

Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge

Comprehensive Conservation Planning Update

August 2011

Progress to Date

Since our last planning update in May 2011, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has made considerable progress in developing preliminary alternatives for the Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and associated Environmental Impact Statement for Chincoteague and Wallops Island National Wildlife Refuges (the refuges). During the week of June 20, our planning team – including representatives from the Town of Chincoteague, Accomack County, Commonwealth of Virginia, and the National Park Service (NPS), as well as FWS – met to draft the preliminary alternatives. The results of this effort appear in this newsletter. Meetings will be held to present and discuss the preliminary alternatives on August 22, 2011. Public comments are welcome until October 1, 2011.

Upcoming Public Meetings

Monday, August 22, 2011

9:00 AM – 12:00 PM

(Open House)

Chincoteague

National Wildlife Refuge

(Near Beach Parking Lot # 2)

5:00 PM – 7:00 PM

(Open House)

7:00 PM – Presentation by
Refuge Manager

The Chincoteague Center
6155 Community Drive
Chincoteague Island, VA
23336-2731



Youths at the refuge

USFWS

Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) Basics

A CCP describes management actions that bring a refuge closer to its vision and help achieve its identified goals. The May 2011 newsletter presented the refuge draft vision and goals, which are reprinted here. The draft vision and goals will be revisited based on comments received. The draft vision and goals informed the development of preliminary alternatives and will be used in the

future to further develop and assess alternatives.

Alternatives (including a no-change alternative) are required under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). CCP alternatives represent approaches to management options that FWS could reasonably undertake to achieve refuge purposes and goals, help fulfill the National Wildlife Refuge System mission, and respond to challenges.

Common to All Alternatives

The following proposed projects and programs would occur regardless of the alternative chosen for implementation.

Climate Change and Sea Level Rise

Each alternative anticipates future conditions as they pertain to climate change and anticipated sea level rise over the next 100 years and proposes a range of adaptation measures. A guiding principle is that sea level rise is a continuous, ongoing process, which along with coastal storms and other natural and man-made processes, reshapes coastal landscapes. Each alternative would provide for data gathering to measure and monitor the effects of climate change and sea level rise.

Focus Area

As indicated in Goal 5, Partnerships, the refuge plans to work with partners to explore how best to establish a regional conservation network for the southern Delmarva Peninsula. This area is recognized globally for its remarkable estuarine, coastal, and marine habitats and substantial populations of migratory and breeding shorebirds, colonial waterbirds, landbirds, and raptors. Unfortunately, several real and growing challenges threaten the area's rich and diverse natural heritage and the many benefits humans derive from the region's intact habitats and natural systems. This partnership would seek to expand a resilient, productive, and connected network of protected lands to facilitate adaptation of native species, natural communities, and ecological systems and processes across a full range of representative habitats from tidal salt marshes to upland forests.

Resource Protection

Current enforcement of all Federal and State laws applicable to the refuge to protect all known archaeological and historical sites would continue, including any efforts to increase resource protection through education.

Certain mandated responsibilities, such as protection of Federal trust species and wetlands and prevention and control of invasive species, would be accomplished under all alternatives.

Threatened and Endangered Species

Each alternative would provide protective conservation measures for federally listed species and their habitats on the refuge as indicated in recovery plans and other relevant regulation.

Bilingual/Multilingual Material

All alternatives would include the development of bilingual/multilingual information for regulations and environmental education.

Facilities and Infrastructure

In all alternatives where new facilities are being proposed, such as the relocated parking in Alternatives B and D, universal access, including standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act, would be incorporated, and safety considerations, such as shelters, would be made. In addition, impacts on resources and visitor services would be considered in design and construction to minimize any adverse effects.

Actions Considered but Not Developed

During the scoping period, the public provided many comments; a summary was provided in the February 2011 newsletter. These comments were used to inform the preliminary draft alternatives. This section identifies topics identified in those comments that are not included in the preliminary alternatives.

Beach Nourishment and Installation of Snow Fences and Jetties or Groins

Several public comments indicated a desire to maintain the current recreational beach and parking locations through

beach nourishment activities and engineering solutions like jetties and groins. Such activities are costly, may have adverse impacts on habitat and wildlife, and are incompatible with FWS and NPS management policies, namely the NPS Management Policies section 4.8.1.1 and the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act. These policies support allowing natural shoreline processes to continue without intervention. An ongoing sand bypassing program to restore the beach at the northern end of Assateague Island is being conducted by NPS and US Army Corps of Engineers to mitigate long-term erosion caused by the jetties at Ocean City Inlet. Consistent with current policy, the recreational beach will not be replenished and dune habitat will not be actively maintained.

