

SECTION B: ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

I. Background

INTRODUCTION

This Environmental Assessment for Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge was prepared in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act. It discusses the purpose and need for the comprehensive conservation plan for the refuge and provides an analysis of the impacts that could be expected from each of the management proposals outlined in the plan. This analysis assists the Fish and Wildlife Service in determining if it will need to prepare an environmental impact statement or a finding of no significant impact for the plan.

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

The purpose of the proposed action is to specify a management direction for Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge for the next 15 years, while providing long-term guidance in relation to management decisions. This management direction will be described in detail through a vision statement and a set of refuge-wide goals, objectives, and strategies in the draft comprehensive conservation plan.

The action is needed because adequate, long-term management direction does not exist for the refuge. Management is currently guided by a series of general policies and step-down plans that are in need of revision based on new laws, policies, and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Also, the action is needed to address current management issues and to satisfy the legislative mandates of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, which requires the preparation of comprehensive conservation plans for all national wildlife refuges by the year 2012.

Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge was established by Congress for the listed purposes.

"... to ensure the well-being of these (nationally endangered and threatened species, such as the brown pelican, bald eagle, and several species of sea turtles, as well as many more species identified by the state to be of special concern) and other species, to serve as a living laboratory for scientists and students and to provide wildlife-oriented recreation for the public."

94 Stat. 483, dated June 9, 1980 (Act to establish the Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge)

"...to conserve an undisturbed beach/dune ecosystem which includes a diversity of fish and wildlife, and their habitat."

94 Stat. 484, dated June 9, 1980 (Act to establish the Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge)

"...to conserve (A) fish or wildlife which are listed as endangered species or threatened species...or (B) plants...."

16 U.S.C. 1534 (Endangered Species Act of 1973)

"...for the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources...."

16 U.S.C 742f(a)(4) (Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956)

"...for the benefit of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service in performing its activities and services. Such acceptance may be subject to the terms of any restrictive or affirmative covenant, or condition of servitude...."

16 U.S.C. 742f(b)(1) (Fish and Wildlife Act)

"...for conservation purposes...."

7 U.S.C. 2002 (Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act)

This environmental assessment was prepared and a list of issues was developed using National Environmental Policy Act guidelines. The Act requires that the effects of proposed actions on the natural and human environment be examined and evaluated. In the following sections, four alternatives for refuge management are described and the environmental consequences of each are evaluated. A preferred alternative is selected based on these environmental consequences, as well as on its feasibility and compatibility with refuge purposes. Goals for the refuge are listed.

Fish and Wildlife Populations

Identify, conserve, manage, enhance, and restore populations of native fish and wildlife species representative of coastal Alabama, with special emphasis on migratory birds and threatened and endangered species.

Habitats

Identify, conserve, manage, enhance, and restore the natural diversity, abundance, and ecological functions of refuge habitats and associated plant communities, with an emphasis on managing designated critical habitat for threatened and endangered species.

Resource Conservation

Identify and conserve archaeological and natural resources on Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge and promote conservation through interagency and private landowner cooperation, partnerships, and land protection programs on the Fort Morgan Peninsula and coastal Alabama.

Public Use and Environmental Education

Provide the public with quality environmental education and interpretation programs; outreach opportunities; and recreational activities that lead to enjoyment and a greater understanding of, and appreciation for, fish, wildlife, habitats, and cultural resources of coastal Alabama.

DECISION FRAMEWORK

The Fish and Wildlife Service will make two decisions based on this environmental assessment: (1) select an alternative and (2) determine whether or not the selected alternative is a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment, thus requiring preparation of an environmental impact statement. The planning team has recommended Alternative D (Expand wildlife and habitat management activities, while optimizing current public use and education) as the best alternative to manage the refuge. The recommendation was based on evaluation of the purposes for which the refuge was established, the missions of the Service and the National Wildlife Refuge System, and other legal mandates and pertinent plans. The draft comprehensive conservation plan was developed for implementation based on this recommendation. Assuming that no significant impacts are found, the plan will be implemented, monitored on an annual basis, and revised when necessary. It will guide the refuge for the next 15 years and serve as the foundation for all future planning efforts.

