

ITEM 4. DRAFT URBAN ECOLOGY STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN – PUBLIC EXHIBITION**FILE NO: S083149****SUMMARY**

The City commissioned the Urban Ecology Strategic Action Plan in response to a commitment in the Sustainable Sydney 2030 vision to protect native plants and animals, and to meet strong demand from the local community.

The objectives of the draft Urban Ecology Strategic Action Plan are to:

- protect, expand and improve the condition of naturally occurring locally indigenous vegetation, including possible remnants;
- increase the extent of bush restoration sites across the City of Sydney Local Government Area (LGA), and maintain them in good condition;
- re-establish representative patches of the likely original vegetation communities;
- protect and enhance sites that provide habitat for priority fauna species;
- increase the distribution and abundance of priority fauna species; and
- improve habitat connectivity across the City's LGA, particularly between the following priority sites, and between habitat areas in adjoining LGAs:
 - Sydney Park;
 - Glebe Foreshore Walk East to Orphan School Creek;
 - Pyrmont (sandstone cliffs and outcrops and bush restoration sites);
 - the Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain (Yurong Precinct);
 - Garden Island (northern end); and
 - Moore Park (Mt Steel, Moore Park Golf and Lake Kippax).

The draft Plan outlines:

- General actions – to be undertaken across the City's LGA and/or the City organisation as a whole, grouped into five categories:
 - park and streetscape management;
 - planning controls;
 - staff and contractor engagement;
 - community engagement; and
 - partnerships; and

- Specific actions – that relate to identified ‘priority’ sites and fauna species.

This report recommends that Council approve the draft Urban Ecology Strategic Action Plan for public exhibition.

RECOMMENDATION

It is resolved that:

- (A) Council approve the draft Urban Ecology Strategic Action Plan, as shown at Attachment A to the subject report, for public exhibition for a minimum period of six weeks; and
- (B) the draft Urban Ecology Strategic Action Plan and any recommended changes be reported back to Council following the exhibition period.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A: Draft Urban Ecology Strategic Action Plan
(Note – This Attachment will be circulated separately from the Agenda Paper and to Councillors and relevant senior staff only. A copy will be available for viewing on Council’s website and at the One Stop Shop and Neighbourhood Service Centres.)

BACKGROUND

1. Biodiversity (a truncation of the words “biological diversity”) comprises plants, animals, all other living organisms, and the ecosystems they form.
2. Biodiversity provides ecosystem services upon which all life depends. For example, it helps to maintain oxygen in the air, enrich soil, purify water, regulate climate, decompose organic wastes, pollinate plants, and control pests. These ecosystem services take place in all environments, including urban areas.
3. Biodiversity also has intrinsic cultural, aesthetic and often economic values.
4. Given that most of the world’s population now lives in urban areas, urban biodiversity comprises the plants and animals that most people encounter in their day to day lives. Research has shown that it provides a connection to nature that can contribute to the quality of life of urban residents. It can also improve awareness about biodiversity issues, not just locally but more broadly, which is important if global patterns of biodiversity decline are to be addressed.
5. Recognising this, many cities around the world are implementing biodiversity initiatives, and there is increasing community expectation that they do so. In a recent report entitled *Cities and Biodiversity Outlook*, the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (the key global instrument for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity), noted that local interventions to improve biodiversity can be implemented in almost any city.
6. In 2008, the City of Sydney launched Sustainable Sydney 2030 and committed Sydney to becoming a green, global and connected city. Central to this vision was the commitment to be internationally recognised as an environmental leader of outstanding performance.
7. The ‘green’ component of the Sustainable Sydney 2030 vision included a commitment by the City to protect native flora and fauna.
8. This commitment combined with strong demand from the local community led the City to commission an Urban Ecology Survey and Urban Ecology Strategic Action Plan.
9. The purpose of the survey was to obtain baseline information about the current biodiversity in the City’s LGA, while the purpose of the Plan was to identify and prioritise actions that would be undertaken to conserve and enhance biodiversity across the City’s LGA.
10. In 2012, Council adopted the Greening Sydney Plan, which focuses on delivering the physical ‘greening’ aspects of Sustainable Sydney 2030. The Greening Sydney Plan recognises that improved urban ecosystems can have both environmental and social benefits, and identifies urban ecology as a strategic focus area.
11. This report provides information on the draft Urban Ecology Strategic Action Plan (the draft Plan).

