

A BIG THICKET ASSOCIATION
STRATEGIC PLAN FOR THE STEWARDSHIP
OF THE BIG THICKET NATIONAL PRESERVE

MISSION STATEMENT

The area known as the Big Thicket is under severe threat from urban sprawl, oil and gas development, and diversion of water from its rivers to other parts of the State. The Big Thicket Association (BTA) is committed to expanding, enhancing and protecting the Big Thicket National Preserve (BTNP), a diverse natural resource of national and international significance, in order to assure the preservation, conservation and protection of the natural, scenic and recreational values of a significant portion of the Big Thicket region of southeast Texas.

A THREATENED PARK

The Big Thicket National Preserve, established in October 1974, was the FIRST National Park System "National Preserve". It was created specifically to protect a unique group of ecosystems featuring a remarkable amount of biodiversity. That biodiversity is now confronted by several threats that require quick but thoughtful response. Briefly, those threats are:

THREAT: FRAGMENTATION

Big Thicket has 436 miles of exterior boundaries that were once somewhat protected by neighboring timberlands. Recent divestitures of approximately 1.5 million acres in East Texas and Louisiana and subsequent sales to investors now expose fragile ecosystems to subdivisions, commercial development, trash dumping, herbicides, pesticides, fertilizer, and invasive species.

THREAT: U.S. 69 HIGHWAY EXPANSION

Expansion of US 69, with the associated frontage roads, overpasses, and access roads, will cut a wide swath through the countryside and will increase noise and air pollution, primarily at the Visitor Center, the Hickory Creek Savannah Unit, and the Turkey Creek Unit.

THREAT: OIL AND GAS EXPLORATION

Before the Preserve was established, 125-155 wells were drilled within the present boundary (many plugged and abandoned). Further exploration is allowed under the new *Oil and Gas Management Plan*, but the Preserve must administer the regulations rigorously.

THREAT: WATER RESOURCES / RESERVOIRS

Proposals to impound water upstream for inter-basin transfer may deprive some ecosystems of the needed natural flooding patterns. New dams on the upper and middle Neches would shrink the floodplain, extirpate some species, reduce recreational opportunities, encourages floodplain building, and destroy sites of social and historical value, such as small communities, cemeteries, and historic sites, such as Fort Teran.

THREAT: FUNDING AND STAFF SHORTFALLS

The Preserve today has fewer personnel than in the 1980s. Flat budgets or small percentage increases do not cover mandated salary increases and increased operating costs, forcing park managers to either reduce costs to cover salaries or leave positions vacant. There are too few resource managers and too few interpreters. Staff turnover and vacancies and the dearth of stable leadership have kept the Preserve from achieving its potential or to satisfactorily maintain the existing park.

ELEMENTS OF THE PLAN

I. LAND ACQUISITION, CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Goal: To advocate the acquisition within the next five years of additional lands within the confines of the Big Thicket for ultimate addition to the Big Thicket National Preserve

Strategies. BTA shall:

1. Seek authorization from the U.S. Congress for the conservation of important adjoining lands. A critical 33,000 acres are proposed. See Appendix 1 for the specific sites and rationale.
2. Assist BTNP in establishing conservation easements, gifts, and/or partnerships with conservation groups and landowners.
3. Help ensure adequate water for the Big Thicket by supporting the creation of the North Neches Wildlife Refuge and the Middle Neches State Park, and the designation of the Neches as a Wild and Scenic River. These efforts would protect critical Neches River flows and thousands of acres of high-quality bottomland hardwood habitat as well as numerous sites that feature rare biological assets, and archeological resources, such as the Mexican historical site at Fort Teran.

Goal: To assist BTNP, over the next twenty-five years, in the effort to conserve greater portions of traditional Big Thicket and Neches River bottoms. . BTA shall

Strategies. BTA shall:

1. Assist BTNP and/or others in conserving additional land in the Neches Flood Plain and old Bear Thicket from willing sellers.
2. Propose legislation to allow counties to protect critical environments with conservation incentives.

Goal: To assist BTNP in developing facilities that would make the Preserve more attractive and accessible to the public.

