May 12, 2014

Understanding Urban Audiences
Community Workshop Results for Potomac River NWRC

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.

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[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 Complex 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 NWRC			
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.

Fourth graders on a digital scavenger hunt at Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck NWR.
Credit: Barrett Elementary School, Arlington, VA.

Community Workshop Findings for Potomac River NWRC

Workshops were conducted with community representatives at Potomac River NWRC in 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. Thirty-one people were contacted and ten attended the focus groups.

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?**

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

    Sports: Sports such as soccer and lacrosse were mentioned as forms of common outdoor recreation in urban areas. Comments included:

    "Still very defined by children's activities – ball fields."

    "For a lot of people in this area it's sports."

    Outdoors: The discussion also mentioned the broader outdoor environment. Phrases such as being in the open space, connecting with nature, and spending time in parks were all mentioned. Trails were mentioned as places that provide a peaceful connection to nature. Taking the elderly, children, or even dogs outside were all mentioned.

    Escape: Another major focus of discussion was opportunity for escaping and exploring within outdoor recreation. Being in the refuge allows people to get away from jobs and long commutes. Several people mentioned discovering natural areas and open space. Comments included:

    "People like to escape and have solitude. Get away from the 95 corridor."

    "Part of what needs to happen is the discovery of natural areas."

    "There has been a lot of work to connect segments of trail to provide more peaceful opportunity to be in nature."

    Activities: Several activities were mentioned associated with outdoor recreation included hunting, fishing, boating, kayaking, and picnicking. Fishing, boating, and kayaking were seen as common activities because of nearby opportunities (e.g., the Potomac River).

Healthy lifestyle: Recreation activities to improve health were identified as a part of outdoor recreation.

Conservation: There were several mentions of the outdoors being associated with preservation and conservation. Natural areas were viewed as settings to teach people about conservation and wildlife habitat protection. Comments included:

"We are hoping that a person that has an opportunity to interact with wildlife here and that will stick with them and it will reflect in their voting on conservation policies. Think about it in terms of environment education – they have moments through recreation and it makes a difference."

"The urban initiative is trying to build conservation constituency"

"People aren't just visiting and leaving with nothing, they are taking some knowledge away."

2. **What motivates people in this community to participate in outdoor recreation?**
    Responses to this question were grouped into the following five theme categories.

Escape: Outdoor recreation and the refuge provide opportunities for getting away, providing stress relief and expression of spirituality. Outdoor recreation is particularly helpful in relieving stress for people who work stressful jobs. Similar responses were given in the previous question about how people in the community define outdoor recreation. Comments included:

"It's a way to feel like you don't live in Northern Virginia. It's an escape from the urban environment."

"It's a way for people to relieve stress."

"The outdoors has a spiritual quality. You can wash away stress and worries."

Convenience: Many of the participants stressed the importance of convenience and proximity to the home when participating in outdoor recreation. Easy access to a public boat ramp or a beach was also a motivator for participation in outdoor recreation. The convenience also allowed visitors to save money while spending leisure-time near home. Comments included:

"When you get off I-95, for people who live in Belmont Bay, you get off I-95 and pass the train station and then see the open space and then you are like, "ahhhhh." You need that."

"I was just thinking of a beach in Pennsylvania that we loved to take our kids there. It was just a little beach we went to every summer and the families were all over the place there."

> *"Going along with budget, a few years back there was a push in Prince William County to do staycations. More affordable options for fun activities."*

Family interaction: Family bonding was another reason given for why local residents participate in outdoor activities. Outdoor recreation allows families to be together, outside of taking the kids to a practice or a sports game. Participants felt that organized youth sports and electronic media (e.g., TV, videogames, etc.) do not offer opportunities for family recreation. Comments included:

> *"Families are looking for a place to do something together that doesn't involve TV or games."*

> *"It's different from parents watching kids play sports."*

> *"What's nice about the area is that there are neighborhood swimming pools and neighborhood parks for families to enjoy."*

Fitness and health: Similar to the responses to the question about what defines outdoor recreation, the appeal of health and well-being from being in the outdoors was another reason for engaging in outdoor activities. Comments included:

> *"Getting back to why people participate – health and exercise benefit."*

> *"Kids just sit and become obese. It's always a pleasure to see parents and kids running together."*

Connection to the outdoors: The broader outdoor environment was viewed as a reason for getting outdoors. Phrases such as being outside with nice weather and enjoying the water were mentioned by the participants. Comments included:

> *"The greatest motivator is the weather. Get out and enjoy the weather. Enjoy the flowers."*

> *"A number of parks have surfaced in the area built around pieces of water. This allows visitors to enjoy boating and fishing."*

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

The five major themes that emerged as barriers were:

Lack of awareness and advertising: The participants indicated that people are largely 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. The lack of advertisement could play a role in the lack of awareness.

