

What's Up on Turtleback?

One year ago, on November 16th, 2006, Turtleback Mountain was purchased with funding from The San Juan Preservation Trust, San Juan County Land Bank, Trust for Public Land, and over 2000 individual donors. On that day, the iconic sentinel's native habitats and expansive vistas achieved "Preserve" status, and the vital task of stewardship began.

As owner and steward, the Land Bank has spent the last year focused on three priorities for Turtleback: 1) Facilitating interim public access; 2) Conducting ecological assessments; and 3) Preparing a Draft Management Plan. Here's an update on our progress.

Interim Public Access

Typically, the Land Bank waits to open a preserve until the ecological assessments and management plan process - which includes vetting public use guidelines - have been completed. In the case of Turtleback, the high profile nature of the acquisition and the participation of so many donors drove the decision to open the preserve as soon as possible under an "interim" plan which allows hiking on designated trails.

Within the first two months, parking areas were constructed at the north and south trailheads, and map kiosks and basic signage were installed. Soon thereafter a cross-mountain connecting trail was built, winter storm debris cleared, maps developed, and a trail through a sensitive area re-routed. The Land Bank added an Orcas-based staff position in

the spring, and established a list of volunteers eager to help with on-going stewardship.

Many people have visited Turtleback since last November; hiking clubs, families, tourists, camp reunion groups, scouts, senior citizens, students, scientists, artists, and wanderers. As they experienced the mountain - many for the first time – we heard heartfelt expressions of gratitude repeated time and again. The opportunity to observe and learn from these visitors has already benefited our planning process.

Ecological Assessments

The Land Bank's ability to protect Turtleback Mountain into the future is based largely on our understanding of the land's physical features and ecologic processes. To build a baseline of information, the following assessments were completed this year: Wetland and amphibian surveys; forest and grassland inventories; archaeological survey; vegetation mapping; and Garry oak mapping. We have compiled data on avian species, reptiles, invasive plants, mammals, and early history, and will continue to add to this information over time.

Assessments are essential to the planning process in that they inform stewardship, management and public use decisions. Activities such as establishing areas for restoration, controlling invasive species, locating trails, and placing signage are considered in light of the preserve's ecological values, and the Land Bank's mandate to "preserve and protect..."

Management Planning

Drawing on assessments, published research, observation and input from conservation professionals, the Land Bank staff has prepared a Draft Management Plan that addresses goals, actions and monitoring

protocols related to ecological resources, cultural resources, and public use.

Currently moving through internal review, the draft will next be presented to The San Juan Preservation Trust, which holds a Conservation Easement on the land, to be sure it is consistent with the easement provisions. It will then be released for public review, revised as necessary, and submitted to the Land Bank Commission and County Council for adoption.

There is an understandable curiosity about the “plan” for Turtleback. Folks wonder what recreational uses will be permitted - will we build more trails, add access points, create larger parking areas, provide restrooms, or allow vehicle access, bikes, horses, hunting, logging, camping, etc. As a result of these questions, we anticipate significant interest in the Public Use section of the Management Plan.

When the plan is ready for public review, early in the new year, it will be available on the Web or by request from the Land Bank. The period for written comments and a schedule of public meetings will be announced in local papers.

Stewardship of Turtleback Mountain Preserve is worthy of our best efforts as a community. We look forward to hearing from you.

About the San Juan County Land Bank

In 1990, San Juan County voters approved funding for the San Juan County Land Bank through a one percent real estate transfer tax. This tax is paid by purchasers of property in the County. Land Bank funds

are set aside expressly for the purpose of preserving the natural heritage of the San Juan Islands. Through conservation easements or outright purchases, the Land Bank protects special properties in the County. These may be shorelines, wildlife habitat, woodlands, wetlands, homesteads, or farmland. The Land Bank has protected over 4,800 acres of important conservation lands throughout the San Juan Islands. For more information, contact the Land Bank at 378-4402.