

Understanding Urban Audiences

Community Workshop Results for Minnesota Valley NWR

Background

In the summer of 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) began creating an updated vision for the future of the National Wildlife Refuge System. More than 100 people from across the Service worked together to craft *Conserving the Future: Wildlife Refuges and the Next Generation*.¹ This document lays out an ambitious plan for the next decade that addresses opportunities and challenges in the face of a changing America and conservation landscape.

To implement the new vision, nine teams consisting of Service employees were created, one of which was the Urban Wildlife Refuge Initiative team. The Initiative team aims to increase the Service's relevancy to urban citizens and contribute to the vision's goal of diversifying and expanding the Service's conservation constituency over the next decade. It grew out of the recognition that America's increasing population is more diverse and increasingly living in urban areas. Objectives set by the Initiative team include establishing measures that help to define and achieve excellence, creating a framework for developing new urban partnerships, and establishing a refuge presence in ten demographically and geographically varied cities in the U.S.

An underlying need for the Initiative is a better understanding of factors that facilitate or inhibit connecting urban audiences with wildlife and nature. To address this need, the Service's Human Dimensions Branch collaborated with U.S. Geological Survey and North Carolina State University on a research project aimed at understanding urban audiences, identifying barriers to engagement in wildlife-dependent recreation, and identifying strategies that the Service can implement to overcome these barriers.

This multiple-method research project includes: (1) a review and synthesis of the current literature to better understand what is known about barriers, motivations, and proven successful strategies of urban engagement in outdoor recreation; (2) interviews with refuge staff and partner organization representatives in urban areas to understand current refuge visitation in these settings, identify programs and strategies that have been successful, and identify institutional factors that promote or impede the ability to connect with urban audiences; and (3) community workshops to hear from community representatives about the needs and motivations for outdoor recreation participation, perceptions of barriers that exist, and suggested strategies to better connect and engage diverse urban residents with wildlife.

¹<http://americaswildlife.org/vision/>

Site Selection

Community workshops were conducted at seven refuges (see Table 1) selected through a multi-stage process. First, Service GIS specialists compiled a list of urban areas within a 25-mile radius of a National Wildlife Refuge, using the Census Bureau's definition of an urban area. The 25-mile radius was selected as the distance because it was the average distance traveled by local refuge visitors who participated in the 2010/2011 National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Survey.² A list of 301 refuges was generated and further refined by omitting refuges that met the following criteria:

- Refuges in U.S. territories (e.g., Puerto Rico)
- Refuges with populations less than 250,000 within 25 miles (based on 2010 U.S. Census data)
- Refuges with no public access
- Refuges whose 2012 annual visitation was less than 22,000

Seventy-one refuges were identified and further refined by Service employees with extensive knowledge about refuges. Through this process, some refuges were removed based on various access or physical attribute restraints. The research team then selected twelve refuges in geographically and culturally diverse urban areas; this list was modified and narrowed down to six locations based on input from key contacts from regions, the Urban Initiative team, and others in the Service. Potomac River NWR was later added to the project based on the utility of the research for their needs and available refuge funds.

Table 1. National Wildlife Refuge locations for community workshops

| Refuge | Urban Area(s) within 25 miles * | Population within 25 miles * | Visitors 2013 ** |
|-----------------------------------|--|---------------------------------|---------------------|
| Tualatin River NWR | Portland, OR-WA | 1,727,100 | 131,709 |
| Don Edwards San Francisco Bay NWR | San Francisco-Oakland, CA San Jose, CA Concord, CA | 5,019,028 | 685,400 |
| Rocky Mountain Arsenal NWR | Denver-Aurora, CO | 2,277,371 | 180,000 |
| Minnesota Valley NWR | Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN-WI | 2,610,793 | 230,000 |
| John Heinz NWR at Tinicum | Philadelphia, PA-NJ-DE-MD | 3,949,328 | 140,000 |
| Potomac River NWR Complex | | | |
| Featherstone NWR | Washington, DC-VA-MD | 2,479,129 | 20*** |
| Mason Neck NWR | Washington, DC-VA-MD | 2,832,706 | 38,210 |
| Occoquan Bay NWR | Washington, DC-VA-MD | 2,774,276 | 38,210 |
| Arthur R Marshall Loxahatchee NWR | Miami, FL | 2,586,378 | 276,680 |

* Based on 2010 U.S. Census.

