

Conservation in Action Summit

**“Hunting and Angling Traditions of
the National Wildlife Refuge System”**

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It's a pleasure to see so many familiar faces once again and share this occasion with you. It's probably no secret that I am an avid sportsman, and I appreciate being able to work in a position that allows me to have influence over the management of our National Wildlife Refuge System. I also appreciate the organizers of the summit asking me to speak to you on a topic that is important to me: namely the hunting and fishing traditions of the refuge system.

One of the things I most enjoy about this job is that it gives me an opportunity to learn about some of the best the refuge system has to offer. One of those was a recent waterfowl hunt for disabled sportsmen at the Bombay Hook refuge in Delaware that was the result of an MOU we signed with the National Wildlife Turkey Federation Wheeling Sportsmen's program. Unfortunately, I was not able to experience the hunt myself. However, on a subsequent hunting trip with my good friend Pete Trexler from Delta Waterfowl, I met two gentlemen who acted as guides for the disabled sportsmen on that hunt. They told me it was a heck of a day and they could not say enough good things about the hunt and the refuge manager -- Theresa Villanueva. In addition to having these two accomplished waterfowlers as guides, Al Dager, a champion duck and goose caller also provided his services. Al is one of the best waterfowlers on the east coast and it's a real treat to be able to hunt with him. That morning, all six disabled sportsmen at the hunt had a memorable time as well as some great shooting.

One person participating in the hunt was Richard VanVorst. Rich became confined to a wheelchair a couple of years ago, following an accident. The Wheelin Sportsmen event allowed Rich to hunt

waterfowl for the first time with his 71-year-old father – something neither of them ever expected to be able to do. I’m told that Rich, his dad, and guide Heath Mason were all smiles all day. His dad told us it was a day he and his son would long remember.

THAT is what the Refuge System is all about. It’s not just wildlife... it’s wildlife AND people. It could not be otherwise. Without the support of people – neither wildlife nor the refuge system has much of a future.

While the proportion of the U.S. population who hunts has declined slightly in recent decades, hunters remain a dedicated force for wildlife conservation and continue to be, by far, the largest source of funding for fish and wildlife conservation in our country.

Certainly more and more Americans are becoming interested in wildlife conservation through other avenues besides hunting and this is a great development. Yet we must never forget that hunters remain one of our greatest supporters and oldest stakeholders.

It is imperative for us to live up to the mandate of the Refuge Improvement Act to provide quality, wildlife-dependent recreation on our lands. That includes enabling traditional outdoor recreation for people like Rich.

As the old saying goes, ‘you gotta dance with who brung ya.’ Hunters and anglers have been largely responsible for the conservation legacy we all enjoy.

Let’s look back over the years. After the Civil War, the American hunting scene changed as wealth and leisure time increased in our industrialized society. The huge increase in urban populations on the heels of industrial growth also brought more demand for food. That marked the beginning of commercial exploitation of wildlife. Conflicts between sport hunters and market hunters were occurring regularly. Sportsmen’s clubs sprouted up all over the nation and it was largely the efforts of sportsmen that brought market hunting and it’s destructive impact on our wildlife resources to the forefront.

George Bird Grinnell quickly saw how the growth of market hunting was impacting the conservation of wildlife. He brought the matter to Teddy Roosevelt's attention, himself an ardent hunter and conservationist. Together, the two men founded the Boone and Crockett Club – one of the oldest conservation organizations in our history and one of our conservation partners represented here at the Summit.

As fans of the refuge system, we all know, one of Roosevelt's first actions as president was the establishment of the bird sanctuary at Pelican Island, the launch of the Refuge System 101 years ago. Where did Roosevelt get his passion for wildlife that inspired him, at the stroke of the pen, to create our first refuge? No doubt, the conservation fire that burned inside of him was kindled, in large part, by his experiences as a hunter.

Roosevelt's conservation legacy did not stop there. In 1907 he convened a Conference of Governors, which focused on an integrated national program of conservation.

Forty of the 46 states represented at the conference agreed to adopt the program, which was, in many respects, the culmination of hunters' efforts to establish state and federal regulatory control over wildlife.

Another landmark in our country's conservation history and certainly that of the history of the soon to be U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was the passage of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act in 1929. This act, passed with strong support from hunters, demonstrated our nation's commitment to bird conservation and helped pave the way for the future of the refuge system.

On Monday, we heard Secretary Norton speak about the large growth of the refuge system during the troubled times of the 1930's, largely as an effort to provide vital habitat for migratory birds. The fact that America would devote any attention to wildlife conservation during our greatest depression says a lot about our American character and maybe even more about the leadership of key individuals, men like Ding Darling and Aldo Leopold, themselves avid hunters.

This year we celebrated another important anniversary important in the Fish and Wildlife Service – that of the 70th anniversary of the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp – or Duck Stamp – as it is more popularly known.

A number of people are credited with the establishment of the Duck Stamp but one man's name certainly stands out: Ding Darling. Darling, the Director of the U.S. Biological Survey, the forerunner of the Fish and Wildlife Service, knew that without a dedicated funding source for wildlife conservation and refuge acquisition, the future of the system would be in doubt. Under Darling's leadership, the Duck Stamp program was launched. In fact, the other President Roosevelt, (FDR) signed into law the act that created the duck stamp six days after Darling took the helm of the Survey.