Urban Ecology Strategic Action Plan

12. The vision for the draft Plan is to restore and conserve resilient urban ecosystems that support a diverse range of locally indigenous flora and fauna species and, in so doing, create a liveable City for all of its inhabitants.
13. The draft Plan's objectives are to:
 - (a) protect, expand and improve the condition of naturally occurring locally indigenous vegetation, including possible remnants;
 - (b) increase the extent of bush restoration sites across the LGA and maintain them in good condition;
 - (c) re-establish representative patches of the likely original vegetation communities;
 - (d) protect and enhance sites that provide habitat for priority fauna species;
 - (e) increase the distribution and abundance of priority fauna species across the LGA; and
 - (f) improve habitat connectivity across the City's LGA, particularly between priority sites and between habitat areas in adjoining LGAs.
14. The draft Plan was developed based on the results of the Urban Ecology Survey, the main components of which were flora and fauna surveys in a selection of parks across the LGA, and community consultation.
15. Results of the survey included identification of:
 - (a) indigenous vegetation representative of five recognisable communities within the LGA, including some possible remnants;
 - (b) a total of 87 indigenous fauna species within the City's LGA, many of which were recorded in small numbers at only a small number of sites; and
 - (c) numerous threats to biodiversity within the City's LGA, particularly limited availability and connectivity of habitat, habitat destruction and fragmentation, weed invasion, use of chemical herbicides and pesticides, pest fauna (both introduced and indigenous species), and artificial light, noise, traffic and other disturbance. While climate change was also identified as a threat, its impact in the local context, although unpredictable, is likely to be of less significance than many of these other threats, but may nevertheless cause them to be exacerbated.
16. Two broad types of actions are outlined in the draft Plan:
 - (a) General actions that require implementation across the City of Sydney's operations and/or the City's LGA as a whole. These have been grouped into five categories:
 - (i) park and streetscape maintenance – actions focused on expanding bush restoration and other habitat enhancement works, and ensuring that best practice bush regeneration and biodiversity management practices are implemented;

- (ii) planning controls – actions focused on ensuring an appropriate level of ecological assessment is undertaken during the development assessment process, and maximising the potential for new developments to incorporate habitat features in site landscaping;
 - (iii) staff and contractor engagement – actions focused on improving staff and contractor awareness of biodiversity and their requirements in relation to the draft Plan;
 - (iv) community engagement – actions focused on improving community awareness of biodiversity and increasing participation in bush restoration and other habitat enhancement works; and
 - (v) partnerships – actions focused on collaborations with other land managers within the City’s LGA, and with government departments, non-government organisations and research institutions to maximise the effectiveness of the Plan.
- (b) Specific actions – site-specific actions that relate to six priority sites that have relatively high biodiversity value, and species-specific actions that relate to priority fauna species, which include threatened species identified in the City’s LGA as well as other species that have become uncommon in the City and urban areas generally.
17. The following eight targets against which progress will be measured are specified in the draft Plan:
- (a) the area of naturally occurring vegetation will be maintained or increased from the 2012 baseline of 2.3 hectares by 2023;
 - (b) naturally occurring vegetation will be in good condition by 2023;
 - (c) the area of bush restoration sites will be increased by 100 per cent from the 2012 baseline of 4.8 hectares by 2023;
 - (d) bush restoration sites will be characterised by well-established, structurally complex vegetation, free of weeds by 2023;
 - (e) representative patches of at least two of the likely original vegetation communities of the City’s LGA will be established by 2023;
 - (f) indigenous fauna species diversity will be maintained or increased from the 2012 baseline of 87 species by 2023;
 - (g) priority fauna species will be recorded from a greater number of locations and in higher numbers compared to the 2012 baseline by 2023; and
 - (h) there will be a progressive annual increase in the number of habitat features for priority species established along potential habitat linkages by 2023.

