

research management

findings

Number 47 • January 2003

The Definition and Mapping of Environmental Corridors by Three Regional Planning Commissions

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Introduction

The term “environmental corridor” has been a controversial part of the lexicon of land use planners and property rights advocates. Philip H. Lewis, Jr., professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, brought attention to the term while working to protect natural resources in Wisconsin and Illinois in the 1960s and 1970s. Since then, environmental corridors have been defined and used in a variety of ways.

In general, environmental corridors encompass linear landscape features containing concentrations of natural and cultural resource amenities. Lewis (1996) defined environmental corridors as “spatial patterns of occurrence of any or all of the combined features of water, wetlands, and steep topography of 12.5% or greater found in an urban or urbanizing environment.” The planning community has often modified or expanded this definition to meet state or federal planning requirements or to include scenic, recreational, and historic resources.

Various regulatory programs have influenced how planning entities define environmental corridors. For example, in the 1980s, Wisconsin promulgated administrative rules (ch. NR 121, Wis. Adm. Code) to implement planning provisions of the federal Clean Water Act. The rules for

Areawide Water Quality Management Plans call for designation of “major areas unsuitable for the installation of waste treatment systems.” These areas include: “wetlands, shorelands, floodways and floodplains, steep slopes, highly erodible soils and other limiting soil types, groundwater recharge areas, and other such physical constraints” (§ NR 121.05 [1] and [2], Wis. Admin. Code). The planning community has often referred to the resulting mapped areas as environmental corridors.

Planners and conservationists think of environmental corridors as particularly vital landscape patterns to protect because these areas are key to regional diversity—both biological diversity, which is central for ecological sustainability, and aesthetic diversity, which is vital for cultural sustainability. Lewis (1996) estimated that 85-90% of natural and cultural amenities fall within an environmental corridor pattern and stressed the importance of inventorying areas with the greatest diversity. The lack of a common definition, however, precludes inventorying, managing, or protecting these areas on a statewide basis.

While some communities have identified and mapped environmental corridors, Wisconsin’s regional planning commissions (RPCs¹) have shown the most interest in developing functional environmental corridor programs. In this study, I examine and document how three of these agencies define and map environmental corridors. The use of the environmental corridor concept will be dealt with in a future paper.

¹ RPCs are advisory regional planning entities created under § 59.091, *Wis. Stats.* Wisconsin has nine RPCs (Figure 1). Participation is optional; five southcentral Wisconsin counties have chosen not to be included in an RPC (Figure 1). RPCs conduct and prepare various types of studies and plans, including a master plan for the physical development of their respective regions (§ 66.0309[9], *Wis. Stats.*). RPCs provide advice and consultation to local governmental units within their respective regions and to other public and private agencies. They help local interests respond to the demands of state and federal programs, such as the state’s comprehensive planning law (§ 66.1001, *Wis. Stats.*) and the federal Clean Water and Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Acts. RPCs are also responsible for reviewing federal grant applications for consistency with adopted regional and local plans (§ 66.0309[13], *Wis. Stats.*).

Methods and Study Areas

I selected three RPCs as study areas: Bay-Lake Regional Planning Commission (BLRPC), Dane County Regional Planning Commission (DCRPC), and Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SEWRPC) (Figure 1). These RPCs have the most experience applying the environmental corridor concept. East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (ECRPC) has developed its own corridor definition, but was excluded from this study due to the relative newness of its process. Preliminary inquiries indicated that the other RPCs have limited or no experience with this planning tool.

I examined a variety of planning documents produced by the three RPCs to determine how each defines and maps environmental corridors. I then supplemented this literature review with personal interviews with RPC and state agency staff. A review of the RPCs' World Wide Web sites provided additional information.

Results and Discussion

Dane County Regional Planning Commission.

The DCRPC assumed water quality planning responsibilities in 1975. The agency's duties required it to outline areas suitable for sewer service. To determine areas for public sewer service expansion, the RPC first delineated the boundaries of urban service areas and then determined which areas within those boundaries were suitable for sewer service. Areas unsuitable for sewer service were termed "urban environmental corridors."

