



# **Final MHCP Executive Summary**

*Prepared for:*

**Multiple Habitat Conservation Program**

*Administered by:*



**for the Cities of Carlsbad, Encinitas,  
Escondido, Oceanside, San Marcos,  
Solana Beach, and Vista**

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**AMEC Earth & Environmental, Inc.  
Conservation Biology Institute**

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

The Multiple Habitat Conservation Program (MHCP) is a comprehensive, multiple jurisdictional planning program designed to create, manage, and monitor an ecosystem preserve in northwestern San Diego County. It is one of several large, multiple jurisdictional habitat planning efforts in San Diego County (Figure ES-1), each of which constitutes a “subregional” plan under the State of California’s Natural Community Conservation Planning (NCCP) Act of 1991. The MHCP preserve system is intended to protect viable populations of native plant and animal species and their habitats in perpetuity, while accommodating continued economic development and quality of life for residents of North County.

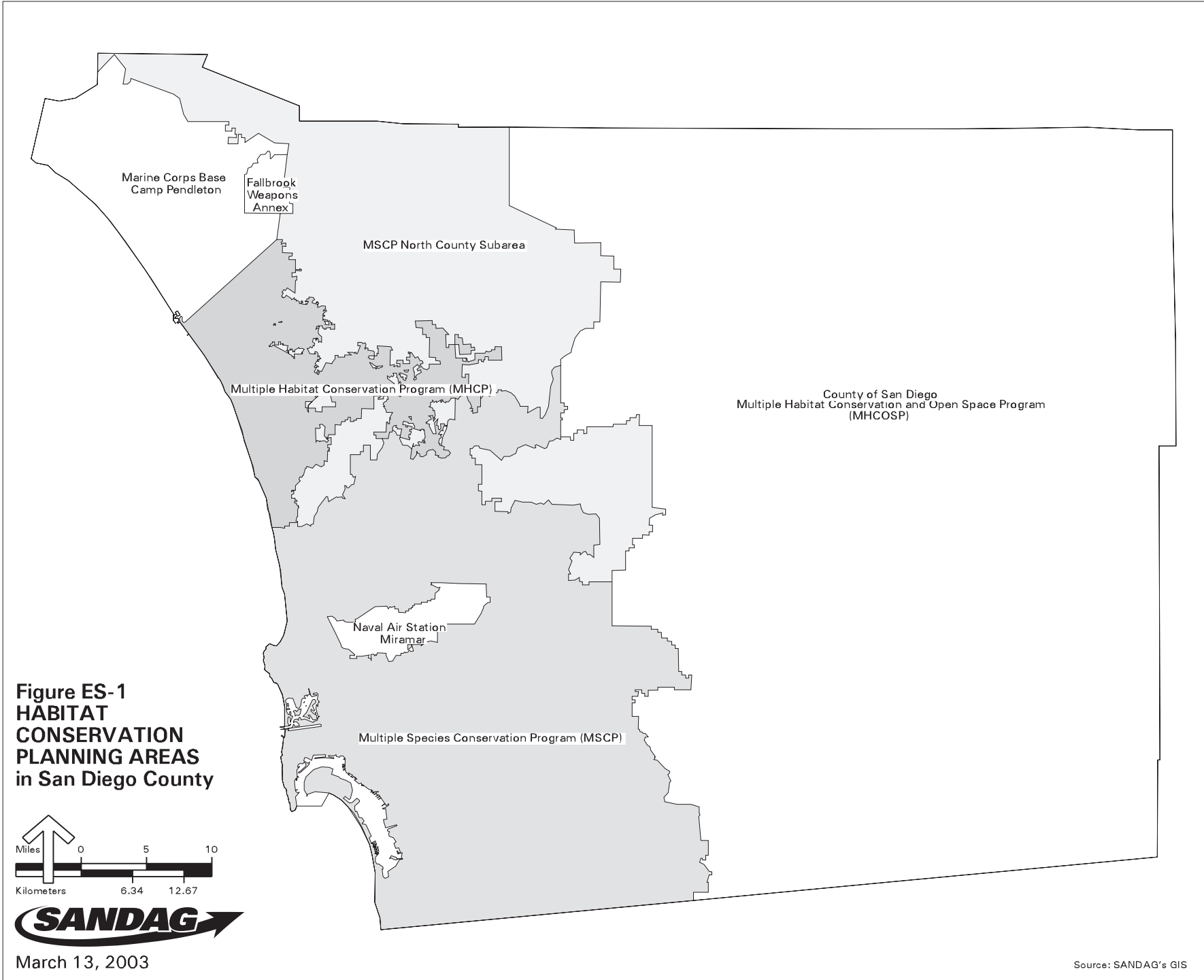
The MHCP subregion (Figure ES-2) encompasses the seven incorporated cities of northwestern San Diego County (Carlsbad, Encinitas, Escondido, Oceanside, San Marcos, Solana Beach, and Vista). These jurisdictions will implement their portions of the MHCP plan through citywide “subarea” plans, which describe the specific policies each city will institute for the MHCP.

