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U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
J.N. "Ding" Darling
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News Release



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Public Review and Comment Requested for J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment

SUMMARY: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) announces that the Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and Environmental Assessment (EA) are available for J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). The Service prepared this CCP pursuant to the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, and the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. The CCP describes how the Service intends to manage the Refuge over the next 15 years.

DATES: In order to ensure consideration of comments in the development of the final CCP, comments must be received by June 16, 2010.

ADDRESSES: A copy of the CCP is available on compact diskette or hard copy. Copies may be obtained:

- **online** by
 - visiting <http://www.fws.gov/southeast/planning/CCPDraftRefugesforReview.html> and selecting the Refuge's name;
 - emailing the Refuge at DingDarlingCCP@fws.gov;
- **by phone** by contacting the Refuge at 239.472.1100; or
- **in person** by visiting the Refuge at 1 Wildlife Drive, Sanibel, FL 33957.

Comments should be mailed to the Refuge at the above listed address or emailed to: DingDarlingCCP@fws.gov. To ensure consideration of your comments in the development of

the final CCP, all comments must be submitted by the deadline and must include your name and return mailing address. Please note, under the Freedom of Information Act, names and mailing addresses on federal mailing lists may be made available to the public upon request.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: DingDarlingCCP@fws.gov; Cheri Ehrhardt, Natural Resource Planner, 321.861.2368; or Paul Tritaik, Refuge Manager, 239.472.1100. Information is also available under Conservation Planning on the Refuge's website: <http://www.fws.gov/dingdarling/>.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (16 U.S.C. 668dd-668ee *et seq*) requires the development of a CCP for all refuge units. The purpose in developing a CCP is to provide refuge managers, partners, and the public with a 15-year strategy for achieving refuge purposes and contributing toward the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, consistent with sound principles of fish and wildlife science, conservation, legal mandates, and Service policies. In addition to outlining broad management direction on conserving wildlife and their habitats, the CCPs identify wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities available to the public, including opportunities for hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation. We will review and update these CCPs at least every 15 years in accordance with the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, and the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (42 U.S.C. 4321-4370d).

Background

Located along Florida's southwest Gulf coast in Lee and Charlotte counties, the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) Complex includes the J.N. "Ding" Darling NWR and four satellite refuges: Pine Island, Matlacha Pass, Island Bay, and Caloosahatchee NWRs. J.N. "Ding" Darling NWR (Figure 2) was established in 1945 as Sanibel NWR and later renamed as a memorial to Jay Norwood "Ding" Darling, the noted editorial cartoonist; conservationist; and first Chief of the U.S. Biological Survey, the founding agency of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service). The 6,406.79 acres [2,592.74 hectares (ha)] of the refuge support hundreds of species of wildlife and plants, providing protection for 14 federally and 49 State listed species, migratory birds, and native wildlife and habitat diversity through a mix of habitats, including tropical hardwood forests, beaches, mangrove swamps, mixed wetland shrubs, salt marshes, open waters and seagrass beds, and lakes and canals.

Comprising roughly half of Sanibel Island and most of Buck Key, the J.N. "Ding" Darling NWR provides key habitats supporting a variety of species in a highly developed landscape. The City of Sanibel, Lee County, Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation (SCCF), and the Service work together on Sanibel Island -- one of the top birding hot spots in the nation with beautiful beaches, shelling, fishing, and wildlife -- to continue conservation work on Sanibel Island. This partnership has resulted in land use planning to guide growth and development ensuring that future generations will be able to enjoy the special ambience and quiet harmony that Sanibel Island has to offer.

Priority Issues

During this planning process, the Service worked with the public and the local, State, federal, and tribal governmental partners to identify issues for the refuge to address over the 15-year life of the CCP. Using this long list of issues, the Service then identified the priority issues for J.N. "Ding" Darling NWR, as listed.

- Increasing and Changing Human Population, Development of the Landscape, Recreational Uses and Demands, and Associated Impacts
- Issues and Impacts Associated with Water Quality, Water Quantity, and Timing
- Invasion and Spread of Exotic, Invasive, and Nuisance Species
- Climate Change Impacts
- Need for Long Term Protection of Important Resources
- Declines in and Threats to Rare, Threatened, and Endangered Species
- Insufficient Baseline Wildlife and Habitat Data and Lack of Comprehensive Habitat Management Plan
- Insufficient Staff and Resources to Address Refuge Needs

Future Management Goals

To address these priority issues, 17 future management goals were developed for the refuge, as listed.

Wildlife and Habitat Management Goals

- Goal 1. Minimize the threats to and promote the recovery of the rare, threatened, and endangered species occurring on Sanibel and Captiva islands and in adjacent waters.
- Goal 2. Conserve, restore, enhance, and manage the upland, transitional, and estuarine habitats of Sanibel and Captiva islands to maintain and enhance their biological integrity and to support species diversity and abundance of native plants and animals, with an emphasis on migratory birds.
- Goal 3. Eliminate existing and future exotic, invasive, and nuisance species on the refuge to maintain and enhance the biological integrity of the upland, transitional, and estuarine habitats of Sanibel and Captiva islands.
- Goal 4. Work with the partners to address and resolve the water quality, quantity, and timing concerns associated with the watershed of the refuge; Lake Okeechobee releases to the west; the watershed of the Caloosahatchee River; and, the Gulf of Mexico.
- Goal 5. Identify, understand, and ameliorate the impacts of climate change on refuge resources to plan for and adapt management as necessary to protect the native wildlife; the upland, transitional, and estuarine habitats of Sanibel and Captiva islands; and the cultural resources of the refuge.

