

Chapter 2: The Planning Process

Patoka River NWR's CCP has been written with input and assistance from citizens, non-governmental conservation organizations (NGOs), and other government agencies. The participation of these stakeholders is vital and all of their ideas have been valuable in determining the future direction of the three refuges. Refuge and regional staff – indeed, the entire U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service – are grateful to all of those who have contributed time, expertise and ideas throughout the comprehensive conservation planning process. We appreciated the enthusiasm and commitment expressed by many for the lands and living resources administered by Patoka River NWR.

Public Scoping

Work on the comprehensive conservation plan began with a public scoping meeting held on October 14, 2004 at the Indiana Department of Natural Resources' Sugar Ridge Fish and Wildlife Area Office, south of Winslow, Indiana. More than 30 people attended the meeting to offer their ideas for the Refuge's management.

People attending the meeting were offered a variety of ways to submit their comments. Refuge staff and regional planners were available to talk about issues, and staff used a computer to write a short summary of the conversation so that it would be recorded. Attendees could also use a survey form or index card to submit written comments. In addition, staff prepared questions about Refuge management to post throughout the room, and people attending the meeting were invited to use red or green stickers to indicate whether they supported a given idea or not.

Staff also invited people to record their experiences on Patoka River NWR on a timeline.



Canada Geese, Patoka River NWR & MA. Photo credit. USFWS

The Comments

There were a number of comments about land acquisition. Most were supportive of additional land acquisition with some noting frustration with the land appraisal process. Others mentioned that insufficient funds were hampering acquisition efforts. Two comments opposed additional funding for land acquisition.

Some comments expressed concern about management of lands presently owned by the Refuge citing the need for additional money and staff to carry out proper management. Trespassing from Refuge lands onto adjoining private lands was seen as a problem by some, and a number supported increased law enforcement presence.

Opinion on hunting was mixed, with some people supporting additional hunting opportunities. Others said that hunting should not be allowed on some

portions of the Refuge; some were interested in limiting hunting to encourage wildlife and others were interested in preserving portions of the Refuge for wildlife observation even during hunting seasons. There was support and some opposition to establishing sanctuary areas where no hunting would occur.

A number of individual comments supported allowing a variety of uses including night fishing, harvesting nuts, berries, and mushrooms, and trapping.

There was strong support for a visitor center. Additional trails as well as user fees were supported by some and opposed by others.

A number of people expressed concern about the potential construction of Interstate 69 and the effect it may have on the Refuge.

Another survey question asked whether there should be more trails on the Refuge. Most of the comments supported additional trails, with one person saying he or she supported more trails except where they might inhibit wildlife. One commenter said the Refuge does not need additional trails, and another said that the existing trails need greater visibility in the community.

Concern about the effect the Interstate 69 project might have on the Refuge was expressed in responses to a survey question asking what changes might help or challenge the Refuge. Two people expressed reservations about the project's effect on the Refuge and a third person said that depending on how it's done the highway project could have either a good or bad effect on the Refuge.

Problems facing the Refuge were described as funding for acquisition, funding in general, all-terrain vehicles, and visibility.

Nine people attending the meeting supported an entrance or user fee while two people indicated that they did not support a fee.

Internal Scoping

On April 19, 2005 the Regional Office held an internal scoping meeting on the development of the Patoka River NWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan. People attending the meeting included the Deputy Regional Director, the Deputy Chief of Refuges, the Chief of Engineering, and staff from the Division of Conservation Planning, the Division of Migratory Birds, the Division of Ecological Services, the Division of Visitor Services, the Division of Realty, and the North American Waterfowl Management Plan.



Flooded river oxbow, Patoka River NWR & MA. Photo credit: USFWS

Regional Office staff identified several issues that should be addressed in the comprehensive conservation plan:

- How will the Interstate 69 project affect the Refuge? The location of exits, a rest stop and a pull off all have positive and negative aspects for the Refuge.
- What is a reasonable acquisition goal for next 15 years?
- Land acquisition is difficult for the Service right now because of funding issues.
- Is there potential for increasing the number of accesses to the Refuge?
- Are there opportunities for moving the Refuge's Headquarters to property owned by the Service or other government agency instead of continuing to lease space?
- More law enforcement presence is needed. Is there any potential for an agreement with the State Conservation Officers?
- The Refuge needs greater local visibility.
- Are there funding sources available that would help the Region get enough money to buy larger properties?
- There is potential for improving fishery habitat in a variety of ways, including connecting oxbows, increasing the hydrology of the oxbows, possibly cleaning out some of the oxbows that are filling in. The Refuge currently cannot afford these projects, but staff should develop a fisheries management plan in the event that the Service is able to acquire necessary tracts.

