

Sunklands Conservation Area

25-Year Area Management Plan FY 2019-2043



Lisa G. Allen

Forestry Division Chief

9/17/2018

Date

Sunklands Conservation Area Management Plan Approval Page

PLANNING TEAM

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OVERVIEW

- **Official Area Name:** Sunklands Conservation Area, #9511
- **Year of Initial Acquisition:** 1990s
- **Acreage:** 40,809 acres
- **County:** Shannon, Texas
- **Division with Administrative Responsibility:** Forestry
- **Division with Maintenance Responsibility:** Forestry
- **Statements of Purpose:**
 - A. Strategic Direction**

The primary purpose of the Sunklands Conservation Area (CA) is to manage and restore healthy forest, woodland, and glade natural communities, promote outdoor recreation, and provide educational opportunities to the public.
 - B. Desired Future Condition**

The desired future condition of Sunklands CA is to provide a healthy forest and woodlands ecosystem that provides diverse structure and habitat across the landscape.
 - C. Federal Aid Statement**

This area, or a portion thereof, was acquired with Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration funds to restore and manage wildlife, conserve, and restore suitable wildlife habitat, and provide public access for hunting or other wildlife-oriented recreation.

GENERAL INFORMATION AND CONDITIONS

- I. Special Considerations**
 - A. Priority Areas:** Audubon Society Current River Watershed Important Bird Area, Current River Conservation Opportunity Area, Current River Hills Forest/Woodland Conservation Opportunity Area, Current River Hills Glades Conservation Opportunity Area, Ozark National Scenic Riverway, and Forest Action Plan Landscape
 - B. Natural Areas:** Sunklands Natural Area
- II. Important Natural Features and Resources**
 - A. Species of Conservation Concern:** Species of conservation concern are known from this area. Area managers should consult the Natural Heritage Database annually and review all management activities with the natural history biologist.
 - B. Caves:** Yes, records kept with Missouri Department of Conservation (Department) natural history biologist. Managers should follow the Cave Management Policy found in the Department Resource Policy Manual. All caves on this and other conservation areas are closed or restricted to public access. The fungus that causes White-nose

Syndrome in bats has been documented in Missouri, resulting in the Department's White-nose Syndrome Action Plan that limits public access to protect bats.

C. Springs: Yes, records kept with Department natural history biologist.

III. Existing Infrastructure

- Four parking lots
- One fire tower that includes a radio relay tower (Hartshorn)
- Gravel roads (17 miles)
- 31 small fishless ponds (5 acres total)

IV. Area Restrictions or Limitations

- A. Deed Restrictions or Ownership Considerations:** National Park Service maintains easements on land that is within the park service boundary. Restrictions vary depending on easement language in each deed. The Ozark National Scenic Riverways was created in the 1960s.
- B. Federal Interest:** Uses of land acquired with federal funds may not interfere with the purpose for which it was acquired. Federal funds may also be used in the management of this land. Fish and wildlife agencies may not allow recreational activities and related facilities that would interfere with the purpose for which the State is managing the land. Other uses may be acceptable and must be assessed in each specific situation.
- C. Easements:** National Park Service scenic easements are located along the Current River. Approximately 5 miles of state highways and 17.8 miles of county roads pass through or are adjacent to the area; Sho-Me Power Corporation has an easement for 2 miles for a large transmission power line on the southeast corner of the property. Local electric cooperative easements for power lines are found throughout the area.
- D. Cultural Resources Findings:** Yes, records kept with the Department environmental compliance coordinators. Managers should follow best management practices for cultural resources found in the Department Resource Policy Manual.
- E. Endangered Species:** Endangered species are known from this area. Area managers should consult the Natural Heritage Database annually and review all management activities with the natural history biologist.
- F. Boundary Issues:** Establishing accurate and identifiable boundary markers is a priority for this property.

MANAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS

V. Terrestrial Resource Management Considerations

Challenges and Opportunities:

- 1) Enhance and restore forest/woodland/glade natural communities to create healthy and diverse habitat and to protect the watershed of the Current River.
- 2) Maintain existing old field habitat for game and nongame wildlife species.
- 3) Monitor and control invasive plant and animal species.
- 4) Manage and protect karst land features throughout the area.

Management Objective 1: Maintain, enhance, and restore healthy forests and woodlands.

Strategy 1: Inventory compartments according to forest inventory schedule.

(Forestry)

Strategy 2: Implement management recommendations as outlined in approved inventory following the *Missouri Forest Management Guidelines: Voluntary Recommendations for Well-Managed Forests* (Missouri Department of Conservation, 2014). (Forestry)

Strategy 3: Continue prescribed burns on glade and woodland units to promote herbaceous diversity and woodland structure. (Forestry)

Management Objective 2: Maintain biodiversity and protect natural community integrity and health.

Strategy 1: Monitor natural area for invasive vegetation and animals, diseases, and insects. Eradicate and/or control as possible. (Forestry, Wildlife)

Strategy 2: Discourage illegal vehicle use within the natural area to allow for natural communities to return where they previously existed prior to disturbance. (Forestry, Protection)

Strategy 3: Maintain existing species and habitats within the natural area. (Forestry)

Management Objective 3: Maintain open land.

Strategy 1: Maintain open land habitat on a limited basis by setting back succession in old fields for diverse wildlife use and associated diverse public use. (Forestry, Wildlife)

Management Objective 4: Manage and protect karst land features throughout the area.

Strategy 1: Ensure that all forest management activities follow the best management practices to protect sinkholes and caves, according to the Department's Cave Management Policy. *Missouri Watershed Protection Practice Recommended Practices for Missouri Forests: 2014 Management Guidelines for Maintaining Forested Watersheds to Protect Streams* (Missouri Department of Conservation, 2014), *Missouri Forest Management Guidelines: Voluntary Recommendations for Well-Managed Forests* (Missouri Department of Conservation, 2014), and *Watershed and Stream Management Guidelines for Lands and Waters Managed by Missouri Department of Conservation* (Missouri Department of Conservation, 2009). (Forestry)

VI. Aquatic Resource Management Considerations

Northern portions of the Current River Watershed and parts of the Ozark National Scenic Riverway are located within Sunklands CA. Also, Twin Springs and Barren Fork Creek are sensitive natural resources within Sunklands CA. Barren Fork Creek is designated as a Blue-Ribbon Trout Area. Several small, less than half-acre fishless ponds exist on the area; additionally, there are several naturally occurring sinkhole ponds. Refer to maps for further detail.

Challenges and Opportunities:

- 1) Protect water quality through managing riparian and buffer areas around streams, springs, sinkholes, and other small impoundments.
- 2) Manage and protect karst land features throughout the area.
- 3) Opportunistically create new fishless ponds for wildlife use.

Management Objective 1: Protect from erosion and enhance the Current River watershed (and its tributaries), springs, seeps, fens, and other high quality natural communities associated with bottomland forest.

Strategy 1: Minimize sedimentation to the Current River tributaries from land management practices and/or road systems that affect biodiversity of high quality habitats by following the practices recommended in *Missouri Watershed Protection Practice Recommended Practices for Missouri Forests: 2014 Management Guidelines for Maintaining Forested Watersheds to Protect Streams* (Missouri Department of Conservation, 2014), *Missouri Forest Management Guidelines: Voluntary Recommendations for Well-Managed Forests* (Missouri Department of Conservation, 2014), and *Watershed and Stream Management Guidelines for Lands and Waters Managed by Missouri Department of Conservation* (Missouri Department of Conservation, 2009). (Forestry)

Management Objective 2: Protect sensitive karst features such as sinkhole ponds and wetlands, springs, and fens throughout the area.

