

Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge
Established 1924
Compatibility Determination

Use: Environmental Education

Refuge Name: Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge (Refuge)

Establishing and Acquisition Authority(ies):

The Upper Mississippi River Wildlife and Fish Refuge was established by Public Law No. 268, 68th Congress on June 7, 1924. This act authorized acquisition of lands for Refuge purposes. Additional lands acquired in fee title by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are managed as part of the Refuge under a 1963 Cooperative Agreement between the Department of the Army and the Department of the Interior.

Refuge Purpose(s):

“The Refuge shall be established and maintained (a) as a refuge and breeding place for migratory birds included in the terms of the convention between the United States and Great Britain for the protection of migratory birds, concluded August 16, 1916, and (b) to such extent as the Secretary of the Interior by regulations, prescribe, as a refuge and breeding place for other wild birds, game animals, fur-bearing animals, and for the conservation of wild flowers and aquatic plants, and (c) to such extent as the Secretary of the Interior may, by regulations, prescribe a refuge and breeding place for fish and other aquatic animal life.”

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission:

“The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is 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:

Currently, environmental education activities contribute nearly 6,000 visits each year to the Refuge. Typically, use occurs between September and June by individual school classes and large groups during educational field days. Environmental education programs focus on river issues including wildlife, history, archaeology, culture, and habitats. Wildlife ecology programs address a number of wildlife conservation issues including wetland and prairie conservation, migratory bird management, and endangered species conservation. Programs also involve development of outdoor skills which enhance appreciation of wildlife and the habitats they live in. The Refuge has become increasingly popular as an outdoor classroom for several universities. These non-staffed activities include seining fish, bird-watching, and collecting plants and animals.

The Refuge provides public facilities which support environmental education including 4 visitor contact stations, observation decks, hiking trails, biking trails, canoe trails, and an auto tour route.

The Comprehensive Conservation Plan recommends additional staffing and facilities and an expanded environmental education program. With additional full-time visitor services specialists, more students will be given an opportunity for environmental education on the Refuge. Additional staff will be able to provide more teacher workshops and orientations, and help develop site-specific curricula, materials, and activities. Additional field trip assistance would be available to enhance learning in an outdoor setting. Students and teachers would also be able to participate in coordinated restoration, and monitoring programs through long-term monitoring studies.

Availability of Resources:

Currently, there are three full-time visitor services staff members for the entire refuge. The staff for coordinating the current level of environmental education is available but limits the number and depth of programs and amount of assistance to educators. Maintaining the public use facilities which support environmental education is part of routine management duties and staff and funding is available. Additional facilities and visitors services specialists as outlined in the Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan will enhance opportunities for environmental education and improve the quality and quantity of programs.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use:

There is some temporary disturbance to wildlife due to environmental education activities. However, the disturbance is local, temporary and generally not detrimental to individual animals or populations. Some habitat is disturbed during activities, but of little long term consequence. Future increases in facilities and participants would cause some displacement of habitat and increase in disturbance, but this is negligible given the controlled nature of environmental education and the size of the Refuge. Control of areas used by groups would avoid or minimize intrusion into sensitive habitats or wildlife areas.

Public Review and Comment:

A draft of this Compatibility Determination was included in the Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) released May 1, 2005 for a 120-day comment period. It was also available during a subsequent 90-day review period on a supplement to the EIS released December 3, 2005. Public notification included notices in the Federal Register, media announcements, and 31 public meetings and workshops attended by more than 3,700 persons. Several comments on environmental education were received and are found in Chapter 7 of the EIS, with a Service response. However, no comments specific to this determination were received.

Determination:

Use is Not Compatible

Use is Compatible with Following Stipulations

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility:

1. Environmental education activities not lead by Refuge staff will require, at a minimum, verbal approval by the respective District Manager or visitor services specialist to minimize conflicts with other groups, safeguard students and resources, and to allow tracking of use levels. District Managers may require Special Use Permits at their discretion.
2. Environmental education (including Refuge-conducted) will not be allowed in Waterfowl Hunting Closed Areas when closed to hunting, or Administrative Closed Areas.
3. Students and teachers will continue to be instructed on the best ways to view wildlife with minimal disturbance.
4. Educational groups are required to have a sufficient number of adults to supervise their groups, a minimum of 1 adult per 12 students.
5. Increased communication with teachers conducting their own activities on the Refuge will help educate about minimizing wildlife disturbance.

Justification:

Most environmental education will occur at, or be directed to, existing and future facilities in strategic locations providing quality opportunities while limiting wildlife and habitat disturbance. Disturbance to wildlife is also limited by the size and remote nature of large parts of the Refuge. Many species have also grown more tolerant of human presence due to railroads, highways, and river traffic adjacent to or through the Refuge. Disturbance is also generally short-term and only temporarily displaces wildlife, and adequate adjacent habitat is usually available for wildlife. The approval process for groups will limit disturbance to wildlife and ensure avoidance of sensitive areas. Numerous other stipulations will be in place to facilitate these uses while reducing direct and indirect impacts.

As one of the six priority public uses of the Refuge system, this use is to be encouraged when compatible with the purposes of the Refuge. The Refuge provides outstanding environmental education opportunities due to the diversity of wildlife and habitat on the Refuge, and the range of environmental issues faced. For example, increasing concerns with invasive species provides a subject for environmental education exploration. The extensive education community bordering the Refuge desires more opportunities for

hands-on experiential learning. Educating students of all ages about the resources and challenges of the Refuge is an important way to influence the future well-being of the Refuge and the river. Only through understanding and appreciation will people be moved to personal and collective action to ensure a healthy Refuge for the future.

Signature: **Refuge Manager:** Wendy Bultman 8/17/06
(signature and date)

Concurrence: **Regional Chief:** Nita M. Zuber 8/21/2006
(signature and date)

Mandatory 10- or 15 year Re-evaluations Date: 2021