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Chapter 2

Snow geese

The Planning Process

- The Comprehensive Conservation Planning Process
- Issues, Concerns, and Opportunities
- Wilderness Review
- Issues Outside the Scope of this Planning Process

The Comprehensive Conservation Planning Process

Service policy establishes an eight-step planning process that also facilitates compliance with NEPA (602 FW 3), as illustrated in figure 2.1. Each step is described in detail in the planning plicy and CCP training materials. While the figure suggests these steps are discreet, there can be 2-3 steps happening concurrently. For more details on the planning process, please visit <http://policy.fws.gov/602fw3.html>.

Effective conservation begins with community involvement. We used a variety of public involvement techniques to ensure that our future management of the refuge would reflect the issues, concerns and opportunities expressed by the public.

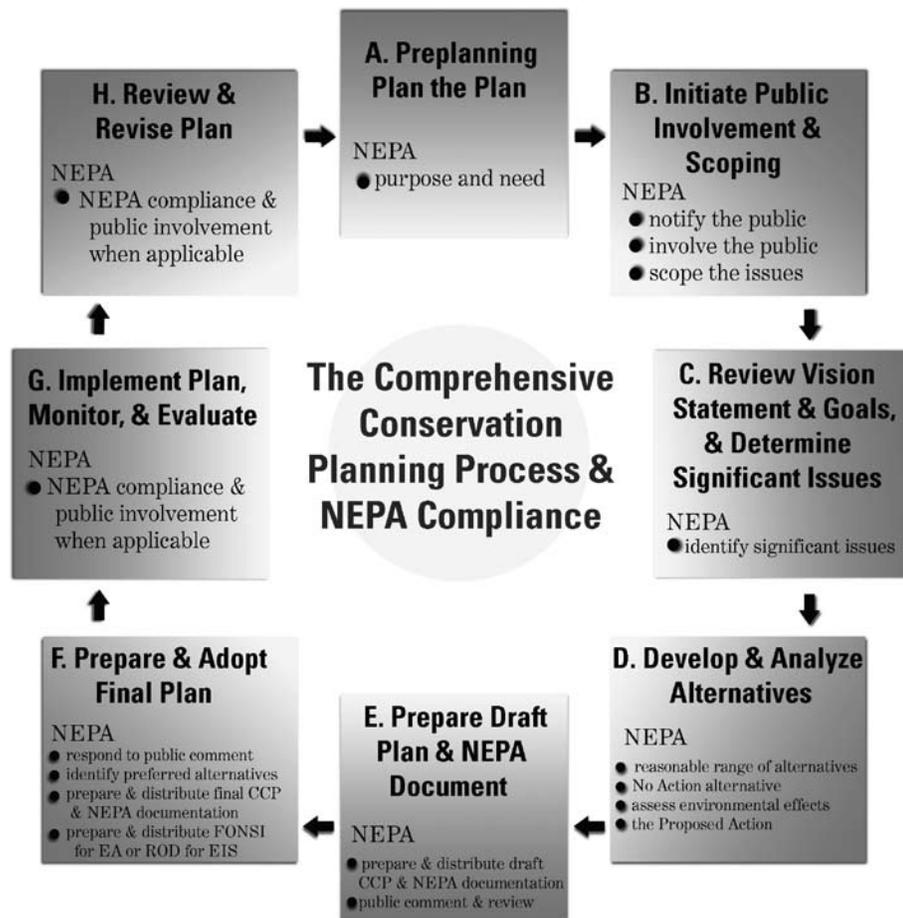


Figure 2.1. The Comprehensive Conservation Planning process and its relationship to the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969

We held Open Houses and Public Information Meetings throughout Suffolk and Nassau Counties at five different locations in fall 2000, advertised locally through news releases, paid advertisements, and through our mailing list. The Open House sessions were for people to learn informally about the project and have their questions or concerns addressed in a one-on-one setting. The evening Public Information Meeting sessions usually included a slideshow presentation about the refuge, a brief review of the System and our planning process, and a question-

and-answer session. We encouraged all participants to express their opinions and suggestions. Those public meetings allowed us to gather information and ideas from local residents, adjacent landowners, and various organizations and agencies.

We developed an Issues Workbook to encourage written comments on such topics as wildlife habitats, exotic nuisance species, and public access to refuge lands, and mailed it to a diverse group of more than 1,500 people on our mailing list, gave it to people who attended a public meeting, and distributed it to anyone who requested one. More than 100 people returned completed workbooks.

In June 2006, we completed Step E: “Prepare Draft Plan and NEPA Document” and released a draft CCP/EA for a 30-day public review and comment. In addition, we held three public meetings/open houses June 26-June 28, 2006. We summarize those public meetings, the public comments we received, and our responses to comments in appendix J. In some cases, our response resulted in a modification to alternative B, our preferred alternative. Our modifications included additions, corrections, or clarifications which we have incorporated into this final CCP.



