

# South Texas Refuge Complex



# community

**The most southern tip of Texas,** the lower Rio Grande Valley (Valley), is considered one of the fastest growing regions in the nation and includes 1.3 million residents on this side of the U.S.-Mexico border. While McAllen is the largest city in the region, there are more 35 communities within the four-county area, all of which are within 7-10 miles of refuge lands. A significant portion of the population lives in 'colonias,' typical border communities that are not recognized as a municipality and lack basic services.

More than 90% of the Valley's population is identified as Hispanic and approximately 80% speak Spanish in the home. In communities closest to the refuge, Hispanics comprise 97-99% of the population. Median household income is \$32,000 and 35% of residents live at or below the federal poverty line; median household income for communities nearest the refuge is under \$25,000. Approximately 60% of residents graduated from high school or higher.

## project summary:

This proposal taps into cultural strengths and addresses a regional crisis that impacts the Service's ability to fulfill its mission – extreme poverty. The area is not yet a 'multi-generational, college-going' culture and students must often work at least part time. Through this program, we will support and facilitate community efforts to identify, recognize, and care for nature in their communities and, by extension, a nearby national wildlife refuge. The proposal will enhance education in one of the nation's poorest school districts and create employment opportunities for youth. Through a diversity of educational, business, and cultural programs, we will create and protect habitat in schools yards, city pocket parks, and vacant lots, as well as create urban wildlife corridors that connect to refuge lands. This proposal provides an urban gateway to refuge lands for a region with restricted access due to poverty and/or limited transportation options.

**Service lands are within 7-10 miles of 35 communities and a U.S. population of 1.3 million.**

## play

- Create a low-cost, weekend trolley that departs from a neighboring community to provide access to local residents with limited transportation options.
- Establish a bike-share program between refuge lands and a centralized community.
- Create a bike route that provides local residents a centralized location to access refuge lands.
- Create urban pocket parks and green space that reflect the needs of a neighborhood.
- Provide bilingual, culturally appropriate, nature-related activities both on and off refuge lands.

## work

- Provide year-round employment for 12-20 local students through the South Texas Youth Conservation Corps.
- Work with 18 neighborhood associations to hire local residents to grow native seedlings for habitat restoration projects.

## learn

- Work with 45 schools, at least 33,000 students, to develop schoolyard habitats.
- Engage students of all ages, parents, teachers, adult learning programs, and programs through educational tours and community programs developed for the public.

## serve

- Compensate urban residents to grow native seedlings for habitat restoration projects.
- Restore habitat in urban areas and create connectivity to refuge lands.
- Partner with 8 neighborhood associations in McAllen, TX.

Through “mini-grants,” communities will create public green space that reflects their neighborhoods and connects to refuge lands, vacant lots, and underutilized urban areas.

# Urban National Wildlife Refuges

## INTRODUCTION

The future success of conservation lies ultimately in our ability to inspire Americans to connect with the outdoors and nature, and to become stewards of the environment. With over 80% of Americans living in urban areas, spending less time outdoors, and becoming more ethnically and racially diverse, our challenge is to become relevant in their daily lives. Without public awareness and support, our conservation mission will not succeed.

*Conserving the Future: Wildlife Refuges and the Next Generation* challenges us to enhance the relevance of the National Wildlife Refuge System (System) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) to this rapidly changing America. Building a connected conservation constituency requires connecting with the ever-growing urban population in order to ensure that Americans care about conservation. To this end, the *Conserving the Future* document contains a specific recommendation:

## RECOMMENDATION 13:

***“Create an urban refuge initiative that defines excellence in our existing urban refuges, establishes the framework for creating new urban refuge partnerships and implements a refuge presence in 10 demographically and geographically varied cities across America by 2015.”***

Urban areas present a strategic opportunity to reach new audiences that are currently not visiting nor aware of the Service. Refuges that are in the heart of where the people are located provide the best opportunity to engage new audiences, whether through an urban refuge or an urban wildlife refuge partnership. Building this constituency ultimately benefits the entire System and the broader conservation community by nurturing new supporters who care.

The goal of the Urban Wildlife Refuge Program is to engage surrounding urban communities in wildlife conservation as partners. Excellence may be achieved through eight standards that serve as a framework for collaboration between the Service and urban communities on and off Service lands:

- 1. Know and Relate to the Community**
- 2. Connect Urban People with Nature via Stepping Stones of Engagement**
- 3. Build Partnerships**
- 4. Be a Community Asset**
- 5. Ensure Adequate Long-Term Resources**
- 6. Provide Equitable Access**
- 7. Ensure Visitors Feel Safe and Welcome**
- 8. Model Sustainability**

In order to demonstrate the potential of urban refuges to reach new audiences in their communities, the Service requested innovative proposals from each region for one urban refuge to receive \$1 million in base funding in FY14. The Service received strong proposals from our 101 existing urban refuges that are within 25 miles of a population of 250,000 or more. **San Diego National Wildlife Refuge Complex (NWRC)** received the funding as announced in August 2014.

The approach to excellence for urban national wildlife refuges must be as flexible and unique as the communities the refuges serve. The Service must strive to understand both human and natural environments in order to understand the expectations of the urban community. The Service must strive to provide programs and leadership on conservation initiatives that are relevant to their communities. Service staff, volunteers, and partners must engage urban communities to develop meaningful connections to wildlife that last a lifetime. This starts by building awareness, fostering deeper understanding, and growing participation through programs that bring more people from the urban world into the larger conservation community.

Urban refuges are great places to build a broader conservation constituency, but the challenge is far too big for any one agency or organization to tackle alone. The Urban Wildlife Refuge Program recognizes the importance of embracing traditional and new collaborations. Various entities whose interests may be conservation, education, human health, or other subjects ultimately can help achieve conservation of wildlife, plants, and their habitats that are essential to maintaining a healthy planet for people.