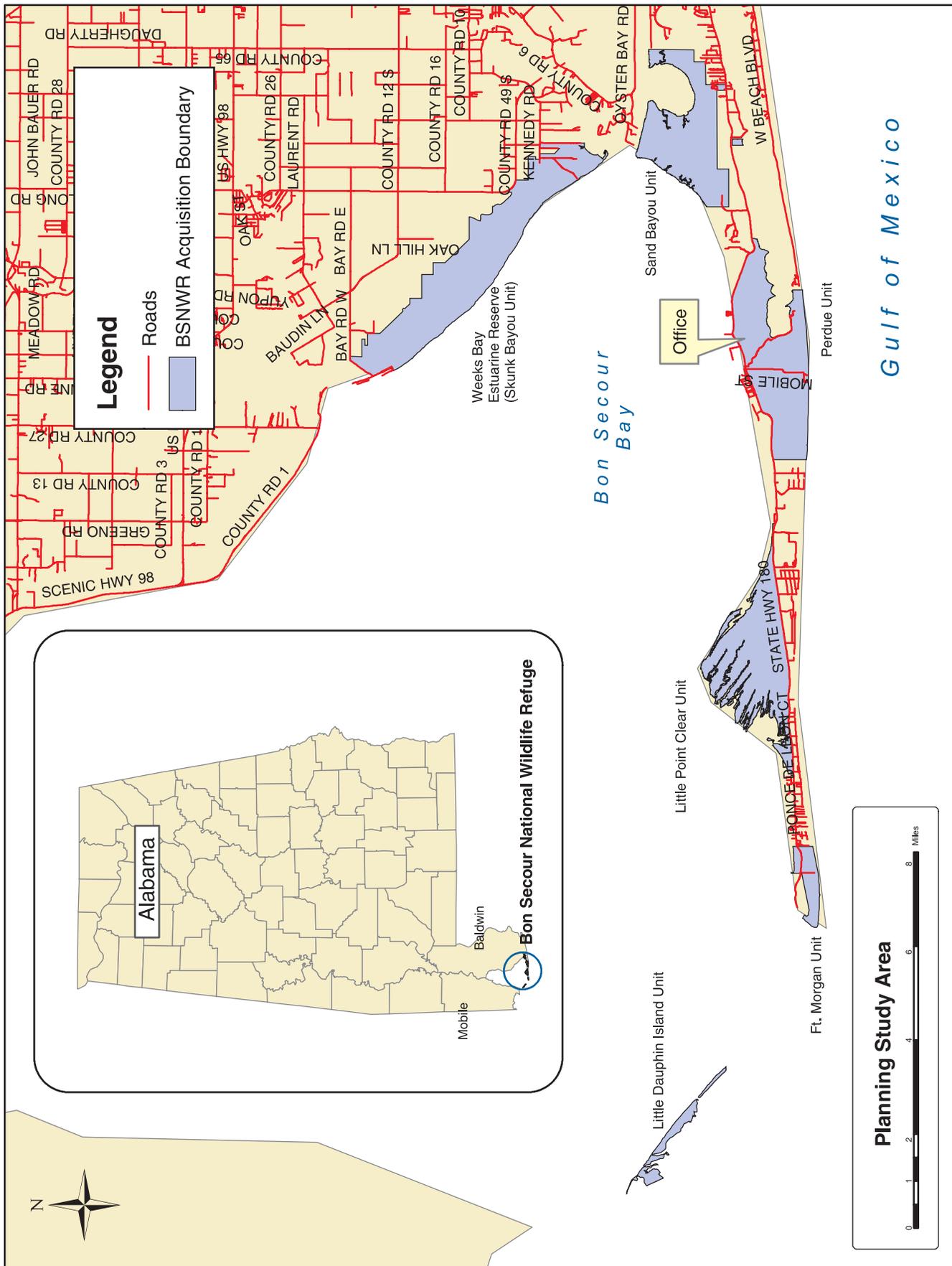
PLANNING STUDY AREA

Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge is located on the Gulf Coast of Alabama, 8 miles west of the city of Gulf Shores, Alabama, on State Highway 180 in Baldwin County. The planning study area (Figure 24) is divided into five separate management units along the Fort Morgan Peninsula and Little Dauphin Island. Since the refuge was established in 1980, a total of 6,978 acres (55 percent) has been purchased within the 12,570-acre refuge acquisition boundary, including 575 acres leased from the State of Alabama. The Service will seek to acquire, from willing sellers, the remaining 1,761 acres not protected by the state or other conservation organizations. (Refer to Figures 5 through 10 in the draft comprehensive conservation plan for acquisition boundaries and ownership designations).