Strategy 1: Continue to protect the Sunklands Natural Area by discouraging illegal vehicle use, especially in sensitive wetland areas. (Forestry, Protection)

Strategy 2: Ensure that all forest management activities follow the best management practices to protect sinkhole ponds and wetlands found in the *Watershed and Stream Management Guidelines for Lands and Waters Managed by Missouri Department of Conservation* (Missouri Department of Conservation, 2009) and *Missouri Forest Management Guidelines: Voluntary Recommendations for Well-Managed Forests* (Missouri Department of Conservation, 2014). (Forestry)

Management Objective 3: Provide habitat for amphibians and reptiles.

Strategy 1: Maintain and seek approval to construct additional fishless ponds as habitat for amphibians and reptiles, and as a source of water for other wildlife. (Forestry)

VII. Public Use Management Considerations

Challenges and Opportunities:

- 1) Provide hunting and wildlife viewing opportunities.
- 2) Discourage illegal vehicle use in the natural area.
- 3) Facilitate open communication with neighboring landowners, concerned citizens, and area users when conducting management activities on the area.

Management Objective 1: Provide diverse hunting and wildlife viewing opportunities across the landscape.

Strategy 1: Hunting and wildlife viewing opportunities will be enhanced through creating diverse habitat through forest, woodland, glade, and open-land management activities. (Forestry, Wildlife)

Management Objective 2: Discourage illegal vehicle use within and around the natural area.

Strategy 1: Continue to visit deer and turkey hunting camps and contact other area users to discuss the use of vehicles in the natural area. (Forestry, Protection)

Strategy 2: Continue to maintain authorized vehicle-use-only signs on the closed trails in and around the natural area. (Forestry, Protection)

Management Objective 3: Facilitate open communication with neighboring landowners, concerned citizens, and area users when conducting management activities on the area.

Strategy 1: Contact adjacent landowners when planning activities such as prescribed burns or timber harvests. Promote habitat management on neighboring landowner properties. Also work with landowners on encroachment and trespass issues. (Forestry, Protection)

Strategy 2: Meet yearly with deer and turkey hunting camps on the area to discuss current and proposed management activities. (Forestry, Protection)

Strategy 3: Conduct field days for area users, as needed, to help communicate management activities goals and objectives. (Forestry)

VIII. Administrative Considerations

Challenges and Opportunities:

- 1) Maintain area infrastructure.
- 2) Maintain boundary lines and area signage.
- 3) Consider land acquisition, when available.

Management Objective 1: Maintain area infrastructure.

Strategy 1: Maintain area parking lots and signage on an as needed basis. (Design and Development)

Strategy 2: Work in conjunction with Design and Development division to maintain roads system throughout the area. (Design and Development)

Management Objective 2: Maintain boundary lines and area signage.

Strategy 1: Maintain boundary lines on a five- to seven-year cycle. Each year a section of boundary line will be repainted.

Strategy 2: Request a survey if boundary line dispute occurs. (Forestry)

Strategy 3: Resolve historic encroachment issues when they are detrimental to the resources. (Forestry)

Lands Proposed for Acquisition:

When available, inholdings and adjacent land may be considered for acquisition from willing sellers. Tracts that improve area access, provide public use opportunities, contain high quality natural communities and/or species of conservation concern, or meet other Department priorities, may be considered.

MANAGEMENT TIMETABLE

Strategies are considered ongoing unless listed in the following table:

	FY19	FY20	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25	FY26	FY27	FY28
Terrestrial Resources Management										
<i>Objective 1</i>										
Strategy 1 - Compartments	4	13	9	7, 10	11, 15	8	24, 21	25, 38	27, 29	30, 37

APPENDICES

Area Background:

Sunklands Conservation Area (CA) is located in northwest Shannon County and far eastern Texas County. The majority of the land is located north of Spring Valley and west of Sinking Creek and south of Big Creek on the west side of Highway 19. The upper Current River runs through the area.

