

III. Plan Development

INTRODUCTION

In accordance with Service guidelines and National Environmental Policy Act recommendations, public involvement has been a crucial factor throughout the development of the Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan for Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge. This plan has been written with input and assistance from interested citizens, conservation organizations, and employees of local and state agencies. The participation of these stakeholders and their ideas has been of great value in setting the management direction for Bon Secour Refuge. The Service, as a whole, and the refuge staff, in particular, are very grateful to each one who has contributed time, expertise, and ideas to the planning process. The staff remains impressed by the passion and commitment of so many individuals for the lands and waters administered by the refuge.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND PLANNING PROCESS

Preparation for the comprehensive conservation plan began with a Biological Review in November 2000 and a Public Use Review in June 2001, both of which provided recommendations for the management direction of the refuge. The following paragraphs summarize the efforts taken to solicit public input and present the results of the public consultation process. A detailed description of that process is presented in Appendix IV.

On February 19, 2003, the first of a series of public meetings was held in Gulf Shores, Alabama. A planning team was formed to identify issues and concerns regarding the refuge, its wildlife, habitats, and management. The planning team consisted of the refuge manager, refuge biologist, a refuge planner, and an outreach specialist from the Daphne Ecological Services Field Office. Non-Service members of the planning team included:

- Director - Fort Morgan Historic Site
- Executive Director/CEO - Alabama Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau
- Vice Chair, Conservation and Natural Resources Committee - Alabama Gulf Coast Chamber of Commerce
- President - Friends of Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge
- Chief, Coastal Section, Division of State Lands - Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources
- Education and Outreach Coordinator, Coastal Section, Division of State Lands - Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources
- Scientific Coordinator - Mobile Bay National Estuary Program
- Baldwin County Extension Agent (Environment and Marine Resources)
- Park Superintendent - Gulf State Park

- Park Naturalist - Gulf State Park
- Nongame Biologist - Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources
- Executive Director - Dauphin Island Sea Lab
- Past President - Fort Morgan Civic Association
- Coastal Programs Coordinator - The Nature Conservancy of Alabama
- Private property owner within the refuge boundary

Further meetings were held from March through June 2003 to provide continuous information to the public and solicit further input. Efforts were taken to widely announce public meetings by publishing dates, times, and locations in local newspapers, as well as on flyers distributed to everyone on the comprehensive conservation plan mailing list. A comment packet was designed to identify the importance of different refuge features and opportunities for the public, while also allowing for "free-hand" comments on values, issues, and concerns related to the refuge. This packet was available at all public meetings, at the refuge office, and at the Alabama Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau. It could also be requested via mail or e-mail. In addition, it was sent out to everyone on the mailing list, the sea turtle volunteers, and the Friends of Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge. Out of an estimated total of 500 comment packets distributed to the public, 102 completed forms (approximately 20 percent response) were returned to the refuge. A summary of the responses is found in Table 6 and a complete analysis of the comment packet and results can be found in Appendix IV.

SUMMARY OF ISSUES, CONCERNS, AND OPPORTUNITIES

The planning team identified a number of issues related to fish and wildlife protection, habitat restoration, recreation, and management of threatened and endangered species. Additionally, the planning team considered federal and state mandates, plus applicable local ordinances, regulations, and plans. The team also directed the process of obtaining public input through public meetings, open planning team meetings, comment packets, and personal contacts. The planning team reviewed comments received at public meetings and also evaluated responses from the comment packet. Several recurring themes were evident during this scoping process.

Table 6. Summary of concerns reflected on the Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge Planning Packet.

Items receiving the most support:	Items receiving the least support:
conserving habitat for wildlife	providing more recreational opportunities
protecting threatened and endangered species	improving fishing opportunities
protecting the whole biological system	improving public use facilities
increasing law enforcement	improving refuge accessibility

Fish and Wildlife Populations

The rescue of stranded and injured wildlife was a concern voiced by several citizens during the public scoping phase of this planning effort. It was recommended that the various agencies and organizations along the Gulf Coast develop and implement a comprehensive stranding call list.

Some citizens suggested that the refuge design and implement scientifically based monitoring programs to document changes in plant and animal communities in response to habitat management. Another comment was for the refuge to identify and inventory current populations of plants (including submerged aquatic vegetation) and wildlife, and then determine which populations are in need of monitoring.