** Based on 2013 RAPP.

*** Featherstone NWR is currently only accessible by water, and has very low visitation as a result.

² <http://pubs.usgs.gov/ds/685/DS685.pdf>

Methods

For each refuge, a protocol for contacting and inviting potential participants was followed. With assistance from refuge managers and staff, people with extensive ties to the local residents and communities of interest were identified. Individuals or organizations were contacted by the researchers to participate in a workshop at the refuge. See Community Workshop Findings, below, for more refuge-specific methods.

The research team for each workshop typically consisted of a discussion facilitator and two note takers. Notes were recorded on flipcharts that participants could view throughout the discussion to ensure that key points were captured accurately. Participants had multiple opportunities to review, clarify, and fill-in any information they felt might be missing. A second note taker recorded near verbatim notes on a laptop, identifying individual speakers with an anonymous coding system. Notes were edited for clarity immediately following the workshop. No audio or visual recording was used.

Both workshops lasted approximately two hours. All participation was voluntary; no money or other incentives were provided to the participants. To begin each session, participants were welcomed by the facilitator and refuge staff (if available), and then asked to introduce themselves and indicate the organization or community they represent. If present, the refuge staff was excused before the discussion began. Then, the facilitator reviewed the goal and guidelines for the session and began the discussion, which was guided by the following questions:

- Speaking on behalf of local community residents, what comes to mind when they hear outdoor recreation?
- What motivates people in this community to participate in outdoor recreation?
- What barriers prevent greater access or enjoyment of outdoor recreation opportunities by people in this community?
- What can be done to promote greater participation in outdoor recreation and use of the refuge by people in your community?

Following the discussion on barriers to outdoor recreation opportunities, participants were asked to indicate the three barriers they perceive as the greatest factors in limiting participation in outdoor recreation for nearby communities by marking them on the flip-chart notes. Participants were asked to do this again for strategies that could encourage greater engagement with the refuge. At the conclusion of the discussion, refuge representatives were invited to speak with the workshop participants and answer any specific questions about the refuge. The primary role of the refuge staff at this point in the discussion was to listen to the workshop participants, and be available to answer any specific questions the facilitator may not have been able to answer.

Analysis and Reporting

All notes from the workshop were compiled and organized by the guiding questions. Each set of notes was analyzed to identify themes representing workshop participants' comments. Themes for each question are summarized below, and, where appropriate, specific examples are provided from the notes. While these should not be considered verbatim quotations, as no recording devices were used, they adhere to the meaning and context of the speaker's original statements.

This report captures workshop findings for an individual refuge. Findings for individual refuges were prepared independently of one another by the workshop leaders, therefore variations in presentation may exist across the seven reports. Results for this refuge will be combined with results from workshops held at the other 6 refuges in a final report. A final report will include major themes and patterns that emerged from the combined data, as well as management and communication implications that could be drawn from the themes and patterns. Final results will be instrumental in the design of future strategies for communicating with diverse urban audiences, and for providing tools and resources that Service staff and affiliates can use to better engage all of America.



Youth Fishing Day at Minnesota Valley NWR. Credit: Joanna Gilkeson/USFWS

Community Workshop Findings for Minnesota Valley NWR

Workshops were conducted with community representatives at Minnesota Valley NWR in November 2013 and April 2014. To recruit participants for these workshops, contacts were identified by the refuge staff and research team, and then a snowball technique was used; those identified were asked to recommend other individuals and organizations to participate. These individuals were then contacted. Fifty-two people were contacted and nineteen participated, eleven in November 2013 and eight in April 2014.

Summary of Key Themes

A summary of the workshop discussions is presented below. The summary is organized around the four guiding questions discussed during the workshop.

1. Speaking on behalf of your local community residents, what comes to mind when they hear outdoor recreation?

Four broad themes emerged from the discussion, which reflect types of outdoor activities, places for recreation, and kinds of recreation experiences.

