

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Meeting the challenges of providing and protecting a healthy environment for fish and wildlife and for people are central to the programs of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and is based in tradition since its predecessor agencies were established more than a century ago. Meeting this challenge requires the cooperation and support of other Federal agencies, State and local governments, conservation groups, and local communities. Dedicated Americans, combined with our dedicated international partners, are sharing a common commitment to conservation and are working hand-in-hand with the Service to ensure that our Nation's irreplaceable natural heritage and the world's fish and wildlife resources are protected for the enjoyment of future generations.

National Wildlife Refuge System

The National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) includes 512 National Wildlife Refuges, 37 Wetland Management Districts, and 50 Coordination Areas encompassing over 92 million acres. This national treasure provides a reservoir of wildlife, fish, and plant resources, and essential habitat while at the same time allowing 30 million visitors nationwide to enjoy wildlife watching, photography, hiking and educational programs. In addition, more than 287 refuges are open for hunting and over 293 refuges are open for fishing.

On October 9, 1997, President Clinton signed the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. This law serves as the organic act for our National Wildlife Refuge System, establishes fish, wildlife and plant conservation as the primary mission of our National Wildlife Refuge System, and gives priority to wildlife-dependent recreation on refuges.

The National Wildlife Refuge System conducts a wide variety of land management, fish and wildlife management, and public use activities. Fish and wildlife populations are monitored and investigated, disease problems attended to, nesting structures provided, contaminants cleaned up, and exotic animals controlled. Habitats are actively managed through crops grown for wildlife food, selective grazing or mowing, grassland and forest management, management of water levels, and treatment of invasive plants. A host of activities

FWS Mission

"To conserve, protect, and enhance fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people."

associated with being a landowner also occur, ranging from identification and protection of cultural and historic resources to health and safety provisions for staff and visitors. Collectively, these activities make Refuge System lands very busy places.

Over 36 stations within the National Wildlife Refuge System provide critical habitat and support and protect threatened or endangered species. Of the nations 1,107 threatened and endangered plant and animal species, 247 are found within the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Four new hunting and sixteen new sport fishing programs were opened on refuges in fiscal year 1997. With these new programs, 287 of our refuges are open to hunting and 293 are open to sport fishing. Refuge hunting and fishing programs are managed to provide the public with a high quality outdoor experience. About 4 percent of refuge visitors engaged in hunting activities and 14 percent in fishing activities this past year.

During 1997, the Service's Economics Division completed the report *Banking on Nature - The Economic Benefits to Local Communities of National Wildlife Refuge Visitation*. By analyzing a sample of refuges, economists found that refuge visitors contribute over \$400 million annually to local economies.

The Service outreach campaign promotes the National Wildlife Refuge System as a natural resources laboratory where visitors can learn about Service programs, from endangered species to fisheries to migratory birds, in an ecosystem approach. Outreach strategy targets local communities, Congress, conservation groups, communications media, and corporate sponsors. The strategy focuses on four annual events: the Refuge System birthday on March 14, International Migratory Bird Day in May, Fishing Week in June and Refuge Week in mid-October.

Started by the Service's late Director, Mollie Beattie, in 1995, Refuge Week has been an unqualified success in increasing public appreciation for the Refuge System. Over 150 refuge units staged Refuge Week events hosting 280,000 visitors in October 1996. One-third of these events involved partner organizations. In Washington, D.C., the National Geographic Society hosted Refuge Week which was attended by representatives from the public and private sectors and where longtime advocates of the Refuge System were honored.

New Refuges and Waterfowl Production Areas

Three new refuges and five new Waterfowl Production Areas were added to the National Wildlife Refuge System and the Mississippi River CAUE was merged with the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), bringing the total number of National Wildlife Refuges to 512. The new Key Cave National Wildlife Refuge in Alabama, Black Bayou Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Louisiana, and the Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge in Florida all contribute significant wetland, riparian and upland habitat for endangered and threatened flora and fauna and other fish, wildlife and plant species. Also, the lands at Midway, so important to hundreds of colonies of migratory sea birds, were officially transferred to the Service from the Department of Defense pursuant to Executive Order 13022, signed by President Clinton on October 31, 1996. These new entities are now part of our total Refuge System comprising over 92 million acres spread throughout all 50 States and several territories.

