



Regional  
Parks  
Association

P.O. Box 9127  
Berkeley CA 94709

*RPA Board Members*

*President: Amelia Wilson, Vice-president: Joe Engbeck, Treasurer: Pete Wilson, Secretary Judi Bank  
Hulet Hornbeck, Harlan Kessel, Kathleen Nimr*

TO: EBRPD Planning/Stewardship/GIS Services Dept.  
2950 Peralta Oaks court  
P. O. Box 5381  
Oakland, CA 94605-0381

FROM: Amelia Wilson, president, Joseph H. Engbeck Jr., vice-president, and Tim Gordon, representing the Regional Parks Association

SUBJECT: Comments on the Coyote Hills Regional Parks Land Use Plan Amendment and recommendations for revision of the proposed amendment.

DATE: March 15, 2005

COMMENTS AUTHORED BY TIM GORDON: The Draft Land Use Plan for Coyote Hills has been prepared and written with evident care and thought that reflect a good deal of time spent and concern for the park.

We intend for the following responses to be respectful of the work done, and hope that the issues raised here are taken in the spirit of building on and adding to the draft in its current form.

Near the beginning, the introduction makes a clear statement on the mission and unique value of this Regional Park:

Coyote Hills is designated as one of the Park District's interpretive parks. Park naturalists share the many stories concerning the natural history, resources, Native Americans and historical persons and events. Innovative programming has included the construction of a Butterfly Garden and replica tule boats once built by the Tuibun. The focus of the program features exhibits and talks on the Ohlone culture and wetland science education for local school children. (page three in the Plan)

On the next page, the Land Use Plan's purpose is highlighted as "[providing] a broad-brush foundation of recommendations for management and protection of the natural and cultural resources, as well as for recreational opportunities and construction of facilities."

We believe that while all these goals are laudable, there can also sometimes be contradictions between them. Here are two examples:

#### Butterfly habitat issues

Park staff have created and nurtured a butterfly garden to protect and extend habitat for these insects, some of which are endangered or soon will be. It serves as a conservation project as well as a strong educational tool which is popular with visitors and used by teachers. There are even plants for sale, so people can extend the work to their homes and schools.

Yet nearby within the park, fennel—an important plant for anise swallowtails and other species—is being cut and burned because it is encroaching on grasslands and may be considered weedy and unsightly. The naturalists should play a major role in decisions as to whether to continue the fennel eradication program and if so, just where, and how aggressive the effort should be.

## Ground squirrel management issues

Ground squirrels are a vital component of the park ecosystem. They are an important prey species for raptors, and their burrows provide habitat for burrowing owls, gopher snakes, Western Fence lizards, and many insect species. Ground squirrels are also easy for kids to observe, and children can learn a lot simply watching them closely. No one probably questions their presence on hillsides where native or wild vegetation predominates.

But let these same ground squirrels invade a turf area, and they are often poisoned. Then, without careful surveillance and removal (which is likely to be costly) , these poisoned carcasses will be in the environment for scavengers to feed on, with the predictable result.

One could write a similar scenario for the Botta Pocket gopher. Both of these animals are native species. Thus expansion of turf areas and standards for turf appearance need to be carefully thought through in consultation, once again, with Park naturalists.

These examples show how plant and animal management can be at odds with values many believe are intrinsic to the park's purposes. We believe that these and similar issues must be understood in the context of what it is that makes Coyote Hills unique and important as a place, as a park, and as the home of some remarkable interpretive and conservation programs.

Beyond the Plan's good general description of Coyote Hills and its interpretive focus, it might be worth noting some specific things that define and set this park apart and, one hopes, to keep them in mind while deciding how and what to do in the future:

--It has a rare and splendid natural setting, with fresh water ponds and a salt water interface.

--There is here a remarkable variety of birds and opportunities to observe them in a setting that is accessible but feels very far from

“civilization”. Some endangered species have possibilities for rebounding to some extent at Coyote Hills.

--The park has a human scale that can be encompassed readily. Distances are not so great that a school child couldn't explore much of it in a single day. Yet this very advantage of small scale could mean that when some further development occurs—such as that to accommodate traffic or “improve” camping facilities—the very essence of the place could be changed in undesirable ways. Or if you will, Coyote Hills could be “improved” into a place which inadvertently loses some part of its best qualities.

### Issues Not Addressed in the Draft Plan

The document is pointed in many of the right directions, but taking into account the very unique nature of this park and its current programs, as well as some of the potential contradictions cited above, we would like to see the following things both included in the Management Plan, and acted on by Park managers and staff in a timely way.

- 1) In view of recent and upcoming staff changes, continuity and growth of programs needs to be addressed as a major point. This is particularly true with regard to the shell mound interpretation program, the butterfly garden, and the native crafts workshops. Assuring that these programs continue and flourish will require special skills and training, and it is crucial to build a bridge between the remarkable interpretive staff that has created them and those to follow.
- 2) A plan must be developed to preserve the sun shelters adjacent to the shell mound, and—without using poisons—to halt encroachment of vegetation that is beginning to obscure the mound itself.
- 3) In order to obtain materials for crafts workshops and structures such as sun shelters, sources must be identified and protected. Will there be a permitting procedure for Native Americans to gather? For others?

- 4) All plans for managing animals, insects or vegetation should be developed in consultation with Park naturalists, in a spirit of partnership. They are trained to look not just at esthetics but also at the whole ecosystem, thus providing a crucial perspective. And having created something like the butterfly garden, they know what it needs to survive and thrive.
- 5) The “historical context” (pg. 19) speaks of “a rich and interesting history of human habitation”. The plan should specify how this crucial and fascinating subject will be addressed. What are the stories? How will they be told? By whom?
- 6) In the future, it will be necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of the stewardship of the Park. A survey of common insects, mammals, reptiles and amphibians should be initiated to facilitate this, so that we will know what is there to begin with and be able to take this data into account in the decision making process around many facets of the park.

None of these are quick, simple or one-dimensional matters. But we believe they will best be addressed by first acknowledging and including them in the Management Plan, and then consulting with or including the Park interpretive staff in carrying it out. Thus the proverbial “right hand” is more likely to know—and care about—what the “left hand” is doing.



