

# Elberta Dunes South Natural Area Management Plan

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*Photo by Michael Collins*

*Let Our Resources Work For You.*



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# Elberta Dunes South Natural Area Management Plan

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# Elberta Dunes South Natural Area

The Elberta Dunes South Natural Area consists of 63 acres of open and forested dunes, meadow, and shoreline, with over 1,400 feet of Lake Michigan frontage. The Natural Area's ridgelines offer spectacular views of Lake Michigan, Betsie Lake, the Betsie River State Game Area, and the Betsie River Valley; and its forests, field, and dune areas are home to a variety of plants and wildlife species. This unique property has long been used by the public for recreation, and in 2011 was officially purchased and designated by the Village of Elberta as a public natural area.

This Management Plan is intended to provide guidance for future activities and improvements at the Natural Area. Management objectives are based on the goals of preserving and protecting the quality natural

environment of the property, while providing for public access and recreation. Implementation of Management Plan recommendations will begin once the plan has been approved by the Elberta Village Council.

This plan should be reviewed often to ensure that goals are attained and that the park is being managed in accordance with the management goals and objectives.

## Natural Area Description

The Village of Elberta is essentially a small peninsula, with its western, northern, and eastern boundaries defined by Lake Michigan, Betsie Lake, and the Betsie River, respectively. The Elberta Dunes South Natural Area is located along the southwestern edge of the



*View from one of the highest points on the property, looking south over Lake Michigan. Photo by Michael Collins, courtesy of Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy.*



bird watching opportunities for fall and spring migrations of shorebirds, waterfowl, raptors, and warblers.

### Property Acquisition

A Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund grant was received in 2010 to assist with property acquisition. Fundraising efforts were led by the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy. The Village took ownership of the Natural Area in 2011. The Natural Area was officially opened and dedicated on October 15, 2011.

An endowment fund has been established to support activities that will facilitate public access and passive recreation at the Natural Area, and to protect its natural features. The fund may also support options to purchase contiguous land for similar purposes.

### Current and Historic Use

Even while privately-owned, the Natural Area was often used by the public as a recreational area: hiking, dog walking, hunting, snowshoeing, and cross country skiing have been popular activities in the Natural Area for decades.

Over the years, a number of social trails have been established on the property, running from the southeast corner of the field and the northern end of the field (at the end of Lincoln Ave) into loops within the interior of the property. More recently, an additional trail was developed in order to provide access to the tremendous views from the ridgelines. The



## Michigan's Critical Dunes

Michigan's sand dunes are a unique natural resource of global significance. Collectively, they represent the largest assemblage of fresh water dunes in the world and support numerous threatened and endangered species. Michigan's dunes are home to five federally listed threatened and endangered species. The combination of topographic relief, vegetation and climatic conditions are a phenomena unique to the State of Michigan. The dunes support a wide diversity of habitats - from cool forests of maple and hemlock, to the harsh environment of the open dunes, to quiet interdunal ponds teeming with life.

*- Michigan Department of Natural Resources*

*Photo by Michael Collins, courtesy of Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy.*

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*View facing north from the Natural Area. Photo courtesy of Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy*

field is used by walkers and skiers, and the grass and shrub habitat also offers birdwatching and wildlife viewing opportunities for a number of species.

The Natural Area's Lake Michigan frontage, which connects with a stretch of undeveloped beach extending over a mile to the north, is a surf-fishing destination that attracts visitors from throughout the region and the state, particularly in the spring and fall, for steelhead and brown trout.

A grass parking lot and trailhead are located in the field fronting M-22 (Frankfort Ave). Signage, installed in 2011, marks the access to the trailhead.



# Planning Considerations

Appropriate activities and uses of the Elberta Dunes Natural Area will be defined in large measure by its fragile natural environment. Highly erodible soils and steep slopes preclude intensive uses, and the property's status as a critical dune limits development: earthmoving, vegetation removal, and construction activities are all prohibited in certain areas of the dunes. As such, management of the Natural Area must occur within the parameters of Michigan's critical dunes requirements, while enhancing and preserving the sensitive environmental areas, endangered species habitat, and other unique resources of the Natural Area.