Recreation Fee Demonstration Program

The Service is one of four Federal land management agencies participating in a Recreation Fee Demonstration Program. Of 72 sites approved, 57 are currently implementing the program with the balance preparing for implementation. Refuge fee programs are not expected to generate nearly enough revenues to administer recreation programs. However, estimates are that \$1.5 to 2 million will be available to maintain and improve visitor services and facilities (e.g., expand tours/demonstrations, maintain trails/signs) after deducting the costs of collection.



River otter with fish (photo by FWS).

Habitat Conservation Planning, Restoration and Land Acquisition

The Service works in partnership with local governments and private landowners to develop Habitat Conservation Plans (HCP), that allow the development of private land while protecting threatened and endangered species and their habitats. These HCP's enable the Service to work with industry, States, communities, and individuals to balance the need for economic growth with the need to protect habitats for vulnerable species.

In 1997, the Service improved guidelines and procedures under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and National Environmental Policy Act, which made the two environmental laws more accountable and flexible to better meet the needs of the American public. This included the implementing of a "no surprises" proposed rule to assure landowners there will be no additional ESA requirements on their land and accelerated approval processes for private, small-scale development projects that fit a "low effects" category. With these improvements and as of June 1997, the Service issued 225 HCP permits for hundreds of species and more than 5.8 million acres of land, which includes land that

will be preserved as habitat and land that will be actively managed or developed.

The purchase of land is often required at the local level for habitat protection within and adjacent to HCP areas. A pilot program in 1997 allocated \$6 million to the Service to provide grants to States for just such land acquisition. Some examples of grant activities stemming from this pilot include:

Balcones Canyonlands Conservation Plan (Texas): \$1 million. This is a regional HCP encompassing 111,428 acres that benefits local development needs while protecting 35 listed and candidate species;

San Diego Multi-Species Conservation Plan (California): \$2,750,000. This HCP will conserve habitat for 85 rare plants and animals, including the threatened coastal California gnatcatcher, a tiny songbird, and 22 other species on the Federal endangered species list.

Safe Harbor Policy

As a new incentive for private landowners to voluntarily manage their lands for the benefit of listed species, the Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service developed the "Safe Harbor" policy. Landowners are encouraged to practice good conservation measures that benefit listed species without the fear of being subject to additional Endangered Species Act regulatory restrictions. At the conclusion of a Safe Harbor agreement, landowners can return their property to its original baseline condition without penalty. Safe Harbor agreements provide conservation benefits to listed species in the form of reduced habitat fragmentation and increased population numbers, while providing new areas for wildlife managers to field test innovative management techniques.

Safe Harbor agreements average about 1,000 acres and range in size from 2.5 acres to 1 million acres, making these agreements attractive to both small landowners and corporate interests. Currently, 25 Safe Harbor agreements have been completed, covering 36,000 acres of privately owned land and serving as valuable habitat for listed and declining species. Another 15 Safe Harbor agreements are in various stages of development.



Redheads (photo by David E. Sharp).

Conserving Migratory Birds

Because many bird species fly thousands of miles in their annual migrations, they cannot be effectively conserved by any single State or Nation, but only through cooperative efforts. The Service is responsible for leading migratory bird conservation under several laws and international treaties with Canada, Mexico, Japan, and Russia. This includes the conservation of more than 800 species of migratory birds. The Service establishes harvest limits for over 30 species of migratory game birds. The Migratory Bird Management Program provides monitoring and scientific assessments of many populations to inform the decisions relative to acquisition and management of National Wildlife Refuges and the efforts of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and Partners in Flight.

The process of amending the migratory bird treaties between the U.S. and Canada and between the U.S. and Mexico moved closer to reality in 1997. Two Protocols were negotiated and transmitted to the U.S. Senate for advice and consent to ratification. Senate action is expected in early 1998. These changes will provide for a managed harvest between March 10 and September 1, thereby increasing the number of options available to manage populations breeding in far northern regions.

Restoring Waterfowl Habitat

During the 1980's, duck populations plummeted to record low numbers as a result of decades of wetlands habi-

tat loss and a severe drought that affected major prairie nesting areas of Canada and the north-central United States. To counter this loss of wetlands, the United States, Canada, and Mexico are working together in a historic effort -- the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. The Plan is a long-term strategy to protect and restore habitat throughout the continent for waterfowl and other wildlife that use wetlands. A broad coalition of partners work to achieve the goals and objectives of the Plan, including conservation organizations, corporations, private individuals, Native American tribes, and state and federal agencies.