Strategies. BTA shall:

1. Assist BTNP in the creation of a user friendly trail from the Visitors Center.
2. Support BTNP in the construction of canoe launch and take out facilities
3. Assist BTNP in providing access to limited areas of the Thicket by automobile
4. Assist BTNP in developing a new hiking trail in the northern confines of the Big Thicket
5. Support the creation of a Birding Center in the area adjacent to the Visitor Center and other birding-friendly facilities.
6. Support, with the Texas Department of Transportation, the creation of safe bicycle trails in the Big Thicket area.

II. PARK OPERATIONS: FUNDING, STAFFING, AND LEADERSHIP

The Big Thicket National Preserve is designated by UNESCO as an International Biosphere Reserve, thus recognizing the incomparable and unique diversity of species and wildlife habitats in the Preserve. The National Parks Conservation Association has given a score of “fair”, 69 out of 100, to the present state of the Big Thicket Preserve. The methodology used to make the assessment considered the following

State of the natural resources, using three general categories:

environmental quality, biotic health and ecosystem integrity.

Cultural resources, which included the NPS's Cultural Resource Management Guideline

Stewardship, which includes protection of park resources, funding and staffing levels, planning documents, resource education, and external support.

The current configuration of funding, staffing and leadership in the Preserve has led to some very negative impacts on this precious national treasure. The Big Thicket Association hopes to encourage and develop Congressional support in addressing the following issues:

Goal: To support the placement and retention of stable, effective and competent leadership for BTNP.

Strategies. BTA shall:

1. Advise and assist the NPS in recruiting and placing in BTNP a full-time, permanent superintendent, and to encourage the retention of competent and effective department heads.
2. Encourage BTNP leadership to be open to opportunities for innovative position management and for achieving results outside the traditional organizational structure. Administrative tasks might be shared across positions. Park administrators should be alert to opportunities for the use of unpaid interns, Senior Aides, or participants in other job development programs.

Goal: To support the increase of staff positions for BTNP.

Strategies. BTA shall:

1. Strongly encourage the addition of natural resource specialists to protect the biodiversity of BTNP and to support the All Taxonomy Biodiversity Inventory.
2. Support the addition of Geographic Information Specialists (GIS), biology technicians, and ecology restoration technician. Additional law enforcement and maintenance personnel and a cultural resource specialist are also needed.

Goal: To support the increase of the BTNP budget and the more efficient use of available funds.

Strategies. BTA shall:

1. Support a significant increase in funding for environmental education and interpretation.
2. Recommend and assist in the design of public use facilities with maximum operational efficiencies so as to limit the demands on existing preserve staff and regional organizations
3. Encourage the consolidation of functions to increase efficiency while maintaining the integrity of BTNP borders and resources, and ensuring the safety of park visitors.
4. Assist BTNP in building and maintaining partnerships with park support groups and local citizens. The continued use of volunteers should be encouraged and supported by identifying functions which are suitable for volunteer activities, and by designing new facilities that provide opportunities for additional volunteer involvement.
5. Seek additional funding sources that might provide operational as well as developmental funds.

III. RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Goal: To support comprehensive research concerning the Big Thicket biota as management tools

Strategies. BTA shall:

1. Sponsor and support the All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory to identify and map the distribution and abundance each organism that exists within the park.
2. Assist in the creation of a data base that would encompass all of the natural and cultural resources of BTNP.
3. Strongly encourage pure and applied, natural and cultural, research, and should continue to assist with the Field Research Station, the Big Thicket Science Conference, and the publication of completed research.

Goal: To Protect, Conserve, and Preserve the flora, wildlife and ecosystems of the Big Thicket National Preserve.