M. Lin/USFWS

We held a series of three public meetings and open houses on June 26-June 28, 2006.

Our Regional Director has signed a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) which certifies that this final CCP has met agency compliance requirements and will achieve refuge purposes and help fulfill the Refuge System mission (appendix K). It also documents his determination that implementing this CCP will not have a significant impact on the human environment, and therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required.

The CCP must be formally revised every 15 years, but earlier if it is determined that conditions affecting the refuge have changed significantly. We will periodically monitor the plan to ensure that its strategies and decisions are being accomplished. We will use that data collected in routine inspections or programmatic evaluations to continually update and adjust management activities.

Issues, Concerns, and Opportunities

These documents will be made available to all interested parties. Implementation can begin immediately.

Public and partner meetings and further team discussions produced the key issues briefly described below. In chapter 4, we present the general refuge management actions, and the goals, objectives, and strategies that we designed to address these issues.

Managing Threatened or Endangered Species and Other Species and Habitats of Special Concern

Protecting federal-listed endangered or threatened species is integral in the fundamental mission of the System. Other federal trust species of primary concern include migratory birds, anadromous fish, and certain marine mammals. As part of the CCP process we initiated intra-service consultation with our Ecological Service's program to evaluate potential impacts of our proposed management to threatened or endangered species. We completed the intra-service section 7 biological evaluation form and included it as appendix H.



R. Parrish/USFWS

Piping plover eggs

Controlling Invasive Species

Invasive upland plants are a relatively recent concern at the Complex. Limited control began in 2002. Invasive plants are a threat because they displace native plant and animal species, degrade wetlands and other natural communities, and reduce natural diversity and wildlife habitat values by out-competing native species for light, water, and nutrients.

Because staff at the Complex are so familiar with its refuges, they have a solid sense of the invasive species present, although they have not mapped their locations. Invasive plants are distributed extensively over each of the refuges, and threaten both aquatic and terrestrial systems. *Phragmites* (*Phragmites australis*), or common reed, dominates virtually all of the more than 300 acres of brackish marsh community at Wertheim refuge, and upland species such as Asiatic bittersweet, an invasive vine, are overtaking grasslands and are beginning

to strangle trees in forested areas. Other invasive plants found at the Complex include multiflora rose, Russian olive, and Japanese wisteria.

Once invasive plants have become established, their characteristic abilities to establish easily, reproduce prolifically, and disperse readily make getting rid of them expensive and labor-intensive. Many of them cause measurable economic impacts, particularly in agricultural fields. Preventing new invasions is extremely important for maintaining biodiversity and native plant populations. Controlling affected areas will require extensive partnerships with adjacent landowners and state and local government agencies.

Invasive species that may pose a threat to refuge resources in the future include the cabomba (Carolina sandwort), perennial pepperweed, water chestnut, Asian long-horned beetle, and northern snakehead.

Managing Overabundant Wildlife Populations

Overabundant species, both native and non-native, may degrade habitat quality or the overall integrity of an ecological community. Native species become overabundant when their populations exceed the range of natural fluctuation and the ability of the habitat to support them. Overabundant species like red fox and raccoon may also displace or prey upon species that are being restored like the piping plover.

The non-native mute swan inhabits the Carmans River down to the mouth of the Great South Bay year-round. Mute swans feed on submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV). While foraging, each bird consumes an average of eight pounds of SAV per day, including leaves, stems, roots, stolons, and rhizomes (DNR Statewide Management Plan, State of Maryland April, 2003).

Mute swans consume large amounts of SAV that might otherwise be available to native waterfowl. This competition for space and food imposed by mute swans reduces the carrying capacity of breeding, staging, and wintering habitats for native species of migratory waterfowl in the Carmans River where mute swans are established.

Resident Canada geese are well adapted to suburban environments and their populations have generally increased throughout New York. Resident Canada goose populations are high enough to have negatively impacted plantings at wetland restoration sites on, and adjacent to the refuge lands. They are also an important game animal, and can provide recreational opportunities for New York hunters.

White-tailed deer, a native and overabundant species, are particularly a concern. Dense populations of deer consume all palatable vegetation within reach, leaving “browse lines.” Adjacent landowners complain about deer impacts on landscaping, the increase in vehicle-deer collisions, and the threat of Lyme disease from deer ticks.