Elimination of Hunting

Refuges provide habitat for the conservation and protection of all species of wildlife. Harvesting surplus animals through hunting is one tool used to manage wildlife populations at a level compatible with the environment, provide wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities, and permit the use of a valuable renewable resource. Hunting is a priority public use of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Therefore, hunting will not be eliminated.

Exclusion of Transit

Some of the public comments requested that transit not be considered in any of the alternatives. Alternative C does not include transit, but the others do include transit because it would provide supplemental beach parking when the beach parking is at capacity and would provide access after catastrophic storm events that may temporarily eliminate or restrict beach parking.

Comprehensive Conservation Planning Vision and Goals

The Chincoteague and Wallops Island National Wildlife Refuges encompass extraordinary and ever-changing lands at the edge of the sea, a place where unique habitats and wildlife flourish. In partnership with others, the refuges are a vital part of a larger system of protected lands and waters on the Delmarva Peninsula critical to migratory birds. People from around the world can visit the refuges to learn, recreate, refresh themselves, be inspired by wildlife and wild lands, and renew their connection with nature.

Goal 1: Coastal Habitats. Provide quality coastal habitats to support wildlife, fish, and plants by managing in concert with natural processes as part of the Delmarva coastal barrier island system.

Goal 2: Managed Wetlands (Impoundments). Manage refuge impoundments to support native wildlife and plant communities, including a diversity of waterbirds, other aquatic species, and species of conservation concern. When an impoundment no longer meets conservation targets or is not viable to maintain, restore its natural hydrology and manage it as part of the natural system.

Goal 3: Upland Habitats. Manage upland habitats to provide forage, cover, and other essential habitat for wildlife including landbirds, migrating monarch butterflies, and Delmarva fox squirrel as focal species.

Goal 4: Southern Barrier Islands Unit (Assawoman, Metompkin, Cedar). Perpetuate the long term viability of native avian communities, turtles, and natural habitats on the Refuge's remote barrier islands through a partnership approach.

Goal 5: Partnerships. Working with partners, protect and restore vigorous, viable populations of migratory and resident wildlife, fish, and native plants and their habitats found on the Delmarva Peninsula and identified in state, national, and international treaties, plans, and initiatives. Take a leadership role in collaborative regional efforts to achieve broader conservation goals and serve as a catalyst for achieving a bi-state eco-regional partnership.

Goal 6: Visitor Services. People of all ages and abilities develop a stewardship ethic while enjoying their refuge experience and increasing their knowledge of the Service, System, and refuge.

Goal 7: Refuge Administration. Maintain and enhance refuge infrastructure and operations responsibly and sustainably for the safety and well being of the wildlife, cultural resources, public, and employees.

Next Steps

In addition to the public meetings at the recreational beach and in Chincoteague on August 22, the refuge will schedule two additional public meetings within the region. Comments received would be used to update and refine the alternatives. The refuge will then conduct the analysis necessary to compare and contrast solutions; each alternative would be assessed for potential environmental effects on the physical, natural, and human environment. The refuge would continue to keep the public informed with periodic updates throughout the process.

Contact Information

For additional information on Chincoteague NWR, please visit the refuge website at <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/chinco/>

Please send mail to:
Chincoteague NWR
P.O. Box 62,
Chincoteague Island, VA, 23336

Telephone: 757/336-6122
Fax: 757/336-5273

Those with hearing disabilities should contact the Federal Relay number 1 800/877 8339 and supply the operator with the refuge phone number above

For more information on the planning process please contact:

Thomas Bonetti, Refuge Planner
300 Westgate Center Drive
Hadley, MA 01035
Phone: 413/253-8307

Email: northeastplanning@fws.gov

Please put "Chincoteague NWR" in the subject line



Boardwalk / Mike Dyer; Volpe Center

Alternative A – Existing Conditions

Alternative A is the status quo (current management) alternative as required by the National Environmental Policy Act. This alternative continues current management strategies as established by the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge Master Plan approved in 1992. Under this alternative, the refuge would protect and maintain all lands it administers, primarily focusing on the needs of threatened and endangered species, with additional emphasis on the needs of migratory birds and resident wildlife. The refuge would continue to preserve approximately 2,650 acres of wetland impoundments based on priority species needs. Natural coastal processes would continue to be the primary force that shapes habitat on the southern barrier islands. The refuge would continue to protect and enhance the wilderness character of the proposed area through actions to eliminate incompatible features and activities. There would be no change in the size or location of the proposed 1,300-acre wilderness area within the refuge.

