U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Humboldt Bay NWR Complex

Planning Update #2—Spring 2007

Humboldt Bay NWR Complex Overview

The Humboldt Bay National Wildlife Refuge Complex includes Humboldt Bay NWR and Castle Rock NWR, both of which are located in northern California.

Humboldt Bay NWR borders Humboldt Bay on the northwest California coast near Eureka and Arcata. In 1971 the refuge was established to conserve coastal habitats for a great diversity of animals and plants, especially migratory birds. In later years the refuge added the Lanphere and Ma-le'l Dunes Units, to help conserve the most pristine remaining dune ecosystem on the west coast of North America.

The refuge complex also includes Castle Rock NWR, a 14-acre island located in Del Norte County, less than a mile northwest of Crescent City. This refuge harbors one of the largest and most diverse colonies of breeding seabirds on the Pacific coast and provides a roost for approximately 20,000 Aleutian cackling geese during their annual migration.

Greetings from the Refuge Manager

The Humboldt Bay National Wildlife Refuge Complex, which includes Humboldt Bay National Wildlife Refuge (Humboldt Bay NWR) and Castle Rock National Wildlife Refuge (Castle Rock NWR), recently began an important two-year process to develop a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP). This CCP will help guide overall refuge management for the next 15 years. Your ideas and comments will be an important part of the planning process, so I would like to invite you to participate.

In this "Planning Update," I would like to provide background information about the Refuge Complex's history, operation, and goals. You will also find some information about the National Wildlife Refuge System and how comprehensive conservation planning fits into the overall picture of refuge management. Planning officially began during the winter of 2006-07. Copies of our first Planning Update are available by contacting the refuge headquarters and also on our website at: http://www.fws.gov/humboldtbay/

USFWS/Timothy Knepp

Refuge staff held three public meetings during the week of February 12, to gather input on the Refuge Complex's CCP. However, I wanted to send out this additional planning update to encourage comments focusing on Castle Rock NWR.

Please feel free to contact me or David Bergendorf if you have any questions. See page 2 to learn about the CCP and page 4 for our phone numbers and e-mail addresses.

Eric Nelson
Project Leader/Refuge Manager

What is the National Wildlife Refuge System?

In 1903 President Theodore Roosevelt protected an island with nesting pelicans, herons, ibis, and roseate spoonbills in Florida's Indian River from feather collectors that were decimating their colonies. He established Pelican Island as the nation's first bird sanctuary and went on to establish many other sanctuaries for wildlife during his tenure. This small network of sanctuaries continued to expand, later becoming the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Today, the National Wildlife Refuge System is the largest system of lands in the world dedicated primarily to the conservation of fish, wildlife and plants. It is spread across 50 states, American Samoa, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Johnston Atoll, Midway Atoll, and several other Pacific Islands. About 20.6 million acres in the Refuge System are managed as wilderness under the Wilderness Act of 1964.

In 1997 Congress passed the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act (Improvement Act), legislation which provides clear guidance for the management of the Refuge System. The act included a new statutory mission statement and directed the Service to manage the Refuge System as a national system of lands and waters devoted to conserving wildlife and maintaining biological integrity of ecosystems.

For the first time, the Improvement Act required the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to develop a comprehensive conservation plan for each refuge. It also stated that certain wildlife-dependent recreational uses are priority public uses on refuges and strengthened the compatibility determination process for assuring that these and other activities do not conflict with refuge management purposes and goals.

What is a CCP?

