



*Saving The Places We Care About®*

Western Pennsylvania  
Conservancy's

County  
Natural  
Heritage  
Inventory  
Program

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Western Pennsylvania Conservancy's County Natural Heritage Program provides a unique service to the counties of western Pennsylvania. In our public presentations and meetings, we often receive a range of questions about our County Natural Heritage Inventory studies. To help interested residents of the county better understand these studies, here are answers to the questions we typically receive.

## What is a County Natural Heritage Inventory?

A County Natural Heritage Inventory (CHNI) is a systematic study of the biological resources of a county. It includes plants, animals, natural communities and habitats that are important to these living resources.

## Why do it?

As a fundamental aspect of natural resource information, County Natural Heritage Inventory results are incorporated into county comprehensive plans and serve to identify important resources for consideration in county and local development and conservation efforts. These studies are important links in community and economic development, especially as initiatives, such as Growing Greener and Growing Smarter, focus attention and funds on planning throughout the state. With greater emphasis on municipal-level planning and more flexibility within the Municipalities Planning Code (MPC) through the state's Growing Smarter legislation, County Natural Heritage Inventories provide important insight into resources that are shared assets among municipalities and the residents of the county.



## How is it done and who does it?

Western Pennsylvania Conservancy (WPC) conducts these studies for the counties. WPC staff scientists collect, analyze and compile County Natural Heritage Inventory information obtained from aerial photography, aerial reconnaissance, on-the-ground field surveys, interpretation of resource maps, interviews with knowledgeable people and the review of historic information and literature. The Pennsylvania Natural Diversity Inventory, Pennsylvania Game Commission, Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission and in-county agencies also furnish information pertaining to the county under study.

## Who is Western Pennsylvania Conservancy?

Established in 1932, Western Pennsylvania Conservancy is a private non-profit natural resource conservation organization headquartered in Pittsburgh. WPC's mission is to enrich the human relationship

with the natural world by saving the places we care about. As part of its mission, WPC works to sustain the natural heritage of our Commonwealth: its native plant, animal and habitat resources. To reach its goals, WPC takes direct independent action and also establishes partnerships with agencies and organizations having similar

interests. County Natural Heritage Inventories are conducted by WPC through such partnerships.

## What does an inventory reveal?

An inventory pulls together information from many sources, including data collected during the study. When information is combined, studied and prioritized, the inventory presents a picture of the unique and important living resources in the county: what they are, where they are and what they require to survive.

## How much does an inventory cost?

County Natural Heritage Inventory budgets vary depending upon the geography of the county, specific areas of focus within the county, amount of public land and accessibility. Geographic Information System (GIS) capabilities and needs within the county are other considerations. Generally, a CNHI will cost between \$80,000 and \$100,000.

## Who pays for it?

County Natural Heritage Inventories are funded through a number of sources. The Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Office of Wild Resources Conservation along with the Department of Community and Economic Development supply about 80 percent of the total funds. A mix of sources that can include private foundations and individuals, county funds, and other state programs supplies the remaining 20 percent of the funds necessary to conduct these studies. Western Pennsylvania Conservancy has worked and



will continue to work closely with counties to secure matching funds for inventory projects.

## Who oversees an inventory?

The county administers this study, usually through planning or conservation district staff. County professional staff participate to assure that the products of the inventory are in line with the needs of the county and other users of the study. Western Pennsylvania Conservancy staff maintain regular contact with county staff and seek guidance regarding information sources and contacts.

## Which lands are inventoried?

County Natural Heritage Inventories cover the entire county and consider both public and private lands. Field staff do not visit sites without contacting landowners and obtaining permission. Western Pennsylvania Conservancy staff inform landowners of their findings and can furnish management information, if requested.

## How do local communities and residents get involved?

The public is encouraged to participate in inventory projects. Public presentations at the beginning of the process solicit input and questions. Recommendation forms distributed throughout the project ask for suggestions of areas that should be considered as part of the inventory. Valuable input from agency personnel, local naturalists and outdoor enthusiasts contributes to the inventory process. Additional public presentations near and after completion of the project inform people of the results and utility of the inventory. Western Pennsylvania Conservancy staff interact with landowners who grant permission to visit their properties and who have further interest in the information collected.

## How will it affect development?

A County Natural Heritage Inventory (CNHI) helps to plan for development. Because the inventory is not part of any legal or regulatory mandate, it holds no power to regulate land use. The Department of Environmental Protection and other state and local





agencies hold the regulatory powers within the county. CNHIs can actually streamline economic and infrastructure development by providing sensitive environmental information early in the planning process when adjustments can be made at little cost or delay.

### **How long does it take?**

An inventory normally requires two years to allow staff to accomplish adequate survey and analysis of potential sites, and to provide the products and services desired by the county.

### **What are the products of the inventory?**

Final results provide a list of the most important biological sites, identify the resources and map their locations. Sites are prioritized and recommendations regarding the management of the biological resources present are included. The inventory produces a written report and maps of the entire county that identify Natural Heritage Areas. County agencies, municipalities and other interested parties designated by the county and advisory committee receive copies of the report. Residents and the general public can reference the reports through county agencies and libraries. Additionally, County Natural Heritage Inventory information will be available electronically and through other publications for the general public.

### **Where have they been done?**

Almost one-half of the counties in the state have been inventoried. By the year 2000, Western Pennsylvania Conservancy had completed inventories in Allegheny, Beaver, Bedford, Butler, Centre, Clinton, Erie, Fayette, Washington and Westmoreland counties. Work continues in many of the other counties in western Pennsylvania. The state-wide goal is to complete the remaining counties in the state by 2006.

### **Can county residents use it?**

- Residents can use County Natural Heritage Inventories and associated materials to better understand the unique natural resources of the places where they live.
- Schools can use the inventories as teaching aids and arrange to have presentations and outings as part of their curricula.
- Groups and organizations with an interest in natural history, conservation or tourism can take advantage of the inventories to further their educational goals and to inform their work and decision-making.
- Residents involved with open space, greenway, rails-to-trails or park projects can use the inventory to help plan and prioritize their efforts.



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