Some participants stated that the main emphasis of refuge management should be to protect threatened and endangered species. It was recommended that the refuge increase law enforcement to better protect wildlife and habitat.

Habitats

A thorough understanding of refuge habitats and their associated plant communities is fundamental to sound habitat management. Many stakeholders understand this concept and consequently, several expressed a strong desire to enhance the refuge's biological program. Among other items, the participants recommended that the refuge:

- Manage or remove invasive species;
- Enhance beach preservation activities and erosion control;
- Improve native habitats for endemic plants and animals;
- Map and type plant communities; and
- Play a more effective role in the cooperative management of resources on Fort Morgan Peninsula and coastal Alabama.

Resource Protection

Many stakeholders commented on the Service's need for continued land acquisition and negotiations with inholders. Special concerns included annexation by the city of Gulf Shores, potential zoning changes, and increased developmental pressures. It was suggested that the refuge coordinate with other agencies and organizations (e.g., Alabama Coastal Heritage Trust, Friends of Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge, and Little Lagoon Group) to protect land through traditional and innovative acquisition methods.

Several comments were made regarding the problem of litter on the refuge. Some of the suggestions were to make trash containers, marked for refuge use only, available on the refuge; to encourage dog owners to remove pet litter; and to explore ways to remove storm debris from the beach.



**Sea turtle outreach
on Bon Secour**

USFWS Photo

Environmental Education and Outreach

Overall, many participants expressed their desire for more public involvement to further promote understanding and appreciation of the refuge and the wildlife and habitat it supports. Suggestions were made to host an annual or semi-annual public meeting to provide information on refuge programs and opportunities, and to enhance communication through appropriate brochures, web sites, and signage. Some of the public comments also indicated a need to improve the current environmental education program and facilities in order to meet present and future demands. Suggestions for improvement of the environmental education and outreach programs included:

- Construction of an education/visitor center;
- Addition of staff and volunteers;
- Participation in research, monitoring, and restoration activities as a means to educate the public (i.e., hands-on learning);
- Education of the public on native landscaping and dune restoration techniques; and
- Strengthening of partnerships with other environmental education programs in the area (e.g., Weeks Bay National Estuary Research Reserve, Gulf State Park, Dauphin Island Sea Lab, Mobile Bay National Estuary Program, and Baldwin County Extension Service).

Public Use

Bon Secour Refuge provides a variety of wildlife-dependent recreational uses, including fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, and environmental education and interpretation. To facilitate these uses, a system of parking lots, trails, and interpretive structures has been developed. Some comments indicated a need for more extensive interpretation of the ecological and cultural resources of the refuge, including an expansion of the refuge's web site, improvement of maps and their distribution, and improved signage on the refuge. Specific recreational concerns, issues, and opportunities are summarized:

- Desire to fish at night on the Fort Morgan Unit;
- Lack of fishing opportunities at Gator Lake;
- Degraded fishing and birding experiences in the western end of Little Lagoon and adjacent refuge lands due to an increase in motorized boat traffic and personal watercraft;
- Need to vary recreational uses among the five refuge units (i.e., some units should have more public use, while other units receive too much public use during certain times of the year);
- Recommendation to study current level of public use on the refuge and to determine the appropriate level of recreational activity for each refuge unit;
- Need for a new and improved trail system on the refuge, including canoe and kayak trails, in different habitats (Sand Bayou and Little Point Clear Units);

- Recommendation to construct observation platforms and elevated walking areas;
- Need to improve refuge parking areas, boardwalks, water access, and access to the beach;
- Need for a comfort station adjacent to the beach access at the end of Mobile Street;
- Recommendation to institute user fees for recreational activities; and
- Recommendation that the refuge coordinate with other local agencies in the development of bike, kayak, and canoe trails on Fort Morgan Peninsula.

On July 10, 2003, the planning team held another public meeting in Gulf Shores to present its vision and direction for the comprehensive conservation plan and to solicit additional public input. It also served as a venue to explain the refuge planning process, introduce the planning team members, and present the issues previously raised in the process. Approximately 50 people attended the meeting and several expressed their support of the planning effort and direction.

Bon Secour
National Wildlife Refuge

**Draft Comprehensive
Conservation Plan**

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