Consistent with the 1992 Master Plan, the refuge would allow NPS to maintain 961 parking spaces (8.5 acres) at the recreational beach. As sea level rise and natural forces reduce the land base capable of supporting current parking, the refuge would identify and pursue alternative Chincoteague Island parking opportunities and institute a shuttle service with stowing capacity for beach cargo to the current recreational beach to supplement remaining beach parking.

Refuge staff would continue to work with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to reduce the non-migrant Canada goose population. The refuge would continue existing partnerships with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the U.S. Navy for monitoring and recovery of trust species.

The refuge would allow grazing of the current pony population (125-150 ponies), consistent with the pony management agreement in partnership with the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Department.

Existing public uses, including wildlife observation, environmental education, walking and bicycling access, fishing, wildlife photography, and hunting of sika elk, white-tailed deer, and off-island migratory birds, would continue with the current facilities, programs, and policies. The off-road vehicle (ORV) closure schedule and vehicle limits would continue. The refuge would continue to manage opportunities for recreational shellfish and crab harvest.



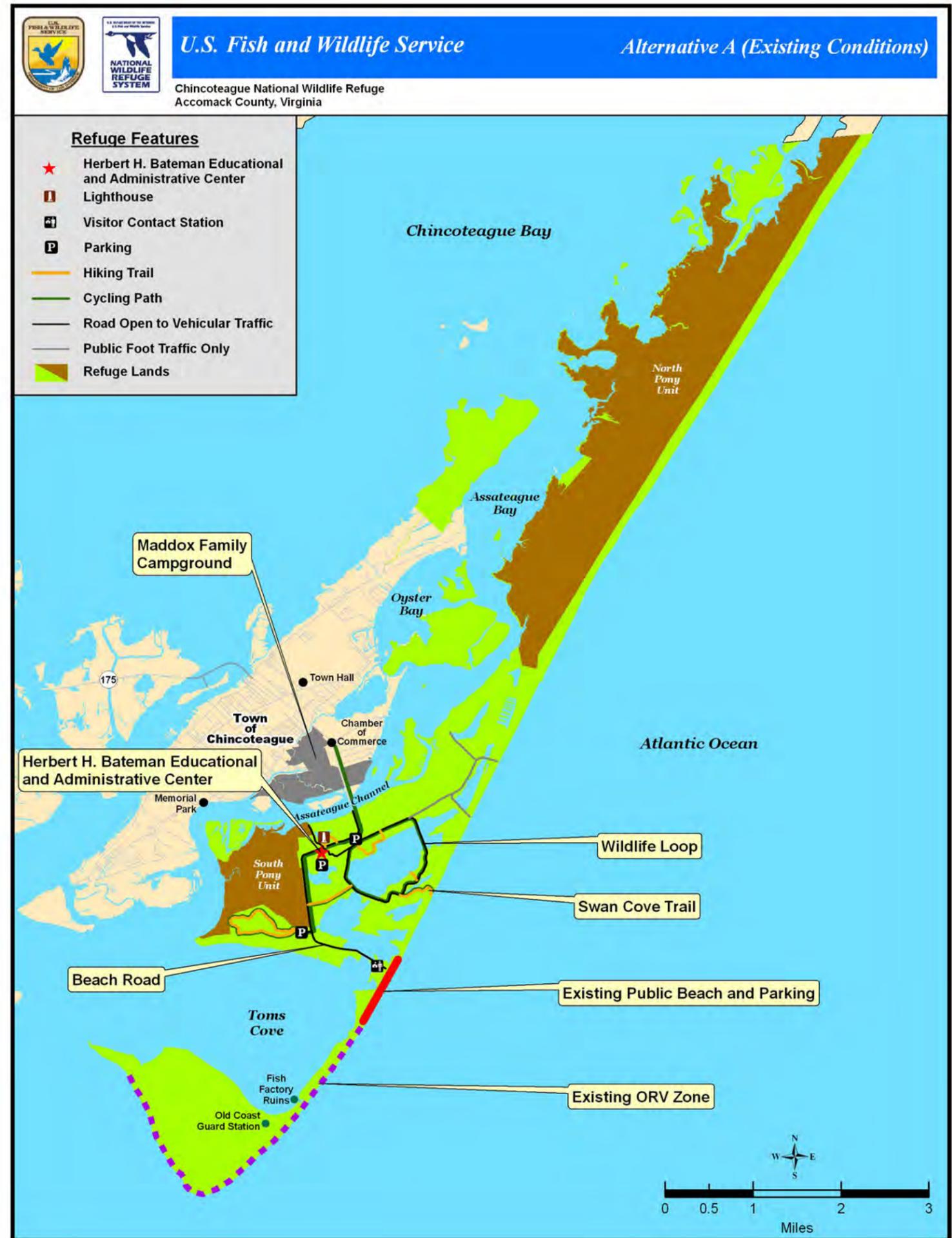
Youths kayaking

USFWS



Assateague Lighthouse

Lindsey Morse, Volpe Center



Alternative B

Alternative B would continue established habitat and wildlife management strategies but focus them in light of the new goals and vision established by this CCP and pursue additional management activities of resources and public use.

