

BUILDING A REFUGE ON WHEELS

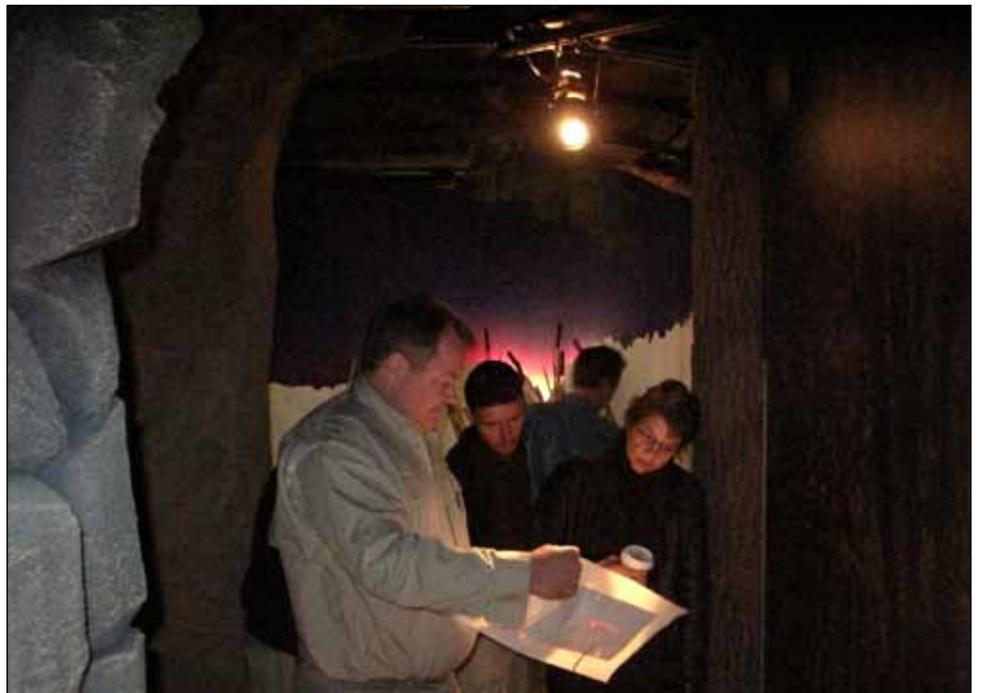


Sarah Bevilacqua, Visitor Services Manager for the Silvio O. Conte Fish and Wildlife Refuge at the Great Falls Discovery Center in Turners Falls, Mass., looks over graphics products before placement on kiosks. Behind Bevilacqua is Refuge Manager Andy French.

The Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge, established in 1997, is spread across several diverse geographic environments and state boundaries covering 7.2 million acres of Connecticut River Valley watershed. In the coming weeks the refuge will expand another 28-feet, extending to 390 communities, schools and educational centers, and anywhere paved roads exist throughout the states of Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Connecticut.

The Silvio O. Conte Mobile Visitor Center will make its long awaited debut sometime this autumn at a regional location still to be determined. The mobile visitor center is a 28-foot trailer currently in the final stages of construction at WB Incorporated in Hyde Park, Mass. Conte Refuge Manager Andrew French says he plans to take the message of conservation and the Silvio Conte refuge to the people of the region. When completed the mobile visitor center will offer handicap access and interactive educational tools depicting the biodiversity of the Conte refuge. An additional 16-foot trailer is part of the package and will carry seven kiosks with 28 panels and several interactive features representing the diverse refuge.

French remembers the initial idea for the mobile visitor center came from seeing a similar trailer operated by the Sevilleta



Andy French confers with Sarah Bevilacqua on inside details of the Mobile Visitor Center.

National Wildlife Refuge in Socorro, N.M. Visitors Services Manager Jeannine Kimble of Sevilleta refuge said their 32-foot Mobile Wildlife Trailer travels extensively throughout New Mexico to events like the state fair and to schools. "People seem to generally like it. I think the money was well spent."

Lori Jones, Visitor Services Manager at Deep Fork Refuge in Oklahoma, was at Sevilleta when the refuge initially took delivery of the trailer. The Sevilleta trailer has a colorful, vinyl, wrap-around graphic on its exterior, similar to the one planned for the exterior of the Conte mobile visitor's center. Jones said two delivery men, who drove the trailer from Florida where it was built to the refuge in New Mexico along the interstate, reported people waving and asking them

about the refuge and the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "We got a lot of bang for our buck," she said. "People very much wanted to get inside."

