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Lessons from Transportation Agency Participation in Regional Conservation Initiatives

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# Lessons from Transportation Agency Participation in Regional Conservation Initiatives

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## Research Topic

Transportation agencies often struggle to balance wildlife habitat preservation with infrastructure development, leading to challenging approval processes for transportation projects in sensitive environments. The Endangered Species Act (ESA) requires that public and private project developers mitigate any harm to endangered species and receive a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS).

Transportation projects are typically permitted individually, which can be time-consuming and expensive. The ESA’s Regional Habitat Conservation Plan (RHCP) is a tool to help agencies protect the environment while streamlining the permit process for infrastructure development. By addressing environmental issues on a regional scale, RHCPs allow one permit to cover projects in multiple jurisdictions for up to 75 years. RHCPs are popular with transportation agencies, but they require unique collaboration with other stakeholders. Researchers at UCLA examined 21 RHCPs to better understand the nature of these institutional collaborations and ways to maintain them over time.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- RHCPs allow transportation agencies to save time and money through economies of scale in the purchase of conservation land.
- Transportation agency participation can improve ecological outcomes. Revenue from transportation agencies can provide initial funding for RHCP planning and implementation, enabling the formation of larger preserves.
- RHCPs can increase regional planning by strengthening regional organizations, incorporating new stakeholders in to the regional planning process, and creating new regional coalitions.
- RHCPs should be flexible enough to allow for changing circumstances and opportunistic participation.

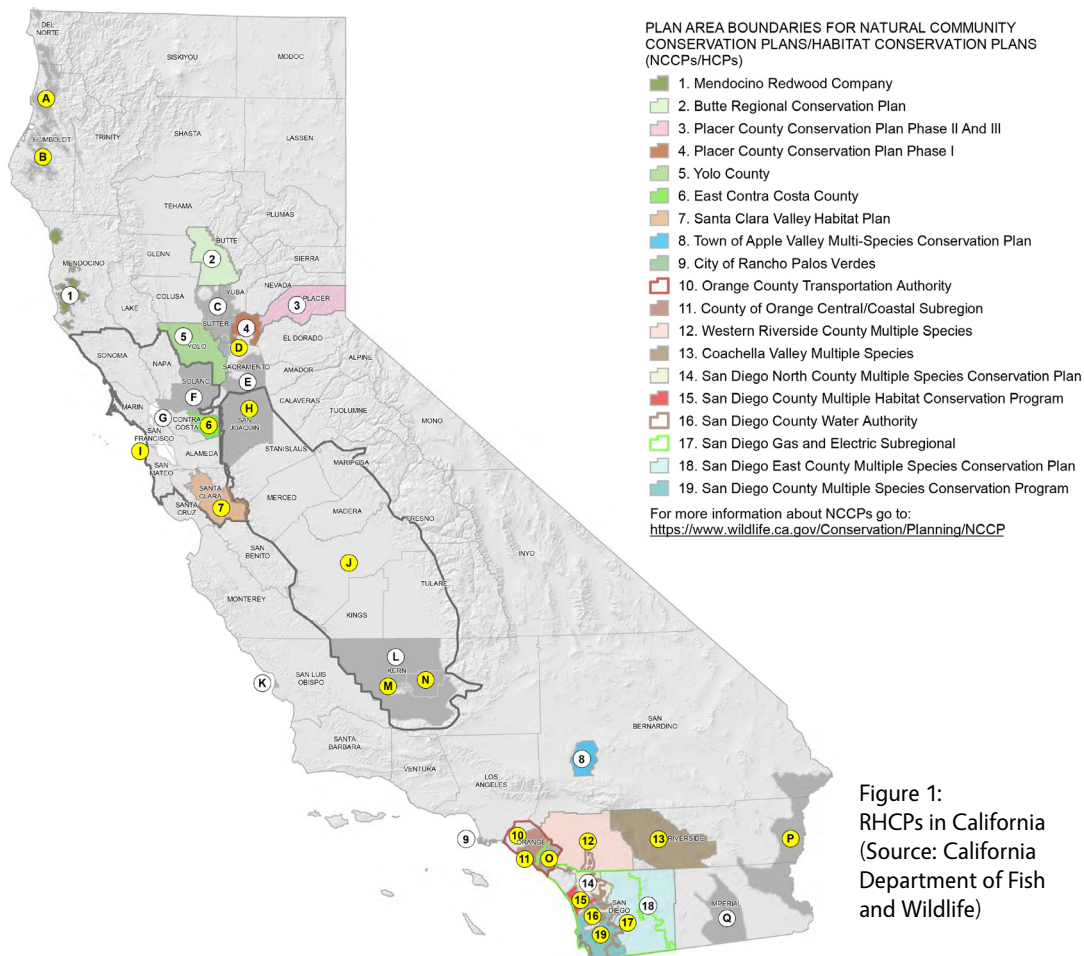


Figure 1: RHCPs in California (Source: California Department of Fish and Wildlife)

## Main Findings

- RHCPs are growing in popularity and importance because they facilitate both habitat preservation and infrastructure development. The plans allow regional stakeholders to anticipate and proactively resolve conflicts that are often associated with project-by-project permitting. RHCPs can guide regional development patterns through a variety of mechanisms, even without formal land use control.
- Transportation agency participation can improve ecological outcomes. Revenue from transportation agencies can provide initial funding for RHCP planning and implementation, enabling the purchase of land for larger preserves.
- RHCPs allow transportation agencies to save time and money on mitigating harm to endangered species. The plans allow regional stakeholders to anticipate and proactively resolve conflicts that are often associated with project-by-project permitting.
- RHCP planning and implementation can provide a basis for regional coordination on future environmental initiatives. The momentum created when a governance coalition forms around an RHCP helps agencies face the long-term planning challenges presented by air pollution, water pollution, and climate change.

**Transportation agencies benefit and provide support to regional conservation plans, and should play an integral role in meeting increasingly regional environmental planning challenges.**

## Study

Researchers at UCLA examined 21 RHCPs in urban, suburban, and rural counties in multiple states, focusing on California and Texas. The resulting case studies on these RHCPs include analysis of planning documents and interviews with RHCP, FWS, and transportation agency representatives.

## Conclusion / Recommendations

- Transportation agencies, particularly at the state level, should proactively participate in regional environmental planning. These agencies are an integral part of the regional planning process, and their participation is essential to conserving biodiversity. State agencies could use the experience gained through project delivery across county lines to help coordinate regional approaches to transportation project planning and implementation.
- RHCPs should incorporate new stakeholders in the regional planning process, expanding the capacity of institutions for regional planning by creating new coalitions.
- RHCPs should be flexible enough to allow for changing environmental and economic circumstances and opportunistic participation.

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*Brief by Ryan Yowell*

