

# America's Hidden Lands

## A Proposal to Discover Our National Wildlife Refuge System

### **Executive Summary**

Our government has a secret. It has been ignoring a system of lands larger than the National Park System - an area about the size of the state of Montana - that protects millions of birds, scores of wildlife, and twice as many endangered species as our national parks. This vast system of lands - the National Wildlife Refuge System - is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, a bureau within the Department of the Interior charged with an array of competing functions. To fulfill its many responsibilities, the Service divides funding and leadership attention across a diverse set of programs. In practice, this limits the Service's ability to promote the Refuge System to the Congress and the American people, and to provide adequate funding and leadership attention to refuges. On the ground, dedicated refuge managers ultimately are restrained from managing refuge habitats, wildlife populations, and visitor services at their full potential.

To make the Refuge System better able to reach its full potential, the Congress should pass - and the administration should support - legislation that would create a bureau within the Department of the Interior that would have as its sole responsibility the promotion and administration of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

### **The Refuge System has the potential to be the world's model of wildlife conservation**

The National Wildlife Refuge System is the world's largest network of lands dedicated primarily to wildlife conservation, with the potential to be a model of innovative land management and successful wildlife protection for the world to witness. The Refuge System is vast - it covers more than 93 million acres -peppering its 516 units throughout all 50 states and five U.S. territories, with the potential to extend its environmental and recreational benefits to all Americans.

The Refuge System conserves an incredible array of the nation's ecosystems: deserts, forests, tundra, great rivers, vast marshes, swamps, mountains, prairies, estuaries, coral reefs, and remote islands. This diverse set of habitats is home to a stunning diversity of wildlife, from the vast herd of Porcupine caribou roaming the unspoiled tundra of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska to the endangered West Indian manatee nestling into the quiet seagrasses of Pelican Island in Florida. In total, the Refuge System protects more than 2,000 fish and wildlife species, about one-tenth of which are federally listed as threatened or endangered. On refuges, threatened wildlife can begin their recovery, or hold their own against extinction.

While some refuges are visited only by seals and seabirds in the remoteness of the Pacific Ocean, others are visited by thousands of schoolchildren just a short bus ride from their classroom. In fact, the Refuge System attracts millions of visitors each year to its outstanding opportunities for wildlife viewing, hunting, fishing, and outdoor education.

## **The Refuge System is held back by its position within the Fish and Wildlife Service**

As has been noted in several reports published by expert panels over the past three decades, the potential of the Refuge System largely has gone unfulfilled. The many disparate functions of the Fish and Wildlife Service hold back the potential of the Refuge System by acting as a barrier to public recognition, adequate funding, strong leadership, and effective management of wildlife refuges.

## **The Fish and Wildlife Service is the only major land management bureau that does not focus primarily on land management**

About 95 percent of federal lands are managed by four bureaus - the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service, and the Fish and Wildlife Service within the Department of the Interior, and the Forest Service within the Department of Agriculture. Three of these bureaus have mission statements that designate land management as their primary function.

The Fish and Wildlife Service is the only such bureau that operates under a broader mission - to conserve fish and wildlife. The Service, accordingly, has many other wildlife-related functions. As a result, the Fish and Wildlife Service is the only major land management bureau that does not focus primarily on land management. In sharp contrast to the other bureaus (see appendix), in 1999 the Service directed only about 37 percent of its total appropriated funds to land management.

## **A House Divided - The Fish and Wildlife Service is charged with a diverse set of competing functions**

Created in 1939, the Fish and Wildlife Service historically was a conglomeration of disparate wildlife-related functions, including enforcing early wildlife laws and managing a modest system of public lands. The responsibilities of the Service have since ballooned. In addition to the complex task of managing the 93-million-acre Refuge System, the Service also must carry out a diverse set of other major functions that compete with refuges for funding and leadership attention. These functions include:

**Regulatory function:** Under several wildlife-related laws, the Service has major permitting and enforcement responsibilities, including:

- Administering the Endangered Species Act. The Service identifies and lists species as endangered or threatened, issues permits for "incidental takings" of endangered species, and develops Habitat Conservation Plans to ensure the long-term protection of listed species.
- Enforcing wildlife laws. Under several wildlife laws, the Service reviews and issues permits for importation and exportation of certain species of wildlife and plants, and

investigates cases of migratory bird hunting violations, large-scale poaching, and commercial trade in protected wildlife.

**Professional services function:** For a range of customers, including federal and state agencies, foreign governments, industry, and members of the public, the Service provides professional services, such as:

- Assessing the impacts of development projects. Traditionally, the Service has offered expert advice to federal and state agencies, industry and the public on the impacts of development projects on fish and wildlife. Under the Endangered Species Act, the Service assesses impacts on endangered species.
- Providing technical assistance to foreign governments. Under 40 treaties, statutes, and international agreements, the Service helps to develop the conservation capabilities of cooperating countries and responds to requests from foreign governments for technical assistance.

#### **Other functions**

- **Operating fish hatcheries.** The Service works to restore fisheries that have been depleted by overfishing, pollution, or other habitat damage by operating 80 national fish hatcheries.
- **Conserving migratory birds.** Under several laws and international treaties, the Service leads U.S. efforts to conserve more than 800 species of migratory birds.
- **Protecting waterfowl habitat.** Under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, the Service works with its counterparts in Canada and Mexico to protect wetland habitat for waterfowl.

