

CHAPTER 7

Natural & Cultural Resources



Donner Summit has a rich historical background and stunning scenery on the crest of the Sierra. The natural environment is identified as one of the main reasons most residents have chosen to live and work in the Donner Summit area. One of the central themes expressed throughout the public visioning meetings is the community's core value to preserve the environments natural and cultural resources (NCR-4.3). There is a commitment to open space, sustainability, green building practices, balanced growth and wildlife preservation. Planning for air quality, water quality, and wildlife is imperative to provide the quality of life for future generations.

The treasured landscape hosts an incredible array of wildlife habitat, including creeks and lakes, mountain meadows, old growth forests, and important wildlife corridors. The area's high elevation (6500 ft. – 8000 ft.) is characterized by its upper mountain forests and meadows transitioning to subalpine at its highest elevations. The scenic lakes, streams, meadows, and old growth forests are framed under the mountain peaks of Mt. Lincoln, Mt. Disney, Devil's Peak, Donner Peak, Castle Peak and Mt. Judah. The area's landscape is habitat for an incredible array of wildlife and plant species. Protection of this habitat must include work to eradicate and prevent the spread of invasive species (NCR-1.6). The Area Plan must maintain habitats for all indigenous species and give particular attention to protect the wetlands and meadows of Donner Summit (NCR-2.7). Any development must protect the environmentally sensitive Lake Van Norden area (NCR-1.7). The high mountain meadows and wetlands play a vital role in the regions hydrologic processes, providing water quality protection, flood regulation and a biodiverse species habitat. Any development must improve and maintain the river watershed and water quality of Donner Summits lakes, creeks and rivers (NCR-1.1).

The Donner Summit community has made a significant financial commitment to conservation through grass roots fundraising campaigns including the recent public acquisition of Royal Gorge's nearly 3000 acres which previously was slated for a massive residential and commercial development. In addition Billy Mack Canyon above Donner Lake and Johnson Canyon across the highway in the Castle Peak Wilderness are permanently protected with conservation easements (NCR-1.10). This land combined with public forest lands will ensure preservation of over 6000 acres of contiguous open space on the summit. Preservation of the natural resources with open space is a key factor in enhancing the experiences for locals and visitors. Development in the area must employ best management practices for forest health including thinning dense timber and reduction of hazardous fuels (NCR-1.2). The quality of life and visitors experience is enriched by the aesthetic and scenic values of the landscape and prominent ridgelines that must be protected (NCR-2.1). Development must provide a buffer of open space protecting sensitive habitats and species (NCR-2.3) while minimizing the removal of native vegetation (NCR-2.4).

Climate change is appropriately a great concern for the community. The impact of climate changes in the coming decades on precipitation patterns on Donner Summit will impact water supply, sewage treatment options and catastrophic wildfire frequency and destabilization of the ski economy. The existing wastewater plant operated by the Donner Summit Public Utility District at Soda Springs is near capacity. The importance of this area to downstream communities is underscored as being the headwaters and watershed for the Truckee River, the North Fork of the American River, and the South Yuba Rivers which are critical to California's water supply, and is recognized by state and federal laws protecting them under Wild and Scenic status. Any new development must not impact the flow of the South Yuba River as regulated by the flood management ordinance (NCR-2.2). Healthy environmental

conditions on Donner Summit affect the whole State's water system (NCR-1.9). The exponential temperature increases have led to several years of drought conditions with profound side effects to the State's economy. The snowpack, a major contributor to the local and State economy, is projected to decrease, resulting in shorter ski seasons. Concern for climate change must also include limiting greenhouse gas emissions created by new development projects by encouraging public transportation, passive solar design (NCR-2.5), and promotion of green building design and construction (NCR-2.6).

Future land use decisions on Donner Summit should consider how they will influence climate change and resiliency. It is important to recognize the challenges and encourage conservation efforts to protect the area from the hazardous impacts of climate change (NCR-1.5). Greater environmental stewardship might involve, resort operators providing employee shuttles, employee housing (Sugar Bowl is the only resort that provides employee housing), water efficiency programs, and preventing fragmentation of open space to support ecosystem health, wildlife corridors, and recreational opportunities. Preserving connected open space is essential to maintaining the Donner Summit experience for locals, tourists, and the diversity of species along the crest of the Sierra Nevada. Along with ecosystem health, conserving a meaningful network of open space also supports the active lifestyle of residents and visitors, a win-win for all (NCR-1.4).

Donner Summit's historic landmarks are valuable features of the area's past and should be preserved and promoted. Informational signage for historical and cultural resources is encouraged (NCR-4.5). There is to be preservation and restoration of historical, archeological, and culturally significant landmarks as recommended by the Donner Summit Historical Society (NCR-3.3). Where possible the County will allow flexibility of development standards for remodeling of historic buildings to maintain the character of the Soda Springs community (NCR-4.2, NCR-4.4). Property owners should understand the value of restoration, as opposed to new construction (NCR-4.1). In addition to the recreation activities visitors may be drawn to the area by the unique cultural features such as Martis Tribe petroglyphs and grinding stones, historical connection to the Donner Party story, wagon ruts along the Emigrant Trail, the China Wall and other transcontinental railroad wonders, the world's first vehicle underpass and first transcontinental telegraph. Signage, special events and promotional publicity could help the community to capitalize on these unique cultural and historical resources (NCR-3.2).