Management efforts since 1980 have emphasized acquiring land, securing staff to operate the refuge, and initiating conservation programs that benefit endangered wildlife species. However, Service acquisition of key properties, such as inholdings and beach/dune habitat, may not be realized within the 15-year planning period due to budget constraints and landowner preferences. The five units within the 12,570-acre acquisition boundary have a significant "edge," which contributes to the predation of birds, sea turtles, and beach mice. Edge effect is the tendency of a transitional zone between communities to contain a greater variety of species and higher population densities than surrounding communities.

This environmental assessment will identify management strategies and guidelines on refuge lands, as well as other lands within the approved acquisition boundary that have yet to be acquired by the Service.

Figure 24. Planning Study Area, Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge, Baldwin and Mobile Counties, Alabama.



AUTHORITY, LEGAL COMPLIANCE, AND COMPATIBILITY

The National Wildlife Refuge System consists of federal lands managed primarily to provide habitat for a diversity of fish, wildlife, and plant species. National wildlife refuges are established under many different authorities and funding sources for a variety of purposes. The purposes for each refuge were established by specific legislation and are listed in the previous section. Additional authority delegated by Congress, federal regulations, executive orders, and several management plans guide the operation of the Refuge System. Appendix III of the draft comprehensive conservation plan contains a list of the key laws, orders, and regulations that provide a framework for the proposed action.

Lands within the National Wildlife Refuge System are closed to public uses unless specifically and legally opened. All programs and uses must be evaluated based on mandates set forth in the National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act of 1997. Those mandates are:

- To contribute to ecosystem goals as well as refuge purposes and goals;
- To conserve, manage and restore fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats;
- To monitor the trends of fish, wildlife, and plants;
- To manage and ensure appropriate visitor uses as those uses benefitting the conservation of fish and wildlife resources and contributing to the enjoyment of the public, including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, and environmental education and interpretation; and
- To ensure that visitor activities are compatible with refuge purposes.

PLANNING PROCESS AND ASSOCIATED ISSUES

Preparation for the comprehensive conservation planning process at Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge began with a Biological Review in November 2000, and a Public Use Review in June 2001. The review teams completed reports which provided recommendations for the management and direction of the refuge. After considerable pre-planning, an initial public meeting was held in Gulf Shores, Alabama, on February 19, 2003. A planning team was assembled consisting of Service personnel and professionals from other natural resource agencies and organizations. This team helped identify a number of issues relating to fish and wildlife protection, habitat restoration, public uses, and management of threatened and endangered species.

The planning team held a series of meetings in Gulf Shores from March through June 2003 and developed a vision statement, identified goals, developed an initial mailing list, and solicited additional issues of importance from the public. Some of the key issues identified by the team and the public are: protection of trust species, protection of migratory songbird stopover sites, restoration of coastal dunes, enhanced resident wildlife populations, opportunities for compatible wildlife-dependent recreation, and environmental education

and interpretation. Meetings were widely announced via mailing lists, newspapers, and radio stations. Input obtained from meetings, correspondence, and returned comment packets was considered in developing this draft plan. Please see Chapter III, Plan Development, of the Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Appendix IV for more detailed information on the scoping of issues.

Issues and Concerns

An array of issues, concerns, and opportunities was addressed during the planning process. Numerous discussions among citizens, focus groups, resource specialists, and refuge planning staff brought to light several recurring themes. In general, these themes centered on creating a balanced public use program, improving and expanding current environmental education programs and facilities, and protecting and managing fish and wildlife populations, natural resources, and habitats.

Some of the specific issues raised during internal and public scoping included:

- Controlling exotic and invasive species;
- Managing endangered species and migratory birds;
- Dealing with stranded and injured wildlife;
- Acquiring land and negotiating with inholders;
- Enhancing the refuge biological program;
- Improving public outreach strategies;
- Restoring and managing beach dune habitat;
- Utilizing prescribed fire on the refuge to promote and maintain food and cover for a variety of wildlife species;
- Protecting and maintaining water quality;
- Providing quality fishing opportunities;
- Restoring interior scrub/shrub habitat;
- Providing wildlife observation and photography opportunities;
- Addressing the lack of staff and facilities and continuity of refuge operations; and
- Developing a balanced wildlife-dependent recreation program.