International Conservation

The Service's most extensive international achievement in 1997 was the 10th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in Harare, Zimbabwe. In preparation for the event, the United States, as the former host country, provided extensive advice and consultation to Zimbabwe, the 1997 host. Service employees organized the United States delegation, in addition to providing Zimbabwe with financial assistance and computer expertise.

The 1997 conference dealt with a full slate of contentious issues, and our CITES delegation negotiated hard for positions favored by the United States. In supporting the invasive species proposal, CITES recognized that international commercial trade in live plant and animal specimens can lead to potentially disastrous introductions of alien species into new habitats. The sturgeon listing is also significant in that CITES placed all the world's sturgeon not already covered by CITES on Appendix II of the treaty. The major caviar exporting nations of Russia and Iran endorsed this action, which speaks well for the cooperation and sound science that went into the decision making process.

Fisheries Conservation

The Fisheries program uses the expertise of National Fish Hatcheries, Fishery Resource Offices, and Fish Health and Technology Centers to successfully combat a variety of aquatic resource problems. In many cases, the Fisheries program collaborates with other Service programs or external partners to protect or restore fishery resources. These partnerships ensure a unified approach in conserving aquatic environments



Fisherman with pike (photo by Milt Friend).

for the continuing benefit of recreational, commercial, and subsistence interests. In a broader context, these cooperative management efforts benefit a plethora of aquatic and terrestrial species that depend on healthy aquatic ecosystems. The result of this approach has been a greater commitment to conservation through internal teamwork and external partnerships.

Assistance to the States

Fiscal year 1997 marked the 60th anniversary of one of the most innovative wildlife conservation programs of all time -- the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Program, commonly known as Pittman-Robertson for its congressional sponsors. Hunters themselves petitioned Congress to dedicate a portion of the excise tax on firearms and ammunition to State programs benefiting wildlife conservation, in what has become a model for shared commitment to conservation. Since its beginnings, the program, which is funded through a Federal excise tax on firearms and ammunition, has distributed \$3.2 billion to the states for wildlife conservation programs. The amount each state receives is determined by a formula that considers land area and the number of hunting license holders in each state. Part of the total is set aside for hunter education and shooting ranges and is distributed according to the relative population of each state. Combined contributions in 1997 of hunters, anglers, boaters and other outdoor recreationists have funneled more than \$439 million to state programs designed to purchase wildlife habitat, conduct needed research, reintroduce game animals, educate hunters, provide boating access, and establish other fish- and wildlife-related recreational programs.



Refuge manager with child on bike trail in San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge (photo by John and Karen Hollingsworth).

In 1997, the Service's Federal aid undertook a number of concerted efforts to improve management of these funds and increase the amount of money available to the states for their vital wildlife conservation efforts. Approximately \$13 million was made available to the States through Federal aid grants that would not have otherwise been available. The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) decided to convert from monthly to quarterly transfers on the archery equipment portion of the excise tax. During these conversions, the IRS decided to withhold the receipts collected on archery equipment for nine months in 1997. By doing this, States that were dependent on these funds for their conservation and hunting education programs were not going to receive them for 1998. With great support from Tennessee, the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and the Archery Manufacturers and Merchants Organization, the Service appealed the decision of the IRS. The IRS decided not only to release the \$13 million but also to return the monthly excise tax transfers.

Conservation Training

In September 1997, the National Conservation Training Center's (NCTC) Shepherdstown, West Virginia campus opened its doors for classes. The facility, under construction since 1994, is the first fish and wildlife conservation training campus of its kind. Fish and Wildlife conservation professionals from the Federal, State and local government, non-government organizations, and the corporate sector can all send people to the NCTC for timely training to help them address difficult conservation issues. The campus includes twelve classrooms, four teaching laboratories, two computer classrooms, including one with Geographic Information System technology, and a 250 seat auditorium. Two lodges provide housing for 100 students, and a third lodge is presently under construction. There is also an education building which houses the NCTC education staff, a distance learning production facility, and dining facilities for students.