As most if not all of you know, a federal duck stamp is required for all hunters, 16 years and older, who want to hunt migratory waterfowl. A duck stamp is also an entrance pass to any National Wildlife Refuge in the system, open to the public. It is also a great tradition of the Service as each year some of the nation's top wildlife artists vie to have their image grace the stamp.

In its 70 year history, proceeds from duck stamps have been used to acquire over 5 million acres for the National Wildlife Refuge System. Now that may not seem like a lot given the current size of the System is approaching 100 million acres. However, if you look the history of how the Refuge System has grown, which I recently did with Bill Hartwig, you'll see that the Service has only purchased just over 8 million acres of all the lands in the System. The remaining acres were either transferred to us or given to us. So, in reality, duck stamp proceeds have been used to buy over 60% of the land that the Service has purchased for the Refuge System.

And this land does not just benefit ducks – although that is and should remain a focus of those dollars. Proceeds from the sales of duck stamps have benefited a suite of wildlife.

Two weeks ago I was lucky enough to spend a few days in the Prairie Pothole region of North Dakota. This area of the country is often

referred to as the "duck factory" where 50 to 75% of the nation's primary waterfowl species are produced. In the PPR, duck stamps have been used to conserve nearly 3 million acres of land. While there, I certainly saw the ducks. But that's not all I saw. The PPR is important to a number of grassland nesting birds as well as shore birds and waterbirds. Birds like avocets, wilson's phalaropes, northern harriers and baird's sparrowe. Some of these birds, the grassland nesting songbirds birds in particular, are facing some of the most serious declines of all bird species.

In addition to providing the fuel for the refuge system, the Duck Stamp also brought together many conservation partners who were challenged to identify the most important lands to protect. Much as you are doing at this summit, they were asked to identify the future direction of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Certainly the role of the National Wildlife Refuge System has expanded beyond waterfowl. With the passage of the Endangered Species Act, the system took on an additional mission; and providing habitat for endangered species has become and will remain, an important mission of the system. But it cannot and should not become the only mission.

Unfortunately some in society see the mission as an either/or game when in reality, it is both. The Refuge System and indeed, the North American Conservation model has shown us that we can have wildlife and people. Furthermore, history has shown us that not only can we have hunting on National Wildlife Refuges, hunters themselves have been a key ingredient to the past, present, and no doubt the future of the System.

This fact was recognized by the Congress, with the passage of the National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act in 1997.

The Improvement Act – the focus of much discussion here at the Summit – establishes the mission of the Refuge System as -- and I quote – "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”.

The Improvement Act also recognizes appropriate wildlife-dependent recreation, when compatible, are priority general public uses of the System. Specifically, those are hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and interpretation.

Today, the Refuge System, with 544 refuges, has established hunt programs on 316 units. Fishing opportunities exist on 275 refuges.

Each year, new hunting opportunities are opened on refuges. In the last 3 years, we have created 50 new hunting and fishing programs and we are looking at opportunities to increase those numbers when compatible with the refuge’s mission. In addition, last year, our Director, as well as his counter parts with the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management signed an MOU with a number of groups in this room to work collectively to provide better access for sportsmen and women to national wildlife refuges and other federal public lands.

We have similar efforts underway for fishing. Our Fisheries program is working with refuges to update a brochure that provides information on fishing opportunities on National Wildlife Refuges and an effort is underway to take a program that was started in by our Northeast region called “Take a Kid Fishing on a National Wildlife Refuge” and it expand it nationwide by the end of next year.

In 2003, more than 2.2 million people hunted and 6 ½ million people fished on refuges. In pursuing their sport, many of these hunters and anglers gained a new appreciation and understanding of the need for quality habitat and habitat management on refuges and have become advocates for the Refuge System. We need these partners in furthering our conservation mission.

Because Americans place high value on individual rights and the liberty to pursue cultural traditions, we need to communicate to the non-hunting public the cultural significance of hunting in our country as well as the role of hunters and hunting in wildlife conservation.

We also need to teach hunting skills and traditions to a new generation of Americans if we are to successfully manage fish and wildlife conservation.

Our hunting and fishing heritage is a great part of our American culture and in many ways, defined who we are as a nation. Just as this nation was founded under the tenants of equality, our fish and wildlife laws have evolved to ensure that all segments of our nation could enjoy our shared fish and wildlife resources. In conjunction with our partners in state fish and wildlife agencies, we have the dual responsibility of managing those resources in trust for the citizens of our nation while also ensuring that those citizens have access to them.

You know, when Roosevelt entered the White House, there were only an estimated 41-thousand elk left in all of North America. Today there are nearly a million.

The number of wild turkey had slipped to about 100,000 birds. Now there are more than four-and-a-half million.

The American pronghorn had faded to about 12,000. Now more than a million grace our sage and grasslands.

The whitetail deer had dwindled to about half a million. We are now endowed with more than 33 million.

Clearly, conservation and consumptive recreation can co-exist. It is our task to ensure that both can continue to thrive in the National Wildlife Refuge System.

As you continue your deliberations and when you go back home to help carry out the priorities we identify here, I ask one thing: I hope you will recommit yourselves to carrying out the mandate that we manage the Refuge System for the conservation and restoration of fish, wildlife, and plants, and that we perpetuate our traditions of

hunting and fishing and other wildlife-dependent recreation on our wildlife refuges.