18. Many actions that will contribute towards achieving the objectives and targets are already in progress. For example:
 - (a) infill planting with locally indigenous understorey species has been undertaken in existing garden beds in Blackwattle Bay Park and under-utilised parts of a number of pocket parks in Glebe, to both re-establish original vegetation communities and provide habitat for small birds; and
 - (b) substantial habitat enhancements were incorporated into Stage 1 of the stormwater harvesting works at Sydney Park, and similar enhancements will be incorporated into Stage 2 to benefit a range of wetland species including birds, frogs and reptiles.

KEY IMPLICATIONS

Strategic Alignment – Sustainable Sydney 2030

19. *Sustainable Sydney 2030* is a vision for the sustainable development of the City to 2030 and beyond. It includes 10 strategic directions to guide the future of the City, as well as 10 targets against which to measure progress. This draft Plan is aligned with the following strategic directions and objectives:
 - (a) Direction 2 - a Leading Environmental Performer – implementation of the draft Plan will lead to the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity in the City's LGA, which is vital in demonstrating the City's commitment to and leadership in environmental performance, since biodiversity decline is an environmental issue of global importance.
 - (b) Direction 6 - Vibrant Local Community and Economies – recognises the diverse lifestyles, interests and needs of our City communities. Implementation of the draft Plan will contribute to the quality of life of City residents by improving visual and recreational amenity through increased greening and providing increased opportunities to interact and connect with nature. The draft Plan also includes numerous community engagement actions, which will respond to and expand upon the strong local community interest in biodiversity.
 - (c) Direction 9 - Sustainable Development, Renewal and Design – responds to sustainability and environmental imperatives facing our cities. Actions under this direction aim to better capture the potential of streets, parks and squares in public life and improve design excellence in our buildings. Implementation of the draft Plan will lead to indigenous vegetation and other habitat improvements being incorporated into the upgrade of City parks and new developments, thereby improving their environmental sustainability.
20. The draft Plan is also aligned with the:
 - (a) City of Sydney Corporate Plan 2012/15, which lists the development and implementation of an Urban Ecology Strategic Action Plan as a major project; and
 - (b) Greening Sydney Plan, which recognises that improved urban ecosystems can have both environmental and social benefits, and identifies urban ecology as a strategic focus area.

Organisational Impact

21. The Plan identifies that staff and contractors with specialist bush restoration and biodiversity management skills are required. This requirement is being included in new park maintenance contract specifications, and specialist contractors are already maintaining some sites. However, as approximately half of the parks and streetscapes in the City's LGA are maintained by City staff, there is also a need to incorporate specialist staff in-house. Recruitment of one staff member is planned to fill an existing vacancy, and training is being offered to other staff.
22. Collectively, the various Council divisions and business units will need to continue working in a collaborative manner together and with the community and other land managers to ensure the specified targets are achieved.