Natural Resource Management Under this alternative, the refuge would protect and maintain all lands it administers, primarily focusing on the needs of threatened and endangered species, with additional emphasis on the needs of migratory birds and resident wildlife. The refuge would continue to preserve approximately 2,650 acres of wetland impoundments, but make adjustments in accordance with a new impoundment management plan that takes into account various factors, such as the habitat needs of black ducks and monarch butterflies, climate change and natural coastal processes, and relocated beach access and parking. Natural coastal processes would continue to shape habitat on the southern barrier islands. If Toms Hook or Assawoman Island meet the minimum criteria for wilderness within the time period of this CCP, the refuge would evaluate their potential for wilderness designation at that time.

Beach Access and Parking Consistent with the 1992 Master Plan, the refuge would allow NPS to maintain 8.5 acres of land for parking at the recreational beach. In recognition of the vulnerability of the current parking, the refuge would develop and implement a site design plan for parking and access to a new beach location, approximately 1.5 miles north of the existing beach. The new recreational beach would offer accessible spaces near the beach, pedestrian and bicycle connections, and safe shelters for visitors. In addition, the refuge would identify and pursue alternative Chincoteague Island parking opportunities and institute a shuttle service with stowing capacity for beach cargo to supplement the beach parking.

Visitor Use and Experience Existing public uses would continue with some exceptions. All public access on the Service Road north of the new recreational beach parking would be restricted. A joint NPS and FWS Visitor Contact Station would be developed near the new recreational beach and the Beach Road causeway across Toms Cove would be demolished, thus restricting public access to Toms Hook. A vehicle turn-around area and launch point for non-motorized boats would be constructed at the new terminus of Beach Road. Assawoman Island would be completely closed to all forms of public use during the breeding season, consistent with the closure on Toms Hook. The refuge would eliminate recreational horseback riding. Swans Cove Bicycle Trail would be replaced by an alternative bicycle trail from Wildlife Loop north to the relocated recreational beach.

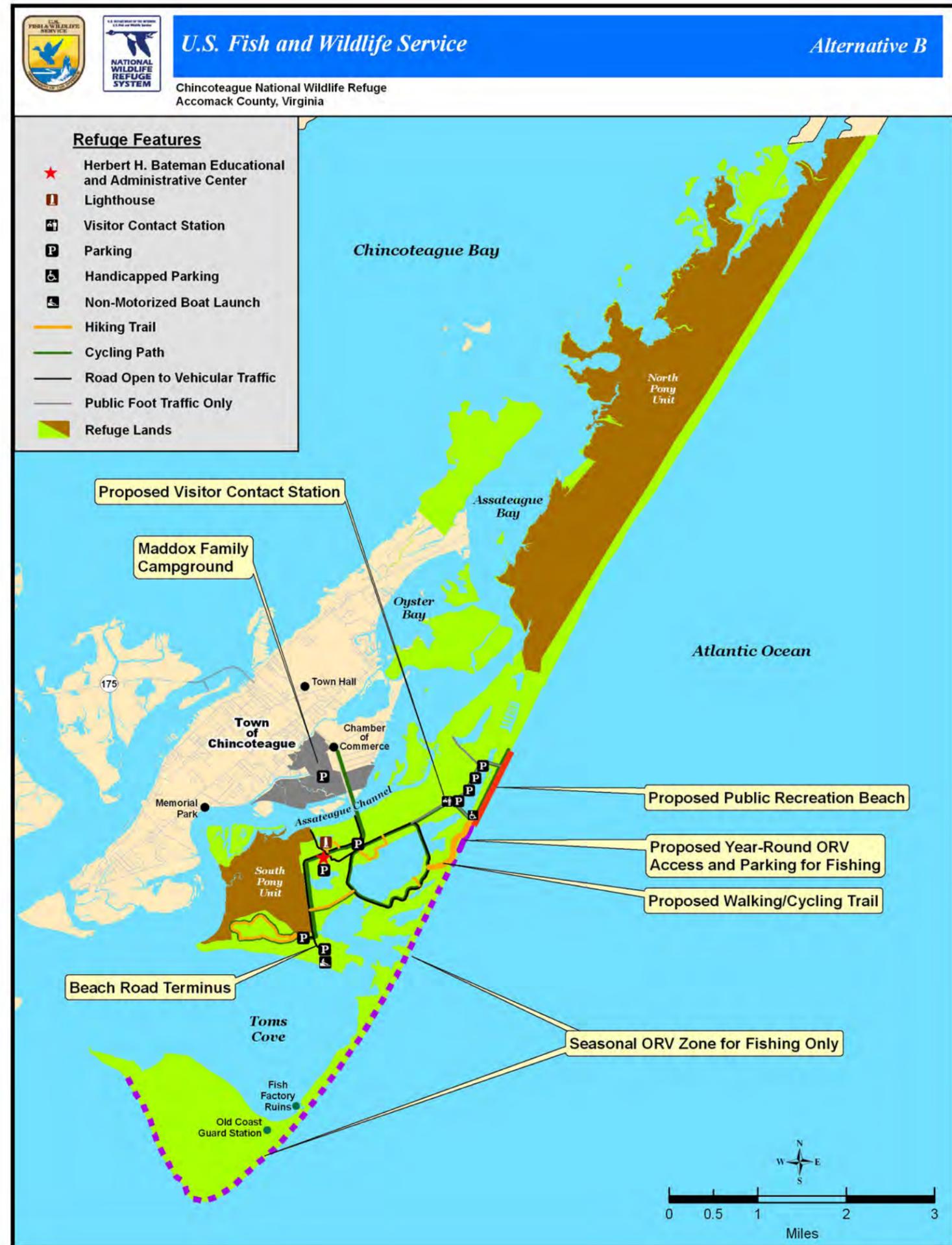
The refuge would maintain and where possible expand current hunting opportunities by including additional species, extending hours, and providing special events and opportunities for youth and women. The refuge would add mourning doves and light goose to the migratory bird hunting program and allow migratory bird hunting on Federal holidays. The refuge would also increase non-migrant Canada goose and light goose hunting opportunities in FWS wetland impoundments. The refuge would also add turkeys to the big game hunting program and pursue development of a trapping program for furbearers. The refuge would continue sika elk hunting and would conduct research to identify a desired population size. The refuge would continue to manage opportunities for recreational shellfish and crab harvest, but would phase out harvesting of horseshoe crabs within the intertidal zone. The refuge would request that the Commonwealth of Virginia restrict shellfish leases within identified areas.

