

Appendix G
Summary of Public Involvement,
Comments and Consultant Coordination

Appendix G

Summary of Public Involvement/ Comments and Consultant/Coordination

Focus Group Results

Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge Complex

August 26 and 27, 1997

John Schomaker

Division of Realty – Ascertainment and Planning

September 19, 1997

Summary

The Service is preparing a Comprehensive Management Plan (CMP) for Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge Complex. The CMP will provide other agencies and the public with a clear understanding of the desired conditions for the Ottawa NWR and how the Service will implement management strategies. Public input into this planning process is encouraged and desired. As a first step in getting public input, focus groups were held at the refuge on August 26 and 27, 1997.

Refuge personnel identified people who had expressed interest or participated in refuge activities in the past. From this sample, 17 people were invited to attend the discussions. Eight persons attended the first group, seven the second group. State and local agencies and organizations were represented, as well as private citizens.

To aid the planning effort, we sought to learn how the people viewed the refuge, what they saw as positive and negative about the refuge, how they saw the refuge fitting into the community, and what they thought the most important thing the refuge could do in the next 15 years.

The focus group participants recognize the biological importance of the refuge and its importance to wildlife, especially migrating species. They also see the refuge as having important social and economic values. In their view, the refuge is a great resource that provides opportunities for education and recreation and thus draws tourists to the area. They also see the refuge as reminding people of their connection to the natural environment.

The focus group participants see the refuge as not known or understood by the public. There was a general feeling that the refuge is underutilized by the public. They felt the refuge was limited by its funding, number of staff, and its acreage. Participants perceive that some in the community have negative feelings toward the refuge because some of the land was acquired through eminent domain.

The participants see increased support for the refuge through an educated public and partnership. The refuge will be challenged by development in the area and government downsizing.

The participants see the refuge as playing a role in the economic well being of the community through tourism, providing greenspace, and public education, among other issues.

The main theme for future activities of the refuge was to expand public outreach opportunities while expanding and maintaining its habitat programs.

Background

Problem Statement

What are the issues and concerns related to the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge Complex? Within a strategic planning framework, what are the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to the refuge.

Methods

Refuge personnel identified people to invite to the focus groups. Persons were invited who had expressed interest or participated in refuge activities in the past. Potential participants were contacted first by the refuge manager by telephone to establish their interest and availability. A follow-up written invitation was sent from the Division of Realty in the Regional Office.

The focus groups were held at the conference table at the headquarters of the Ottawa NWR. John Schomaker moderated the groups, Larry Martin was present as an observer, and Rebecca Lewis recorded main ideas on a flip chart during the discussion. Audio recordings were made of the sessions.

The sessions began at 6:30 p.m. and lasted approximately 1½ hours. Snacks and beverages were provided.

Participants

Participants in the August 26 group included:

Two managers from the Ohio Division of Wildlife
A professor from School of Natural Resources, Ohio State University
Ottawa County Administrator (and owner of a neighboring marsh)
Manager of neighboring private marsh
Representative from Ottawa Soil and Water District (and Pheasants Forever)
Representative from Ohio Audubon Council
An environmental education teacher

Participants in the August 27 group included:

Representative from the Black Swamp Bird Observatory

Representative from the Ottawa County Visitors Bureau
Representative from Ducks Unlimited
Representative from the Toledo Naturalist Association
Representative from Lucas Soil and Water Conservation District
Outdoor News Editor from the Toledo Blade
Private landowner and marsh manager living near proposed expansion area

Key Questions

The questions that guided the discussion were:

What do you see positive about the refuge?

On the other side, what do you see negative about the refuge?

In your view, how does the public perceive the refuge?

What changes do you see coming from outside influences that will help the refuge?

What changes do you see coming from outside influences that will challenge the refuge?

How do you see the refuge fitting into the community?

What is the most important thing the refuge can do in the next 15 years?

Results

What do you see positive about the refuge?

August 26

The participants pointed out that the refuge provides opportunities for education and recreation, preserves wildlife habitat, has economic and quality-of-life benefits for the community, and has a quality staff that provides good service and maintains the dike infra-structure.

A dominant theme throughout the first focus group was the value of the refuge in education. The refuge is seen as contributing to the education of school children, the general public, portions of the public with special interests such as waterfowl hunters and birdwatchers, and students who will go on to have professional roles in natural resource management. Specifically mentioned as valuable and something that should be continued were the Fifth Grade Conservation Tours that are conducted annually on the refuge with the local soil and water conservation district.

Recreation opportunities that were mentioned included waterfowl hunting, youth hunts, and bird watching. The opportunities were seen as community benefits of eco-tourism, as well as aesthetic and inspirational benefits for the individual. The state wildlife participants stressed the important economics contributions of waterfowl hunters.

