Chapter 2

View from the top of North Pack Monadnock
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The Planning Process

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The Comprehensive Conservation Planning Process

Service policy establishes an eight-step planning process that also facilitates our compliance with NEPA (figure 2.1).[1] Our planning policy and CCP training course materials describe those steps in detail. We followed that process in developing this final CCP.

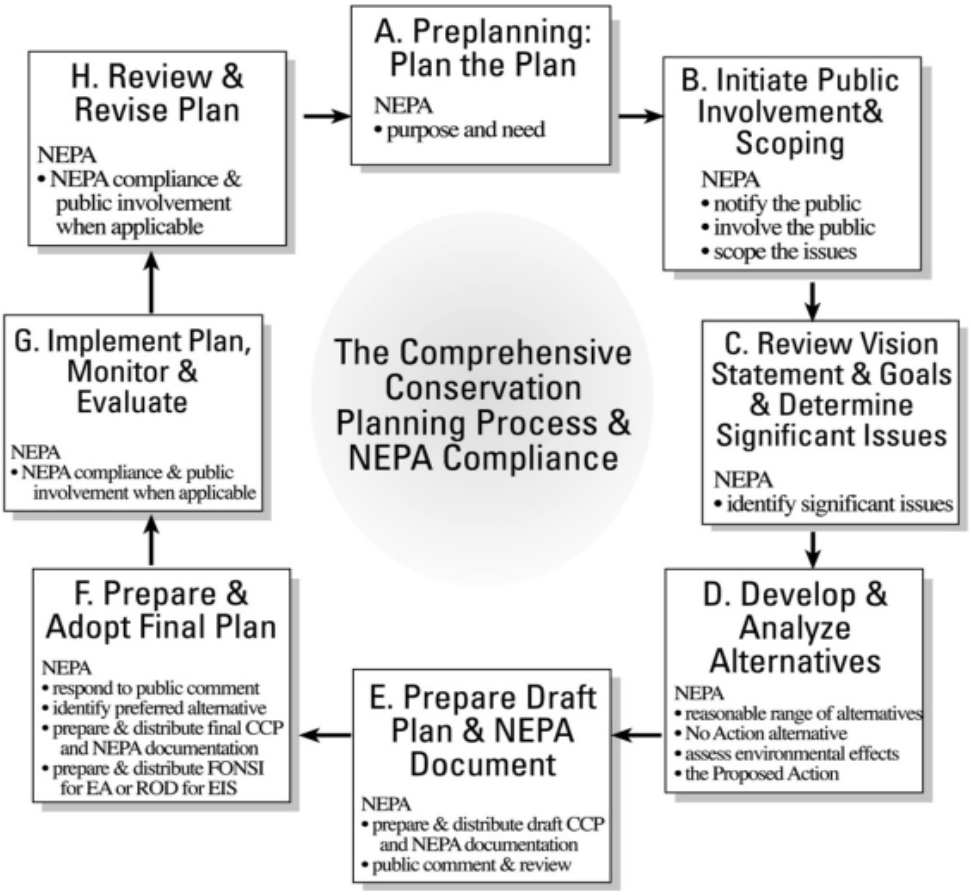

Figure 2.1. The Comprehensive Conservation Planning Process

In January 2007, we began to prepare for the CCP by collecting information about resources on the refuge and by requesting available information from surrounding conservation landowners (e.g., Miller State Park, Joanne Bass Bross Preserve). Graduate students from the Conway School of Landscape Design in Conway, MA, participated in that project from January to March 2007.

In February 2007, we convened our core team, which consisted of refuge staff, regional office staff, and representatives of the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department (NHFG) and the New Hampshire Department of Recreation and Economic Development (NH DRED), Division of Parks and Recreation. We discussed management issues, drafted a vision statement and goals, and compiled a project mailing list of known stakeholders, interested individuals, organizations, and agencies. We initiated all of those steps as part of NEPA Step A; "Preplanning" (figure 2.1, above).