ORV use would be permitted for fishing only. The ORV zone would be expanded from C dike to Toms Cove from approximately September 1 to March 14. For the rest of the time, the ORV zone would be closed to all public access. A new ORV beach parking area south of C dike would be accessible year-round for fishing.

The refuge would implement a pony management plan that meets multiple objectives: visitor viewing, habitat management, and pony health. The refuge would provide north and south units as long as the land base allows for safe pony management.

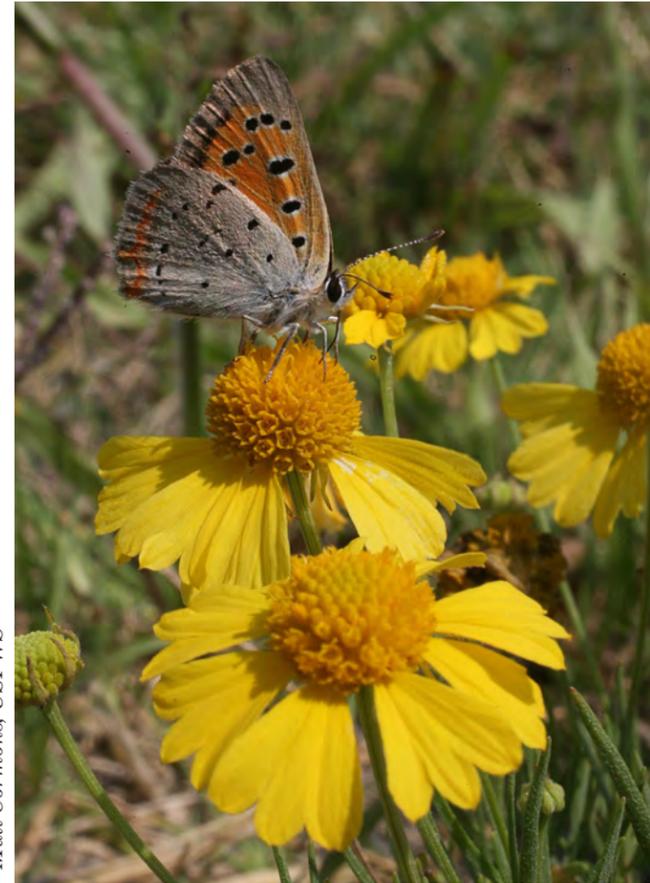
Partnerships The refuge, in conjunction with NPS, would work with the states of Maryland and Virginia to establish a marine sanctuary that ranges from the Atlantic Ocean into Chincoteague Bay. The refuge would pursue partnerships to enhance environmental education and interpretation on the Delmarva Peninsula.