In 1979, boundaries for urban service areas were defined and the *Dane County Water Quality Plan* (DCRPC 1979) was adopted. This report noted that a "system of . . . corridors, centered around stream valleys, wetlands and lakes, is a concept with substantial water quality benefits." The next task, delineating and adopting environmental corridors within urban service area boundaries, was finished for areas within the Central Urban Service Area, as well as other areas in the county by 1986. The water quality planning process led to adoption of the following environmental corridor definition:

"Environmental corridors are continuous systems of open space in urban and urbanizing areas. These corridors include environmentally sensitive lands and natural resources requiring protection from disturbances and development, and lands needed for open space and recreational uses. They are based mainly on drainage-ways and stream channels, floodplains, wetlands, steep slopes, and other resource features, and are part of a countywide system of continuous open space corridors."

– DCRPC (1996)

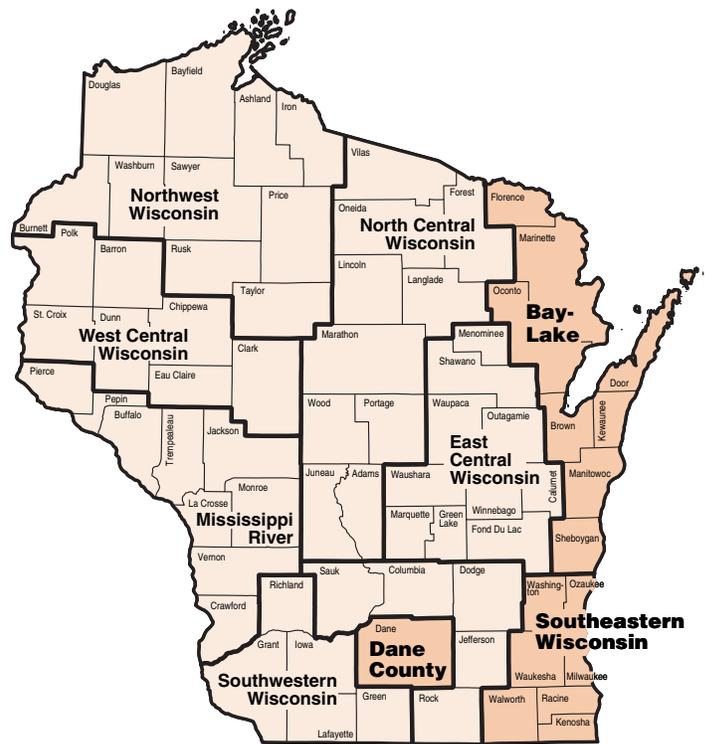


Figure 1. Statutory jurisdictions of Wisconsin's Regional Planning Commissions in 2002. The BLRPC, DCRPC, and SEWRPC are highlighted.

The DCRPC uses eight features as criteria for defining environmental corridors and preparing environmental corridor maps. These include:

1. All waterways and water bodies, including lakes, ponds, intermittent and perennial streams, and drainage ways.
2. Vegetated buffer strips along drainage ways, streams, lakes, and wetlands.
3. 100-year floodplains.
4. Mapped wetlands (taken from the DNR's Wisconsin Wetland Inventory).
5. Steep slopes (those 12% or greater).
6. Woodlands.
7. Existing and proposed parks, greenways, conservancy areas, and storm water management areas.
8. Areas of unique vegetation or geology.

Using these features, the DCRPC has used geographic information system (GIS) technology to map environmental corridors throughout the entire county.

Southeast Wisconsin Regional Planning

Commission. In 1966, the SEWRPC adopted an environmental corridor definition as part of *The Regional Land Use-Transportation Study* (Rubin and Emmerich 1981). That document defined environmental corridors as “areas in the landscape containing especially high value natural, scenic, historic, scientific, and recreational features.”

Under the SEWRPC’s definition, environmental corridors normally include one or more of the following seven elements:

1. Lakes, rivers, streams, shorelands, and floodlands.
2. Wetlands.
3. Woodlands.
4. Wildlife habitat areas.
5. Areas of steep slopes.
6. Significant geological formations and physiographic features.
7. Wet, poorly drained, and organic soils.

These elements are part of the Natural Resources Base in SEWRPC’s GIS. In addition to the Natural Resource Base elements, there are four additional “Resource-Related” elements that the SEWRPC considers:

1. Existing outdoor recreation sites.
2. Potential outdoor recreation and open space sites.
3. Historic sites and structures.
4. Significant scenic areas and structures.

