

ENVIRONMENTALLY SENSITIVE HABITAT AREA



ESHA may be identified by the presence or likely presence of plants, animals, or communities that are rare or especially valuable, including habitats with special features, functions, and resources within the landscape.



What is ESHA?

Environmentally sensitive habitat area (ESHA) is any area in which plant or animal life or their habitats are either rare or especially valuable because of their special nature or role in an ecosystem and which could be easily disturbed or degraded by human activities and developments.

(Coastal Act Section 30107.5)

How Is ESHA Identified In The Coastal Zone?

Biological Surveys

ESHA Mapping & Lists

ESHA Determination

- There are many types of ESHAs in the coastal zone. The presence of ESHA is determined based on review of the specific site characteristics (historical and current) and context of the surrounding landscape. Some coastal cities and counties may categorically identify particular types of habitat as ESHA (e.g., oak woodlands or coastal dunes), but generally ESHA is identified through biological reviews using best available science.
- To identify ESHA, desktop and site surveys are undertaken by a qualified biologist to identify potential occurrences of sensitive species and map vegetation communities following the Manual of California Vegetation standards, relative to the proposed development and activities.
- The Coastal Commission reviews this information in conjunction with any additional information that may be relevant to make an ESHA Determination regarding the presence or extent of ESHA.

How Is ESHA Protected?

ESHA is protected by restricting development in and around these sensitive areas of the coastal zone through limiting types of land uses in ESHA and creating natural buffer zones between ESHA and development.



RARE SPECIES

Rare plant or animal life or their habitats include but are not limited to: globally and state-ranked species (i.e., G1-3 or S1-3), federally threatened and endangered species, California threatened and endangered species, California rare plants (i.e., CRPR 1 or 2), California Species of Special Concern, and California Fully Protected Species.

SENSITIVE COMMUNITIES

Sensitive natural communities are comprised of globally and state-ranked vegetation communities (i.e., G1-3 or S1-3), as characterized by the Manual of California Vegetation at alliance and association levels. Communities should be mapped following standard protocols. Importantly, communities may be recognized as sensitive even when highly degraded.



SPECIAL HABITATS

In addition to habitats recognized on the basis of rare resources, other areas may be considered 'especially valuable' based on their nature or role in the ecosystem, thus meeting the definition of ESHA. Examples of special nature include genetically distinct populations, unusual ecotones, or large, pristine habitat areas. Recognition of a special role may apply to essential linkages like riparian corridors, tree groves supporting nesting raptors or monarch colonies, or long-lived features that cannot be readily replaced.

For More Information

[California Department of Fish and Wildlife \(CDFW\)](#)

[California Endangered Species Act](#)

[CDFW Mapping Protocols](#)

[CDFW VegCAMP](#)

[California Native Plant Society \(CNPS\) Rare Plant Ranking](#)

[Coastal Commission Workshop on ESHA](#)

[Manual of California Vegetation](#)

[National Marine Fisheries Service \(NMFS\)](#)

[U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service \(USFWS\)](#)

The **California Coastal Commission** is responsible for making ESHA Determinations based on the review and recommendation of its staff for development under its jurisdiction.

Contact the relevant [Commission District Office](#) for ESHA-related project questions.