Cultural Resource Management With partners, the refuge would restore the light keeper's house and historic landscaping at Assateague Lighthouse and develop new cultural resource and interpretation amenities, including a virtual tour of the lighthouse. The refuge would allow access to the cemetery near Beach Road and develop tours and controlled access opportunities for Assateague Village. Within Wallops Island National Wildlife Refuge, the refuge would work with NASA to develop a boardwalk and kiosk from the NASA Visitor Center.



Alternative C

Alternative C would utilize a habitat management strategy in which management actions and strategies would allow for natural succession and coastal processes to take place on the refuge with little intervention. Refuge administration of programs would be minimized primarily through reduction of activities, partnership, and use of volunteer staff.



Matt Cormons, USFWS

Copper butterfly on Sneezeweed

Natural Resource Management Under this alternative, the refuge would protect and maintain all lands it administers, primarily focusing on the needs of threatened and endangered species, with additional emphasis on the needs of migratory birds and resident wildlife. Existing management actions would continue as long as infrastructure (dikes, pumps, water control structures, etc) function as intended. Mandated monitoring of Federal trust species would continue, but other wildlife and habitat management actions would largely be performed on an incidental basis. Habitats would not be actively managed. The refuge would allow natural disturbances to occur. The refuge would continue to protect and enhance the wilderness character of the proposed area and there would be no change in the size or location of the proposed 1,300-acre wilderness area within the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge.

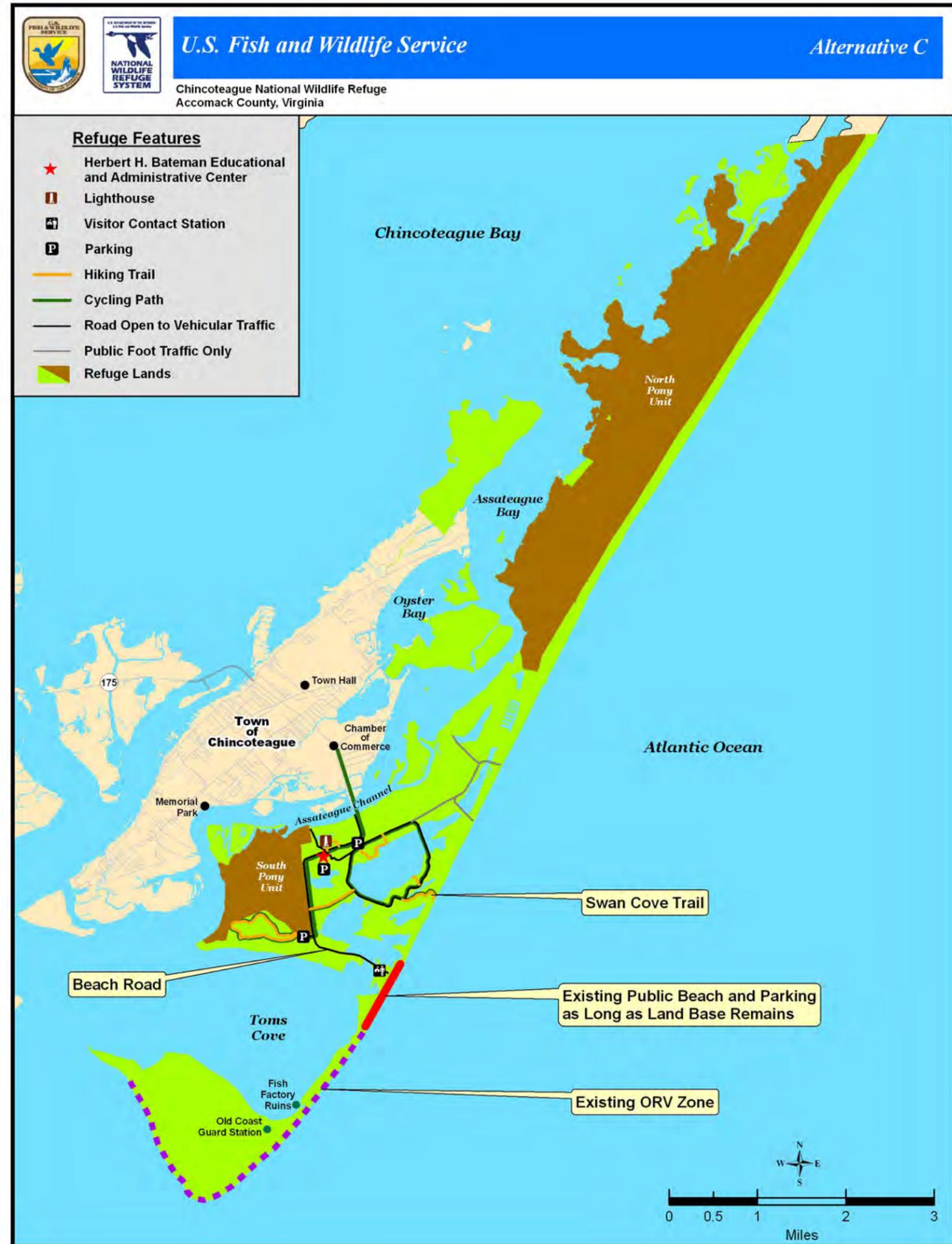
Beach Access and Parking Consistent with the 1992 Master Plan, the refuge would allow NPS to maintain 8.5 acres for parking at the recreational beach as long as the land base exists. As natural forces reduce the land base capable of supporting the current parking, feasible repairs would be made but the number of spaces would be reduced accordingly. Beach users would be able to use all parking available on the refuge but no new parking would be pursued by the refuge on Assateague or Chincoteague Islands. The refuge would not develop a shuttle system.