Sports: Sports such as basketball, soccer, football and softball were mentioned as forms of common outdoor recreation in urban areas.

Outdoors: The discussion also focused on the broader outdoor environment. Phrases such as being in the sunshine, connecting with nature, and spending time in parks were all mentioned. It was also mentioned that the outdoors is a common resource that belongs to all, and many people in the area enjoy getting outdoors in spring and summer after a long, cold winter.

Discovery: Another major focus of discussion was discovering and exploring within outdoor recreation and how being in the outdoors opens up a whole new world for the people of the community. Several people mentioned the excitement of urban youth when they first experience a natural setting, such as the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in Northern Minnesota, or when they discover something new in the outdoors.

Healthy lifestyle: Recreation activities such as fitness walking, biking, swimming, and running to improve health were identified as a part of outdoor recreation. In addition, participants mentioned anything that promotes physical health as well as spiritual well-being and peace were connected to outdoor recreation.

2. What motivates people in this community to participate in outdoor recreation?

Responses to this question were grouped into the following eight themes:

Escape: Outdoor recreation and the refuge provide opportunities for getting away from everyday city life, experiencing peace and quiet, and slowing down. Comments included:

“The benefits are a sense of peace and being away from the hustle and bustle, crime, and sirens.”

“The really unique thing about the refuge is it’s a place to escape that feels like 100 miles away from the city. You can escape and get away from it all. It is a vast area, a real wilderness, and it’s only steps from the Mall of America.”

Wildlife: Outdoor recreation offers opportunities to see wildlife and the excitement of seeing animals. Natural settings provide a convenient outlet to learn about wildlife.

“If you live right smack in the middle of the city you can come to the refuge and see wildlife.”

“Wildlife education is important to families.”

Engaging children: Outdoor recreation provides opportunities for children. Children are given an outlet to learn about the environment and take “managed risks.” It was also mentioned that children can be more engaged in time-intensive activities in the outdoors rather than inside a community center or school. Comments included:

“Parents are motivated to take kids to instill values.”

“Being outside you can engage your kids.”

“Seeing kids up on the [wildlife viewing] platform looking out and seeing bald eagles – it’s a very powerful experience. Kids get to witness the wonder of nature.”

Activities: Several participants mentioned that participation in outdoor recreation allows people to engage in their hobbies (e.g., jogging, photography, or birding).

Fitness and health: The appeal of health and well-being from the outdoors was another motivator. The benefits of getting exercise in the fresh air were mentioned.

Cultural experiences: Many people mentioned that different cultural experiences motivated involvement in outdoor recreation. Comments included:

“When connecting Native American kids to the outdoors they gain a sense of self but also a cultural aspect – this happens for other kids as well. They gain a strong sense of respect for the tiny urban plot of woods.”

“Folks from different parts of the world have a place to hang out and connect to the community.”

“A lot of what we experience with diverse immigrant groups, especially in Minnesota, is the need to connect to the community. The emergence of a city park is about having a spot for everyone to hang out.”

Family and social interaction: Family bonding and social bonding was another motivational factor. Time spent in the outdoors was mentioned as a means to help one revert back to childhood and share memories across generations with family members. Also, kids take the time in the outdoors to have fun and be social with one another.

Emotional responses: The discussions mentioned how being in the outdoors leads to a range of emotional experiences. Key emotions were excitement, fear, nostalgia, surprise, and also a range of stimuli. The refuge and the outdoors give a sense of adventure, exploration, and unpredictability.

3. What barriers prevent greater access or enjoyment of outdoor recreation opportunities by people in this community?

The major themes that emerged as barriers are summarized below.

Fear and anxiety: There were several mentions of fear and anxiety associated with being outdoors. Some fears were associated with wildlife not found in the area. Others reflected anxiety about things that could be encountered in outdoor settings. Comments included:

“Kids are afraid of being outside. They’re afraid of tigers, bears, and walking at night.”

“Once we get out into a wildlife area we see resistance from the kids – mosquitos, bats, just the unknown scares them.”