Using a weighted system, the SEWRPC classifies each natural resource area as either a primary environmental corridor, secondary environmental corridor, or isolated natural area. Primary environmental corridors are linear landscape features that contain at least three of the above 11 elements. Primary corridors occupy an area of at least 400 acres, have a minimum length of 2 miles, and a minimum width of 200 feet. Secondary environmental corridors encompass one or two of the resource elements, occupy at least 100 acres, and have a minimum length of 1 mile. Isolated natural resource areas are at least 5 acres in size, more than 200 feet wide, and contain at least a

couple of the features (UW-Extension and SEWRPC 1996). Consistent with these designations, the SEWRPC has mapped environmental corridors throughout its entire 7-county region.

Bay-Lake Regional Planning Commission. The BLRPC used, among others, the DCRPC and SEWRPC definitions as models to craft one of the most comprehensive definitions for environmental corridors used currently in the state.

The BLRPC uses the overarching title, Environmental Feature, to define and map areas meriting resource protection. Environmental Feature is broken down into two components:

1. Environmentally Sensitive Areas - used for sewer service area planning under NR 121, Wis. Admin. Code.
2. Environmental Corridors - for all other community planning work.

Using these distinctions, the BLRPC defines environmental corridors as, “linear features in the landscape which represent a composite of the best remaining elements of the natural resource base” (BLRPC 1999). This definition is based on a standard set of digital data that includes:

1. Lakes, ponds, rivers, streams, flowages.
2. Wetland areas of 2 acres or greater.
3. 100-year floodplains.
4. Areas of steep slope (those 12% or greater).
5. 75-foot setback from navigable waters.
6. 25-foot wetland buffers.

Environmentally sensitive areas are delineated using the same features, but sewer service area planning under ch. NR 121, Wis. Admin. Code, is conducted at the local level and the definition is modified to meet the needs of each community (BLRPC 1999). The BLRPC piloted this definition in Manitowoc and Sheboygan counties and is currently working on applying the definition in the remaining counties of the region, with the goal of completing the entire region by 2004 (Mark Walters, BLRPC, pers. comm. 2001).



Table 1. Comparison of environmental corridor features.

Feature	DCRPC	SEWRPC	BLRPC
Lake, perennial river, or stream	✓	✓	✓
Perennial shoreland (lake, river, stream)	✓	✓	✓
Intermittent stream	✓	✓	✓
Intermittent shoreland		✓	✓
Shoreland buffers	✓	✓	✓
Floodway		✓	
100-year floodplain	✓	✓	✓
Wisconsin DNR wetlands	✓	✓	✓
Wetland buffer	✓		✓
US Army Corps wetlands			✓
Woodlands	✓	✓	✓
High value wildlife habitat		✓	✓
Medium value habitat		✓	✓
Low value wildlife habitat		✓	✓
Significant geological feature	✓		✓
Steep slope (20 percent or greater)	✓	✓	✓
Steep slope (12 to 19 percent)	✓	✓	✓
Prairie	✓	✓	
Existing rural open space site	✓	✓	
Existing park or recreation site	✓	✓	✓
Passive park and open space areas	✓	✓	
High value potential park	✓	✓	
Medium value potential park	✓	✓	
Low value potential park	✓	✓	
Historic structure		✓	✓
Historic cultural site		✓	✓
Scenic areas and vistas		✓	✓
State scientific area		✓	✓
Natural area of statewide or greater significance		✓	✓
Natural area of countywide or regional significance		✓	✓
Natural area of local significance		✓	✓
Hydric and organic soils	✓		

Adapted from Bay-Lake Regional Planning Commission, 1999.

Comparison of Definitions. Table 1 provides a comprehensive list of features included in the environmental corridor definition used by each of the three RPCs. All three have definitions with similar components; common features include surface waters, wetlands, floodplains, steep slopes, and shoreland buffers. The greatest differences are the inclusion/exclusion of cultural resources and recreation opportunities, and the size and type of shoreland buffers (a result of county-level shoreland zoning authority).

These RPCs have retained the option of tailoring their adopted regional definitions to individual communities. This flexibility allows the RPC to meet the distinctive needs of a community and provides for better correlation between corridor maps and existing land use or comprehensive plans. Some communities choose to adopt stricter standards than others do.



Recreational resources, like this trail, are sometimes included in environmental corridors.

Data Sources and Standardization. When mapping environmental corridors, consistency between regions requires data standardization. This is complicated by the independent and different mapping procedures used by each RPC. Increased data availability and use of GIS can improve consistency when data come from the same sources. When base information comes from the same source and is interpreted in the same manner, planners can create data layers that are similar in scope and, therefore, application.