Visitor Use and Experience Existing public uses would continue with some exceptions. The NPS Toms Cove Visitor Center would only be maintained as long as the land base allows. ORV management would continue as is. The refuge would maintain current hunting opportunities, but with limited or no refuge check station and a streamlined permitting process. Refuge staff would increase non-migrant Canada goose and light goose hunting opportunities in FWS wetland impoundments and institute a Canada goose harassment program. The refuge would continue to manage opportunities for recreational shellfish and crab harvest.

The refuge would implement a pony management plan that meets multiple objectives: visitor viewing, habitat management, and pony health. The refuge would provide north and south units as long as the land base allows for safe pony management.

Partnerships The refuge would shift to teacher and partner-led environmental education and interpretation activities.

Cultural Resource Management The refuge would complete restoration of Assateague Lighthouse and maintain current access to cultural resources as resources allow.



Alternative D

Alternative D would direct staffing and funding towards maximizing habitat and wildlife management strategies. As a result of prioritizing habitat and wildlife management, public use activities and access may be reduced.

Natural Resource Management Under this alternative, the refuge would protect and maintain all lands it administers, primarily focusing on the needs of threatened and endangered species, with additional emphasis on the needs of migratory birds and resident wildlife. The refuge would continue to preserve approximately 2,650 acres of wetland impoundments, but make adjustments in accordance with a new impoundment management plan that takes into account various factors including the habitat needs of black ducks and monarch butterflies, climate change and natural coastal processes, and new beach access and parking. The refuge would work with partners to protect comparable freshwater habitat on the Delmarva Peninsula. Natural coastal processes would continue to be the primary force that shapes habitat on the southern barrier islands.

Beach Access and Parking The refuge would work with NPS to relocate the recreational beach, as indicated in Alternative B. The capacity of the parking area would be less than that of Alternative B. The refuge would pursue alternative Chincoteague Island parking opportunities and a shuttle service with stowing capacity for beach cargo to supplement the beach parking.

Visitor Use and Experience Existing public uses would continue but with several exceptions. All public access on the Service Road north of the new recreational beach parking would be restricted and public access to the beach south of the new recreational beach would be restricted from March 15 to August 31. A joint NPS and FWS Visitor Contact Station would be developed near the new recreational beach. The Beach Road causeway across Toms Cove would be demolished, thus restricting public access to Toms Hook. Assawoman Island would completely close to all forms of public use during the breeding season, consistent with the closure on Toms Hook. The refuge would eliminate recreational horseback riding. The refuge would phase out all ORV use over time. The refuge would prohibit smoking on the recreational beach. These actions are intended to reduce adverse impacts on wildlife.

