

Appendix: J: The Upper Detroit River: A Report to Congress

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The Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge Establishment Act included a provision to study the resource merits of the Upper Detroit River. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) was given 18 months to conduct a study of fish and wildlife habitat and aquatic and terrestrial communities of the north reach of the Detroit River for potential inclusion in the Refuge, and to report its findings to Congress. To meet this directive, the Service developed a Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the Refuge containing this report.

The subsection of Public Law 107-91:

Section 5(f) STUDY OF ASSOCIATED AREA. – The Secretary (acting through the Director of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service) shall conduct a study of fish and wildlife habitat and aquatic and terrestrial communities of the north reach of the Detroit River, from the northernmost point of Ojibway Shores north to the mouth of Lake St. Clair, for potential inclusion in the Refuge. Not later than 18 months after the date of the enactment of the Act, the Secretary shall complete such study and submit a report containing the results thereof to the Congress.

The Environment

The 14-mile long Upper Detroit River flows past downtown Detroit and Windsor, Ontario. The shoreline has been highly altered since the time of European settlement over three centuries ago. Aquatic vegetation, shrubs and trees long ago gave way to intense agricultural use and later industry and a modern metropolis. On the U.S. side, roads, factories, and huge skyscrapers, including the new General Motors Renaissance Center, hug the riverfront. Nearly every inch of the shore has been encased in concrete and steel pilings or rock.

Several municipal parks are found along the Detroit shoreline and these are developed with trails, benches, ball fields and maintained in mowed grass for recreational purposes. The shoreline also contains a few open lots; the remnants of abandoned industrial sites. Many of these lots have environmental contaminants in the soil and adjacent river sediments such as phosphates, heavy metals, oils, and Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). Very few, if any, shoreline segments contain natural vegetation suitable as wildlife habitat.

Above Fighting Island on the Canadian side of the lower river, the Detroit River narrows to an approximately one-half mile width. Domestic barge and international ship traffic pass through the shipping channel in close proximity to the shore. Water velocity also increases in the upper river, making for a harsher environment for many aquatic species.

Belle Isle at three miles long and 980 acres, one of only two islands in the upper river, is one of the most heavily used islands in the United States. Several lakes and canals have been constructed on the island and these are adjacent to historic buildings, marinas and a public aquarium. The island is connected to downtown Detroit by a bridge and is the site of high recreational use. But decades of neglect of building and landscape maintenance has taken a toll. In recent years, citizen-led efforts have focused on improving the quality of recreation facilities and restoring some natural features to Belle Isle. Several conservation projects are in progress on the island including a soft engineering demonstration project along an eroded inland lake, enhancement of fishery habitat around two fishing piers and an artificial, offshore rock bed for spawning lake sturgeon.



Resource Values

As discussed earlier, the Upper Detroit River is a heavily altered riparian system impacted by human activities. Much of the resource value of the Upper Detroit River resides in the water column itself as a travel corridor for fish and waterfowl. Several fish species, including walleye and lake sturgeon, migrate through the upper river. In the case of lake sturgeon, a species of special concern to the Service, spawning activity may occur in the upper river but is undocumented at this time.

The entire length of the Detroit River is an important travel corridor for migratory birds as it lies in the convergence of two flyways. Migrating birds, especially waterfowl, pass quickly through the upper river and on to Lake St. Clair or the marshes and aquatic vegetation beds found on the lower river on their seasonal north and south migrations. Substantial numbers of migrating waterfowl do not linger in the upper river due to the increased water velocity, the high level of disturbance by boat traffic and the limited amount of submerged vegetation as a food source.

Bald Eagles, a Federally-listed threatened species, are often spotted in flight over the upper river. However, nesting activity has not been documented in the area and only occurs on the lower river shoreline and islands. The Northern riffleshell, a federally-listed endangered mussel, has not been documented in the Detroit River but may occur on island shoals. Two state-listed threatened species have been associated with lower Detroit River islands. The spotted turtle was recorded in the Michigan Natural Features Inventory in 1997, and the Common Tern was recorded in 1977.

Findings

As a general rule, lands included in the National Wildlife Refuge System are selected because they contain habitats of high value to fish and wildlife species considered Trust resources of the agency. Trust species are those in which the Service has legislated jurisdiction and include all migratory birds and those plants, wildlife, or invertebrate species on the federal threatened and endangered species list.

The Service has determined that the shoreline of the Upper Detroit River does not contain sufficient undeveloped lands to warrant inclusion in the authorized boundary for a national wildlife refuge. Opportunities to conserve or establish quality habitats for Service Trust wildlife species are extremely limited on the Upper Detroit River. However, we recognize that the waters of the Detroit River, and some small sections of mainland shoreline and areas on Belle Isle, do provide habitats for resident and migratory birds and fish. The Service will continue to assist in the habitat restoration and environmental education programs occurring on Belle Isle even without designation of a new authorized boundary for the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge. The Service will remain involved with habitat restoration efforts on these sites through the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program, endangered species consultations, and through environmental education programs to be developed by future staff of the adjacent Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge.

The Lower Detroit River, the area within the existing authorized Refuge boundary, contains islands and shoreline segments that can be conserved or restored as wildlife habitat. Plenty of opportunities for conservation work will exist for years to come within the current, and recently expanded, boundary of the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge.