The refuge is seen as important in preserving wetlands with subsequent benefits of preserving bio-diversity, sources of environmental indicators, and as a place to conduct biological research.

Ottawa County cites the refuge as an important asset in its applications for funding.

“From a teacher’s point of view this is a tremendous resource for education.”

“People come from hundreds, even thousands of miles to visit this area during the migrations to see birds. There is an economic value to it, also in terms of tourism. Ecotourism, I think, would be a good name for it. People just coming to see the birds”

“Lack of habitat is probably one of the key issues in northwestern Ohio. The presence of Ottawa National being a part of the marsh complex and Lake Erie makes it an invaluable natural resource.”

“The sportsmen of Ohio have spent millions of dollars to support this refuge for the migrations and the waterfowl that it supports.”

“I welcome the opportunity to be in a pristine marsh environment and harvest waterfowl in the fall.”

“The hunts that are allowed here now are really a good thing. ... One of the greatest things they have done here is special hunts for youth—the kids’ hunts.”

“A major portion of the Great Lakes flyway between here and Canada. If we close that off, we’ve lost a tremendous biological resource. And, the implications of that we can not hardly begin to imagine. We don’t know what preserving that gene pool really means until we start losing all these different kinds of species.”

“There should be some kind of system of assistance for private marshes—some kind of tax incentive program.”

August 27

Participants see the refuge as having a high value and unique because it is the only NWR in Ohio, it is the last, large piece of Lake Erie marsh wetland remaining, and preserves habitat that is important for migratory birds. In addition, West Sister Island is the only designated wilderness in Ohio, and it contains the largest heronry in the Great Lakes.

The refuge’s role in providing a resting area for migratory waterfowl was emphasized.

Participants recognize and value the recreation opportunities that the refuge provides. These opportunities include birding, hunting, photography, and hiking.

The participants pointed out the value of the refuge as a reminder of the natural and cultural heritage of the area—the Black Swamp. The refuge is a reminder of what was once there.

The refuge is seen as having an economic value to the community through the birders and hunters that are attracted to the area. The study authored by Kerlinger was cited as a conservative estimate of the economic impact.

The biological value of the refuge is seen to include the protection of endangered animals and, presumably, unknown plants as well as improving water quality.

The participants see the refuge as a resource for wetlands research and as an outdoor laboratory for wetlands and fish research.

“It’s been since the beginning of time a spot where the migratory birds move into, I think it should be maintained and kept at the best level that it can be for the continued well-being of the migratory fowl that come through here.”

“It serves as a good reminder of what was once here—a natural heritage.”

“Provides a good place for wildlife, wetlands, or fishery research.”

On the other side, what do you see negative about the refuge?

August 26

A major theme with wide support from all participants throughout the discussion of the first focus group was that the refuge suffered from not having a visitor center and that one should be provided. This idea arose in many different contexts.

The main themes in the first focus group were that the refuge lacked identification within the community and accessibility to the public. There was a general feeling that the refuge is underutilized by the public.

Points made during the discussion were that the value and assets of the refuge are not communicated to the public. Participants thought that publicity (video, newspapers) and media events should be a bigger part of refuge activities.

Opportunities for the public are seen as limited. There is the perception that the refuge is off-limits, in general, and hunters, in particular, feel that they are given poor quality hunting opportunities and that the refuge is underutilized for hunting. This perception leads to a lack of support from sportsmen.

A desire for more access by vehicles for wildlife viewing was expressed. A contrast between what is available for viewing from a car at Ottawa and the nearby state area was made. A desire for trails that could be used by persons with ambulatory challenges was expressed.

A participant questioned the level of protection of cormorants and great blue herons. His feeling was that the birds were reducing the fish populations too much. As part of the discussion, the need for more research and education about this issue was pointed out.

A participant thought that several negative aspects of the refuge resulted from its being too small and that increased acreage would be a good thing.

There are still negative feelings in the community from when the refuge was established.

A participant asked why private lands work could not be done on CRP lands.

“I think Ottawa is underutilized, especially for the sportsmen. It has the aura about it. People are afraid to set foot here, because of the unknown and the fact that you have to buy a Duck Stamp to walk on the property.”

“One of the reasons I come here is that there are fewer people here.”

“The one thing we really lack here is a visitor center.”

“Next door at Magee you do get a tremendous view just from your vehicle.”

“I think it is important that if we are going to have a hunt here, that it be a quality hunt. Something that we can be proud of.”

“Some of the bird protection programs, they go overboard on them. I can’t see the reason to have protection on cormorant. The lake is full of them, and they are eating fish—the prize fish. There should be studies on these birds.”