- Increasing fishing opportunities is of considerable local interest.
- There are several endangered species in the area, including the copperbelly watersnake. The copperbelly watersnake conservation agreement area encompasses a large part of the Refuge area; nine coal companies signed this agreement; it kept the Service from listing the copperbelly watersnake if the areas in the conservation area are not mined.

Preparation, Publishing, Finalization and Implementation of the CCP

The Draft CCP and Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) for Patoka River NWR & MA were prepared by a contractor with a great deal of input, review and support from Refuge staff and the Service's Regional Office. The Draft CCP/EA was published in two phases and in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The Draft EA (Appendix A of the Draft CCP) presented a range of alternatives for future management and identified the preferred alternative, which formed the basis of the Draft CCP. A 30-day public review period, which included a public meeting, followed release of the draft CCP. Verbal and written comments received by the Service have been incorporated where appropriate.

The alternative that was ultimately selected has become the basis of the ensuing Final CCP.



Channelized section, Patoka River, Patoka River NWR & MA. Photo credit: USFWS

This document then, becomes the basis for guiding management on the Refuges and the management areas over the coming 15-year period. It will guide the development of more detailed step-down management plans for specific resource areas; it will underpin the annual budgeting process through project submittals to the Service Asset and Maintenance Management System (SAMMS). Most importantly, it lays out the general approach to managing habitat, wildlife, and people at Patoka River NWR and Wildlife Management Area that will direct day-to-day decision-making and actions.

The Draft CCP/EA was released for public review and comment on October 17, 2007. A Draft CCP/EA or a summary of the document was sent to more than 416 individuals, organizations, and local, state, and federal agencies and elected officials. An open house event was held on November 7, 2007, at the Sugar Ridge Fish and Wildlife Area headquarters following release of the draft document. We received a total of 18 comment letters and e-mails during the 45-day review period. Appendix K of the CCP summarizes these comments and our responses. Several of the comments resulted in changes in the CCP.

Summary of Issues, Concerns and Opportunities

Issue Statement

The Service often cannot compete with other buyers for properties within the Refuge's acquisition boundary due to lack of funds. This makes it difficult to grow the Refuge at a time when interest in and demand for public land is increasing.

Background: Since the Refuge was established in 1994, the Service has acquired 6,162 out of 23,743 acres within the acquisition boundary. The Land Protection Plan groups land parcels within the acquisition boundary into four priority classes:

- Bottomlands supporting natural habitat and parcels essential to the restoration of a woodland corridor along the length of the Patoka River within the Project boundary;
- Bottomland farmland in the floodplain;
- Upland forest and reclaimed land; and
- Upland farmland and other lands, such as abandoned mine lands.

There are more willing sellers than funds available, and acquisition budgets are declining as land values around the Refuge rise. Economic growth and the potential construction of Interstate 69 are likely to continue to drive up land values. Many scoping respondents supported additional land acquisition. The Refuge continues to work with partners such as Ducks Unlimited to acquire property.

Issue Statement

Local public support of the Refuge has been closely tied to hunting and fishing. There is demand to provide areas for other wildlife-dependent uses and for wildlife sanctuary, which could reduce the amount of the Refuge open to hunting and fishing.

Background: All but 606 acres of the 6,162 acres of Refuge lands are open to hunting and fishing consistent with Indiana DNR regulations. Hunting is prohibited on about 5 acres surrounding a trail and boat launch, and within a single 113-acre block of reclaimed mine land. This block will be open to hunting when the lands meet reclamation criteria and the bond collected from the mining company is released. Hunting also is prohibited on the 488-acre Cane Ridge Wildlife Management area 24 miles west of the Refuge office. The number of other wildlife-dependent uses is growing and facilities constructed to support these uses are popular with visitors. During scoping, respondents suggested providing additional trails and other facilities as well as designating a portion of the Refuge as a waterfowl sanctuary free of hunting. Others opposed any reduction of lands open to hunting and fishing.

Issue Statement

There is demand for additional public use on the Refuge. Some of the uses are not wildlife-dependent.