Resource Protection Goals

- Goal 1. Protect the archaeological and historical resources of the refuge exemplifying the natural and cultural history of Sanibel and Captiva islands and connect refuge staff, visitors, and the community to the area's past.
- Goal 2. Work with the partners to acquire, manage, or otherwise protect all remaining properties within the refuge's acquisition boundary to protect wildlife and the upland, transitional, and estuarine habitats of the Sanibel and Captiva area.

- Goal 3. Protect the J.N. “Ding” Darling Wilderness Area, promote an understanding of its wilderness values and *Leave No Trace* principles, and enhance awareness of the Wilderness Area among visitors to preserve the opportunity for outstanding coastal wilderness experiences in southwest Florida.

Visitor Services Goals

- Goal 1. Visitors will feel welcome and find accurate, timely, and appropriate orientation material and information on refuge visitor facilities, programs, and management activities.
- Goal 2. Members of the fishing public will enjoy their fishing experiences, behave ethically, and support refuge management and wildlife and habitat protection.
- Goal 3. Wildlife observers and photographers of all abilities will enjoy and value the diversity of area wildlife, will behave ethically, and will support refuge management and wildlife and habitat protection.
- Goal 4. Participants in quality environmental education and interpretation programs and activities will develop an understanding and awareness of the legacy of Jay Norwood “Ding” Darling, the value and history of the refuge and the Refuge System, the natural resources of the refuge, the role of the refuge in the landscape, and the human influences on ecosystems, and will support refuge management and wildlife and habitat protection.
- Goal 5. Communicate key messages and issues with off-site audiences to build support within the local community and beyond for the refuge, its purposes, and its management.
- Goal 6. Continue to provide quality wildlife-dependent activities through a single concessionaire to support refuge management goals and objectives.

Refuge Administration Goals

- Goal 1. Provide sufficient infrastructure, operations, volunteers, and staff to implement a comprehensive refuge management program to protect and manages refuge resources and the natural and cultural values of Sanibel and Captiva islands.
- Goal 2. Foster strong and effective working relationships with existing and new governmental and non-governmental partners for the purposes of accomplishing refuge management goals and objectives and protecting the natural and cultural resources of Sanibel and Captiva islands.
- Goal 3. Limit the impacts to the natural resources and waters of the refuge from commercial harvesting activities to current levels until these activities can be phased out from the refuge.

Four Alternatives Developed

To also address these priority issues, four alternatives were developed and evaluated during the planning process: Alternative A (Current Management, the No Action Alternative), Alternative B (Native Wildlife and Habitat Diversity), Alternative C (Migratory Birds, the Proposed Action Alternative), and Alternative D (Rare, Threatened, and Endangered Species).

Summary of Proposed Action

Alternative C proposes to expand refuge management with a focus on the needs of migratory birds, providing direction for refuge management actions, decisions, and priorities and prioritizing migratory birds in all restoration plans. This alternative addresses the management

needs of all birds covered under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, including resident species of native birds that are found using the refuge year round.

Alternative C would expand the current wildlife and habitat management activities of the refuge to better serve migratory birds, including expanded survey and monitoring; increased water management capabilities; increased control efforts to address exotic, invasive, and nuisance species; and increased coordination with the partners to address water quality, quantity, and timing of flows. Further, in coordination with the partners, the refuge would utilize the best available science and employ a strategic habitat conservation approach to anticipate wildlife and habitat adaptation tendencies and to target management actions to facilitate successful adaptation responses to the impacts of climate change.

The refuge would work with the partners to increase protection of the archaeological and historical resources of the refuge on Sanibel and Captiva islands, including the “Ding” Darling fishing cabin; pursue designation as Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network and RAMSAR Wetlands of International Importance; and enhance its Wilderness Area program.

Although the refuge currently has a robust visitor services program, Alternative C would expand existing visitor services activities to focus messages of all visitor and outreach activities and programs on migratory birds and the minimization of human impacts on these resources and to increase the ethical natural resource behavior of refuge users. In general, existing visitor uses would continue, including fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation, while refuge staff would increase efforts to improve ethical behavior, expand and enhance outreach activities, and maintain the concession approach to facilitating visitor activities and experiences. To provide additional visitor opportunities, the refuge would locate and develop an observation tower at the Bailey Tract and a handicapped-accessible fishing pier at Smith Pond on the Bailey Tract. The Wildlife Drive would be evaluated for any needed changes. And, the refuge would evaluate the need for and ability to provide parking at the Shell Mound Trail to address existing ad hoc parking and Wildlife Drive congestion issues at this site.

To help accomplish the outlined actions, Alternative C would add five refuge-specific staff: Wildlife Biologist, Biological Science Technician, two law enforcement officers, and Park Ranger (Environmental Education/Outreach). The refuge would work with SCCF to replace the existing Marine Research Lab, located at Tarpon Bay. In line with regional compatibility guidance and to limit the impacts from commercial fishing activities, the refuge would phase out commercial bait fishing activities from the refuge during the life of the Plan.

In summary, the CCP was developed based upon the selection of Alternative C as the proposed action. The actions outlined in the CCP provide direction and guidance for future management of J.N. “Ding” Darling NWR. Successful implementation will depend on coordination and partnerships between the public, the partners, the Service, and other governmental agencies.



As part of its mission, the Service manages 551 national wildlife refuges and other units of the Refuge System covering 150 million acres (60.7 million ha). These areas comprise the National Wildlife Refuge System, the world's largest collection of lands and waters set aside specifically for fish and wildlife. The majority of these lands, 77 million acres (31 million ha), are in Alaska, while 54 million acres (21.8 ha) are part of three new marine national monuments in the Pacific Ocean. The remaining acres/hectares are spread across the other 49 states and several United States territories. In addition to refuges, the Service manages thousands of small wetlands, 37 wetland management districts, 70 national fish hatcheries, 65 fishery resource offices, and 81 ecological services field stations. The Service enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