A. EXISTING NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

NATURAL RESOURCES



Biological Resources

Sixteen species of amphibians, 20 species of mammals, and at least 100 species of birds are known to inhabit on Donner Summit. Home to more than one third of all plant families in California, the area's diverse flowering plant population provides habitat for one of the richest butterfly faunas documented in North America.



Wetlands and Meadows

The high mountain meadows of Donner Summit play an important role in the region's complex system of hydrologic processes, and species habitat. Donner Summit is the headwaters for the Yuba, American, and Truckee Rivers. Lake Van Norden was drained in 1977, the meadow is the largest high elevation wetland in the County. The clear seasonal streams and subalpine lakes of Donner Summit are some of its most appreciated resources.



Forests

Outside of National Parks, one of the only remaining large stands of virgin, old-growth forests in California is found in the Donner Summit region. These forests have developed over centuries to include large-diameter, old-growth trees, snags, and downed logs. Increasingly rare in the northern Sierra, they provide essential habitat for important species such as the California Spotted Owl, Northern Goshawk, and Pine Marten.



Mountains

The high mountain peaks – Mt. Lincoln, Mt. Disney, Castle Peak, Donner Peak, Mt. Judah, Devil’s Peak – provide a magnificent backdrop to the lakes, streams, meadows, and forests.

CULTURAL RESOURCES AND LANDMARKS



Native Americans

Native Americans left evidence of their crossings in the form of petroglyphs and grinding stones. Historically part of the Washoe tribe territory, Donner Pass was a trading route for many Native American tribes for thousands of years.



Emigrants

The first emigrants to arrive in California with wagons came over Donner Summit, and events surrounding the Donner party represent one of the best-known events in California history.



Chinese Laborers

The China Wall stands 75-feet and was hand built by Chinese laborers during construction of the transcontinental railroad. The wall contains no mortar and is still standing over a century later.



Rainbow Bridge

One of the most beautiful bridges in California, the Rainbow Bridge overlooks Donner Lake along Old Highway 40. The 240-foot bridge was completed in 1926 and was the first bridge built with a grade change and compound curve. The first transcontinental highway (the Lincoln Highway) crossed through Soda Springs on its way over Donner Summit.

B. NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES GOALS & POLICIES

NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES VISION

Protect and preserve the natural and cultural resources of Donner Summit for the enjoyment and education of future generations (NCR-4.6). A Native American proverb says “we do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children.” In order to ensure that future generations are able to live, work and play on Donner Summit, there must be a community-wide commitment to transform the area into a more sustainable community (NCR-3.1).

GOAL NCR-1: ENCOURAGE THE CONTINUED DIVERSITY OF NATURAL RESOURCES INCLUDING TIMBER, ECOSYSTEMS, WATERSHEDS, VIEWSHEDS, AND AIR QUALITY ON DONNER SUMMIT.

Policy NCR-1.1: Water

Improve and maintain the water quality of Donner Summit's lakes, creeks, and rivers. Protect and enhance the South Yuba River watershed and tributaries to the Truckee River and the North Fork American River watersheds in the Donner Summit area.

Policy NCR-1.2: Forest

Employ best management practices for forest health including regular thinning of dense timber stands and removal of understory vegetation in order to reduce the intensity of naturally occurring wildfire and prevent catastrophic wildfire. Expand permanent protection of Donner Summit forest resources.

Policy NCR-1.3: Wildlife Habitat

Maintain suitable habitats for all indigenous species of wildlife through maintenance, improvement and protection of habitat diversity. Protect endangered, threatened, or rare species, buffer from conflicting land uses, and increase habitat connectivity. Protect the wide array of habitat and the incredible range of biodiversity on Donner Summit.

Policy NCR-1.4: Open Space

Cooperate with Local, State and Federal agencies and other public and quasi-public organizations and agencies in the acquisition, restoration and maintenance of open space for natural resource protection and enhancement.

Policy NCR-1.5: Climate

Recognize the challenging climate on Donner Summit and the impact of climate change on the region's landscape and resources. Encourage conservation efforts to protect the region from the impacts of climate change.

Policy NCR-1.6: Invasive Species

Support public and private efforts to prevent, manage, or eradicate invasive species especially at the headwaters and along water courses, and in sensitive habitat areas, along public roadways, and public spaces.

Policy NCR-1.7: Lake Van Norden

Protect from development the environmentally sensitive and regionally significant Lake Van Norden area, also known as Summit Valley.

Policy NCR-1.8: Places of Interest

Encourage informational signage for the Lake Van Norden/Summit Valley area for educational purposes regarding the natural and historical importance of the area.

Policy NCR-1.9: Headwaters

Recognize the importance of the Donner Summit region to the broader Central Sierra and downstream ecosystems.