[1] 602 FW 3, "The Comprehensive Conservation Planning Process" (*http://policy.fws.gov/602fw3.html*)

In February 2007, we began NEPA Step B, "Initiate Public Involvement and Scoping," by publishing a newsletter to announce the start of the planning process, and to encourage community involvement. We also worked concurrently on Step C, "Review Vision Statement, Goals, and Identify Significant Issues."

On February 23, 2007, we formally published the start of the planning process in a Federal Register Notice of Intent (NOI). We also announced one public scoping meeting in Peterborough to identify public issues and concerns, share our draft vision statement and tentative goals, describe the planning process, and explain how people could become involved in and stay informed about that process. The 26 people who attended helped us identify the public concerns we must address in the planning process.

During March 2007 we reviewed the public comments received at the meeting and via email and regular mail to firm up our key issues. We also reviewed our draft vision and goals and made some refinements. This completed Step C, "Review Vision, Goals and Determine Issues."

Next, we moved into Step D, "Develop and Analyze Alternatives." The purpose of this step is to develop alternative objectives and strategies for addressing the issues and achieving the goals. Our preliminary ideas were presented at a second public meeting on March 6, 2007. We then worked from March to August 2007 to finalize our proposals to serve as a foundation for the draft CCP/EA. In November 2007, we distributed a newsletter summarizing the alternatives in detail and updating our planning timeframes.

In March 2008 we completed Step E: "Prepare Draft Plan and NEPA document," and released a draft CCP/EA for a 37-day public review and comment. In addition, we held a public meeting/ open house on April 17, 2008, at Shieling State Forest in Peterborough, NH. Fourteen people (non-FWS) attended the public meeting.

We received and recorded comments from those present at the public meetings. We also received 11 hard-copy letters or electronic mailing (email) correspondences. Appendix F summarizes those public comments and our responses to them. In some cases, our response resulted in a modification to original proposals. Our modifications include additions, corrections, or clarifications which we have incorporated into this final CCP.

Our Regional Director has signed a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and documented his decision which certifies that this final CCP has met agency compliance requirements and will achieve refuge purposes and help fulfill the Refuge System mission (appendix H). It also documents his determination that implementing this CCP will not have a significant impact on the human environment, and therefore an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required.

Issues

During the scoping process, our partners and the public brought to our attention the issues they wanted us to address, and we identified others in our planning team discussions. Initially, we distinguished between those issues whose resolution lies within the jurisdiction of the Service, and those that either lie outside the scope of this analysis or do not fall completely within Service jurisdiction. We summarize those in a separate section below.

Our discussion of the issues within Service jurisdiction generated a wide range of opinions on how to resolve them. A more detailed description of those issues follows. Chapter 4, "Management Direction and Implementation," includes our plans for addressing these key issues.

Biological Surveys

Because the Wapack refuge is unstaffed, no one is available onsite to conduct biological surveys. Our limited budget also makes it difficult to contract those surveys to other organizations or individuals. Members of the community not only are concerned over the lack of biological surveys, but also want us to publish or make available present and future refuge biological information.

Vegetation Management

Some members of the public suggested that the Service manipulate vegetation to provide more habitat diversity for wildlife species on the refuge. They also expressed an interest in reducing mature forest cover through selective cutting and prescribed burning, to attract more species of mammals (e.g., moose, bobcat) to the refuge.

Some suggested that the refuge establish clearings by cutting selectively along the Wapack trail, to provide better birding and viewing at the top of the mountain. We heard that tree growth is obscuring those views.

One person also expressed an interest in our actively managing refuge habitat to maintain blueberry bushes; they cannot survive under heavy shade. Annual or biannual selective cutting or prescribed burning would be necessary to remove that shade and promote the growth of blueberries. The deed of donation restricts any tree cutting on the refuge, except as necessary for maintaining trails.

Invasive Species

The establishment and spread of invasive species, particularly invasive plants, is a significant problem that spreads across all types of habitat. For this discussion, we use the definition of invasive species in the Service Manual (620 FW 1.4E): "Invasive species are alien species whose introduction [causes] or is likely to cause economic or environmental harm, or harm to human health. Alien species, or non-indigenous species, are species that are not native to a particular ecosystem. We are prohibited by executive order, law, and policy from authorizing, funding, or carrying out actions that are likely to cause or promote the introduction or spread of invasive species in the United States or elsewhere."