Participants mentioned that there is not a central newspaper or newsletter to help advertise the refuge and what it offers. In addition, the lack of bilingual advertisements and other information is a barrier for people whose first language is not English. Comments included:

"Lack of information – folks don't know places exist."

"We have a weekly, but not daily newspaper. It gets disjointed when you don't have one place for the community to look for stuff."

"Need bilingual papers. There is a lot of the Spanish speaking population that we have to reach out to."

"Just knowing that it's there. Even when an adjacent property owner doesn't know it's there."

Access: One barrier that was mentioned multiple times was limited access. Natural areas in Northern Virginia have multiple landowners and public lands are not always connected and gaining access can be difficult. Geographically, the area has many creeks and other waterways that limit the ease of access to the refuge. Access by public transportation is also hard to come by. Participants mentioned the difficulty to get school field trips to the area due to the limited availability of school buses. Traffic and congestion were identified as barriers related to access. Time spent in traffic or at children's extracurricular took time away from visiting the refuge. Traffic increases the time it can take to travel to the refuge or any recreation requiring driving.

Comments included:

"A lot is geography. Rivers, creeks, and necks of land you have to be able to get around."

"The availability of the buses – having only so many and have only a certain about of time because the buses need to be back to pick the kids up from school."

"Not well known transportation to get here. You could take the Virginia Railway Express (VRE), but I don't think that's open on the weekends."

"Traffic. I think that's a major barrier – it's a destination and not interwoven into communities."

"People working in DC have long commutes, so time is limited. Even on the weekends because you spend so much time commuting during the week."

"In general kids are really committed on the weekend – soccer, lacrosse, etc. You work all week and then Saturday morning you go to the lacrosse game with the kids."

Organizational barriers: Respondents mentioned the lack of staff needed at the refuge and other organizational restrictions were barriers to enjoy the refuge. The lack of activities or facilities for families (e.g., picnic tables) was specifically mentioned because participants felt the refuge appealed more towards solitary visitors. Some felt that the refuge or USFWS is not as inviting as national parks or state parks. Also, the discussion brought up the perception that the uniforms of refuge staff could be easily confused with a police uniforms or even uniforms of UPS workers. The lack of signage in other languages was considered a barrier and the fact that the signage mainly focused on restrictions (e.g., no jogging, no fishing) was also considered a barrier. Overall, the participants expressed that the refuge was not inviting for recreationists in the community. Comments included:

"Government got a big hold early in this area and restricts access. There are areas where you take a boat across the river and have to stay a certain distance from shore."

"There are pavilions here but not picnic tables."

"The refuge is built for solitary rather than group experiences."

"There is an entrance fee. If you only have a $20 bill and there is no one here to make change that can be a barrier."

"Right now the Urban Refuge Initiative is serving a particular group of users (retired birders of a certain income level). This doesn't reflect the community around here at all."

"We have a convention and visitor's bureau that attempts to pull together activities for day visitors but it doesn't work as well as we would like."

Restrictions: As suggested above, workshop participants indicated that limitations or perceived limitations on allowed activities were a deterrent. The perceived limitation of time was considered a major barrier for people in the area. The lack of cell coverage to the area and feeling of isolation was another restriction that they felt kept people from enjoying the refuge. In addition, visitors feel restricted by the conservation needs of the area. Comments included:

"I think time is the biggest barrier. Working, commuting, and trying to get home through the traffic makes it hard."

"One time my phone was not working on a part of the refuge. Made me nervous to be out alone."

"Some families don't have time or financial resources to take kids to these areas that would really open their world."

"How do you balance public use with the mission of conserving wildlife?"

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Safety and health concerns: Several participants were concerned over the cleanliness of the water and the contaminants in the area. Since enjoying the water is a popular outdoor recreation activity in the area some concern was expressed about whether the water was safe for recreation. Also, safety concerns related to crime in the area was mentioned. The perception of the lack of safety and possible crime on the trails was mentioned as a potential barrier. Comments included:

"The refuge is surrounded by water but we don't have clean water for recreation – that is a shame."

"You rarely see other people on the trail. I use to have to volunteer at the gate because some people have safety concerns."

"It's not familiar. We see things on TV about people getting attacked in the woods."

"There is more concern about crime on the trail than being attacked by wildlife."

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

   Three themes were identified within the responses to this question:

   Outreach and community partnerships: Workshop participants emphasized that the refuge should do more to get out into the local community and partner with other organizations. Suggestions included working with the local parks and recreation departments, faith organizations, volunteer organizations (e.g., Kiwanis, veterans groups, and volunteer Prince William County), and local restaurants. One suggestion was to coordinate bus trips for senior centers in the area to allow the elderly to visit the refuge. Similarly, school field trips were seen as a way to increase attendance and awareness. It was recommended that one day events to attract locals could be planned, such as a nature photography workshop co-sponsored with a local arts program that could be hosted at the refuge. Participants felt that increasing community partnerships would promote awareness of the refuge. Comments included:

   "Partner with Occoquan Water League and others to promote regional identity of arts and open space."

