



Friends & National Wildlife Refuges

*The Value of
Collaboration*



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Prairie dogs at
Wichita NWR, Kansas



In every state, caring people have formed nonprofit Friends organizations that are dedicated to supporting the mission and work of National Wildlife Refuges. Wildlife refuges are an asset to the communities that surround them. The hard work of Friends allows refuges to thrive and continue to provide resources, information and events to the public. The ideas and inspiration in this handbook will take your organization to new heights of success.

The National Friends Partnership

In 1996 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA), National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) and National Audubon Society (NAS) initiated an ambitious national partnership designed to facilitate the growth and effectiveness of Friends organizations with National Wildlife Refuges across the country (Friends/Refuge collaborations). Together the national partners developed an array of programs that have included national conferences and regional workshops, training, publications, grants, internet support and a mentoring program. On the local level, Friends organizations and Refuge staff have also been supporting each other and sharing vital information for creating sustainable collaborations.

These efforts, supported by the enactment of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, led to a tremendous growth in the number of Friends organizations across the country. In 1996 there were about 50 organizations. Today more than 230 organizations exist—a more than 350 percent increase.

The average membership per organization is approximately 260 members, totaling about 65,000 citizens who are dedicated to supporting the mission of our National Wildlife Refuge System. To fully appreciate the significance of this support, you must look beyond the quantifiable results, such as funds raised and volunteer time donated, and appreciate the less tangible outcomes, such as changes in local culture and attitudes toward our National Wildlife Refuges. Indeed, successful Friends/Refuge collaborations have resulted in a wide range of benefits:

- Positive relationships with local communities
- Increased awareness of Refuges at the local level
- A better informed public
- Increased visibility, support and understanding of Refuges as part of a national system
- Increased funds and volunteers to help achieve Refuge management goals
- Positive relationships with legislators
- Ability to plan for and seek out new opportunities that weren't possible before the collaboration



Assisting Collaborators to Solidify Their Partnerships

You can see the benefits are tremendous, thus a widespread incentive to establish Friends/Refuge collaborations at as many National Wildlife Refuges as possible. Yet creating a solid, sustainable collaboration is a complex process that takes time, commitment, skill, patience, flexibility and enthusiasm from everyone involved. Although Friends/Refuge partners report many achievements, there can be many potential stumbling blocks. Partners may still have questions about how to manage the difficulties inherent in collaboration and still accomplish their objectives.

This handbook offers guidance on creating a successful and sustainable Friends/Refuge collaboration. It is based on the collective experience of successful Friends/Refuge partners across the nation and on the wide range of literature available about nonprofit organizations and collaborations. It recognizes that it may be challenging to enter into such a partnership. Indeed, as recognized collaboration expert Karen Ray (2002) writes, “[F]or many of us, the collaboration process is a pain in the neck. Collaboration can mean frequent, irritating meetings, arduous task completion and snail-paced decisions.”

The goal of this handbook is to help partners solidify their partnerships and manage the bumps along the way. Experts in Refuge Friends and Refuge partnerships agree that focusing on a handful of areas can ensure the success of the collaboration. The following chapters detail these keys to success.

“Even when it’s not perfect, the benefits are so incredible, it’s amazing!”

Kathy Woodward, NWRS Friends Mentor, Friends of Great Swamp NWR

The Friends Organization Mentoring Program

In 1997 the Service established a National Wildlife Refuge System Friends Organization Mentoring Program. This program is staffed by Friends members and Refuge Managers who voluntarily share their expertise with people involved with Friends/Refuge collaborations at refuges around the country. Through this program, mentors offer guidance and assistance as Friends/Refuge partners form collaborations or deal with transitions or challenges.

These experts have visited close to 100 refuges and communities around the country. The areas visited have been diverse (rural, suburban and metropolitan, poor, affluent and retirement communities), as have been the needs presented by the local Friends/Refuge partners.

NWRS Friends Mentors have recognized that there is *no* model Friends organization and the definition of success at any one refuge will depend on local needs. Trying to make a Friends organization and a Friends/Refuge collaboration fit a perceived model is a mistake that can lead to unrealistic expectations



and disappointment. Every situation is different, and effective partnerships need to reflect local needs and interests. Success must be measured against local visions and plans, not in comparison with the outcomes of other Friends/Refuge collaborations around the country.

Mentors report there *is* a model for crafting a sustainable Friends/Refuge collaboration, one that weathers the storms, adapts with changing needs and sustains itself over time. This model includes five key elements that are common to all successful Friends/Refuge collaborations.

Key Elements to a Successful Collaboration

1 A Solid Collaboration

Hallmark features of a solid Friends/Refuge collaboration include:

- Communicate, communicate, communication, with communications systems in place.
- The manager provides leadership and takes a personal interest in the Friends organization and its members. While day-to-day activities may be delegated to staff, the manager attends most Friends meetings and events, and is readily available to the Friends leaders.
- The Friends leaders, Refuge Manager and Refuge staff create a culture that provides an opportunity for everyone to get to know each other on a personal level.
- The Friends/Refuge partners trust each other. Everyone feels honored, valued and respected. Partners recognize this type of relationship doesn't happen overnight, and they work hard to build trust and respect.
- Expectations created together are clear and realistic.
- Everyone in the relationship (manager, all the staff, the Board and committee members) takes responsibility for making the collaboration succeed.
- Roles and responsibilities of the partners are clear and respected.

THE MENTORING PROGRAM

Sponsors The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Wildlife Refuge System, Division of Visitor Services and Communications through the National Friends Coordinator.

Established 1997

Purpose To help Friends Organizations flourish

Program Model The Mentoring Program is a form of advanced education and information sharing between the Mentoring Team, the Refuge Staff, and the respective citizen members of a forming Friends organization or Friends organization needing assistance. Mentoring visits are designed to help form new Friends collaborations, and nurture and advise the groups beyond their earliest stage of forming.

Visits Completed 96

Mentors

- Experts in Friends/Refuge collaborations
- Friends leaders and Refuge Managers
- Receive regular training



② Strategic Thinking

The partners have jointly defined a vision for what they want to achieve. For meeting that vision, they are guided by a plan that is regularly evaluated and updated as needs change. In addition, partners regularly consider the future: they position themselves to seize opportunities as they arise and plan for the inevitable transitions that occur over time.

③ A Well-Managed Organization

Well managed Friends organizations use good business practices, nurture leadership skills, hold efficient meetings and use a committee structure. An effective Friends organization is critical to the long-term success of the collaboration. Funds, volunteers and members come to organizations that demonstrate they are a good investment. Sound business and non-profit management practices ensure a solid organizational future.

④ Understand FWS Systems & Nonprofit Management

To effectively collaborate, Friends and Refuge partners must be knowledgeable about each other. Friends must learn about Refuge systems, and the Refuge Manager and Refuge staff must understand nonprofit governance. Partners do not need to become experts in each other's realm of work, but they should educate each other in order to build mutual respect and understanding.

⑤ Celebrate and Evaluate

The importance of celebrating cannot be underestimated. Celebrations provide opportunities to build personal relationships while recognizing personal and professional achievements. Successful collaborators consciously integrate celebrations into their strategic plans. The partners discuss anticipated accomplishments, allowing them to be well defined *before* they happen. Acknowledgements readily flow between partners, with each recognizing the contributions of the other. Rewards are given that are personally meaningful. And partners celebrate the collaboration itself, as well as its achievements.

The following chapters discuss each of these five keys to a successful Friends/Refuge collaboration in detail. □



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