“Fear also belongs to the parents because lynching happened in the woods.”

This last comment from an African American participant reflects concerns that might limit participation in recreation in natural areas because of the association with violent hate crimes that were committed in those settings in the past.

Lack of awareness and advertising: Participants indicated that people are unaware of the recreational opportunities provided by the refuge. Some mentioned that even long term residents may not be aware of the refuge’s existence. In addition, recent immigrants to the area might not realize they can use the land. A lack of advertising also plays into the lack of awareness. The lack of quality advertising was mentioned in addition to just the lack of advertising. Comments included:

“There is a lack of awareness. There are new African communities in the area. Even people who have been here for years don’t know it is there. Marketing and advertising is needed.”

“You might see a story about the refuge here or there, but there is not a concentrated effort. Market the refuge and let the community know that this resource is here and it is theirs.”

“Advertising and marketing or more programs to bring kids to the refuge are needed. Then there would be tons of people here.”

Cultural barriers: Several times throughout the workshop participants mentioned cultural barriers and even “cultural fear” that some might experience in the outdoors or that is associated with particular activities. Culturally and religiously appropriate behavior and dress for Muslim women was given as an example for swimming. Also, the lack of

diversity among people recreating at specific sites, like the refuge, may be a barrier for minorities because it can make them feel as though they don't belong. Language barriers could also prevent visitors from understanding the presence of the refuge or the rules on the refuge. Comments included:

"There are a lot of cultural barriers, particular with swimming. New immigrant populations don't have a good way to get to try it."

"Muslim women for cultural reasons need to be secluded when swimming."

Weather: A few of the participants mentioned the fact that weather in the area can be a barrier for participating in outdoor recreation. The extreme winter weather in the region can keep people from getting outside. Some residents will not tolerate the discomfort of the extreme weather and would rather stay indoors.

Organizational barriers: Respondents mentioned that the lack of particular facilities was a barrier to enjoying the refuge. The lack of campsites was specifically mentioned and the lack of structures and signs as well. The mission of the Refuge System was also mentioned as an organizational barrier because the mission puts wildlife and preservation before the enjoyment of visitors. Comments included:

"The mission of the refuge is different than the mission of a state park. The mission of the refuge is wildlife, but the state park mission is recreation."

"People don't know the rules and what's nearby. There aren't interpretive signs in different languages."

Lack of connection to nature: Some comments indicated a general disconnect with the natural world that may be present due to cultural values and where you grew up. Some cultures are more connected than others. The presence of fear due to lack of connection to nature was again mentioned for this theme. Comments included:

"Our organization held a hike at night and one mother said there was no way she was going out without a flashlight."

Restrictions: Participants indicated that restrictions or perceived restrictions on activities at refuges were a deterrent to potential visitors. Transportation restrictions for some people in the area also make it difficult to get to the refuge. Not being able to afford the proper clothes and equipment prevents some people from participating in outdoor recreation, as do physical and health restrictions.

"There are many things that wildlife refuges are not for...trying to define all that you can and can't do is kind of difficult."

"Transportation is a barrier even though there is a light rail. You need the resources to get people there."

"Instruction for some outdoor activities is needed and the equipment is needed as well."

“There are accessibility issues for those with disabilities. Can you get around with crutches or a wheelchair?”

4. What can be done to promote greater participation in outdoor recreation and use of the refuge by people in your community?

Four themes were identified within the responses to this question.

Community partnerships and outreach: Workshop attendees emphasized that the refuge should do more to get out into the local community. Suggestions included working with faith-based organizations (e.g., Minnesota Council of Churches), non-profit organizations (e.g., YMCA, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts), and schools to increase visitation and awareness. Also, increasing awareness by providing greater outreach to low income communities and urban youth was heavily stressed in the workshop. Comments included:

“Build partnerships. What’s needed is the capacity to provide outreach and programs for the community and finding the funding sources to pull it together.”

“Promoting the refuge helps get people out here. Bringing the Boy Scouts or the Girls Scouts might mean they come back with their families.”

“Capitalize on Friend groups and volunteers. Ask them to go to schools and give talks.”