“You’ve got a crown jewel here. It is the only such place in the entire State of Ohio. Within 500 miles, you’ve got two-thirds of the population of the United States. So, you have a tremendous opportunity for outreach.”

“They want to see the area. It comes down, I think, really to one of the main things is that visitor center, interpretive center, where you can tell what the area is, the value of it, how it is used, and make more of it accessible..... There are people who might only walk a few hundred feet, but they are out in the open.”

“There has to be a balance between the refuge program and a disturbance there or you lose use by the wildlife.”

August 27

Participants said that the refuge, and the refuge system, lacked identity with the public. Their perception is that the public, even users of the refuge, do not understand the refuge’s mission. A participant thought many in the public were intimidated about coming on to the refuge.

A participant thought the entrance signage could be more welcoming.

Most telling among the participants’ comments was the outdoor news editor commenting on the countless articles that he has written about the refuge and his still meeting many people who are not clear about the refuge.

Participants see the budget and personnel as inadequate. One person mentioned that no staff are available on weekends to greet visitors and weekends are when most people are present.

There was significant disagreement within the group dealing with funding priorities. Some felt strongly that any available money should be used to acquire additional lands whenever possible. Others felt that the current facilities should be brought up to a standard and maintained before additional land is acquired. One participant thought that the way projects were funded was a problem. He perceives that special projects are funded based on decisions at upper levels in the agency and that routine operation and maintenance are ignored in the funding process.

A participant noted that quite a lot of remaining marsh is in private ownership. He sees pressure to change the use of the land and thinks a tax incentive for marsh management and dike maintenance would help preserve habitat and be cheaper than land acquisition by the government. He referred to recommendations in the Lake Erie Marsh Management Plan.

Participants see a lack of respect and visibility as a problem for the refuge.

Participants' impression is that some neighbors view the refuge negatively because of crop damage caused by wildlife that moves from the refuge on to private land to feed.

A participant felt that the refuge has suffered because of frequent changes in the staff, particularly the manager. There has been a lack of consistency.

Participants noted that caution should be used in encouraging more use. Too much use will destroy what is being preserved, in their view.

"The public does not understand the wildlife refuge system. ... It's a problem that really needs to be tackled. I don't know how to go about it. But, you want to identify problems, that's one I see."

"A lot of people get confused over the identity of the place."

"There are misconceptions of what is available here. ... It is intimidating. They are not quite sure that it is open to the public. They're not quite sure that they are welcomed here."

"The message can be gotten out through partnerships. It takes awhile, but it is beginning to work."

"The working hours (of the staff) don't match the use hours."

"There are units that I never get to visit—ever."

"There is a lot, still, considerable bad feelings, because, you know, some people were run off this property. They didn't go voluntarily."

"The refuge holds the birds. The migratory birds, especially geese, leave the property in the spring, in the fall, into the wheat fields and, especially in the spring, do considerable damage. How is that perceived? Especially, when there are geese everywhere and this is the only place where you can kill just one."

“There has been a rapid turnover in staff, particularly the refuge manager, which has caused some inconsistency. About the time the refuge manager learns the area, off they go.”

In your view, how does the public perceive the refuge?

August 26

The participants felt that a very small percentage of the nearby public (perhaps 10-20%) were aware of the refuge and what it does. The feeling was that many see the refuge as inaccessible and off-limits.

August 27

The participants felt that a very small percentage of the public understands the refuge. There is a memory among the public about past condemnation. There are also negative views because of wildlife damage to crops. The perception is that among some of the public that they are not welcome on the refuge.

“So many different user groups with special interests, to balance the interest of the special groups with the mission of the refuge. That’s the challenge.”

“It’s your very own fish people, your waterfowl people, everybody else. No one has any care of continuity. Everybody wants their thing and to hell with everybody else. And, until you straighten up your own house (within the Service), don’t expect to get someone else’s house straightened up. There should be continuity. ... Put the dollars to the refuge first and then special projects get the money later.”

What changes do you see coming from outside influences that will help the refuge?

August 26

Participants saw increased support for the refuge from children as they move through environmental education in school, from zoos, and from the local media. Participants thought more support would come from sportsmen if they knew how the refuge benefitted them.

Participants felt that the refuge would be valued more as surrounding lands are developed.

The refuge will continue to garner support from Audubon and other birdwatching organizations.

August 27

Among participants the theme was partnerships and working together as the way to accomplish things. Projects under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and the Lake Erie Wing Watch Program were cited as a successes.

Participants identified existing and potential partners as local businesses, non-governmental organizations, the public through volunteering, and state-federal cooperation.