## Uses and Activities

While the Natural Area has historically been used for a variety of activities, its unique topography and sensitive environment make it best suited to low-impact trails that provide hiking, snowshoeing, and bird or wildlife watching. Soils and steep slopes prohibit mountain biking, motorized vehicles, and other intensive uses of the property within much of the interior of the site. Firearm hunting is not permitted within the Village limits.



*Photo by Michael Collins, courtesy of Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy.*

Cross-country skiing is not recommended for the steep, wooded portions of the site.

### **Trails**

Trail access to the interior begins at two locations: the first is located in the southeast corner of the field, and the second begins at the north end of the field (via Lincoln Ave.) The access trails come together and wind up the hills through the interior of the property in several loops.

A trail to the ridgeline provides views of Lake Michigan and surrounding areas. However, the steep slopes and sandy soils in this area are prone to erosion, and stabilization measures are required to make the trail sustainable over the long term. Log reinforcements as well as a staircase have been discussed as potential actions that could provide sustainable access to a lookout area on the ridgeline.

Additionally, soils and slopes leading from the interior of the property to Lake Michigan would make for difficult and potentially dangerous hiking down to the beach, thus precluding trails to the beach from the dune area. For any lookout or viewing areas developed on the ridgeline, a barrier and signage may be considered in order to discourage access to the beach from the interior of the property.

Public input indicated an interest in the possibility of additional trail routes within the interior of the property.

### *Accessibility*

Because of regulatory and environmental limitations to development in the Natural Area, universal accessibility features are not planned for the property. However, universally accessible recreation opportunities are available at the Elberta Historic Waterfront Park and Betsie Valley Trail, and planned upgrades to Elberta Lake Michigan Beach park will improve access to the beach and create universally accessible picnic and restroom facilities.

### **Access, Facilities, and Improvements**

With the exception of signage and a parking area to better facilitate public use, improvements and management will be focused on providing low-impact, non-motorized recreational opportunities at this site.

A grassy parking area is currently available in the open field along M-22. Access may be improved by development of a gravel parking lot.

A pedestrian or bicycle access may be considered for the end of Lincoln Avenue, where a social trail currently exists. A non-motorized access in this location could present an opportunity to connect with the nearby Betsie Valley Trail, a 23 mile trail that links communities and parks throughout the County. Access to the trail is available in Elberta, and serves as an accessible non-motorized linkage to the City of Frankfort. Signage or designated routes directing Betsie Valley Trail users

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through the Village to the Natural Area could raise awareness and encourage usage of the park.

Other improvements that may be appropriate in the parking area may include a picnic area, bike rack, and restrooms. A pit toilet may minimize maintenance needs.

### Signage

Additional signage relative to trail routes and difficulty levels, permitted activities, and access issues, as well as designated routes for snowmobiles, will help to ensure appropriate usage of the Natural Area.

### Motorized Vehicle Access

Motorized vehicles, including snowmobiles and off-road vehicles, have historically accessed the Natural Area through Lakeside Boulevard,

which also provides access to Elberta Lake Michigan Beach and adjacent privately-owned properties. Previous vehicle use on the property has compromised its environmental quality by causing erosion and destruction of dune plants.

In the past, the Village has worked to prevent vehicles on both Village-owned and privately owned beach and dunes through the use of signage and berms. Natural Area management activities will continue efforts towards addressing this issue. Additional signage, public awareness efforts, and enforcement may help to prevent motorized access on the dunes and beach; while designated snowmobile/ORV trails may also be effective in directing snowmobilers away from sensitive areas within the park.



*View from the foredunes looking out over the beach near the center of the west line of the property. Photo by Michael Collins, courtesy of Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy.*

### Shoreline Access and Adjacent Properties

The western boundary of the Natural Area consists of about a quarter-mile of Lake Michigan beach frontage, which connects with adjacent privately-owned beach and dunes that stretches to the north for about a mile. However, given the steep, difficult terrain that prohibits hiking along the western-facing slope of the Natural Area, the only access to the Natural Area beach frontage is through privately-owned property along the shoreline. Some discussion has been held regarding trail easements through adjacent properties in order to provide access to the Natural Area beach.

In order to discourage hiking from the beach up the dunes, additional signage should be installed in the beach area to direct park users to access hiking trails from the parking lot near M-22.

### Maintenance

Despite the low-impact character of the park, ongoing maintenance and cleanup will be necessary, particularly in the spring, with litter and brush pickup needed at regular intervals. Installing garbage cans at park entrances and other locations throughout the park could also help in keeping the park clean.