Policy NCR-1.10: Commitment to Conservation

Provide for the protection, maintenance and restoration of such unique eco-systems as wetlands, meadows, and riparian and other native vegetation. Promote use of native, water-efficient, nutrient-efficient, fire-resistant and non-invasive vegetation in the plan area.

GOAL NCR-2: ENSURE THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT DOES NOT ADVERSLY AFFECT NATURAL RESOURCES IN THE DONNER SUMMIT AREA.

Policy NCR-2.1: Scenic Protection

Preserve the extraordinary aesthetic quality and scenic values of the Donner Summit area, including the following prominent ridgelines in Nevada County: Castle Peak, Beacon Hill, Boreal Ridge, and Signal Hill. Request consultation with Placer County when development is proposed on the following prominent ridgelines in Placer County: Donner Peak, Mount Judah, Mount Lincoln, Crow's Nest, Rowton Peak, and Devil's Peak. Examine impacts to the identified landscape views from roadways, bike paths, and public areas for all proposed development.

Policy NCR-2.2: Flood Management

Ensure new development does not impact the flow of the South Yuba River consistent with the Flood Management Ordinance.

Policy NCR-2.3: Environmental Protection

Ensure new development complies with resource protection standards such as permanent open space and buffers to natural resources to protect environmentally sensitive habitats and species.

Policy NCR-2.4: Vegetation

Minimize the removal of native vegetation.

Policy NCR-2.5: Air Quality

Maintain and improve regional air quality and limit greenhouse gas emissions by encouraging the following types of features for new development projects in the Donner Summit area: public transportation, alternative transportation, reduced parking standards, and south facing buildings.

Policy NCR-2.6: Energy Efficiency

Encourage energy efficiency in new development projects and in remodel projects to comply with the highest standards for green building design and construction.

Policy NCR-2.7: Stream Zones

Protect the wetlands and meadows of Donner Summit.

GOAL NCR-3: INCREASE PUBLIC AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE CULTURE AND HISTORY OF DONNER SUMMIT AND ITS IMPORTANCE TO THE ECONOMIC VITALITY OF SODA SPRINGS.

Policy NCR-3.1: Stewardship

Foster a community sense of stewardship and personal responsibility for all historic and cultural resources.

Policy NCR-3.2: Public Visitation

Whenever possible, encourage public accessibility of historically eligible structures and sites, even if only for temporary or special events.

Policy NCR-3.3: Partnerships

Cooperate with the Donner Summit Historical Society, other local historical organizations, and historians to identify significant historical and cultural resources, and to educate the public on the positive benefits of historic preservation.

GOAL NCR-4: IDENTIFY, PROTECT, ENHANCE, AND WHERE FEASIBLE RESTORE SIGNIFICANT ARCHEOLOGICAL, CULTURAL, AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES ON DONNER SUMMIT INCLUDING HISTORIC LANDSCAPES, SITES, BUILDINGS, FEATURES AND ARTIFACTS.

Policy NCR-4.1: Rehabilitate

Encourage the preservation of existing historic resources by educating property owners on the value of rehabilitation and/or restoration of existing structures as opposed to new construction.

Policy NCR-4.2: Historic Register

Encourage the inclusion of significant archaeological and cultural resources in the Federal or State Historical Register based on the recommendation of the local historical society or a qualified professional. Sites and structures designated as historically, culturally, or archaeologically significant shall be given special incentives and exemptions to promote the preservation and restorations of such structures and sites.

Policy NCR-4.3: Resource Protection

Establish permanent open space by utilizing project design techniques such as clustering and restricted building sites to protect sensitive cultural and historical resources. Identify and protect historical or culturally significant landmarks in the area from damage or alteration.

Policy NCR-4.4: Reuse

Encourage the adaptive reuse of historic buildings and where possible allow for maximum flexibility of development standards for remodeling of historic buildings to maintain the character of the Soda Springs community and Donner Summit area.

Policy NCR-4.5: Signage

Encourage consistent informational signage for historical and cultural resources.

Policy NCR-4.6: Preserve

Preserve the history and scenery of Donner Summit as the portal to California and as a primary recreational and economic resource. Encourage innovative techniques to preserve archaeological and historic sites by gift, private conservancies and easements.

Policy NCR-4.7: Archeological Investigations

Nevada County shall require archeological investigations for all applicable discretionary projects, in accordance with CEQA regulations, for areas not previously surveyed and/or that are determined sensitive for cultural resources. The County shall require the preservation of discovered archeologically significant resources (as determined based on local, State, and Federal standards by a qualified professional) in place if feasible, or provide mitigation (avoidance, excavation, documentation, curation, data recovery, or other appropriate measures) prior to further disturbance.

C. NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES STRATEGIES

The following actions or improvements are necessary to implement the goals and policies listed above.

1. Identify areas for wildlife observation and nature appreciation and identify opportunities for supporting improvements such as viewing platforms and trails.

2. Adopt a natural resource management plan to manage wildfire prevention, water conservation, energy conservation, and biodiversity protection.

FIGURE 7-1: NATURAL RESOURCES MAP

