Recreation

Opportunity exists for two scales of recreation to occur on the Site. The intensity of human impact on the land largely distinguishes the two types (passive recreation and active recreation).

Passive recreation is an activity that creates opportunity for independence, closeness to nature, and a high degree of interaction with the natural environment and which typically requires no organization, rules of play, facilities, or the installation of equipment, other than those which may be necessary to protect the natural environment.

Active recreation is typically involving the manipulation of land and/or water resources for the construction of recreation facilities or more intensive development than passive recreation and where such activity may or may not feature cooperative/organized participation.

Management Plan

The long term cost of operating and managing a conservation-oriented site exceeds its acquisition, design, and development costs. Therefore, establishing an effective management plan framework will help conserve the site, maximize limited human and financial resources, and generate public and private support.

For this Site, no organization or management plan has ever been in place to provide a strategic approach for the conservation of this important resource. A host of key stakeholders, along with the general public, has emerged with a unified view on the fundamental importance of conserving this unique area; however, their unified view on conservation is not without an array of diverse opinions on how the site should be conserved and/or under whose responsibility the Site should exist.

The purpose of the Operations and Management Plan is to provide the framework for organizing how the Spring Creek Canyon Site will be taken care of in order to achieve the goals of the Master Plan. It offers guidelines to plan and program work elements, allocate resources, implement projects, and evaluate accomplishments. Proactive in nature, the plan is designed to help achieve the conservation and passive recreational use of the project area. It broadly maps the elements that the future organization responsible for the Site should pursue in implementing the Master Plan. The management plan does not provide a detailed list of tasks with their chronology, as that information should be provided in an operational plan developed as an annual program of work. The management plan outlines an on-going continuous process in which key stakeholders assess changing conditions, emerging opportunities and evolving needs to keep moving ahead in achieving the goals for the Site.

The Operations and Management Plan is organized around three components:

- The **Organizational & Management Structure** identifies the recommended basic organizational structure for how the Spring Creek Canyon Site should be managed. Recognizably, depending upon the timing and type of the implementation of the recommendations of the Master Plan, there will be a variety of ways in which the organizations within this structure interact. The recommended structure is based on a Capacity Analysis of key stakeholders evaluated as part of the Conservation Strategy planning process. The Capacity Analysis presents a summary assessment of the missions and resources of key stakeholder organizations related to the Spring Creek Canyon Site's (or portions thereof) operation and management.
- The **Operations & Management Action Plan** sets forth the actions needed to plan, direct, implement and evaluate actions required for the conservation and public use of the Spring Creek Canyon Site.
- The **Funding** section outlines potential concepts for financing Site operations and management tasks along with potential funding sources.

The operation and management of this site is complex and expensive, requiring funding, staffing, and expertise that is not presently available. It calls for innovation, expertise, and financial and human resources for conservation, research and recreation. Based on completed analyses, no one organization has emerged as ready, willing, and/or able to assume the responsibility for the entire site and manage it in accordance with the recommendations of this Master Plan. The Spring Creek Canyon Site Operations and Management Plan recommends the creation of an entirely new partnership-based entity comprised of key stakeholders who should operate and manage this Site. The recommended organization is based upon the capacity analysis of the stakeholder organizations with respect to their mission, human and financial resources available or potentially available, and their ability to undertake specified operations and management functions successfully for this unique site.



Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul

John Muir

**Conservation
Easement
Framework**

Developed between a landowner and a holding entity, a conservation easement is a legal agreement that restricts a landowner's use and/or development of its land while simultaneously preserving a landowner's right to complete defined activities on the land. By accepting the conservation easement, a holding entity agrees that it will be responsible for enforcing the easement's stipulations. It is customary for a conservation easement to be executed with the transfer of land. Consequently, it is recommended that any conservation easement for the Spring Creek Canyon site be executed when the land is transferred as best as practical. It is also recommended that PADCNR and ClearWater Conservancy begin conceptualizing the issues and parameters of the conservation easement as soon as possible.

As part of this Conservation Strategy and considerations for the following conservation easements framework, there are several phases which are important to identify in preparing the Conservation Easement(s) for the site. If more than one land owner is part of any future site divestment, each land owner will need to sign their respective conservation easement. The first phase is drafting a series of specific provisions based upon the Conservation Easement Framework (see below). The resulting draft Conservation Easement(s) (Easement) document will need to be reviewed and refined based upon feedback from the Easement's landowners. Once the final document(s) has been prepared, the Site's landowner(s) and the Easement(s) holders will need to sign the document(s) in order for it to take effect.

Several entities are anticipated to be involved in the Spring Creek Canyon Conservation Easement process. Proposed holding entities are The Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) and the ClearWater Conservancy. At the time of the time that the Conservation Strategy was being created, the Easement's landowners had yet to be determined.