

Blue Goose Alliance Bulletin

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Alliance Board Member Responds to Audubon Magazine's June, 2003 issue titled "SAFE HAVENS--The National Wildlife Refuge System Turns 100."

BGA board member Phil Morgan sent the following letter to the editors of Audubon magazine. A much condensed version was published in the September issue of the magazine.

Letters to the Editor, Audubon
700 Broadway
New York, NY 10003

I read Audubon's "SAFE HAVENS - The National Wildlife Refuges System Turns 100 (6/2003) with deep and very mixed emotions. My career spanned four decades with the Fish and Wildlife Service, most of it with the Refuge System. Since retirement almost 10 years ago I have continued working on its behalf with the National Wildlife Refuge Association and more recently with the Blue Goose Alliance. That explains my deep emotions. My mixed emotions come from the belief that your excellent publication and its writers continue to miss the mark concerning the underlying ills of our Refuge System.

Ted Williams writes of the System's number one foe: "species that don't belong". I agree that invasive species are a major concern but they are not the System's number one foe. They are symptomatic of the neglect the System has endured almost since its inception 100 years ago. I submit that the number one foe is continued apathy on the part of the Congress, the Department of the Interior and the public. Williams acknowledges their underfunded and underappreciated status. But, unlike the other major federal lands systems, the Refuge System is also disadvantaged by its organizational placement as one of many, diverse and competing programs of its parent agency, the Fish and Wildlife Service. It has no full time advocate to speak on its behalf

Grand plans by the Centennial Commission have gone largely unfulfilled. Who noticed?

Unfortunately, not many, not nearly enough. For almost 40 years, study after study has concluded that organizational change is needed for the System to achieve its potential and be operated as a system. One of the most recent pleas for change was Audubon's own initiative described in its publication "AMERICA'S HIDDEN LANDS -- A Proposal to Discover Our National Wildlife Refuge System". That initiative calls for "A New Bureau, the National Wildlife Refuge Service". That call is being kept alive by the recently formed Blue Goose Alliance and its mission TO PROMOTE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SERVICE AS A SEPARATE AGENCY WITHIN THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR.

Editor-In-Chief David Seideman on page 4 writes of the "most money ever" earmarked for refuges. That is a good thing and sounds almost like a wonderful thing but is not since it only slows the growing backlog of unfulfilled funding needs. Moreover, the 95

million-acre Refuge System continues to be funded on a per acre basis far below that of its sister agencies, the National Park Service and U. S. Forest Service.

Seideman also writes of volunteers dedicated to fulfilling the refuges' promise. Again, a very good thing and I shudder to think what condition refuges would be in without volunteers. Unfortunately, while volunteers should be the icing on the cake, in many cases they have, by necessity, become the cake.

Our National Wildlife Refuge System can never reach its potential buried in the Bureaucracy of the Fish and Wildlife Service. Nor can the apathy that surrounds it be overcome. Seideman comments that Refuges enjoy bipartisan backing in Congress and in the Bush administration. Although opponents of drilling the Arctic NWR might argue the latter, would not it be timely during this centenary, to finally achieve what has been recommended time and again? While agency status will not translate to panacea for Refuges, it will put the System on equal footing with the other federal land managing agencies giving it the recognition it so richly deserves as the World's foremost assemblage of lands and waters dedicated to wildlife.

I urge the National Audubon Society to reignite its Hidden Lands initiative and move aggressively to engage its membership, the public, and other conservation organizations to achieve the goal of that initiative as a 100th birthday present for our National Wildlife Refuge System. I am quite confident that Theodore Roosevelt would approve!

Sincerely,

Phillip S. Morgan