Strategies, Five Years: BTA shall:

1. Work with TPWD, NatureServe, The Nature Conservancy and other entities to complete element occurrence records for plant and vegetation community associations.
2. Assist in the creation of a plant collection to be housed at the Big Thicket Research Station for access by Preserve staff, researchers and other interested parties.
3. Advocate the adoption and implementation of the International Vegetation Classification System for Preserve planning and management activities.
4. Include wetland longleaf pine savannas, American beech-southern magnolia forests and bald cypress-water tupelo swamp forests as priority communities for science and resource management efforts.
5. Assist in the conduct of baseline surveys on lands under protection as a result of recent land transactions including the Big Thicket Addition Act. Continue efforts to protect and to reintroduce plant species
6. Promote inventory and research on wildlife, particularly avian fauna
7. Support a program to reintroduce former wildlife, including black bears
8. Continue and expand efforts to control non-native species

Strategies, Ten Year: BTA shall:

1. Secure complete inventory of flora of the Preserve.
2. Develop and maintain unit database for flora and vegetation associations.
3. Expand education and outreach programs with the emphasis on the historical, cultural, ecological and aesthetic values of the flora of the Big Thicket.

Goal: To increase the use of fire management for threatened longleaf pine habitat

Strategies: BTA shall:

1. Support a fire management program that enhances and protects biodiversity by restoring and maintaining fire-dependent communities
2. Utilize prescribed fire to restore and maintain vegetative associations.
3. Include in the Preserve's education and outreach programs the importance of fire application for sustaining biodiversity.

Goal: To improve stream corridor management

Strategies: BTA shall:

1. Support and assist BTNP in managing the water corridors so as to prevent further degradation of its critical resources, water quality, and ecological integrity and to preserve the natural setting and restore as much of the pre-settlement scene as possible;
2. Continue to promote scientific inventory and monitoring programs of the riparian and aquatic ecosystems and human use of and impacts to the water corridor resources. This will allow management to establish and recognize threshold levels of adverse impacts and implement appropriate management actions.

Goal: To improve opportunities for observing birds and other wildlife

Strategies: BTA shall:

1. Assist BTNP in managing habitat for the Red-cockaded woodpecker and the Bachman's sparrow.
2. Develop birding module at Visitor Center and coordinate educational activities and enhanced facilities to attract birders as tourists.
3. Construct a Birding Center near the Big Thicket Visitors Center on Highway 69 that would capitalize on the Thicket as "Globally important birding area."

IV. Public Use and Support- Local and National

To enhance economic development through tourism while maintaining the unique biological heritage of the Big Thicket.

Goal: To diversify and expand communication concerning the opportunities available in the Big Thicket

Strategies: BTA shall:

1. Identify and develop partnerships with businesses, and local, regional and national organizations who share concerns about stewardship of natural resources and economic development through tourism.
2. Foster the creation of an organization that will serve as the electronic hub of a central communication network to collect and disseminate information about Big Thicket research, information, publications and events.
3. Create a media plan that will analyze current strategies, project new advertising and promotional options and when implemented have an international outreach.

Goal: To promote environmental literacy through collaborative learning that engages scientists, community leaders, educators and students.

Strategies: BTA shall:

1. Provide Keep Texas Beautiful training for community litter and solid waste reduction programs and forge partnerships to enhance community pride and public awareness on clean communities.
2. Assist in providing interpreter training and the development of Test of Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) based educational tools, accessible free of charge on the internet and through community resources and with corresponding field activities, for every grade level K-12.
3. Support Big Thicket Science Conference as an incentive for researchers and for students
4. Initiate and host well planned birding, heritage-historical, nature festivals and science based summer camps that will provide fun and informative educational experiences for participants.

Goal: To increase nature tourism, cultural heritage and recreation opportunities in the Big Thicket must be enhanced, expanded and diversified to link local, regional, national and international markets

Strategies: BTA shall:

1. Promote the Big Thicket in connection with a larger area (e.g. the entire Neches River Valley from Tyler to Beaumont) and develop infrastructure with a public/private partnership beyond the local area to regional, national and international markets.
2. Support development of visible Gateway communities that reflect the character of the Big Thicket by encouraging local entrepreneurs to increase tourism amenities inside Big Thicket towns.
3. Plan and coordinate quality birding educational experiences to promote “Globally Important Birding Area” through interpretation activities and site development.
4. Secure financial resources from both the public/private sectors to develop new recreational activities and facilities that promote comfortable, safe public use by tourists.