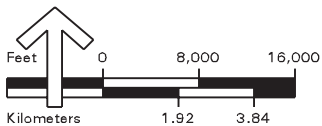
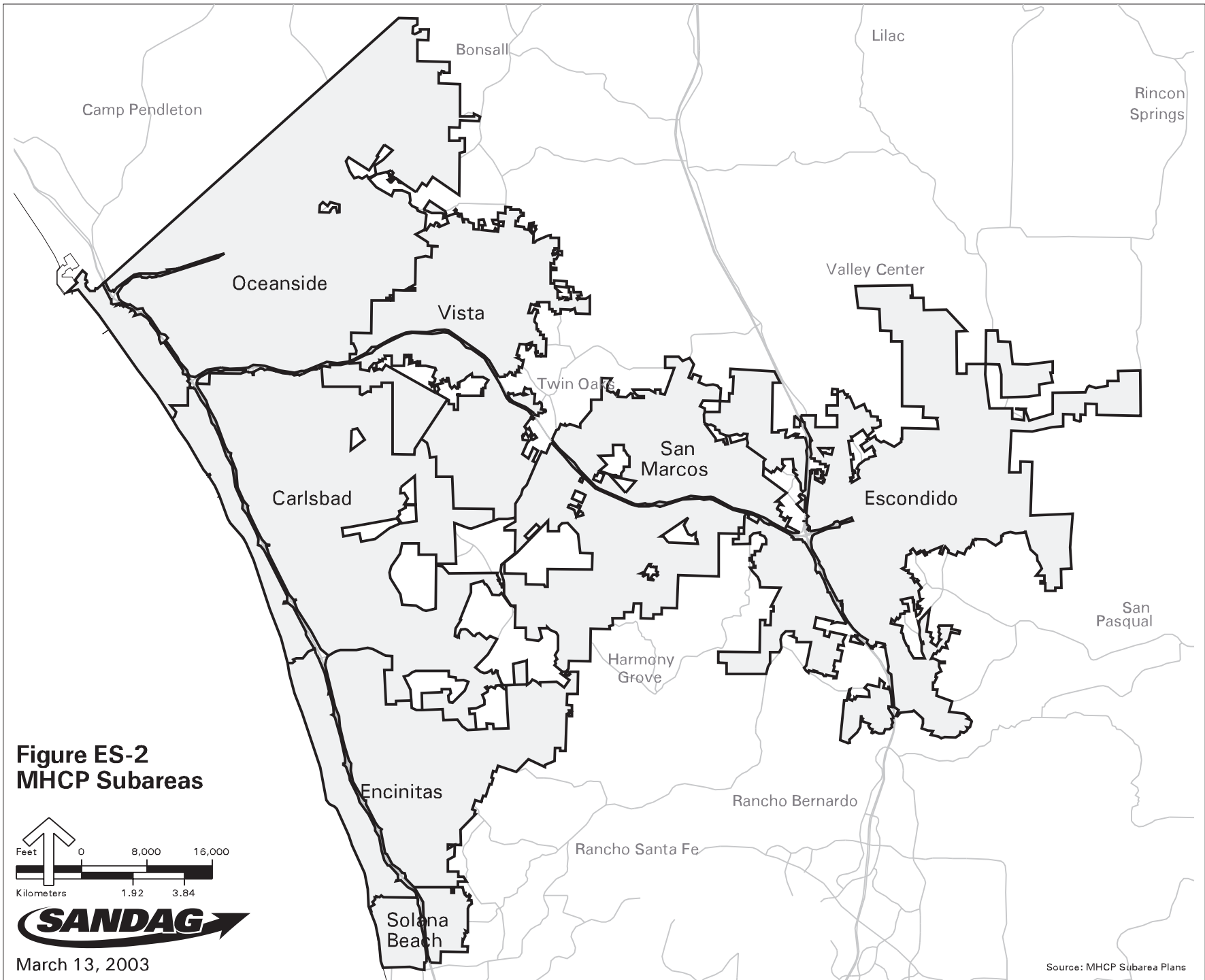
### **Plan Organization**

