

Thank you for your comments on the Barton Springs Pool Master Plan, and your commitment to restore Sunken Garden.

On the subject of opening Sunken Garden to the public for swimming. I agree that increased attention to the structural and natural aspects of the site will foster more stewardship, which would be a wonderful thing. However, there are two reasons for not advocating opening the site to swimming by humans in the BSP Improvements Master Plan.

One, when the habitat is restored to a more natural spring-fed stream, the water depth of the spring pool will be too shallow for swimming; a person would only be able to wade in the water. The salamanders are stream animals that require shallower, flowing water to survive and thrive. The shallow water in Sunken Garden will increase the probability that salamanders will be harmed by humans stepping on them or on the rocks under which they reside. Certainly the unnaturally deep water of the past limited that type of harm, but at the same time it was harmful because it was an environment in which the salamanders and their insect food did not thrive. Preventing human intrusion into the aquatic environment in Sunken Garden is a result of habitat restoration to protect and foster the recovery of the salamander species.

Two, our federal permit prohibits human recreational use of Sunken Garden and Eliza Spring in order to provide two small areas in the entire world where the salamanders can live without human disturbance so that the species can potentially recover its resilience and the likelihood that it will persist in perpetuity, as required by the Endangered Species Act. The purpose of restricting human recreational access is to give the species a chance to adapt to the human-induced alterations to its habitat. Adaptation to these alterations requires evolution, which will take many, many salamander generations, likely several decades. If adaptation and recovery do occur, it will be indicated by a persistent increase in the population of salamanders. The population of Barton Springs Salamanders is still very small (maybe 1000), too small to assume that adaptation and long-term recovery is ensured. For these reasons, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff have indicated that a request to amend the permit to allow human recreation in Sunken Garden or Eliza Spring would not be granted at this time.

Note, that since the habitat in Eliza Spring has been restored and the salamander numbers at this site have increased, we are able to use the site as an outdoor educational amphitheater. We have had several hundred visitors to Eliza Spring since 2003, from school children, to university students to professional scientists and educators. Our goal is to use Sunken Garden as a similar educational facility once all the restoration is completed, so that people can learn about both the natural and human history of the site. We have had several volunteer groups conduct preliminary landscape and habitat restoration, along with several art and music performances in the past couple of years. So, we have been, and will continue, to balance the needs of the salamanders and the desires of the public. Part of that effort is developing an Interpretive Plan for Sunken Garden and the other springs sites, which is one of the short-term items in the Barton Springs Pool Master Plan.

We welcome any additional comments and suggestions that you have.