   "Having someone who can go out to schools and talk to kids. Why is it important to have wildlife refuge on the edge of the Potomac? Spread the word. Hand out brochures for the kids to take home."

   "It would be nice to see an event at the senior center that would bring people to the refuge. Maybe senior field trips would increase community participation."

   "Refuge could make better use of partners since they have limited staffing. No big increase in funding coming, so partnerships could be beefed up."

Marketing strategies: Ideas that were offered included using the local visitor's bureau and public education TV networks to disseminate information about the refuge. Advertising through community education or school groups was also recommended. The importance of creating a marketing campaign to reach different ethnic communities was emphasized. Comments included:

"Social media to reach new younger demographics and help with visibility for the refuge. We talked a little about how the refuge is not part of the community identity. Incorporating even refuge pictures into outreach materials."

"On channel 23 you could even have a map up of the trails."

"Trying to reach a certain demographic, whether it's the elderly or a particular income level. Get the information out that is bilingual using the Hispanic radio station."

Facility resources: Suggestions included increasing transportation to the refuge, signage, visitor services and facilities, and access points to the refuge. Comments also reflected preference for more flexible staff times to make staff available to the visiting public. The expanded access that will occur in the near future with the opening of a new trail (Potomac Heritage Trail) was discussed. Overall, participants wanted to increase the connectivity of the refuge to the community. Comments included:

"One thing that I think would help is if there was greater staffing on the refuge especially geared towards visitor services. Be accessible and willing to interact. More interaction between staff and visitors for visitors to feel more welcome."

"More ways for people to find out how to get to the refuge without getting in traffic. No sign to tell you the refuge is here."

"More flexible staff times… Yes, currently the refuge is open while everyone is at work."

Addressing Barriers

During the workshop, participants were asked to identify the three most important barriers and the three most important things that the USFWS could do to reduce those barriers. Collectively, the three largest barriers were identified as:
(1) lack of information on the refuge,
(2) transportation time, and
(3) competition with other activities.

The three strategies for overcoming barriers that were most heavily emphasized were:
(1) advertising and promote the refuge
(2) increase public transportation, and
(3) increase the number of special events to increase awareness.

Responses from the community workshop suggest several strategies that refuge management could consider to engage urban audiences and address barriers to participation. Creating a marketing campaign that brings awareness to many different ethnic communities. This requires partnering with community organizations to promote the refuge. Also, suggestions were made that the refuge should create bilingual information to get the word out to different cultural communities. An example of advertising through the local television stations, visitor bureau, and local schools were all suggested as methods to promote the awareness of the refuge across different ethnic and cultural groups in the area.

Related to marketing and promotion, the Potomac River Refuge Complex lacks a central visitor's center to interact with visitors to provide interpretation or to orient visitors who may want to use the refuge. Future planning at the refuge should include ways to overcome this barrier to interacting with the public. Until a physical location can be provided, a web-based central location can be used for information on local recreation opportunities on the refuge properties.

Issues with transportation were probably the most revisited topic at the workshop. Problems related to transportation to reach the refuge appear to affect many visitors. Bus schedules could be coordinated to stop at the refuges to increase attendance. The region of Northern Virginia is known for heavy traffic and congestion so personal transportation was generally not a favored means of getting more people to the refuge among the workshop participants. Public transportation could be used by all residents but could be especially important in creating access for low-income families that have fewer transportation options. Partnerships with local community organizations could help share the cost of public transportation. For example, one suggestion was to create vouchers that seniors could use for taxis or other public transportation for refuge visits. Vouchers systems have been used to help seniors cover costs of getting to medical appointments. Continuing to work with schools to overcome challenges of using school buses will be important. Perhaps schools can dedicate a bus (or buses) for field trips.

Finally, another important part of engaging urban audiences is outreach by increasing the number of special events offered by the refuge. Events at the refuge could increase the awareness of the refuge to people that might not know about its existence. Similarly, going into communities presents opportunities for introducing the refuge to people who may not know it exists. Both strategies depend on partnering with local community organizations. The refuge should seek to inventory potential partners to determine what partners are available, what resources can be shared, and to what extent they can co-sponsor or collaborate on programs and events for the public.

By partnering with local organizations such as arts councils, faith organizations, scouts, YMCAs, and local government agencies, refuge staff can utilize existing information networks, cultural institutions and funding sources to plan and conduct events. Partnerships would be particularly important for reducing financial barriers related to transportation and in paying for equipment

and fees. Overall, the participants in the workshop stressed the need to increase the connection of the refuge to the community.