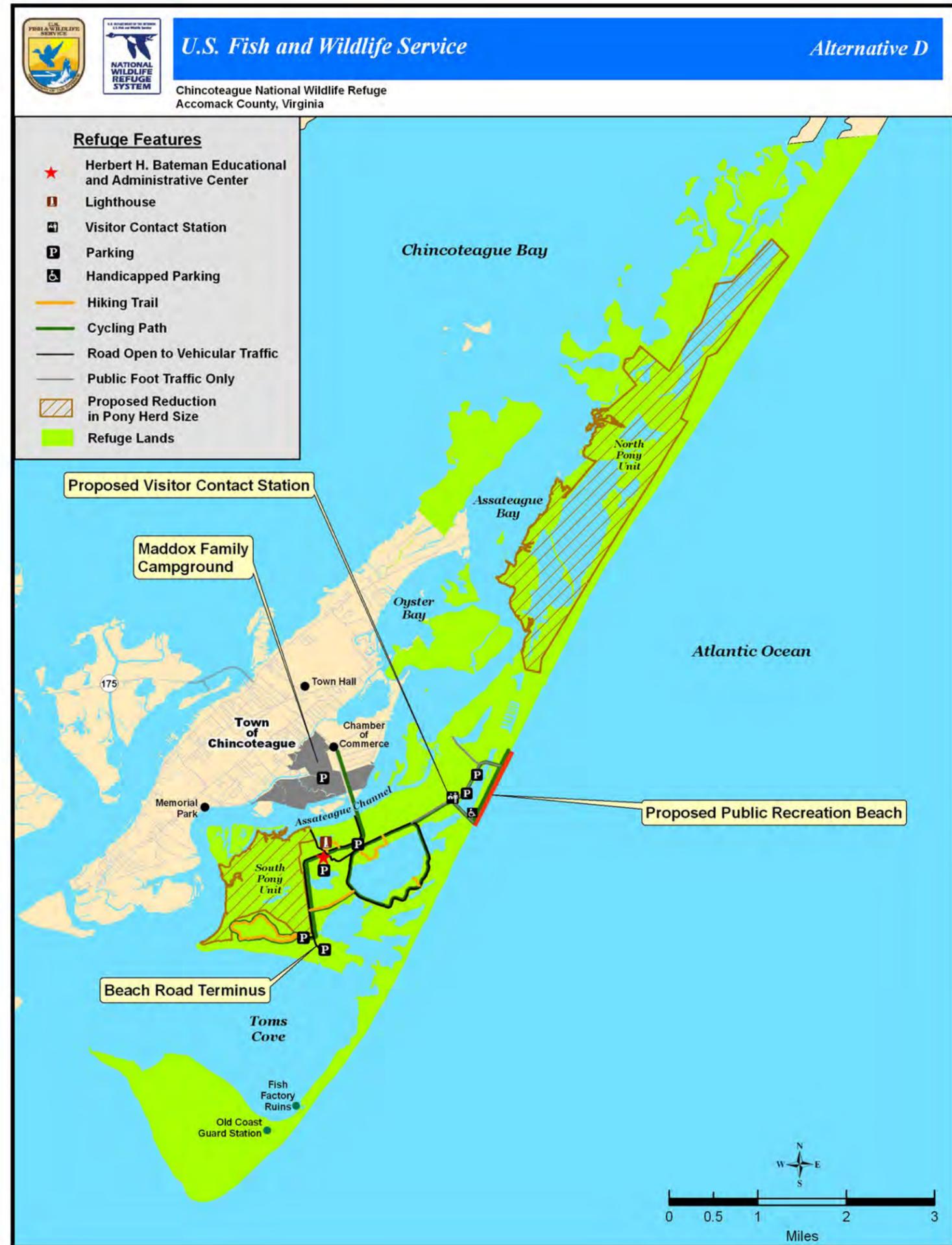
The refuge would maintain recreational hunting opportunities with a focus on local, regional, and state wildlife priorities like sika elk, light goose, and non-migrant Canada goose. The refuge would work to eliminate the sika elk population through continued recreational hunt and professional contracts within five years. The refuge would expand non-migrant Canada goose and light goose hunting opportunities to other refuge properties where feasible and work to reduce the populations. The refuge would continue to manage opportunities for recreational shellfish and crab harvest, but would phase out harvesting of horseshoe crabs within the intertidal zone. The refuge would request that the Commonwealth of Virginia restrict shellfish leases within identified areas.

The refuge would limit the number of ponies allowed to graze on the refuge within 15 years to maximize habitat health and biodiversity. The refuge would reduce the size of the north unit and maintain a minimal viewable herd in the south unit as long as the land base allows. Once the south unit is no longer feasible, the refuge would develop a new small viewing area near the relocated recreational beach.

Partnerships The refuge, in conjunction with NPS, would work with Maryland and Virginia to establish a marine sanctuary that ranges from the Atlantic Ocean into Chincoteague Bay. The refuge would pursue and enhance off-refuge environmental education and interpretation partnerships with an emphasis on wildlife and habitat issues. The refuge would also work with partners to manage exotic, invasive, and nuisance species outside of refuge lands.

Cultural Resource Management The refuge would complete restoration of Assateague Lighthouse and maintain current access to cultural resources.

Wilderness The refuge would continue to protect and enhance the wilderness character of the proposed area through actions to eliminate incompatible features and activities. The refuge would pursue wilderness designation for the proposed 1,300-acre wilderness area and for Toms Cove and Assawoman Island within the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge.



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