

FOCUS...*On Urban Refuges*

With an Urban State of Mind

We left our hearts in San Francisco, we might consider leaving Las Vegas, and we may be in a New York state of mind — at least in song. But do we know what these cities and others are doing to national wildlife refuges? This issue of *Refuge Update* explores the myriad ways refuges are meeting the challenge of urbanization.

In 1991, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officially adopted an Urban Refuge Policy to encourage the creation of refuges that offer places for recreation, scientific research and environmental education in and near cities. “The primary purpose for the

establishment of new urban refuges will be to foster environmental awareness and outreach programs to develop an informed and involved citizenry that will support fish and wildlife conservation,” says the policy.

New refuges have been established specifically because of their proximity to urban areas. But many more refuges are adapting management strategies and education programs to serve populations that are growing larger along on their borders.

California State University Professor Emilyn Sheffield suggests that all

Every Refuge is an Urban Refuge

by Emilyn Sheffield

What, exactly, is an urban wildlife refuge in a country that has added 100 million people to its population since 1967? We can no longer consider just a handful of refuges as urban refuges.

Perhaps all national wildlife refuges are urban because they function in a context dominated by the concerns of metropolitan America. Urbanization and other population changes influence every wildlife refuge and require new strategies to connect people to the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The U.S. population passed the 300 million mark last fall, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. While most people still live east of the Mississippi River, growth in the south and west is inexorably moving the country’s population center. West of the Mississippi, the pull of heartland interstates and Interstate 5 on the Pacific Coast concentrates growth in the cities and suburbs connected by these great transportation arteries.

Transportation made suburban growth a critical aspect of mid-to-late 20th century. Between 1950 and 2000, the percentage of people living in city centers stabilized at about 30 percent. The percentage of people living in suburbs steadily increased from 23 percent in 1950 to 50 percent in 2000. Currently, more than

Urbanization affects every national wildlife refuge, especially those like John Heinz at Tinicum National Wildlife Refuge near Philadelphia. Engaging the hearts, hands, heads and human spirit of a vibrant, urban and diverse 21st century America can only increase the support for the National Wildlife Refuge System. (USFWS)



refuges could be considered urban because they operate in the context of metropolitan America. Today, anywhere from 80 to 150 national wildlife refuges could be considered “urban” refuges, in close proximity to metropolitan areas with populations of 50,000 or more — sometimes, far more.

Refuges like Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge in Minnesota and Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge in Texas, established in what then were relatively rural areas, are now coping with major development pressures directly on their borders.

As cities become more ethnically diverse, refuges are discovering the benefits and creativity of reaching out to visitors whose first language is not English. Environmental education programs must be adapted for children whose play space is more asphalt than grass. Habitat protection on urban refuges means careful attention to issues of water quality and fire at the wildland urban interface (WUI). Almost a quarter of the Service’s fire management budget is devoted to hazardous fuels reduction in urban areas near refuges.

The urbanization of America is a seemingly continuous process. Where or when it will stop can be debated by demographers, urban planners and a host of other organizations and individuals. In the real world of habitat conservation, national wildlife refuges are facing challenges and opportunities in a nation that grew from 200 million people to 300 million in less than 40 years. ♦

80 percent of the U.S. population lives in urban or suburban areas, a near reversal of the rural-urban percentages in the first decade of the 20th century.

California, the Carolinas, Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, Virginia and Washington, already more densely populated than the U.S. as a whole, grew faster than the national average between 1990 and 2000. Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Idaho, New Mexico, Nevada, Oregon, Texas and Utah also experienced fast growth, though from a less densely populated base. At the other end of the continuum, several plains and mid-western states grew more slowly than the U.S. average or lost population. The Great Lakes and the northern New England states remained fairly stable during the 1990s.

Older, More Diverse

Changes in composition of the U.S. population also have implications for wildlife refuges. Two aspects are especially important: the population is growing older and becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. Between 2000 and 2030, the number of people 65

and older are projected to grow from about 12 percent to almost 20 percent of the population.

The growing diversity of the United States is reflected most clearly in the ranks of the young. In 1980, slightly more than a quarter of the population under the age of 25 was Latino or other-than-white; by 2000 that percentage had increased to almost 39 percent. Today, according to a 2006 Census Bureau report, 45 percent of all children in the United States under the age of five belong to racial or ethnic minorities. These population trends are transforming the country and are more concentrated in metropolitan areas, now home to more than 8 in 10 Americans.

Do these trends align with the traditional national wildlife refuge visitor or advocate? Refuges are alive with opportunities to engage and inspire urban Americans. New partners are emerging with the time, talent and connections to bind wildlife refuges to the hands, heads, hearts and human spirits of urban America. In the past year, I had the pleasure of addressing gatherings of

Friends groups in four different regions. In each region, there are innovative and exciting programs that are connecting refuges to new audiences in powerful and enduring ways.

By providing opportunities for family recreation, refuges and their partners can promote active healthy lifestyles. With partners from the arts and humanities, refuges can connect with the human spirit. Through stewardship opportunities and volunteerism, refuges and their partners can engage the hearts and passions of urban Americans. The ultimate goal must be to engage all Americans as partners in efforts to preserve nature and protect wildlife. ♦

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