Table 2 identifies data sources used by each RPC to delineate and map environmental corridors. In most cases, the three RPCs derive a mapped feature from the same data source. In some instances, however, different data sources are used by the RPCs, often including information derived from local experts and citizens.

Table 2. Comparison of environmental corridor data sources.

Feature	DCRPC	SEWRPC	BLRPC
Lakes and ponds	1:24,000 USGS topographic maps	1:24,000 USGS topographic maps	1:24,000 USGS quadrangle maps, local base maps
Perennial streams	1:24,000 USGS topographic maps, supplemented by aerial photographs	1:24,000 USGS topographic maps, supplemented by aerial photographs	1:24,000 USGS quadrangle maps, local base maps
Intermittent streams and drainageways	1:24,000 USGS topographic maps, supplemented by aerial photographs	1:24,000 USGS topographic maps, supplemented by aerial photographs	1:24,000 USGS quadrangle maps, local base maps
Open channel (constructed) drainageways	Aerial photographs or municipal storm sewer maps	Not used	Not used
Shoreland buffer strips adjacent to streams and drainageways	1:24,000 USGS topographic maps, supplemented by aerial photographs with 200-foot total buffer	1:24,000 USGS topographic maps, with 75-foot buffer	Local ordinances
100-year floodplains	Federal Emergency Management Agency Flood Insurance Rate Maps	Federal Emergency Management Agency Flood Insurance Rate Maps	Federal Emergency Management Agency Flood Insurance Rate Maps
Wetlands	Wisconsin DNR Wisconsin Wetland Inventory Maps	Wisconsin DNR Wisconsin Wetland Inventory Maps and SEWRPC Land Use Inventory	Wisconsin DNR Wisconsin Wetland Inventory Maps
Wetland buffer strips	Wisconsin DNR Wetland Inventory with 75-foot buffer	Not used	Wisconsin DNR Wetland Inventory with 300-foot buffer
Woodlands	Aerial photographs	SEWRPC Land Use Inventory	BLRPC land use inventory, Manitowoc County Soil & Water Conservation Department, digital aerial photography, WISCLAND land cover
Unique vegetation or geology	Wisconsin DNR Natural Heritage Inventory maps and discussion with experts	Regional Natural Areas and Critical Species Habitat Protection and Management Plan for Southeastern Wisconsin	Wisconsin DNR, US Fish & Wildlife Service
Steep slopes	USGS contour maps or detailed topographic maps	USGS contour maps or detailed topographic maps	USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service
Existing parks, greenways, conservancy land	Aerial photographs, Land Use Inventory Maps, zoning maps, various community plans	Regional Park and Open Space Plan for Southeastern Wisconsin: 2000	Wisconsin DNR, county, city, town, village officials
Proposed parks, greenways, conservancy land	Preliminary Subdivision Plats, Community Plans, Adopted park and open space plans, City of Madison Official Maps, University of Wisconsin-Madison Campus Development Plan	Regional Park and Open Space Plan for Southeastern Wisconsin: 2000	Not used
Historic and archaeological sites	Not used	Wisconsin State Historical Society files	Wisconsin State Historical Society files, published archaeological surveys
Other unique natural features	Not used	As identified	As identified
State identified scientific and natural areas	Not used	As identified	Wisconsin DNR
State/federal wildlife areas	Not used	As identified	Wisconsin DNR, US Fish & Wildlife Service