In the pre-settlement era, from 1580 to 1700, Sunklands CA had a very low human population and was forested with shortleaf pine, various oaks, and hickories. From 1701 to 1820, the area was repopulated by Native Americans and by 1820 the area was starting to be settled by European Americans. The population recorded a peak in the early 1900s, when a large lumber mill was located in West Eminence. The Missouri Mining and Lumber mill operated from 1909 to 1927 and most of the shortleaf pine was harvested during this period on Sunklands CA. Smaller mills operated during and after this period and mainly cut oak timber. After the large mill shut down, some of the land was sold to farmers and some was sold to other timber companies. Moss Tie Company acquired much of the Missouri Mining and Lumber land and later sold the land to Kerr-McGee Corporation, who continued to harvest the timber on a 15- to 20-year cycle. Kerr-McGee Corporation focused on diameter limit harvesting of red oak species. Open range grazing was closed in 1969 and fire control efforts have continued to reduce the acreage burned by arson fires. Currently, prescribed fire and timber harvesting is being applied to maintain healthy and diverse glades, woodlands, and forests on various rotations based on management objectives. Fire suppression efforts are still in place to reduce destructive fire activity.

Most of Sunklands CA was purchased in 1992 and 1993 with Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration funds. The land was purchased from The Nature Conservancy in cooperation with Kerr-McGee Chemical Corporation. The remaining acres were purchased with Department funds in the 1940s and '50s and were part of the old Cedar Grove, Hartshorn, Skunk Pond, and Shannondale State Forests. In 2010, the Jerry J. Presley Center and surrounding 800 acres were transferred to the Missouri Department of Natural Resources and became Current River State Park. In 2014, another 2,928 acres were purchased from The Nature Conservancy.

Current Land and Water Types:

Land/Water Type	Acres	Miles	% of Area
Forest and Woodland	40,287		99
Glade	405		<1
Old Field	92		<1
Grassland (non-prairie)	25		<1
Total	40,809		100
Stream Frontage		4.3	

Public Input Summary:

The draft Sunklands Conservation Area Management Plan was available for a public comment period Dec. 1–31, 2017. The Missouri Department of Conservation received comments from four respondents (Appendix A). The Sunklands Conservation Area Planning Team carefully reviewed and considered these ideas as they finalized this document. A brief summary of public input themes, including how they were incorporated or why they were not, can be found below. Rather than respond to each individual comment, comments are grouped into general themes and are addressed collectively.

Department responses to themes and issues identified through the Sunklands Conservation Area Management Plan public comment period.

Suggests planting duck food in area ponds.

Sunklands CA focuses on restoring forest, woodland, and glade natural communities to create healthy and diverse habitat for both game and non-game species. We are currently managing several food plots and fishless ponds for wildlife use on the area. There are no plans to expand these efforts.

Suggests liming hedge rows and fields.

Sunklands CA plans to maintain existing old field habitat for both game and non-game species.

Concerned with illegal hunting with dogs at Sunklands CA. Suggests that hunting with dogs has resulted in over-hunting of deer.

Sunklands CA is open to hunting under statewide regulations. Hunting with dogs is a legal method for many species of game, such as squirrel, rabbit, and many furbearers including raccoon, fox, and coyote. Each of these is hunted to various degrees on the area, with squirrel and coyote likely being the most commonly targeted species. Hunting of deer with the aid of dogs is illegal and conservation agents are aware that the activity does still sometimes occur on the area. Random, highly visible group enforcement patrols are conducted during peak use periods to act as a deterrent.

Suggests blocking unimproved roads during deer and turkey seasons.

Sunklands CA is a multi-use area that is open year-round to the public. Closing some roads would pose challenges to other non-hunting users during these seasons. Trails and roads that are closed are signed appropriately.

Suggests better enforcement of deer hunting regulations (e.g., to prevent poaching).

Any violations witnessed should be immediately reported to the Operation Game Thief Hotline at 800-392-1111 or the Shannon County conservation agents.

Suggests prohibiting the use of lead shot at the conservation area.