Trail maintenance will require mowing in the old field portion of the property, and addressing overgrowth in wooded portions of the property.



*Photo courtesy of Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy.*

### Invasive Species

A number of invasive species have been identified on or near the property. Garlic mustard was removed from some areas within the Natural Area in 2010-2011; however, the property should continue to be monitored for new garlic mustard growth, as seeds can remain viable for up to 11 years.

Scotch pine and autumn olive are present on the property as well, primarily in the field area. Baby's breath is abundant on adjacent property to the north. The dunes and beach areas should be monitored for baby's breath and blue lyme grass to prevent their growth into the Natural Area.

# Elberta Dunes South Natural Area Management Plan

## Natural Area Administration

The Elberta Dunes South Natural Area is managed with oversight from the Elberta Village Council. However, many of the activities and improvements at the park, including the purchase, planning, and trail building, have been conducted in large measure by a partnership between Village officials and the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy (GTRLC).

### Village Council

The Elberta Village Council is elected to adopt budgets, approve contracts, adopt policies, and oversee staff. Management activities, expenses, and decisions at the Natural Area will be reviewed and approved by the Village Council.

### Staff

One full-time employee supervises park maintenance activities in the Village of Elberta, and will conduct the majority of maintenance at the Natural Area, such as mowing and snow plowing.

### Volunteers

The use of volunteers for maintenance and improvements to the property will be will be coordinated by the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy and Village officials. Potential volunteer activities may include routine maintenance; trail grooming; park patrols; and park programming.

## Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy

The Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy (GTRLC) is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization with its own bylaws, policies, a volunteer board of directors, professional full-time staff, and budget. The organization is funded by private donors and local, state, and national foundations. The GTRLC provided fundraising and procedural assistance in the acquisition of the property, and will continue to be engaged in Natural Area activities in order to assist in volunteer coordination and to ensure that management activities are consistent with the adopted Management Plan.

A fund has been established to cover management activities. The Fund is managed by the Grand Traverse Regional Community Foundation, and is used to reimburse Natural Area management costs assumed by the Village.

# Goals, Objectives, & Actions

## Management Statement

The Elberta Dunes South Natural Area will be managed as a low-impact passive recreation area, in order to preserve and protect its unique environmental features while providing for public access and usage, including hiking, snowshoeing, bird/wildlife watching, and bow hunting. Motorized vehicle usage and firearm hunting are prohibited within the Natural Area.

## Goals & Objectives

### Usage

*Ensure that usage of the Natural Area is limited to non-motorized, passive outdoor recreation.*

- Develop and provide signage at parking lot, ridgeline, and shoreline areas to inform users of appropriate activities/usage and rules, including:
  - Motorized vehicles and hunting are prohibited.
  - Dogs must be leashed.
  - Fines/enforcement for violation of leash ordinance and litter or dog waste.
- Develop and provide signage and engage in public awareness activities relative to prohibited activities, in particular motorized vehicle usage.



*View from the Natural Area looking out over Betsie Bay, Elberta, and Frankfort. Photo courtesy of Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy.*

- Provide information at entry points relative to routes and difficulty levels of hiking trails.
  - Engage partners, volunteers, and others as necessary to develop trail maps and signage
- Provide information at entry points relative to hunting seasons and restrictions on firearm hunting within the Village limits, including:
  - Dates of archery season (October 1—November 14; December 1—January 1)
  - Safety precautions for hikers/snowshoers during hunting season
  - Fines/enforcement for violation of firearm prohibition within Village limits
- Consider posts or other barriers at entrance to hiking trail within dune area, to prevent motorized vehicle usage, if needed.
- Consider enforcement options for violation of motorized vehicle restrictions.
- Monitor park activities and usage, through volunteer and Village committee members/staff updates, to determine where issues may arise and how they may be addressed.

### Access

*Ensure adequate parking and access for users.*

- Install a gravel parking lot in field area adjacent to M-22.

- Provide pedestrian/bicycle access from Lincoln Ave.
- Consider bicycle parking racks within parking lot.