Partnerships were mentioned as a partial answer to solving the problem of identity and encouraging use.

What changes do you see coming from outside influences that will challenge the refuge?

August 26

Participants listed the following challenges: development of lands in the area, groups that oppose hunting and fishing, and government downsizing resulting in limited funds and personnel. An additional challenge will arise if the refuge attempts to expand its acreage. There are strong feelings about protecting good farmland, and any attempt to expand acreage that is perceived as taking good farmland will be opposed by political leaders.

“I am not opposed to more refuge area. But, you have to make sure that you deal with the issue of farmland and not taking away good farmland.”

August 27

Participants saw the refuge challenged by a lack of funds. They also saw potential challenges from too many people competing for the refuge (many special interests) and from people who don't care about the refuge and its mission.

An increase in deer and goose populations were mentioned as a challenge that the refuge would need to address.

A participant thought that there was a lack of consistency in the approach to management from within the Service—fisheries and wildlife are not coordinated. There is also a lack of continuity of management. The participant perceives a lack of a clear, consistent mission for the refuge.

Participants see the development of neighboring lands and subsequent fragmentation a challenge to the refuge.

A participant sees the refuge challenged by the additional need of restoring lands over more passive preservation.

Neighbors to refuge will continue to offer challenges to the refuge over issues of drainage and ditch maintenance and use.

“I see it as a great beneficial greenspace which I would hope would be here forever.”

“The refuge serves as a reminder of nature and our roots in it. We need that so badly. We are losing touch as a culture with our roots. The more remote we get from that, the tougher it is to sell the idea that we are on a planet and that we are a part of it.”

“Access and good management will do a tremendous amount. If the local people know the area is managed well and the people who come out here to see the place, the word of mouth will travel faster than advertisements, because the person who’s telling it is telling it with feeling.”

How do you see the refuge fitting into the community?

August 26

Participants wanted the refuge to be more open and accessible to the public and have a feeling of user friendliness. The refuge has a role in the economics and tourism of the area. And, the refuge has a role in public outreach and education.

As part of this discussion, one participant mentioned that sportsmen have expressed interest in a museum that would relate to Lake Erie marshes. Participants pointed out that the refuge needs to be sensitive to feelings in the community about the conversion of farmland. Participants also recognized that more publicity and public outreach (generally perceived as a good thing) could bring too much use and undesirable effects.

“To fit in you have to have accessibility—whether it is to the area, to its staff, knowledge of the programs that are going on. I think there is sort of question mark, at least with a lot of the local people, just what does go on at the refuge. Is it just one big block of wetlands that is closed to the public and don’t come near it. ... You have to be a little more user friendly.”

August 27

Participants see the refuge as providing a great, beneficial greenspace, economic benefits through eco-tourism, and relieving recreational pressure from public lands. They also see the refuge as serving as a reminder of our roots in nature where people can learn proper outdoor ethics and lead to community appreciation.

There was a feeling that proper access and good management will lead to increased support for the refuge.

“I see it as a great beneficial greenspace which I would hope would be here forever.”

“The refuge serves as a reminder of nature and our roots in it. We need that so badly. We are losing touch as a culture with our roots. The more remote we get from that, the tougher it is to sell the idea that we are on a planet and that we are a part of it.”

“Access and good management will do a tremendous amount. If the local people know the area is managed well and the people who come out here to see the place, the word of mouth will travel faster than advertisements, because the person who’s telling it is telling it with feeling.”

What is the most important thing the refuge can do in the next 15 years?

August 26

The main themes for the future activities of the refuge were to expand public outreach and opportunities while maintaining the habitat programs and environmental integrity of the refuge.

Specifically, the following points were made: provide a visitor center that would include classroom space, work with the local visitors bureau, make people aware of what the refuge is, expand and improve waterfowl hunting, increase wetland protection, and maintain and improve biodiversity.

Participants recognized a challenge and need to work for increased funding and staffing.

“Increase in size or increase in wetland protection, however you do it through easements, leases, or outright purchase and increase in utilization (hunting). The eco-tourism will take care of itself.”

“A visitor center would be the most helpful. But, keep it a refuge. Don’t open it up like a zoo.”

“Make people aware of what’s here.”

August 27

Participants thought the refuge should acquire land, establish partnerships, expand staff and operation and maintenance funds concurrent with land acquisition, seek continuity and consistency within the organization, restore lands.

One participant stated his fantasy of an area twice as large as now exists with first class interpretive facilities, a 15 mile auto tour route, and more access to the refuge by people who appreciate nature.

“This is such a unique, wonderful area. It is a shame not to give it a top-drawer kind of treatment. It’s fabulous. It’s a great area.”

