

*The following is an article printed in July 2006 West Portal Monthly:*

***NATURAL AREAS PROGRAM EXACTS A PRICE  
Final version of costly 20-year plan expected this summer;  
Habitat restoration would eliminate non-native plant species***

In 1806, George Heinrich von Langsdoff said this about the San Francisco landscape, "The surroundings are mostly bare and the hills, covered in places with low shrubs, afford but little of anything interesting."

Hidden from Langsdoff's view were fields of wild plants, remnants of which still exist. Jake Sigg, a Recreation and Park gardener for 31 years, came upon these patches of native plants and is dedicated to preserving these survivors. Preservation of these native species will require elimination of trees, plants and animals that were introduced to the Bay Area after non-native people settled here. Sigg has declared that it is "as important to me as health care, the economy, and other central human concerns."

After years of debate about the Natural Areas Program (NAP), the Recreation and Park Department will submit the final version of a 20-year program for approval by the Recreation and Park Commission this summer.

Some critics are challenging the NAP, not because of Sigg's concept of preservation of endangered species, but because of the cost of the program. Others criticize the plan for the removal of 3,400 non-native trees from San Francisco, and the removal of 15,000 non-native trees from Sharp Park in Pacifica on land donated to the City.

Still other critics object to converting recreational areas over to natural areas. The plan will designate 1100 acres of parkland as natural areas. Over 26% of trails will be closed in natural areas. Areas for off-leash dog runs will shrink to 2% of all park acreage. In order to protect native animal species, cats and other non-native bullfrogs and turtles will be removed from natural areas.

Because the scope of the program is so ambitious, the question is whether or not the City can afford it. Another question is whether the City will benefit by implementing a program to restore remnants of flora that grew before the Mayflower arrived on America soil. Opponents of this program have studied it and have found that there is no mention of how much this program will cost San Franciscans in tax dollars. Another expense that is not in the report is the perpetual cost of maintaining these delicate plant areas after restoration. Maintenance of natural areas in the Presidio, despite the use of volunteers, still costs hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Crissy Field is a successful example of a restoration of natural plant areas restoration, but the price tag was a whopping \$34,000,000 and was privately funded.

At the Great Highway and Balboa Street, the Recreation and Park Department's attempt at sand dune native flora preservation was not as successful. The 1.3-acre lot, formerly part of Playland at the Beach, was purchased jointly by the Recreation and Park Department and the PUC for \$3,000,000. In 1993, approximately \$300,000 was spent for site preparation, a fence, a boardwalk, and plants. From this amount, \$47,000 was allocated for trucking in of "imported" sand. The sand may have been more fancy than the beach sand across the street from the site, but it did the same thing that all sand does. It shifted. It shifted onto the adjacent sidewalk and into neighbors' yards.

Hawk Hill, above Herbert Hoover Middle School, was purchased in three separate negotiations for an approximate \$7,000,000. The neighbors found that the non-native ice plant had been stabilizing the hill only after it had been removed. It is the hope of NAP to plant the endangered San Francisco *Lessingia* on Hawk Hill. This native plant can only survive in “disturbed” environments, in other words where sands are constantly shifting.

While the Recreation and Park Department is promoting the reintroduction of coastal scrub and grassland, it is ignoring the problem of thousands of aging, diseased and hazardous trees in our parks. Mary McAllister, formerly a member of the Natural Area Program Citizen Action Committee created by the Board of Supervisors in 2003, had this to say about how the City is allocating park funds in a letter to *The Examiner* on June 26, 2006: “The sorry state of trees in our parks is not the fault of an inadequate budget for the Recreation and Park Department (“Report: The City’s Urban Forest Fading” June 22). It is a reflection of how the department chooses to spend its budget.”

She added, “The Recreation and Park Department has spent ten years and \$1,000,000 developing a plan to destroy trees in order to reintroduce native plants to many of our parks. If you prefer trees to prairie and scrub, make your opinions known to the Recreation and Park Commission, that will soon consider the approval of an expensive 20-year commitment to the native plant movement.”