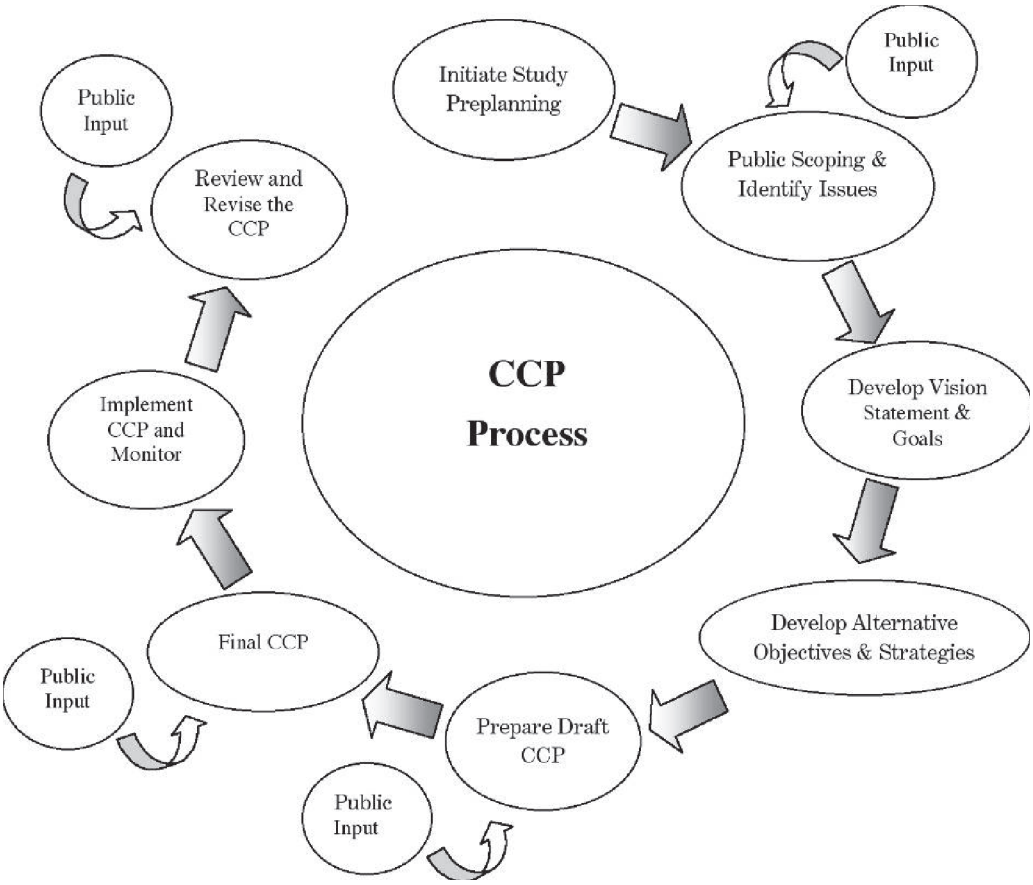
When Congress passed the Improvement Act, it incorporated an underlying philosophy that "wildlife comes first" on refuges.

The Improvement Act provides the FWS with guidance for managing refuges to ensure the long-term conservation of fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats. Two important principles of the Improvement Act are to maintain biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the refuge and to facilitate compatible wildlife-dependent recreation.

Every refuge must have a CCP completed by 2012. The CCP will outline refuge goals, objectives, and management strategies. It is a flexible, "living" document that will be updated every 15 years.

The CCP:

- Ensures that management of the refuge reflects the purposes of the refuge and the mission, policies, and goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System;
- Provides the public with an understanding of the reasons for management actions on the refuge;
- Provides a vision statement for the refuge;
- Ensures the compatibility of current and future uses of the refuge with its purposes;
- Provides long-term continuity in refuge management; and
- Provides budget justification for operation and maintenance and facility development requests.



The CCP will provide broad management direction and guidance for the refuge, contingent upon future funding and resources. The accompanying environmental document, required by the National Environmental Policy Act, will describe the alternatives considered and their environmental effects. You will have an opportunity to review and comment on the draft CCP and environmental document.

During February, 2007, we held our first public scoping meetings to help identify issues and gather information. The key planning steps are listed in the diagram above and will be listed in future updates so you can track our progress through the planning process.

Black Oystercatcher Photo by USFWS

Compatibility of refuge uses

Prior to allowing various public uses on the refuge, federal law requires that the FWS first determine that these specific uses are compatible.

A compatible use is a proposed or existing use of a national wildlife refuge that, based on sound professional judgment of the refuge manager, will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the National Wildlife Refuge System mission or the purposes of the refuge.

Compatibility Determinations are used to help evaluate public uses and will be integrated as part of the CCP planning process. Many Compatibility Determinations were completed for Humboldt Bay National Wildlife Refuge Complex between 1994 and 2005. Compatibility Determinations were made for uses including: environmental education and interpretation, outdoor recreation, research, wildlife observation and photography, grazing and haying, recreational boating canoe/kayak landing/launching in navigable waters, and Tribal access and gathering.

Castle Rock NWR

Castle Rock NWR as seen from the shore at Crescent City. Photo by USFWS

Castle Rock NWR Project Location and Watershed

Castle Rock NWR lies about eighty miles north of Humboldt Bay and about a half mile offshore from Crescent City, California. Castle Rock NWR is an island of 14 acres in size.

History of Castle Rock NWR

Castle Rock was privately owned until 1979. During the mid- and late-1970s, speculators were contemplating guano mining, rock quarrying, and construction of a tourist attraction on the island. Castle Rock was purchased in 1979 from The Nature Conservancy to preserve habitat for magnificent seabird colonies and marine mammals, in perpetuity.

Overview of Castle Rock NWR

Castle Rock NWR rises 335 feet above sea level with a grassy slope, two large inlets, and cliffs that are important habitats to nesting seabirds in the summer. Castle Rock NWR is critical to the survival of several hundred thousand seabirds each year. It is also a key roost site for up to 20,000 Aleutian cackling geese each winter and spring.

