

Compatibility Determination

Use: Environmental Education and Interpretation

Refuge Name: Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge

Establishing Authority: Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1974 under an Act Authorizing the Transfer of Certain Real Property for Wildlife, or Other Purposes. (16 U.S.C. 667b).

Refuge Purpose: Oxbow NWR's purpose is its "...particular value in carrying out the national migratory bird management program." (16 U.S.C. 667b-d, as amended)

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission: To administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.

Description of Use: Environmental education includes activities which seek to increase public knowledge and understanding of wildlife and the importance of habitat protection and management. Typical activities include teacher or staff-guided on-site field trips, off-site programs in classrooms, and nature study, such as teacher and student workshops and curriculum-structured instruction, and interpretation of wildlife resources. The refuge also conducts an Urban Education program which offers these programs to students from the Boston and Worcester schools.

Interpretation includes those activities and supporting infrastructure that explain management activities, fish and wildlife resources, ecological processes, and cultural history among other topics to public users. Programs and activities may be developed, sponsored and supervised by the Friends of Oxbow NWR.

Access to the refuge for these activities is achieved through walking, snowshoeing or cross-country skiing.

The refuge will continue the activities above plus provide additional volunteer led interpretive and education programs on the refuge. Additionally, the Urban Education Program may be expanded to other regional school systems. An annual teacher workshop, refuge-specific EE curriculum, and refuge-sponsored interpretive and educational events on the refuge might also be conducted. The Service will place three additional kiosks on the refuge as well as self-guided interpretive walking and canoe trails. Additionally, a visitor contact station could be built in a prime location to offer educational and interpretive programs to the greater Boston area.

Availability of Resources: Environmental education and interpretation occur through the use of existing staff, resources, and facilities. Existing resources include staff, interpretive kiosks and displays, environmental education programs carried out through extensive help of volunteers, displays, and trails. The amount and character of environmental and interpretive programming will be a direct reflection of the refuge's staff and funding levels. The following components of an environmental education and interpretation program will need to be developed to fully implement

the program outlined in the Comprehensive Conservation Plan. Additional components may be added at later dates. Specific costs will be determined as implementation of specific programs occurs.

- Planning and implementation of wildlife oriented public use and outreach programs
- Interpretive and educational programs (cost of Park Rangers)
- Construction of visitor contact station
- Provide refuge visitor contact station support, administrative programs and services
- Construction and maintenance of three new kiosks
- Exhibits and operation visitor contact station

Anticipated Impacts of the Use: On-site activities by teachers and students using trails and environmental education sites may impose low-level impacts such as trampling of vegetation, removing vegetation, littering and temporary disturbance to wildlife. In the event of persistent disturbance to habitat or wildlife the activity will be restricted or discontinued.

Placement of kiosks may impact small areas of vegetation. Kiosks will be placed where minimal disturbance will occur.

Providing additional interpretive and educational brochures and materials may result in increased knowledge of the refuge and its resources. This awareness and knowledge may improve the willingness of the public to support refuge programs, resources, and compliance with regulations.

There will be impacts from building a new visitor contact station. These impacts will be analyzed in an appropriate NEPA compliance environmental document after potential sites for the building are identified.

Public Review and Comment: The compatibility determination was included in the Draft CCP/EA. The Draft CCP/EA was available for comment from July 20 through September 3, 2003. Refuge staff held four public meetings to collect public comments, written and verbal, on the draft CCP/EA, including all compatibility determinations.

Determination:

Use is not compatible ____.

Use is Compatible with the following stipulations X.

The following stipulations are required to ensure compatibility: Activities will be held in areas where minimal impact will occur. Periodic evaluation of sites and programs will be conducted to assess if objectives are being met and to prevent site degradation. If evidence of unacceptable adverse impacts appears, the location(s) of activities will be rotated with secondary sites, curtailed or discontinued. The known presence of a threatened or endangered species will preclude the use of an area until the refuge manager determines otherwise.

Special use permits will be issued to organizations conducting environmental education or interpretive tours or activities. A fee may be charged for the special use permit. The areas used by such tours will be closely monitored to evaluate the impacts on the resource. If adverse impacts appear, the activity will be moved to secondary locations or curtailed or discontinued. Specific conditions may apply depending upon the requested activity and will be addressed through the

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special use permit.

Guidelines to ensure the safety of all participants will be issued in writing to the teacher or group leader responsible for the activities and will be reviewed before the activity begins.

Law enforcement patrol of public use areas should continue to minimize the above-mentioned types of violations. The current “Refuge open ½ hour before sunrise to ½ hour after sunset” regulation restricts entry after daylight hours, and should be maintained along with “Public Use Restricted to Trails Only”.

Justification: The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-57) identifies six legitimate and appropriate uses of wildlife refuges: environmental education, interpretation, hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and wildlife photography. These priority public uses are dependent upon healthy wildlife populations. Where these uses are determined to be compatible, they are to receive enhanced consideration over other uses in planning and management.

Environmental education and interpretation activities generally support Refuge purposes and impacts can largely be minimized (Goff et al., 1988). The minor resource impacts attributed to these activities are generally outweighed by the benefits gained by educating present and future generations about refuge resources. Environmental education is a public use management tool used to develop a resource protection ethic within society. While it targets school age children, it is not limited to this group. This tool allows us to educate refuge visitors about endangered and threatened species management, wildlife management and ecological principles and communities. A secondary benefit of environmental education is that it instills an ‘ownership’ or ‘stewardship’ ethic in visitors and most likely reduces vandalism, littering and poaching; it also strengthens Service visibility in the local community. Environmental education (outdoor classroom) is listed in the Refuge Manual (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1985) as the highest priority visitor use activity throughout the National Wildlife Refuge System.

These activities will not materially interfere with or detract from the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System or the purposes for which the refuge was established.

Literature Cited:

Goff, G.R., D.J. Decker And G. Pomerantz. 1988. A Diagnostic Tool for Analyzing Visitor Impacts on Wildlife Refuges: A Basis for a Systematic Approach to Visitor Management. Trans. Northeast Sect. Wildl. Soc. 45:82.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1985. Refuge Manual. Wash., D.C. U.S. Gov’t Printing Office.

Signature - Refuge Manager: /s/ Elizabeth A. Herland 12/21/2004
(Signature and Date)

Concurrence - Regional Chief: /s/ Anthony D. Léger 12/27/2004
(Signature and Date)

Mandatory 15-year Reevaluation Date: December 27, 2019