The unchecked spread of invasive plants threatens the biological diversity, integrity and environmental health of all refuge habitats. In many cases, because of their competitive advantage over native plants, they form dominant cover types, thus reducing the availability of native plants as food and cover for wildlife. Over the past several decades, government agencies, conservation organizations, and the public have become more acutely aware of the negative effects of invasive species. Many plans, strategies, and initiatives target the more effective management of invasive species, including *The National Strategy for Management of Invasive Species* for the Refuge System (USFWS 2003c) and *Silent Invasion—A Call to Action,* by the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA 2002). The Refuge System biological discussion database and relevant workshops continually provide new information and updates on recent advances in control techniques. Funding sources to conduct inventory and control programs also have grown, both within the Service budget and through competitive grants.

Trail Management and Maintenance

The 4-mile section of the Wapack Trail that runs through the refuge is often difficult to maintain due to the rocky terrain. That terrain and the unsure footing of the trail may also create a safety issue for refuge visitors. The compaction of soil and vegetation can increase runoff and, consequently, increase erosion. In trying to circumvent problem areas, people have created braided trail sections and stream crossings.

There are now four trails on the refuge: the Wapack trail, the 1.1 mile Cliff Trail, and the Ted's and Carolyn's trails (3 miles of their total 5.15 miles run on the refuge). The long-term management and maintenance of these popular trails is a common issue, given our limited staff and funding.

Trailhead Access to the Northern End of the Refuge

The only way that visitors can access the northern end of the refuge now is by parking on the road shoulder of Old Mountain Road. Parking there can be problematic for several reasons. First, on many weekends, not enough parking is available for all the visitors who want access to the refuge. Because of the limited space for cars, visitors often park in unsafe areas. Once visitors have parked, they must walk along the road to access the trailhead. That creates another safety concern about traffic on the road. Parking on that road also creates a problem for the Town of Greenfield's Department of Transportation. In the winter, cars

parked on the side of the already narrow road make clearing it safely even more difficult for snowplows. The Town of Greenfield is very concerned about this recurring problem, and wants us to work with them in solving it.

Minimal Service Presence on the Refuge

Our limited staff and funding have prevented us from improving the visibility and presence of the Service at the refuge and in the local community. Only one sign, erected by the Friends of the Wapack (FOW), shows a topographic map at the trailhead (the northern end of the refuge). It shows the layout of the Wapack Trail, but does not provide any information about the refuge (e.g., the refuge boundary, Service contact information, or refuge rules and regulations). We posted the refuge boundary with standard Refuge System "blue goose" signs; however, those are the only signs that notify the public they are on a national wildlife refuge.

Dog Walking

Before this CCP, we had not decided whether to allow leashed dogs on the refuge. Technically, without a finding of appropriateness or determination of compatibility, dog walking is prohibited on the refuge. However, our limited staff has been unable to enforce that prohibition, and many refuge visitors are unaware that the activity is prohibited. Consequently, many dogs have been seen on the refuge. During several visits this spring and summer, we observed dogs roaming freely without leashes on the refuge trail.

The public expressed an interest in dog walking on the refuge. Many would be satisfied with adhering to a regulation allowing only leashed dogs on the refuge. Others would like us to allow unleashed dogs that are under the command and control of their owners. Everyone we spoke with stated that prohibiting dog walking altogether on the refuge would create confusion when users of the Wapack Trail walk north from other areas, (e.g., Miller State Park), where dog walking on leash is allowed.

Illegal Camping

No camping is allowed on the refuge. Members of the FOW have seen evidence of camping on the refuge, but recently that evidence has decreased. The minimal Service presence makes it difficult to monitor the area regularly for illegal camping and enforce the "no camping" restriction.

Illegal Hunting

The deed restricts any form of hunting on the refuge. Landowners nearby have complained of hearing gunshots in the refuge area during the hunting season. In response, they called local wardens of the state game division, with whom we have a partnership agreement. Again, the minimal Service presence makes it difficult to monitor the area regularly for illegal hunting. Members of the community would like to see more law enforcement officials (whether state or federal) patrolling the area, particularly during the hunting season.