Castle Rock hosts one of the largest and most important nesting seabird colonies south of Alaska. The estimated annual number of seabirds using Castle Rock has been as high as 150,000. The cliffs provide nesting habitat for one of the largest breeding populations (>100,000) of common murres on the Pacific coast. Ten other species of seabirds also nest on Castle Rock, including three species of cormorants, pigeon guillemots, Cassin's and rhinoceros auklets, Leach's and fork-tailed storm-petrels and tufted puffins. Because many of these bird species nest in burrows and crevices and are primarily nocturnal, they avoid predation by western gulls that also nest on the island. Castle Rock NWR also serves as an important haul out (resting site) for marine mammals, including harbor seals, northern elephant seals (both bear pups there), and California and Steller sea lions.

Tufted Puffin Photo by USFWS

Visitor Services at Castle Rock NWR

Castle Rock NWR is closed to all direct public access because it is a very sensitive area for nesting seabirds during the spring and summer, and for roosting Aleutian cackling geese in the winter/spring. The soils, vegetation, and the burrows of burrow-nesting seabirds are sensitive to damage by trampling. Additionally, landing on this vertical sea rock is quite treacherous. There are also several species of marine mammals that use the island for rest and/or breeding that are sensitive to disturbance. Both marine mammals and seabirds are protected from disturbance by federal law. Interpretive signs are displayed at a near shore viewing location in Crescent City.

Management Activities at Castle Rock NWR

Castle Rock NWR resource values are maintained by natural processes.
The Refuge is monitored to ensure that these values have not been compromised. Nesting seabird and Aleutian cackling goose activity is closely monitored on a yearly basis.

Humboldt Bay NWR

Humboldt Bay NWR Project Location and Watershed

Humboldt Bay NWR is located within and adjacent to Humboldt Bay and associated watersheds. The approved refuge boundary is roughly defined by Hookton Road on the South, Mad River County Park on the north, Highway 101 and Mad River Slough on the east, and the Pacific Ocean on the west. Our CCP Planning Update #1 has a more detailed description of Humboldt Bay NWR. Planning Update #1 is available upon request from the Refuge (see refuge contact information on page 4) and on the internet at: http://www.fws.gov/humboldtbay/

Help us plan for Castle Rock NWR's future

During spring 2007 interested individuals, agencies, tribes, organizations, and other stakeholders will be invited to express their concerns and share their visions for Castle Rock NWR. This will be your opportunity to help us identify issues and concerns, and for us to answer any questions you may have. Your comments and/or participation will be critical to the success of this planning effort.

Stellar sea lions use Castle Rock NWR for resting.
Photo by USFWS

Please send your written suggestions for Castle Rock NWR management via mail, fax or e-mail to David Bergendorf (contact information to the right) by May 17, 2007. However, please note that there will be additional opportunities to comment once a draft CCP has been prepared.

What is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service?

The FWS is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The FWS manages the 95 million acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. The FWS also operates 66 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations.

The FWS enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

What's in a name?

Many people confuse state and federal fish and wildlife agencies because their names are similar. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is a federal agency within the U.S. Department of Interior. The California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) is a department within the California Resources Agency.

Our names are similar and so are our missions: both agencies are dedicated to the conservation of wildlife for the benefit of present and future generations. Our jurisdictions are different. The FWS is the lead agency responsible for federal Endangered Species Act listed plant and animal species and migratory birds, whether they are located on federal, state, or private lands. The CDFG has primary responsibility for resident fish and wildlife on State and private lands, and oversees the California Endangered Species Act listed plant and animal species and stream alteration issues throughout California.

Humboldt Bay NWR Complex is managed by the FWS, which coordinates with CDFG on a variety of management issues.

Please feel free to contact us!

We are available to provide additional information about the refuge history, goals, and accomplishments to date, and to answer any questions about the planning process. Feel free to call, write, e-mail, or come to see us.

If you would like to be on our mailing list, please contact us. You can also find information at our website http://www.fws.gov/humboldtbay/.

If you would like to be removed from the list or are receiving multiple copies of these notices, please let us know.

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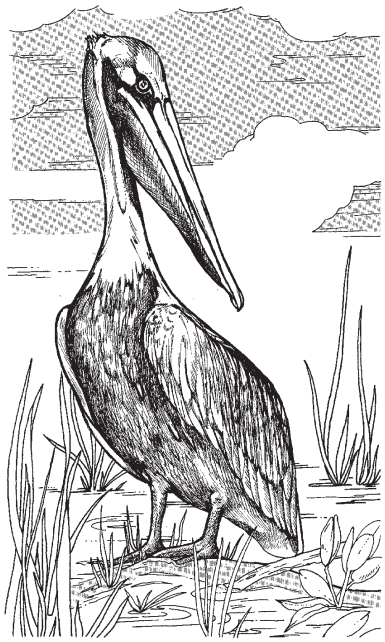

Brown pelican