The MHCP plan is presented in three volumes. Volume I describes the planning process and the resultant plan itself, including how the preserve system will be assembled over time, how the plan will be implemented through locally enacted policies and a cooperative implementation structure, and how it will be financed. Volume I also describes the general resource protection policies and general preserve management and monitoring guidelines that subarea plans must follow.

Volume II presents the biological analysis and permitting conditions that MHCP subarea plans must meet to receive take authorizations for covered species. It details the scientific methods used to analyze plan effects on ecological communities, natural habitats, and 77 sensitive species of plants and animals. Based on results of these analyses, each species is categorized in one of four ways: (1) covered, (2) covered subject to species-specific conditions, (3) not covered unless subarea plans adopt additional measures, and (4) not covered. These determinations are based on how well current public review draft subarea plans meet MHCP conservation objectives and ESA and NCCP requirements for take authorizations.

Volume III presents the MHCP biological monitoring and management plan. It describes the various approaches needed to monitor plan compliance and effectiveness at the scale of individual reserve areas as well as at the broader, subregional scale. Volume III also describes how management decisions will be guided by monitoring results within a scientifically valid adaptive management program. Finally, Volume III describes the primary roles, responsibilities, and staffing levels necessary to implement the monitoring and management program.





## **Purpose and Need**

The San Diego region is a “hotspot” for biodiversity and species endangerment, having more rare, threatened, and endangered species than any comparable land area in the continental United States. This has led to intense conflicts between economic growth and endangered species protection laws. Moreover, the traditional project-by-project approach to gaining approvals to develop in habitat of protected species is costly and inefficient, resulting in piece-meal preserve designation that doesn’t ensure continued species or ecosystem viability. The MHCP replaces this approach with a coordinated, comprehensive program that ensures that project mitigations are directed to those areas most critical to biological conservation, while allowing expedited development of less important habitat areas. MHCP implementation will also include perpetual monitoring and management of the preserve system.

In exchange for these conservation actions, participating cities will receive “take authorizations” from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG). Take authorizations allow for otherwise lawful actions that may incidentally harm individuals of a species or its habitat (generally outside of the preserve system) in exchange for conserving the species inside the preserve system. Jurisdictions granted these take authorizations may share their benefits by using them to permit take by public or private projects that comply with the city’s subarea plan. This delegation of state and federal endangered species authority to local cities is made possible through the combination of the subregional MHCP plan and city subarea plans, which together serve as a multiple species Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) pursuant to Section 10(a)(1)(B) of the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA), as well as an NCCP plan under the NCCP Act and the California Endangered Species Act (CESA). An implementing agreement (IA) serves as the contract obligating each city and the wildlife agencies to fulfill their conservation, management, and monitoring responsibilities under each subarea plan.

## **Planning Process**

The MHCP plan and its policies have evolved with consensus and input from numerous stakeholders. Primary direction has come from the MHCP Advisory Committee, which met regularly throughout the process in a public forum and included representatives from the seven participating cities, the County and City of San Diego, federal and state wildlife agencies, public facility providers, environmental organizations, property owners, developers, and various citizen and special interest groups. The Board of Directors of the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) serves as the overall policy body for the MHCP. An ad hoc Committee of Elected Officials, one from each participating city, has also provided policy perspectives since July 1997 on MHCP policy issues that affect the cities, such as program funding and intergovernmental coordination. The MHCP also established a Scientific Review Panel comprised of experts on MHCP biological issues.

## **2.0 DESCRIPTION OF MHCP STUDY AREA**

### **Biological Resources**

Approximately 29,962 acres of natural vegetation remain in the study area (Figure ES-3). These remnant natural areas are highly fragmented, existing mostly as small, scattered patches surrounded by development or agriculture, except for a few larger blocks of habitat within certain cities. Nevertheless, the MHCP area supports a wide variety of rare, threatened, and endangered species, and is important to the conservation and recovery of many of them.