During 1997, the National Conservation Training Center offered 191 classes on 94 separate subjects. Most of these courses were offered in field locations throughout the country. Over 3,300 Fish and Wildlife Service employees participated in these courses, as did approximately 850 employees from other Federal, State, tribal and non-government organizations, for a total of over 4,000 conservation professionals. The summary evaluations for these courses indicate a high level of customer satisfaction. The NCTC anticipates expanding course offerings to over 250 courses in fiscal year 1998.

Implementing the Government Performance and Results Act

The Fish and Wildlife Service has a long history of commitment to conservation, a practice that has been further formalized through the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA). During 1997, the Service completed its first strategic plan in support of the Government Performance and Results Act. The Service has developed four mission goals which are supported by underlying strategic goals and related performance measures. The four mission goals are:

- *Sustainability of Fish and Wildlife Populations.* Migratory birds, endangered fish and wildlife species, interjurisdictional fish and marine mammals are conserved, protected enhanced or restored. The

Service is participating in conservation of other species when its expertise, facilities or lands can enhance state, tribal or local efforts.

- *Habitat Conservation: A Network of Land and Waters.* An ecologically diverse network of lands and waters -- of various ownerships -- is conserved, in cooperation with others, to provide habitats for marine mammals and migratory, interjurisdictional, threatened, endangered and other species associated with ecosystems conserved.
- *Americans and Wildlife.* Americans have the opportunity to understand and participate in the conservation and use of fish and wildlife resources.
- *Workforce Excellence.* The Service's workforce, scientific capability and business practices -- in cooperation with the Department's scientific expertise -- fully support the achievement of its mission.

Customer Service -- "Communicating with the American Public"

Communicating effectively with a growing and diverse public is essential to the success of any sustained wildlife conservation effort. Wildlife habitat continues to vanish in the face of development pressure, while our growing urban population has less direct connection with fish and wildlife than any previous generation. As a consequence, professional fish and wildlife managers face new, constantly changing challenges in addressing the social and cultural dimensions of their work.

To help employees communicate their shared commitment to conservation with the American people, the Service focused on public outreach and education this year and developed a new national outreach strategy for 1997. The newly-adopted outreach strategy focuses on conveying three key messages to the American people about the Service:

- We are the Federal agency established with the primary mission to provide expert leadership for fish and wildlife conservation;
- We help protect a healthy environment for fish and wildlife and people; and

Banner Year for Wildlife Lands

Fiscal year 1997 was unlike any other year in the 95-year history of the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS), the world's largest and most diverse network of lands and waters dedicated to wildlife. Significant accomplishments include the following:

- *The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 made wildlife conservation the overarching mission of the NWRS and gave priority to wildlife-dependent uses, namely fishing, hunting, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation. This legislation not only establishes a clear mission for the NWRS, but also sets the tone for future resource management in refuges.*
- *Communities increased their support for surrounding refuges and assisted the Service by providing wildlife conservation and visitor services. The "Friends" initiative of the Service, with the help of the National Audubon Society, National Wildlife Refuge Association, and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, will complement the NWRS Improvement Act and a separate bill under consideration in Congress, the National Wildlife Refuge System Volunteer and Community Partnership Act. Living up to its longstanding tradition of providing premier migratory bird habitat, the NWRS acquired prime wetlands and other important bird habitats within 22 national wildlife refuges strategically located along major bird migration corridors.*
- *Key partnerships were forged to increase public awareness of and public participation in fish and wildlife conservation. The Service joined hands with the National Audubon Society and the Safari Club International to benefit the conservation of fish and wildlife and the ecosystems on which they depend. The North American Nature Photography Association is promoting nature photography that will highlight the tremendous opportunities offered to capture amazing wildlife spectacles and unique scenic landscapes in units of the NWRS.*
- *New hunting and fishing programs opened in the NWRS. New fishing programs in Colorado, Louisiana, and Nebraska raised the total opportunities in the NWRS to 293. New hunting programs in Florida, and Texas are now two of 287 within the NWRS. From lunger bass fishing at the Upper Mississippi National Fish and Wildlife Refuge to prime snow goose hunting at Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge in Delaware, refuges offer some of the best fishing and hunting opportunities in America.*

- We help Americans conserve and enjoy the outdoors.