French took the idea to his staff for more refinement. "The idea just kept developing," said French, "lobbing ideas back and forth as a group." They eventually met with Cambridge 7, a design and construction firm in Cambridge, Mass., and WB Incorporated, the sub-contractor who would build the trailer, to discuss their vision. Those concepts were then translated into physical working forms by WB Inc. According to their website, WB Inc. has been designing and building custom trade show and museum exhibits for over 20 years and have used that innovative experience to invent and design the working pieces of the Conte staff's vision.

The mobile visitor center is as collaborative a project as the Conte refuge itself. Sarah Bevilacqua, Visitor Services Manager



John Walsh, of WB Incorporated in Hyde Park, Mass., explains the layout of the marsh scene inside the main trailer of the mobile visitor center.

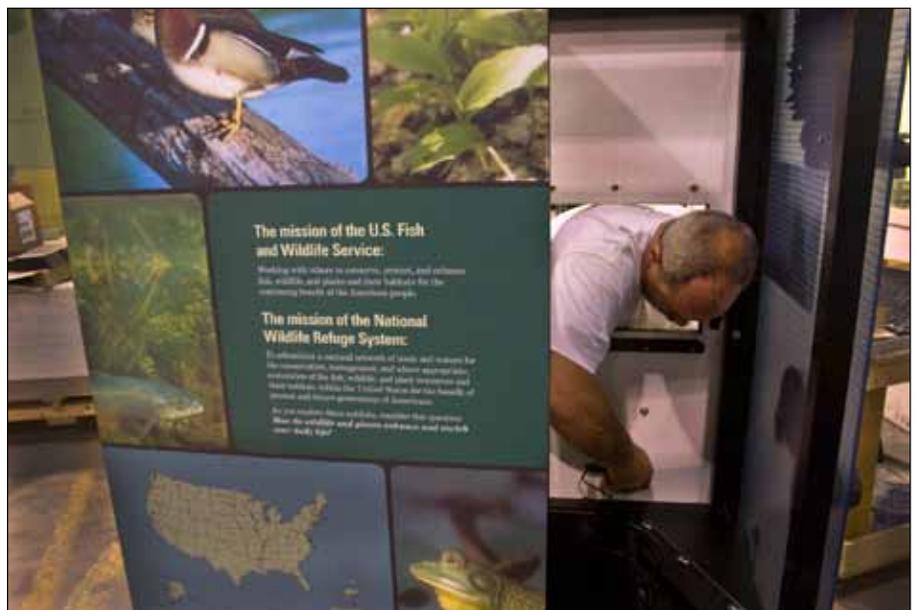


Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge Manager Andy French tests the interactive features on one of the traveling kiosks prior to taking delivery of the support trailer for the mobile visitor center.

for the Conte refuge at the Great Falls Discovery Center in Turners Falls, Mass., has been shepherding the project to completion for the last two years. According to Bevilacqua, everyone from botanists to biologists at the refuge has participated in the development of the mobile center, “It’s all about partnerships,” she says, “It’s how Conte works.” Even now, before completion and delivery, the mobile visitor’s center has several commitments at venues throughout the region. “I can’t think of where it’s not going to go,” said Bevilacqua.

Bevilacqua was handed the baton from Beth Goettel, now at the Maine Coastal Islands National Wildlife Refuge, who initially worked on the project with French when she worked at the Conte refuge. Goettel remembers their concepts revolved around making the trailer an effective educational tool to show the breadth of the refuge. “They were thinking inside the box and we were challenged to think in much larger terms, and looking for a way to connect core values,” said Goettel.

The rear door of the mobile visitor center serves as the entrance and will offer handicap access. Through the door visitors will step into on an early morning marsh environment, complete with twilight, morning ground fog and marsh reeds. The corridor through the trailer passes a vernal pond with



Finishing touches are made to one of the educational kiosks.

amphibian life and water, past a pine tree bordered mural of wildlife, a rock wall and then through an arc leading to a suburban environment and the exit. Wildlife sculptures are scattered in different locations throughout the wildlife environment.

The design of the mobile center allows for the kiosks and educational panels to travel separately from the main trailer.

“Our objective was to take the show on the road,” said French, “and provide double destinations in partnership with someone else. The exhibits can be loaned out and stand alone to educational facilities. When you think about school budgets, I think they’re looking to be all over that. There are 390 communities in the Conte refuge watershed and that’s 390 opportunities.”



The companion trailer for the mobile visitor center that carries the educational kiosks has similar wrap-around graphics.