Social / Cultural / Community

23. Improved biodiversity can contribute to quality of life of the City community by improving visual and recreational amenity, and providing a connection with the natural world. Research has shown that regular contact with nature can help to lower stress, boost immunity, heighten creativity and improve cognitive function.
24. There is strong community interest in biodiversity in the City. For example, within the City's LGA there are currently five active community groups with a specific biodiversity focus:
 - (a) Pyrmont Ultimo Landcare;
 - (b) the Glebe Bushcare Group;
 - (c) the recently established Friends of Orphan School Creek;
 - (d) The Glebe Society's Blue Wren Group; and
 - (e) Sydney Park Swans.
25. The former three undertake volunteer bush restoration works, the Blue Wren Group focuses on small bird conservation, and Sydney Park Swans is a Facebook group comprising over 500 people that was established to share observations and assist in the protection of black swans nesting at Sydney Park.
26. Others with a demonstrated interest in biodiversity within the City's LGA include the City's community garden groups, several of whom have installed frog ponds and native bee hives, and the Friends of Sydney Park group, who have organised biodiversity-related talks and tours in conjunction with the City.
27. Community interest is further demonstrated by attendance at planting days such as National Tree Day, which attracts hundreds of participants each year, and biannual 'Biodiversity in your Backyard' workshops, which are also well-attended and receive positive feedback.
28. The Urban Ecology Strategic Action Plan was commissioned in part to meet the expectations of the City community, and the draft Plan includes numerous community engagement actions to respond to and expand upon the strong community interest.

29. There is also increasing community expectation that indigenous vegetation and other habitat features are incorporated into City parks and into new developments. The draft Plan includes actions that have been formulated to meet these expectations.

Environmental

30. Biodiversity decline is an important environmental issue globally.
31. Like most urban areas, biodiversity within the City's LGA has been dramatically reduced from its original state.
32. Implementation of the draft Plan will lead to the restoration of locally indigenous vegetation, and assist fauna species that have become uncommon or that have disappeared from the LGA to become more abundant and widespread, thereby contributing to a reversal of past biodiversity decline.

Economic

33. There is growing recognition globally that ecosystem services have significant economic value, although many currently do not have market prices and their value can only be estimated by indirect methods.
34. It is however anticipated that the increased greenery that will result from implementation of the draft Plan will contribute to improved property values.

BUDGET IMPLICATIONS

35. Implementation of the Plan will require estimated one-off funding of \$597,000 and annual recurrent funding of approximately \$1,378,000.
36. Approximately \$93,000 of one-off funding and \$1,263,000 of annual recurrent funding is covered within existing budgets. New budget items will be subject to the annual budget bid process.

RELEVANT LEGISLATION

37. Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999.
38. Local Government Act 1993.
39. Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979.
40. Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995.
41. Fisheries Management Act 1994.
42. National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974.
43. Noxious Weeds Act 1993.

CRITICAL DATES / TIMEFRAMES

44. The proposed timeframe is:
- (a) July 2013 – Council endorsement of the draft Plan for public exhibition; and
 - (b) December 2013 – Council adoption of a final Plan.

PUBLIC CONSULTATION

45. The draft Plan will be available on the City's website and printed versions will be available at the One Stop Shop, The Green Living Centre and at all Neighbourhood Service Centres. Public consultation will be undertaken for a period of six weeks.
46. Key community stakeholders, notably Pymont Ultimo Landcare, the Glebe Bushcare Group, Friends of Orphan School Creek, The Glebe Society's Blue Wren Group, Sydney Park Swans and Friends of Sydney Park will be notified by email of the public exhibition period and the procedure for making submissions.
47. Other key stakeholders will similarly be notified by email. These include:
- (a) other land managers within the City's LGA, such as the Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain Trust, Centennial and Moore Park Trust, and Department of Defence, all of which were consulted in development of the draft Plan, as well as Railcorp, Sydney Water and the University of Sydney;
 - (b) relevant NSW Government departments, such as the Office of Environment and Heritage; and
 - (c) non-government organisations, such as BirdLife Australia.
48. Meetings will also be held with key land managers within the City's LGA to further brief them on the draft Plan and ensure they are aware of how they can contribute to achieving its objectives.
49. All submissions will be considered and the results of the public exhibition will be reported to Council at the time when a final Plan is recommended for adoption.

KIM WOODBURY

Chief Operating Officer

Chris Derksema, Sustainability Director
Katie Oxenham, Manager Urban Ecology