Background: Local residents grew accustomed to recreating on private lands because absentee landowners, usually coal companies, did little to enforce against trespass. Today, these landowners are leasing the land and more aggressively enforcing trespassing laws. With fewer places to recreate, use has shifted to Refuge lands. Also, economic prosperity within the region has drawn more people to the area. Some of these newcomers also recreate on Refuge lands. The Refuge is open to the priority wildlife-dependent uses noted in the 1997 Refuge Improvement Act (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental educa-



Community involvement, Patoka River NWR & MA. Photo credit: USFWS

tion, and environmental interpretation). Other uses have been authorized through a special use permit system at the discretion of the Refuge Manager. A number of scoping comments suggested that recreation opportunities on the Refuge could make it a tourist destination. Others requested specific uses of Refuge lands.

Issue Statement

Refuge habitats are at risk from a number of threats such as agricultural runoff, coal mining, potential construction of Interstate 69, illegal uses such as All-Terrain Vehicles (ATV's), and development of lands not yet acquired.

Background: Most of these threats to land and resources in the area preceded establishment of the Refuge in the 1990s. They are long-term threats to the quality and quantity of terrestrial and aquatic wildlife habitat in the area. Water quality impairment from agricultural runoff and coal mining may have improved somewhat since the Refuge's establishment. Construction of Interstate 69 has not yet occurred, but continues to loom ever closer. Land development – both residential and commercial, and to some extent industrial – has accelerated in recent years as the area's amenities (accessible outdoors, semi-rural/small town lifestyle, low housing prices and cost of living) have attracted outsiders and returning native-born residents alike.

Issue Statement

The patchwork of public and private lands within the Refuge boundary can be confusing to visitors and may lead to conflicts with adjoining private land owners.



American lotus, Patoka River NWR & MA. Photo credit: USFWS

Background: Approximately 75 percent of the lands within the Refuge's acquisition boundary are not owned by the Service. The Refuge has a small scale map showing ownership, but Refuge boundaries are not posted and the patchwork of public and private lands within the acquisition boundary could easily confuse visitors. One scoping respondent expressed concern about trespass from neighboring Refuge lands.

Issue Statement

Demand for visitor services, facilities, information, and environmental education exceeds existing supply and/or the capacity of existing staff and budgets.

Background: Refuge visitation continues to climb and is currently estimated at 21,221 visitors per year. Presently, the Refuge has maps and fact sheets available during business hours at the Refuge office. The staff and volunteers deliver off-Refuge environmental education programs several times per year, but there is additional demand that is not being met. A number of scoping respondents requested additional Refuge information, environmental education, or facilities.

Issue Statement

Some Visitor Services facilities do not meet U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service standards.

Background: As a relatively new Refuge with no park ranger or public use/visitor services specialist on site, Patoka River NWR has not yet developed facilities or visitor services on a par with many older refuges. During scoping, many participants called attention to a need for greater information about the Refuge and what it has to offer to be made avail-

able to the public via e-mail, the Internet, newsletters, signage, and so forth. Respondents expressed unawareness of the existence of trails for wildlife observation, for example. There is no visitor center on the Refuge to provide information, interpretation, and environmental education.

Issue Statement

Refuge ecosystems and the effects of management activities (including public use) are not well understood.

Background: Sustaining wildlife populations is central to the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, but in many cases information is lacking regarding the success of management activities or the effect of public uses on Refuge wildlife. This hampers managers' ability to adapt habitat management practices or modify public uses in ways that best sustain wildlife numbers. Presently, the Refuge monitors the Least Terns at Cane Ridge WMA, conducts seasonal waterfowl, shorebird and breeding songbird counts, bands Wood Ducks, and contributes to the Indiana DNR's annual turkey call survey. Monitoring of uses as well as management activities is necessary to determine success or thresholds.

Issue Statement

Productivity (fishery) is declining in some oxbow lakes along the channelized portion of the Patoka River.

Background: In the 1920s area residents channelized a portion of the Patoka River in an attempt to drain nearly 100,000 acres of forested wetlands for farming. Known as Houchin's Ditch and beginning at the town of Winslow, the project replaced 36 miles of natural, meandering river with about 17 miles of dredged, straight ditch. The dredged spoil deposited on both sides of the ditch cut off 19 miles of natural river meanders on the north and south sides of the new ditch main channel. Water exchange within these cut off oxbows is now limited to periods of high water. Heavy sediment loads during these periods result in increased deposition in the oxbows. Consequently, the oxbows are becoming shallower and hold water for a shorter duration. Although this process occurs in all natural riverine systems, new oxbows are continually being created as river meanders are severed from the main channel. In the case of Houchin's Ditch, these oxbows are not being replaced and the associated wetland habitat is being lost.