

Where it all Began—San Bruno Mountain

by Al Donner

Often called the “Island of Openness,” massive San Bruno Mountain dominates the crowded San Francisco Bay area. The mountain is 4 miles (6.5 kilometers) long and 1,300 feet (almost 400 meters) high. In the early 1980s, it faced plans for housing developments over much of its steep surface.

Today, some 2,800 acres (1,130 hectares) of San Bruno Mountain are forever protected by what was once a unique and untested concept. At a time when Endangered Species Act (ESA) consultations focused only on the possible impacts of individual projects, the idea of protecting entire ecosystems was novel.

The Fish and Wildlife Service developed the concept of Habitat Conservation Plans (HCP) in an effort to reduce habitat fragmentation. This approach was enabled by a 1982 amendment to the ESA allowing private landowners to establish “conservation plans” and receive ESA protection under an “incidental take” permit. In 1983, the Service issued the nation’s first such permit for the San Bruno Mountain HCP. The Service worked out a process focused on collaboration, bringing differing interests together and getting them to agree on a plan. It meant everybody had to give up something and everyone gained something.

The San Bruno HCP protects most of the mountain habitat while allowing landowners to develop about 300 acres (120 ha). It has resulted in a more secure future for three listed species: the San Bruno elfin butterfly (*Callophrys mossii bayensis*), Mission blue butterfly (*Icaricia icarioides missionensis*), and San Francisco garter snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis tetrataenia*).

Much has been learned since that first effort. Newer HCPs often protect even larger areas and cover large numbers of non-listed species that benefit from habitat conservation before they reach a crisis condition, a lesson learned when the San Bruno HCP had to be amended to cover two

additional species listed after 1983. Newer HCPs also require a solid financial base to fund land acquisitions and habitat management expenses. The San Bruno HCP lacked funds to manage the saved habitat adequately, a shortcoming remedied with a recent amendment to the plan.

In the end, the open crest of San Bruno Mountain remains a vital habitat for native species and a treasure for the people of the Bay Area, thanks to the pioneering efforts at collaboration to protect large ecosystems.

The purple lupine, a plant critical to the mission blue butterfly, receives protection under the San Bruno Mountain HCP. Patrick Koebmus/USFWS