**Too Many Mouths to Feed - The many functions of the Fish and Wildlife Service act as a barrier to public recognition, adequate funding, strong leadership and effective management of wildlife refuges**

#### **Public recognition**

Several reports published by expert panels over the past three decades have found that the many functions of the Service prevent it from strongly promoting refuges to the Congress and the American people. Weak public recognition of the System leads to weak or sporadic public support for refuges, less public use of refuge lands for wildlife-oriented recreational and educational activities, and less public participation in the planning and decision-making processes that will guide the management of refuges in the future.

## **Funding**

The Refuge System must compete with a diverse set of other functions for scarce funds in the Fish and Wildlife Service budget, and refuges have no consistent advocate at the bureau level to make the case for refuges in the federal budget process. Though the Refuge System has been fortunate to receive healthy increases in funding over the past few years, it still receives far less funding than other major land systems. In 1999, the Fish and Wildlife Service received a total of \$297 million for land management. In sharp contrast, the National Park Service received over \$1.6 billion. Underfunding and understaffing in past years has handcuffed refuge managers, hindering their ability to address invasive exotic species, inadequate water supplies, and other problems that encumber many refuges, leading to declines in refuge habitats and wildlife populations. The Service now has a maintenance backlog of \$526 million, leaving many critical projects uncompleted.

## **Leadership**

Senior leaders are forced to spread their attention across many competing responsibilities, and often are trained in the legal, budgetary, policy and planning issues relevant to Service functions other than land management. Compounding the problem, some of the Service's responsibilities are more controversial, and thereby command more leadership attention. In response to a 1997 survey conducted by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), one refuge manager commented that "de-emphasis of refuges at higher levels of leadership has resulted in a weakened refuge system. Most regional directors pay lip service to refuges while pushing hot topics concerning endangered species."

## **Management**

Managing a major federal land system is a full-time job - just ask the National Park Service, the Forest Service, or the Bureau of Land Management. Due to weak public recognition of refuges, inadequate leadership attention and inadequate funding, refuge managers are constrained in their ability to manage refuge habitats, wildlife populations and visitor services at their full potential. In 1997, the managers of 125 refuges across the country voiced concerns about these problems in a Campfire Note to the Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, and called for an elevation of the status of refuges as the solution.

## **Audubon's Solution - A New Bureau, the National Wildlife Refuge Service**

The Congress should pass - and the administration should support - legislation that would create the National Wildlife Refuge Service, a bureau within the Department of the Interior that would have as its sole responsibility the promotion and administration of the National Wildlife Refuge System. This change will:

- **Align the Refuge System with other major federal land systems**  
Currently, independent bureaus dedicated primarily to land management administer three of the four major federal land systems. The Refuge System is the only major land system not managed by such a bureau.

- **Remove barriers that prevent the Refuge System from reaching its full potential**  
The division of priorities within the Fish and Wildlife Service serves as a barrier to public recognition of the Refuge System, as well as a barrier to adequate funding, strong leadership, and effective management. Promoting the Refuge System to bureau status would remove these barriers, allowing a strong focus on improving government performance in the complex undertaking of refuge management. As a result, the Refuge System would be better able to provide its many important services to the American people.

### A Costly New Bureaucracy?

While the promotion of refuges to bureau status would require short-term expenses to manage the transition, it would not create significant new bureaucracy that would burden the federal budget in the long-term. In fact, the costs of the move are unlikely to be burdensome, because:

- **Personnel and facilities needed to administer the Refuge System are largely in place**  
To manage the Refuge System in the field, the Fish and Wildlife Service employs an extensive network of regional offices and field stations populated with dedicated professional land managers, administrators, and scientists. In Washington, the Division of Refuges provides policy and budget support and other administrative services.
- **A major increase in administrative support for the Refuge System may not be necessary**  
The Service's current spending on administrative services for the Refuge System - about \$30 million annually - already exceeds the budget for administrative support for other stand-alone bureaus within the Department of the Interior. For example, the Minerals Management Service, with a total appropriation in 1999 of \$218 million, dedicated \$25 million to administrative services. In addition, administrative overhead for the Refuge System - about 10 percent of total appropriated funds for refuges - is comparable to that of other land management bureaus. For example, administrative overhead comprises about 8 percent of the total appropriated funds for the National Park Service.

For further background and supporting documentation:

- *"The National Wildlife Refuge System," Report of the Advisory Committee on Wildlife Management, Appointed by Interior Secretary Stewart L. Udall, A. Starker Leopold, chairman, Clarence Cottam (Welder Wildlife Foundation), Ian McT. Cowan (University of British Columbia), Ira N. Gabrielson (Wildlife Management Institute), Thomas Kimball (National Wildlife Federation), March 1968.*
- *Assistant Secretary of the Interior Task Force Report, Forrest Carpenter (National Wildlife Refuge Association), Charles Clusen (Sierra Club), John Grandy (Defenders of Wildlife), Laurence Jahn (Wildlife Management Institute), Willard Klimstra (Southern Illinois University), C. Eugene Knoder (National Audubon Society), Betty MacDonald (League of Women Voters), Chester Phelps (Virginia Commission of Game and Fish), Ronald Way (Department of the Interior), Robert S. Cook (Fish and Wildlife Service), 1978.*

- *"Putting Wildlife First," Defenders of Wildlife, Robert Weeden, Chair (University of Alaska), Mollie Beattie, Vice-chair (Commissioner of Forests, Parks, and Recreation in Vermont), sixteen other distinguished commission members representing private organizations, 1992.*
- *"The National Wildlife Refuges: Theory, Practice, and Prospect," Richard J. Fink, Harvard University Environmental Law Review, 1994.*
- *"Campfire Note: Strengthening the Refuge System," memorandum from Refuge Managers across the country to Jamie Rappaport Clark, Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1997.*

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