

Gazzam Lake Preserve is supposed to be preserved

By Paul J. Kundtz • May 19, 2023

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A recent article in the *New York Times* should give us pause. “Wildlife is disappearing around the world, in the oceans and on land. The main cause on land is perhaps the most straightforward. Humans are taking over too much of the planet, erasing what was there before.”

The Gazzam Lake Preserve is the largest and most important wildlife preserve on Bainbridge Island. After a three-year campaign, the work of hundreds of volunteers, and voter approval of a \$2.25 million bond levy, the property was purchased in 1995 subject to a strict conservation easement held by the BI Land Trust and restrictions for its use imposed by a state wildlife grant for \$1 million. Many island residents donated money for this preserve.

From its inception, the Gazzam Lake Preserve was never intended to be an active, multi-use park like most other parks on BI. It is unique in the limitations of its use. Its conservation easement provides that, “The purposes of this easement are (i) to assure that the property will remain forever as a scenic area, forestland, watershed, wetlands and wildlife habitat ... (v) to prevent any use of the property that will substantially impair or interfere with the conservation values ...”

Unfortunately, the original intent and the terms of the conservation easement have been forgotten or ignored. Also, many Bainbridge residents have arrived after the conservation of the property, and are not aware of its history and appropriate use.

Over the years, neighbors have created private, unauthorized access trails into the park and cut through wildlife habitat. Off-leash dogs run throughout the preserve, scaring away wildlife. Electric bikes zoom through the preserve, though they’re prohibited there. Some visitors walk and bike off the designated trails. Other visitors engage in geocaching, a game of finding hidden treasures, also off the trails.

Recently, a proposed new trail from Winslow to Gazzam Lake will, under its current plan, create a new major access into the preserve and through the heart of the largest undisturbed woodland wildlife habitat in it.

Each inappropriate activity, occurring on or planned for the preserve, negatively impacts wildlife habitat. Almost all these activities violate specific terms of the conservation easement, and they all undermine the purpose of the Preserve. The cumulative detrimental impacts of these activities are very large.

Recent scientific studies demonstrate that trails adversely impact wildlife. One study released last year concluded that wild animals are far more sensitive to humans on trails than previously thought. A scientist at the University of Washington who participated in this research said, “These results are striking in showing that really any level of human activity can have an effect on wildlife.”

A recent study in Portland concludes that “The presence of dogs causes wildlife to move away, temporarily or permanently, reducing the amount of available habitat in which to feed, breed and rest.”

There are solutions to these problems. The western end of the Winslow-to-Gazzam-Lake trail can be rerouted to the originally planned, current entrance on Marshall Road. The BI Metro Parks and Recreation District and the Land Trust can work collaboratively to resolve two issues associated with that route. The Park District can increase efforts to block unauthorized access trails.

At the two current access points, it can also install signs that identify the activities that are not allowed in the Preserve. The Land Trust’s recently installed signs describing wildlife in the Preserve are a good start, but more information is needed. Volunteers can monitor the preserve and educate the public as they enter it. We can learn from Rainier, Olympic, North Cascades, and most other National Parks, where pets are kept off trails to protect wild animals.

The Friends of Gazzam Lake seek to restore habitat and protect wildlife at the Preserve. Our group is comprised of members of the Gazzam Lake campaign and Advisory Committee, former members of the Land Trust board, professional wildlife biologists, biology teachers, two of the region’s leading bird experts, wildlife stewards, and others who care about wildlife.

For details, go to www.Gazzam.org.



Paul Kundtz is a member of Friends of Gazzam Lake, a founder of the BI Land Trust, and co-led the three-year campaign for the lake’s acquisition and protection. He is also a former park district commissioner.