### Improvements

*Ensure that the location, size, and scale of improvements are suited to environmental conditions and the natural character of the park*

- Design improvements, including restrooms and signage, to blend with the environment, and site structures in least sensitive areas to minimize impacts.
- Consider providing benches in viewing areas, i.e. at ridgeline lookout and valley overlook.
- Consider installation of a low-maintenance pit or compost toilet in parking area.
  - Site temporary toilet facilities (port-a-john) near parking lot to establish long-term location/design

### Trails

*Develop, maintain and monitor trails to ensure safe and appropriate usage.*

- Plan and design trail routes in consideration of soils, slope, and other environmental constraints. Consider permanent, sustainable trail routes to ridgeline and interior viewpoints within the property. Design primary trail route to terminate at ridgeline “lookout” area.

- Engage partners, contractors, and/or volunteers to conduct trail assessment to determine needs for trail development or reinforcements
- Consider designating paths to valley overlook in the interior of the property.
- Consider options such as log reinforcements for stabilizing trails to ridgeline/lookout area.
  - Engage partners, contractors, and/or volunteers to conduct trail assessment to determine areas of concern and needs for trail stabilization.
- Consider barriers and signage at terminus of ridgeline trail to ensure users are aware of safety and environmental concerns of accessing the west-facing slope of the dunes.
- Provide signage in beach area regarding safety and environmental concerns relative to hiking/walking within steep slopes on west-facing dune.
- Provide ongoing maintenance and clean up of trails.
- Maintain pedestrian trail through the open field from Lincoln Ave to primary trailhead.
- Consider linkages with the Betsie Valley Trail and other bicycle/pedestrian routes, through designated bicycle routes from the Betsie Valley Trail to a Lincoln Rd pedestrian/bicycle access.
- Design and install directional signage at Betsie Valley Trail
- Provide entry signage along M-22 and at Lincoln Rd access
- Initiate discussions with neighboring property owners regarding potential trail systems or easements that would provide connections between the Natural Area and the Village neighborhoods/parks.

### **Resource Conservation**

*Manage the Natural Area so as to preserve and protect the site's natural resources.*

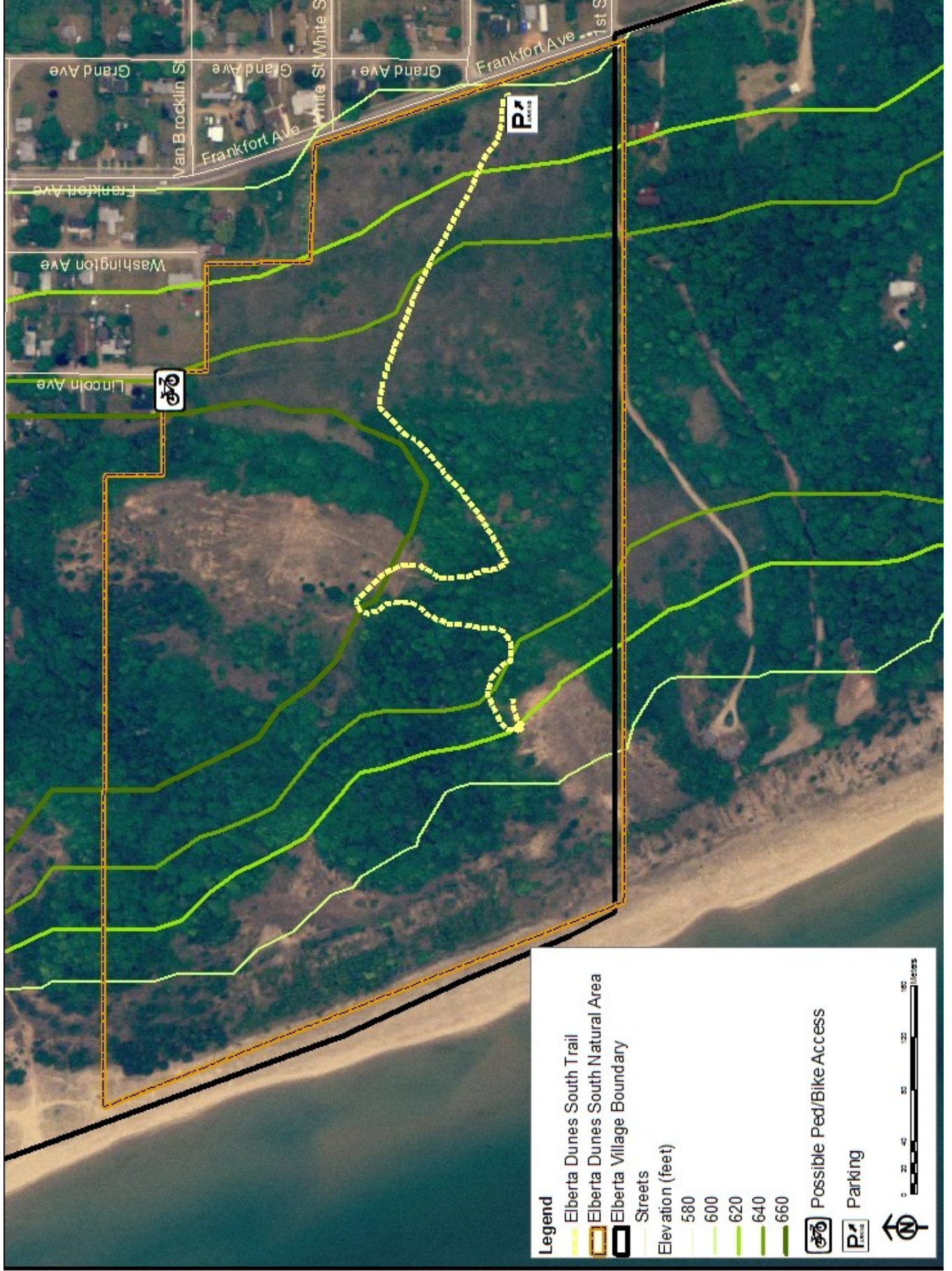
- Use flora and fauna inventories to identify areas for special consideration for management activities.
- Work with volunteers and partner organizations (i.e. Cooperative Weed Management Area) to address invasive species.
- Work with partners and volunteers to assess impact on natural features prior to implementation of any park improvements or management activities.