The prohibition of lead shot is currently reserved for locations where it is possible for large concentrations of waterfowl to feed. This area has no history of waterfowl use that would suggest a restriction of lead shot is needed.

Suggests adding trails (especially, hiking and equestrian trails) to Sunklands CA. Suggests adding a trail through the natural area.

All roads open to public vehicles within the Sunklands Natural Area are open to foot and equestrian traffic, unless otherwise noted. Groups of more than 10 are required to obtain a special use permit. Adding multi-use trails for horseback riding would increase interference with existing area uses and could negatively impact sensitive habitats. Horseback riders can pursue this recreational opportunity on Angeline CA having 9.5 miles of trail (Shannon County), and also 25 miles of National Park Service Ozark National Scenic Riverways horse trails located adjacent to the Angeline CA.

References:

Missouri Department of Conservation. (2009). *Watershed and stream management guidelines for lands and waters managed by the Missouri Department of Conservation*. Jefferson City, MO: Missouri Department of Conservation.

Missouri Department of Conservation. (2014). *Missouri forest management guidelines: Voluntary recommendations for well-managed forests*. Jefferson City, MO: Conservation Commission of the State of Missouri.

Missouri Department of Conservation. (2014). *Missouri watershed protection practice recommended practices for Missouri forests: 2014 management guidelines for maintaining forested watersheds to protect streams*. Jefferson City, MO: Conservation Commission of the State of Missouri.

Nigh, T. A., & Schroeder, W. A. (2002). *Atlas of Missouri ecoregions*. Jefferson City, MO: Missouri Department of Conservation.

Maps:

Figure 1: Area Map

Figure 2: Easement Map

Figure 3: Topographic Map

Figure 4: Land Cover Map

Figure 5: Compartment Map

Additional Appendices:

Appendix A: Sunklands Conservation Area Management Plan Public Comments

Figure 1: Area Map

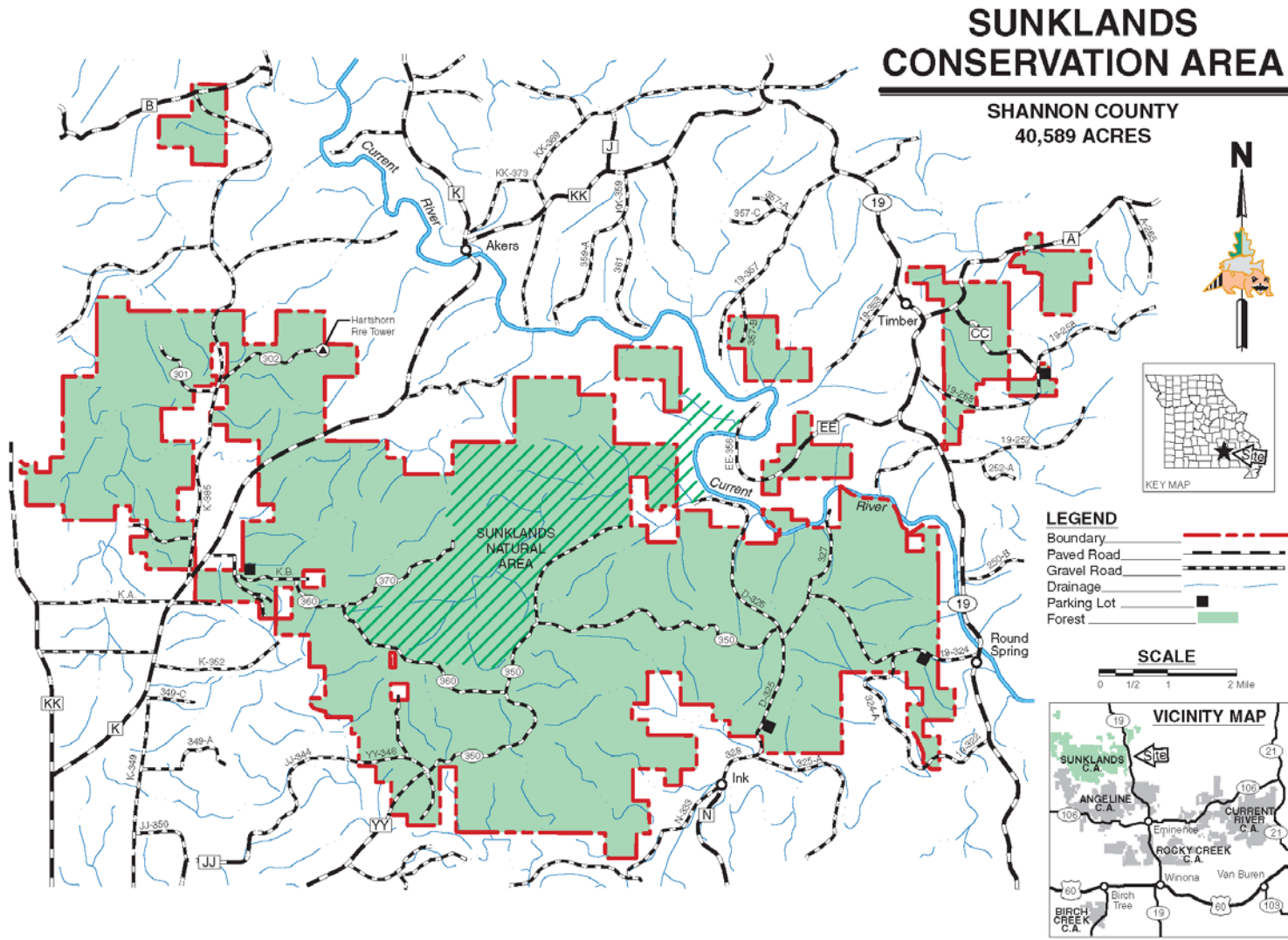