The MHCP study area supports approximately 400 to 600 breeding pairs of California gnatcatchers, which are patchily distributed due to the highly fragmented state of their remaining coastal sage scrub habitat. Few habitat patches in the study area are large enough and contiguous enough to be considered reliable core breeding areas for gnatcatchers. Rather, most are considered “stepping-stones” that help link larger, core gnatcatcher populations to the north and south of the MHCP area. These stepping-stones are thought to serve a critical function in genetically and demographically linking together the regional network of gnatcatcher populations.

### **Ownership and Land Use**

About 71% of land in the study area is in private ownership. Of the 19,584 publicly owned acres (about 17% of total), the largest proportion (16,843 acres, or 86% of the public ownership) is owned by local jurisdictions. The state owns 417 acres in the study area, mostly natural habitats at the coastal lagoons.

Approximately 48% of the total study area is currently planned for residential use, and about 15% is currently planned open space. The remainder is planned for other forms of development or agriculture.

### **Historical and Forecast Growth**

Between 1990 and 2002, total population in San Diego region (San Diego County) grew by an average of 1.3% per year to 2,918,300, and total housing in the region increased by slightly less than 1% per year to 1,062,870 units. The slower growth of housing relative to population has led to a lack of affordable housing in the region. According to San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), the region's population is projected to grow to 3.9 million in 2030, while the number of housing units is projected to grow to 1.4 million units. The region, including the MHCP study area, thus faces a pressing need to accommodate future growth, particularly in housing.

Local jurisdictions and SANDAG are currently (through 2004) preparing a regional comprehensive plan (RCP) to integrate land uses, transportation systems, infrastructure needs, and public investment strategies for the San Diego region. A key feature of the RCP is emphasis on "smart growth," which would limit urban sprawl and improve

existing neighborhoods, directing future development away from rural areas and closer to existing and planned job centers, education and health institutions, and transportation corridors. The goals of the MHCP are consistent with and support the implementation of smart growth by limiting urban sprawl and conserving currently undeveloped areas.

### **3.0 CONSERVATION PLANNING**

The MHCP plan contains the overall conservation strategy for the subregion and documents the conservation actions that collectively will guarantee the protection of species covered by individual subarea plans. The subregional plan also describes the institutional mechanisms to coordinate MHCP implementation among the cities and other agencies. The MHCP subregional plan does not by itself authorize the taking of biological resources and does not receive a permit. Permits or authorizations to take biological resources will be granted to individual cities preparing adequate subarea plans, which describe the specific conservation and management actions each city will take to implement the goals, guidelines, and standards of the MHCP.

