

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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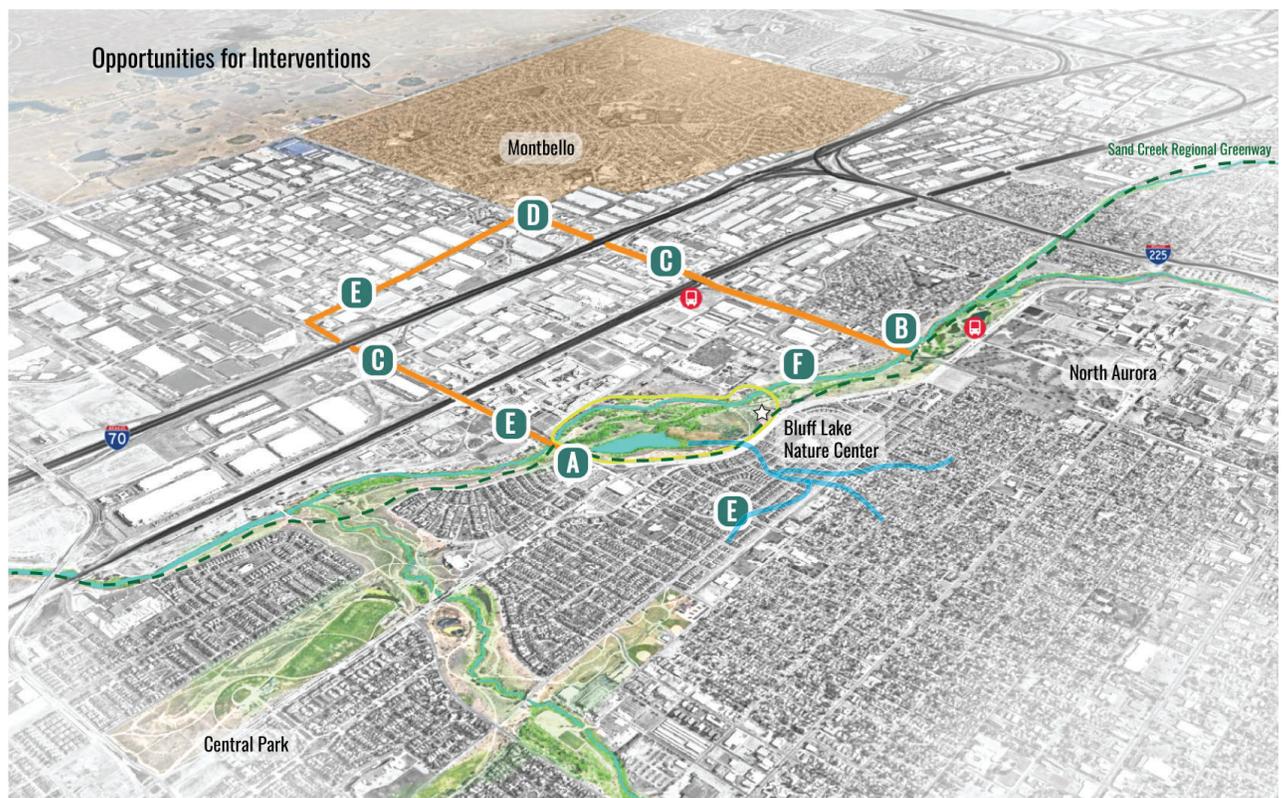
The Metro Denver Nature Alliance (MDNA), the Nature Conservancy (TNC), and Biohabitats have worked to create the first region-wide ecological assessment. This capstone project serves as an initial pilot project, relating the spatial data of this assessment to the objectives of local organizations: the Bluff Lake Nature Center (BLNC) and the Sand Creek Regional Greenway Partnership (SCRGP). This has the purpose of highlighting the usefulness of the habitat assessment for providing ecological context in the region, as well as strengthening the initiatives of these partner organizations in their goals of increasing accessibility to their natural resources.

This project had the unique opportunity to work at various scales. First, I worked with the regional organizations, concerned with establishing a Vision for People + Nature that houses a shared bank of resources and values that members of MDNA can access and work toward. This involved building the narrative, in the form of an online story-map, that entrenches the Regional Conservation Assessment (RCA) as a pivotal part of this Vision plan. To further ground the RCA as a valuable tool for partners, I conducted a case study analysis, also to be housed in the form of a story map, that ties the initiatives of BLNC and SCRGP to the spatial analysis showing the habitat value of their properties thus the social value of increasing access to their properties.

This case study involved discussing these partner's existing projects and objectives, participating in and creating visuals for a Walking Audit report, and conducting site analysis of the core habitat patches, considering challenges and opportunities to preserving them. Objectives for the two organizations differed in specificity, but generally focused on protecting habitat while increasing safe, accessibility to the Greenway and Nature Center. The BLNC was specifically interested in designing a new entrance along Havana Street to protect habitat trampled by illegal entries on the western edge of their property. The Walking Audit, conducted by SCRGP, involved walking along the two routes that connect Montbello, a socially vulnerable neighborhood, to the Greenway. Participants, myself included, noted positive and negative features impacting the pedestrian experience. The SCRGP compiled this into a report, and I generated graphics, showing possible interventions to improve the pedestrian experience, that can assist in grant applications and advocacy for pedestrian infrastructure changes. Lastly, I conducted an ecological site analysis with Biohabitats' Senior Ecologist, Susan Sherrod, on the threats to habitat quality within these core habitat zones, along the Walking Audit routes, and within the Bluff Lake watershed.

Building upon the challenges found during these analyses, I provided a series of interventions that work toward achieving the shared goals of BLNC and SCRGP, as well as MDNA, TNC, and Biohabitats. These interventions varied from improving the pedestrian experience and safety along routes to Sand Creek to suggesting deeding of city property to the BLNC to provide better ecological management of core habitat. While these interventions require advocacy to municipalities and complex discussions, creating a new entrance to Bluff Lake along Havana Street is more achievable in the short term, only requiring funding through grants or generous donations. This series of interventions serves as a playbook to guide ongoing improvements to connection between Montbello and the high-quality nature along Sand Creek. This project also serves as a case study for similar initiatives by local organizations within the Denver Metro Region looking to advocate for improving accessibility or protecting vital natural habitat.

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- A** Build a western entrance to Bluff Lake to provide safer access for those entering from the west, protecting habitat and offer an opportunity for new educational signage
- B** Create a facilitated entrance point at the Peoria-Sand Creek bridge with wayfinding to create a safer experience for pedestrians and to protect soil and natural environment
- C** Add new street trees, create new crossings, and add wayfinding stenciled elements to safely guide pedestrians to the Greenway and Nature Center
- D** Improve bus stops by adding shade structures, street trees, and benches. Also, add maps and wayfinding to guide potential visitors to the natural areas.
- E** Naturalize drainage ways and private properties to add ecological diversity beyond the Sand Creek corridor, pretreat stormwater before entering Bluff Lake, and beautify the urban setting
- F** Restore and protect the high quality habitat on Aurora Parks and Recreation property to benefit the larger ecological corridor. Consider deeding to Bluff Lake Nature Center