Figure 2: Easement Map

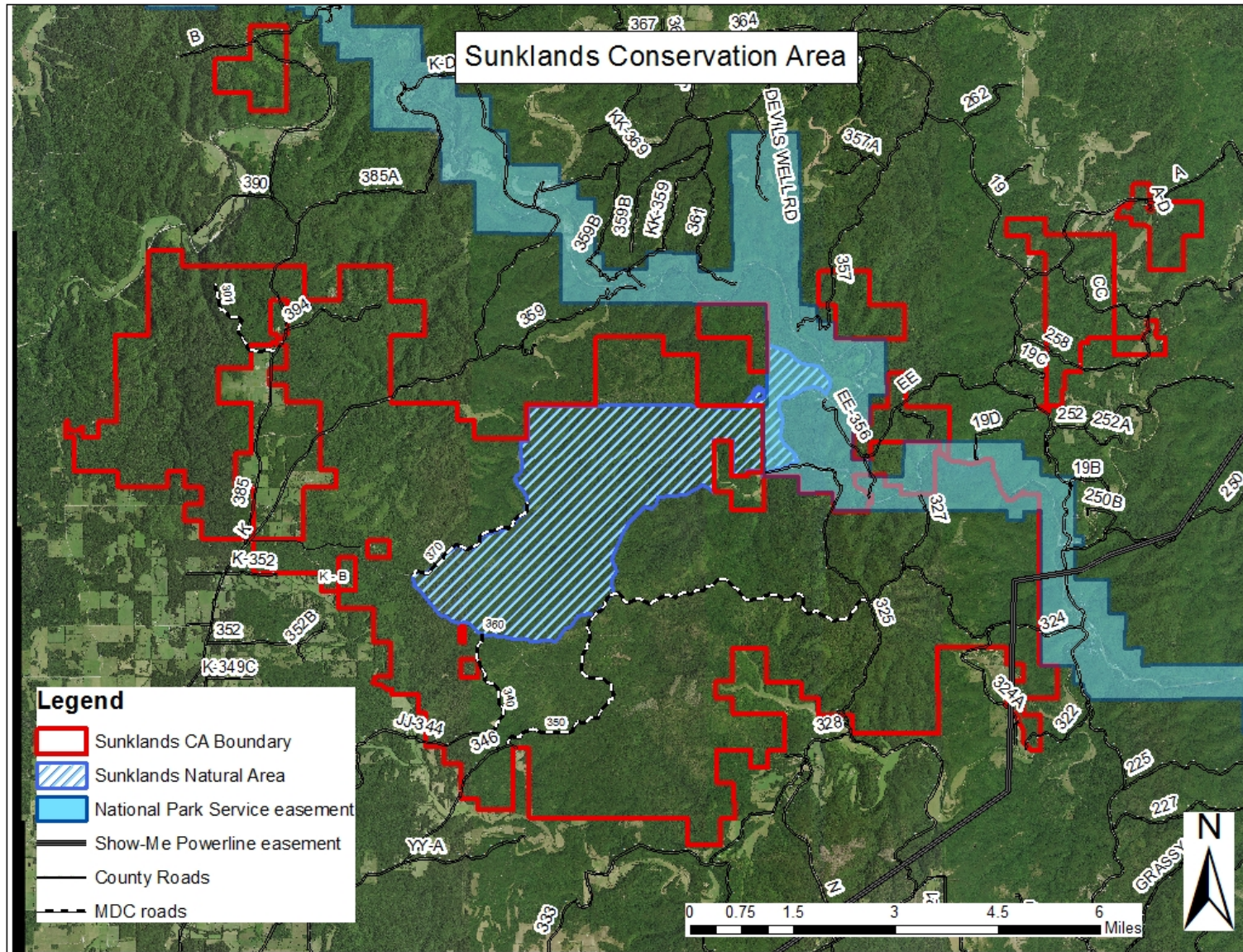
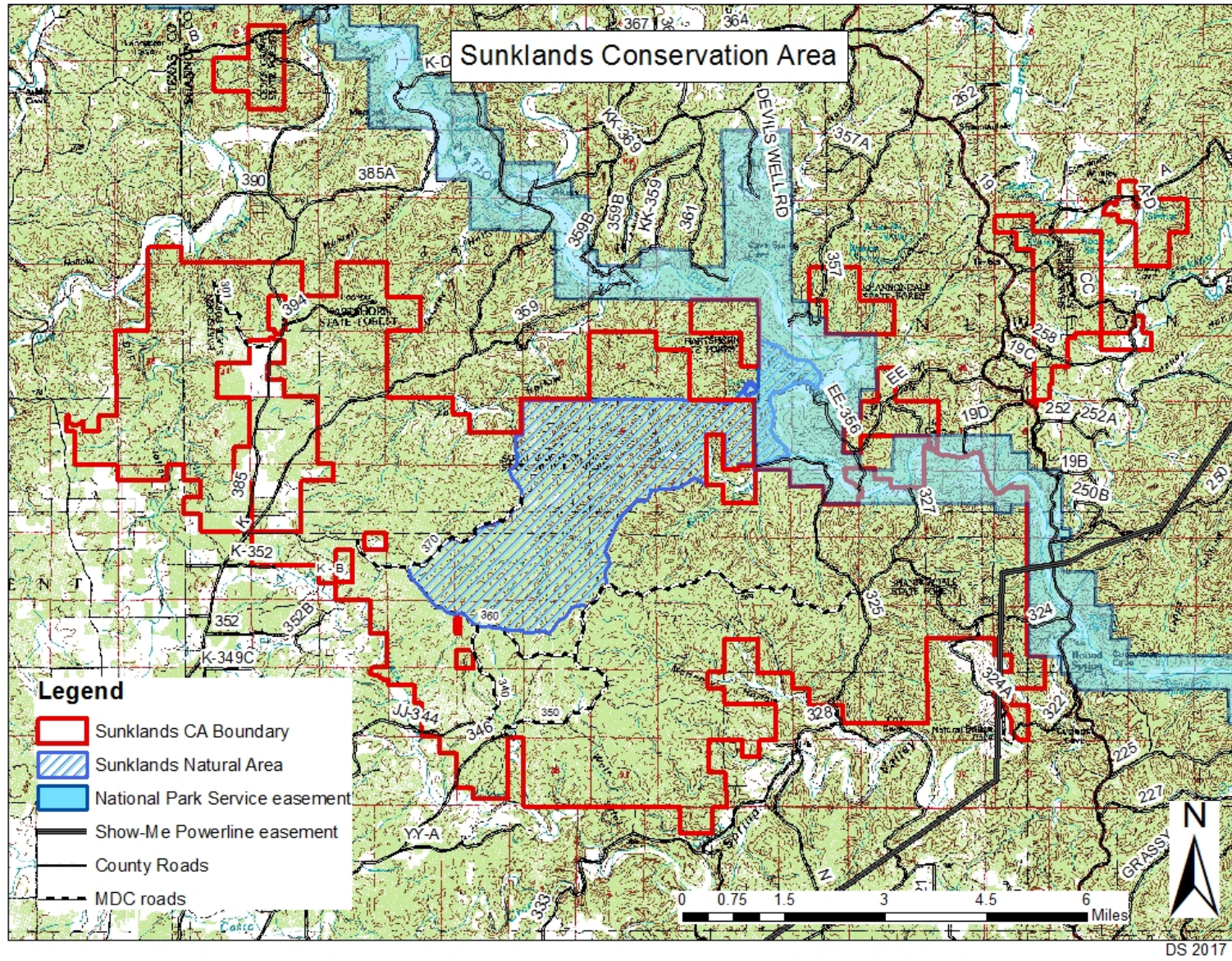