Refuge Expansion

Several members of the public suggested that the Service consider expanding the refuge to create better linkage with other conservation land areas. Some were interested specifically in acquiring adjacent, lower elevation habitat, including old farm fields. They believe this protection would ensure the support of a greater diversity of wildlife. Please refer to "Refuge Expansion" below for a more detailed discussion.

Issues Outside the Scope of this Project or Not Completely Within the Jurisdiction of the Service

Giving or transferring refuge lands to other local conservation organizations

Members of the public suggested that the Service transfer or give the refuge or refuge management authority to a state or local conservation organization. They are concerned that the Service is unable to manage the refuge effectively due to its limited staff and budget. Some feel that other conservation groups would do a better job of managing refuge resources and improving the visitor experience.

We have no plans to assign staff permanently to this refuge, as other regional priorities and current fiscal conditions prevent us from doing so. On the other hand, we plan to make several improvements to the refuge through enhanced partnerships and cooperation with other federal agencies, local conservation groups, and the public. Those proposals will promote better stewardship of the refuge and raise the visibility and public awareness of its resources.

Although some suggest that we transfer or donate the refuge to another conservation entity, the deed prohibits us from doing so. Furthermore, the Service can only relinquish lands it owns in fee through a land exchange, legislation, or the disposal or transfer of excess property under the Transfer of Certain Real Property for Wildlife Conservation Purposes Act of 1948. For example, the Service can dispose of refuge lands only after congressional legislation requires it, or because the agency determines that those lands are excess to its needs and no longer serve the mission of the Refuge System or the purposes for which the refuge was established. The Service can also exchange refuge land for other land of equal market value and equal or higher natural resource value. An equalization payment settles any difference in value.

In summary, unless directed by congressional legislation to initiate a disposal or exchange process, the Service would have to determine that the land of the Wapack refuge no longer contributes to the conservation of migratory birds and, in the case of an exchange, that the agency would gain land more important to our federal trust resources. In our professional judgment, that determination is unwarranted.

Actions Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study

Federal-designated Wilderness

During the scoping phase of our planning process, we learned of an interest in designating the refuge as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). Appendix B, "Wilderness Review," documents our analysis of the wilderness potential of the refuge, and explains that the formal designation requires an act of Congress. That usually is predicated upon a recommendation from a federal agency. Our analysis determined that such a recommendation is not warranted at this time. However, we will reassess that determination in 15 years, when we revise this CCP.

Refuge Expansion

Many responses in our public scoping process encouraged us to expand the refuge for a variety of reasons. Some were concerned about the rapid rate of development nearby. Some wanted to link refuge land with two large conservation projects nearby.

- One is the Quabbin to Cardigan Conservation Collaborative (Q2C), which focuses on protecting land along the Monadnock Highlands, from the Quabbin Reservoir in central Massachusetts north to New Hampshire's Mt. Cardigan (The Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests 2004). The refuge lies in the "Wapack Focus Area" of the Quabbin to Cardigan corridor. If you would like more information, please visit the website *http://www.spnhf.org/landconservation/q2c.asp*.

- The other is the Temple to Crotched Community Conservation Corridor. The Monadnock Conservancy, which leads this effort, envisions linking the conservation areas on Crotched Mountain, Pack Monadnock, and Temple Mountain with a network of conservation easements in the towns of Greenfield, Peterborough, Sharon, and Temple (Monadnock Conservancy 2006). As with Q2C, the refuge lies directly in the Temple to Crotched Mountain corridor. For the latest information, please visit *http://www.monadnockconservancy.org/html/what_news20.html*.

Despite our interest in seeing those lands conserved for wildlife, neither alternative recommends that we acquire additional land at this time. Our regional perspective on all the other land protection priorities of the Service leads us to doubt that we would be able to secure the funding to buy additional land here or hire staff to manage it. However, if conditions change in the future and more land acquisition funding becomes available, we may pursue that under a separate environmental assessment and public review. As always, we would evaluate separately any opportunities that arose to accept donations of land.