### **Administration**





*Encourage volunteer and public engagement in Natural Area management activities.*

- Establish a standing Elberta Dunes South Natural Area Management Committee, composed of Village officials, staff, and members of the public, to review and advise on the Village Council management activities.

- Continue to work with the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy and other partners to coordinate volunteer activities and other Natural Area management activities.
  - Identify point-of-contact and/or process to coordinate volunteers, Management Committee, and Village Council activities




**Legend**

-  Elberta Dunes South Trail
-  Elberta Dunes South Natural Area
-  Elberta Village Boundary
-  Streets

**Elevation (feet)**

-  580
-  600
-  620
-  640
-  660

 Possible Ped/Bike Access

 Parking



## 2012 Action Items

**Access and Improvements**

Release request for parking lot development bids; authorize expenditures	Winter 2012
Release request for bids/obtain estimates for bicycle parking rack, temporary toilet facilities; authorize expenditures	Winter 2012
Construct parking lot	Spring 2012
Install bicycle parking rack in parking area	Spring 2012
Install temporary toilet facilities	Spring 2012
Conduct routine maintenance	Ongoing

**Signage**

Work with partners/volunteers to design signage and maps per management plan objectives	Winter 2012
Release request for bids/obtain estimates for signs; authorize expenditures	Spring 2012
Install signage at M-22 access, beach area, ridgeline	Spring 2012

**Trails**

Engage volunteers and/or release request for bids to conduct trail assessment to determine any needs for trail stabilization or reinforcement	Winter/spring 2012
Release request for bids for barriers/fencing at ridgeline and any necessary reinforcements; authorize expenditures	Winter 2012
Install directional signage at Betsie Valley Trail	Spring/summer 2012
Conduct routine maintenance and cleanup	Ongoing

**Usage**

Monitor Natural Area usage to determine issues and needs	Ongoing
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**Resource Conservation**

Identify partners to assist in invasive species removal and/or volunteer coordination	Spring 2012
Engage partners/volunteers in invasive species removal	Spring 2012—Ongoing

**Administration**

Schedule/conduct regular meetings of the Elberta Dunes South Natural Area Management Committee to review issues and needs, make recommendations to Village Council for implementation of management plan objectives	Winter 2012—Ongoing
Identify point-of-contact and/or process for volunteer/Management Committee	Winter 2012
Provide regular Committee updates to Village Council	Ongoing