Figure 3: Topographic Map



Appendix A: Sunklands Conservation Area Management Plan Public Comments

Received during public comment period (Dec. 1–31, 2017):

1 plant duck food on all ponds so they will light in M.O. instead of other states 2. no lead shot. shot guns make 95% of the lead in the wild. Healthy soil =healthy plants =healthy animals. The reproductive of the hen ducks will fall !!!!! and everything else
3. Lime the hedge rows and fields to help neutralize the dissolved lead 4 . leave the Rifles and pistols alone! it has lost 3 times in top federal courts because police have protective closingAdd hiking trails. There are roads going through the area, so a trail head parking lot would be easy to add and of course a trail through the natural area would be the best case.

Thank You

1. Stop dog hunting in the Sunklands, many of the mature deer have been decimated by over hunting with dogs no enforcement of laws and poaching after hours and after season.
2. Block off roads during turkey and deer seasons. you cant find a ridge to hunt on with out a 4 wheeler or road vehicle driving in the woods. The deer sign that was there just 5 years ago has decreased. Several years ago you could find multiple deer rubs and sit in a stand and observe several bucks. Now the road hunters and dog hunters have either poached the majority of bucks out or pushed them out of the area due to pressure.
3. If your going to allow the road and dog hunting at least regulate it.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Sunklands Conservation Area Draft Management Plan.

Horseback Riding is a longstanding Ozark tradition and a popular form of outdoor recreation today. Many citizens who are elderly, very young, or face mobility challenges rely on this method of transportation to stay in touch with the outdoors and the rich natural resources of Missouri. For two generations Missourians and out-of-state visitors have had access to public land through the USDI-National Park Service, Ozark National Scenic Riverways. The implementation of the (soon to be announced) Roads and Trails Management Plan can be expected to severely restrict this access on the Upper Current and limit recreational opportunities for equestrians and bikes.

The Sunklands Conservation Area provides the best opportunity to replace these much-needed trails. The vast, relatively unused Conservation Area affords virtually limitless opportunities for designated multi-use trails. Please consider adding an extensive multi-use trail system on Sunklands CA.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.