“The refuge staff is stretched so thin. If they want to further their mission, we can make it happen. We’re doing it. We can help the community see that out their backdoor they can connect with nature. It’s having the capacity to do it.”

Marketing strategies: Suggestions for marketing strategies included creating better signage, advertising on public education TV networks, redesigning the website, advertising through community education or school groups, and creating a marketing campaign to reach different communities. Comments included:

“Make the refuge known.”

“Revamp the websites and increase the promotional videos.”

“Advertise through community education, school groups, and other groups with kids and parents.”

“Promoting the refuge on the community radio station in several languages may be an excellent strategy. People tune in to hear programming in their language.”

Bring schools: Working with schools to engage children was a frequent context for many other strategies mentioned throughout the workshops. One area of particular emphasis was encouraging school groups to visit the refuge. Suggestions included designing programs that incorporates school curriculum science requirements, visiting schools to promote outreach programs, and increasing field trips to the refuge itself for a more direct, hands-on experience. Comments included:

“There is no representation from the public schools. The curriculum there is important.”

“It’s one thing to have the refuge go to the school, but it’s different to bring the kids to the refuge and have them actually experience it.”

Facility resources: Suggestions included increasing transportation to the refuge, providing more campsites, and creating more access points to the refuge. The workshop participants also mentioned offering programs like first aid classes to expose program leaders to the refuge, who might then expose their participants to the refuge.

Comments included:

“The refuge could offer a wilderness first aid class that exposes program leaders to this place and expand the pool of people working with youth and families that utilize the refuge.”

“Maybe invite artists out to provide a place for different fields of professionals to come and experience the refuge.”

“It would help if there were more access points to the refuge. Plenty of Bloomington residents never come here. If there were more access points available, the refuge would get more use.”

Identifying Top Barriers and Strategies

During the workshop, participants were asked to identify the three most important barriers and the three most important strategies that the Service could implement to reduce those barriers when considering the best way to engage local communities in outdoor recreation.

Collectively, the three largest barriers were identified as:

- 1) lack of awareness of the refuge,
- 2) financial barriers, and
- 3) cultural barriers.

The three strategies for engagement that were most heavily emphasized were:

- 1) create a marketing campaign that reaches out to many different communities,
- 2) increase outreach through community education and school groups, and
- 3) increase outreach for low income residents and urban youth.

Conclusion: Addressing Barriers at Minnesota Valley NWR

Participants in the community workshops suggested several strategies that refuge management could consider to engage urban audiences and address barriers to participation in outdoor recreation. One was to create a marketing campaign that brings awareness to many different communities. This requires knowledge of the wide range of platforms different communities use to get local news and information. For example, non-English speaking immigrants that are new to the area might not tune in to local television stations, and only by advertising on

platforms relevant to those communities will awareness increase. The utilization of the 4 P's – product, place, price, and promotion – was suggested to increase awareness when designing an efficient market campaign.

Elementary and high school students are one of the most important groups to reach according to workshop participants. Partnering with school systems to provide guided on-site programs (i.e., at the refuge) that meet education standards was a highly suggested strategy. Other related suggestions included targeting advertising to teachers to make them aware of field trip opportunities, especially those teachers responsible for science and ecology courses, and providing informational materials about the refuge to students to take home to parents.

Finally, an important part of engaging urban audiences is going into urban communities. The “go and grab” approach was specifically mentioned. This involves going to neighborhoods where kids are and recruiting them to participate in outdoor programs. To promote awareness of outdoor opportunities, wildlife programs could also be held at special events in surrounding communities and at programs sponsored by partner organizations. Partnering with local organizations, such as faith-based organizations, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, YMCAs, Kiwanis, and local government agencies, the refuge staff can utilize existing social networks, cultural institutions, and funding sources to implement these strategies. Partnerships would be particularly important for reducing financial barriers related to transportation and in paying for equipment or other associated fees.

Overall, participants indicated that there were many ways to address the barriers that exist for local urban residents, and they were interested in opportunities to engage with Minnesota Valley NWR to overcome these barriers.