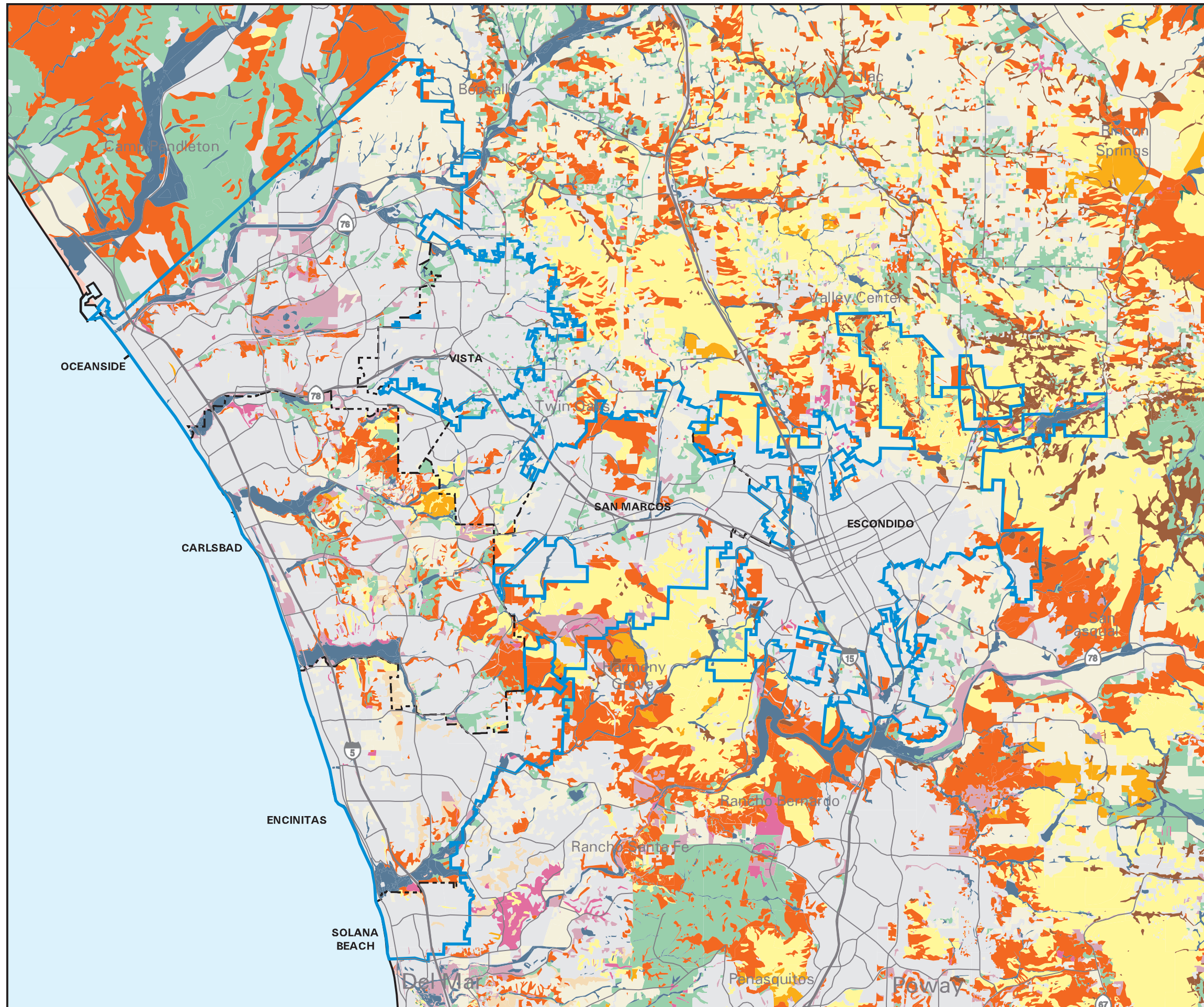
#### **Focused Planning Areas**

The MHCP jurisdictions identified focused planning areas (FPAs) within which some lands will be dedicated for open space and habitat conservation (Figure ES-4). Conservation within FPAs will be achieved by the implementing measures documented in each city's subarea plan, including land use regulation (avoidance of lands based on land use policies), minimization of impacts, mitigation, and acquisition of parcels from willing sellers. FPAs were designed to conserve as much of the Biological Core and Linkage Area (BCLA) as possible, minimize preserve fragmentation, maximize use of existing public lands and open space, and maintain private property rights and economic viability. They include "hard-line" areas (lands to be conserved and managed primarily for biological resources) and "soft-line" planning areas, within which hard-line preserve areas will ultimately be delineated based on further data and planning. Each jurisdiction's subarea plan must contain written guidelines for preserve design and land-use planning in soft-line areas, as well as guidelines for habitat management, mitigation, interim protection during the planning period, and a process for establishing permanent protection of conserved lands.

Figure ES-4 also illustrates two other important land categories: (1) properties already planned under existing HCPs or Section 7 agreements, and therefore not subject to MHCP preserve planning, and (2) the "unincorporated gnatcatcher core area," which is indicated by a red circle around the general area within which the MHCP will conserve additional core breeding habitat for California gnatcatchers outside of the seven-city study planning area.



### Figure ES-3 Vegetation Communities MHCP Study Area



- Dunes and Beaches
- Coastal Sage Scrub
- Chaparral
- Southern Maritime Chaparral
- Coastal Sage Scrub/Chaparral Mix
- Grassland
- Riparian/Wetlands
- Oak Woodlands
- Eucalyptus Woodlands
- Agricultural Land
- Disturbed Land
- Developed
- Generalized Subarea Plan Boundary
- MHCP Boundary

SOURCE: 1995 Vegetation Inventory, SANDAG

Feet

0 6,500 13,000

Kilometers

0 1.56 3.12

**SANDAG**

March 13, 2003













