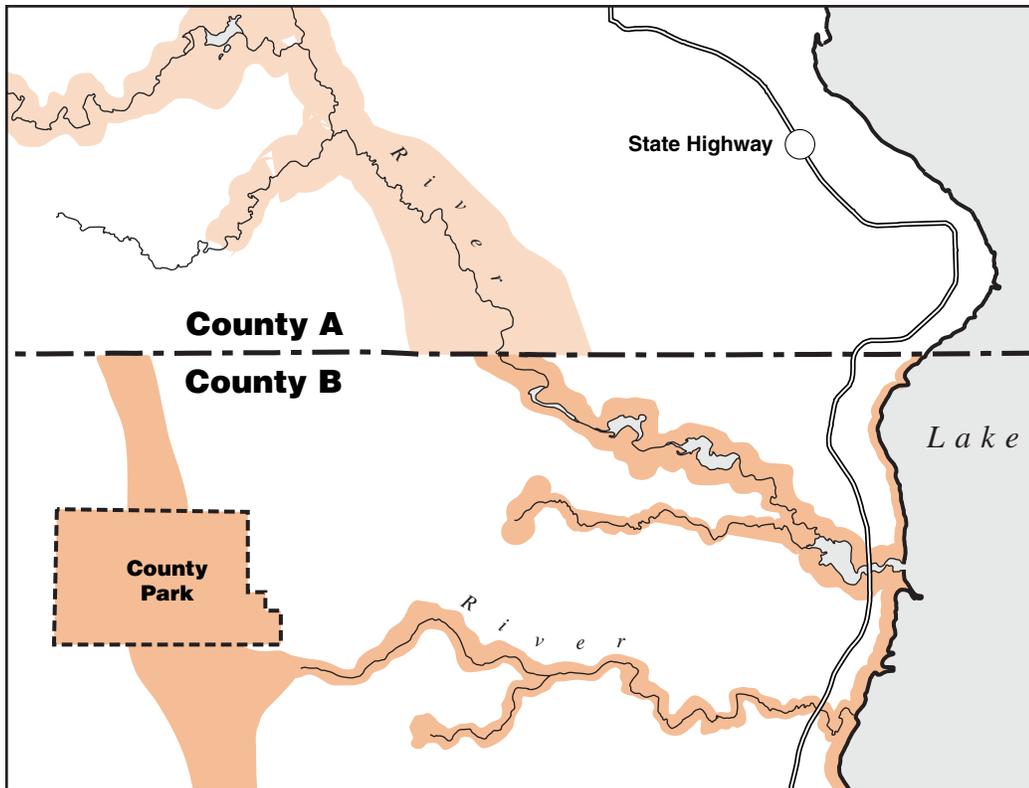


Figure 2. Map showing environmental corridor delineation of two communities along an RPC border.

Because the landscape is constantly changing, so must the data that represent it. Many of the maps and data sources used by the three RPCs are relatively old. For example, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service publishes soil surveys for each county. Many of these were completed in the early 1900s, however, and few have been updated since 1980. The SEWRPC has worked to ameliorate this problem by updating information for specific sites when evaluating the potential for environmental corridors (UW-Extension and SEWRPC 1996). The SEWRPC uses extensive field work and site inventory to adjust existing data to better reflect current conditions. The SEWRPC completes this work on a case-by-case basis. Updating the entire data pool similarly, though, would amount to a significant workload. Other RPCs have not yet tackled this issue.

Boundaries and Overlap Issues. Consistency at adjacent borders creates concern when mapping environmental corridors that cross regional boundaries. Corridors, being natural features, rarely respect the human-defined regional boundaries. Since the three RPCs use different definitions and different mapping techniques, the likelihood of corridors lining up along boundaries is slim. For example, we can look at a corridor that crosses the

boundary between two RPCs. The definition of the first RPC may cause the corridor to be mapped with a 75-foot width, while the adjacent RPC may have mapped the same corridor within its boundaries at a 300-foot width. Thus, when the two maps are aligned, edges of the region-crossing corridor do not align (Figure 2). Differences in defining environmental corridors can create complicated scenarios as well. For instance, one RPC may have mapped a corridor that continues across its border into an adjacent RPC, where the same area may not be considered or mapped as a corridor at all. The management and protection of significant resources can be hampered in these situations, especially when multi-jurisdictional cooperation is not routine business for some communities.

Definitions and Regulations. Problems may arise when an RPC definition used to delineate environmental corridors in a sewer service area plan includes more than the categories listed in ch. NR 121, Wis. Adm. Code. Definitions of this type may exceed the administrative definition for "areas unsuitable for the installation of waste treatment systems." Features not included in the NR 121 definition or not based solidly on water quality protection may be subject to challenge, if a community uses those features to exclude sewer collection systems.

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Acknowledgments

I thank the following individuals for providing information and insight into current environmental corridor definitions and mapping practices: L. Helmuth, DNR; K. Mesbah, DCRPC; D. Schilling, SEWRPC; D. Siebert, DNR; B. Stauber, SEWRPC; and M. Walter, BLRPC.

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Editor: Dreux J. Watermolen

Layout: Michelle E. Voss

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Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
P.O. Box 7921
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PUB-SS-747 2003