Controlling Mosquitoes

The use of chemical compounds to control mosquitoes is a controversial topic among Suffolk County residents. The Complex is working with Suffolk County Vector Control to more rigorously manage mosquito populations. One alternative to chemical control is Open Marsh Water Management (OMWM) on the refuges, which we initiated in winter 2004. OMWM is designed to restore the natural tidal flow in the marshes which reduces available mosquito breeding habitat. Mosquitoes and ticks may pose a health risk to humans, but are also part of the ecological system. Mosquitoes are a particularly important food source for aquatic invertebrates, waterfowl, and fish; and by using OMWM techniques, this food network is supported while reducing the human health risks associated with large numbers of mosquitoes.

Establishing Hunting Opportunities at the Complex

Hunting surfaced in the scoping process as a key issue, one raised by Service personnel, DEC biologists, and individuals both for and against expanding hunting opportunities on the Complex. The Service views managed hunts in areas where there are overabundant populations as an effective tool for regulating them. Furthermore, hunting is a valid wildlife-dependent recreational use as defined by the Refuge Improvement Act. Responses generally agree that the overabundance of deer is a concern in Long Island, reflected in the increased numbers of vehicle-deer collisions, increased complaints about deer browsing on residential landscape plantings, visible impacts on native vegetation, and concern about contracting Lyme disease.

Those opposed to hunting cited concerns over public safety, disturbance and harm to other wildlife species, and the impact on visitors engaged in other public uses. The latter concern arises from the likelihood that significant portions of the refuges, due to their small sizes and configurations, would be closed to other activities during hunting. Some expressed the opinion that the refuges should function as a sanctuary for all native species, and that hunting is inconsistent with that function.

Increased Visibility and Partnership Communications

The Service recognizes the need to improve the support and recognition of the Friends of Wertheim and establish other friends groups. Establishing a new volunteer program, initiating additional partnerships and, if necessary, formalizing existing partnerships will all help achieve the goals of the CCP.

Developing a Refuge Complex Headquarters and Visitor Center

The Complex lacks adequate funding and personnel to provide all of the programs and services desired by the public and to effectively meet the goals for this CCP. The current headquarters does not have enough office space to accommodate even existing staff, and the visitor services area is limited to one rack of literature in the reception area. The alternatives compare different funding and staffing levels based on their proposed management strategies for dealing with the issues.

Many of the respondents in the scoping phase of planning felt strongly that more refuge staff should be present during peak visitation to increase resource protection and improve visitor services. Respondents also felt existing visitor facilities including kiosks and interpretive signs on trails should be improved. Other recommendations to increase visibility include more visitor contact stations, increasing wildlife interpretation and environmental educational opportunities, a better location for a headquarters office, developing a visitor center for the Complex, increasing support for a volunteer program, and increasing community involvement.

Wilderness Review

Service planning policy requires a wilderness review to determine if any lands and waters held in fee title ownership are suitable to be proposed for designation as a Wilderness Area. Some of the eligibility criteria include lands that are 5,000 contiguous acres or at least large enough to make it practical to preserve and use the land in an unimpaired condition, or a roadless island. The planning team determined that none of the nine units met the minimum criteria identified in the Wilderness Act due to their small size and many permanent roads. Therefore, this CCP does not further analyze their suitability for wilderness designation. The results of the wilderness inventory are included in appendix D

Worth noting, just south of Wertheim National Wildlife Refuge lies the “Otis Pike Fire Island High Dune Wilderness,” the only federal-designated wilderness area in New York. It is part of Fire Island National Seashore operated by the National Park Service. That wilderness area covers 1,363 acres over a 7-mile stretch along the south shore of Long Island.

Issues Outside the Scope of this Planning Process

This CCP does not consider proposals for new, non-wildlife-dependent public uses. Service policy and the Refuge Improvement Act state that incompatible or non-wildlife-dependent recreation will be eliminated as expeditiously as practicable, with few exceptions. The Refuge Manual (8 RM 9.1; 04/82) specifically mentions the need to phase out non-wildlife-dependent activities such as swimming, sunbathing, surfing, motorized boating, jogging, bicycling, and horseback riding. Following public review and comment, the Service published a final compatibility policy in Federal Register Vol. 65, No. 202, pp. 62484–62496 (603 FW 2) on October 18, 2000. That final rule provides more detail on our process for determining which activities are compatible with a refuge’s establishment purpose and management goals.

The Federal Register published on June 26, 2006 a Notice of Availability for a new policy regarding appropriate refuge uses. The purpose of the policy is to establish a procedure for finding when uses other than the six wildlife-dependent recreational uses are appropriate for further consideration to be allowed on a refuge. The new policy also provides procedures for review of existing uses. As the policy was not yet incorporated into the draft CCP/EA and available for public review, we have not included a review of appropriateness in this final CCP. However, future uses will adhere to the new policy, and a finding of appropriateness will be the first step in deciding whether we will allow a proposed use or continue, expand, renew, or extend an existing use on a refuge.