

# CAREing for Wildlife

**The National Wildlife Refuge System provides a unique combination of conservation and public access for Americans who want to hunt, fish, watch birds and other wildlife, take photographs, and enjoy the great outdoors.**

**It's critical that Congress adequately fund refuges to keep visitor centers open and enable Refuge System staff to provide environmental education for children and the public and properly manage, conserve, and restore fish, wildlife, and their habitats.**

BY PATRICK WOOLFORD AND SCOTT KOVAROVICS

THEODORE ROOSEVELT PROBABLY NEVER DREAMED that the National Refuge System he founded in 1903 would grow to more than 90 million acres by the 1990s. Throughout the century, refuges protected unparalleled habitat and offered exceptional opportunities to hunt, fish, watch wildlife, and simply take a walk in the woods. Yet this “system” was only loosely connected — it did not have a clear, overarching mission like the National Park System, and refuge budgets were small and relatively static. Hunting, angling, and conservation groups, including the Izaak Walton League and the National Wildlife Refuge Association, became increasingly concerned that without a clear mission established in law and backed by adequate funding, the refuge “system” would not be able to accomplish President Roosevelt’s broader goal of conserving our country’s natural resources and places that define the American landscape.

This common purpose led to creation of the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE) in 1995. The Izaak Walton League and the National Wildlife Refuge Association were founding members of CARE, which now includes 22 conservation, recreation, scientific, and wildlife organizations representing more than 14 million Americans. CARE coalition membership is among the most diverse in the country — from Defenders of Wildlife and The Wilderness Society to the National Rifle Association and Safari Club International.

While CARE actively advocated for Refuge System funding, organizations within CARE and others worked with Congress to more clearly define the mission and vision for National Wildlife Refuges and ensure that they would be managed as a coherent system of public lands. In 1997, this effort paid off with passage of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act. The Improvement Act provided a specific mission for the system focused on conserving, managing, and restoring fish, wildlife, plants, and habitat for current and future generations. Congress recognized that wildlife-dependent recreation — including hunting, fishing, and wildlife observation — and environmental education can be compatible with a refuge’s mission and priority public uses of refuges that should be actively supported.

## Growing National Needs

CARE has always had one goal: Increased investment in the Refuge System to address pressing needs on the ground and reverse years of relatively static budgets. With active engagement from members of CARE organizations and from citizens across the country, CARE made steady progress toward that goal as the budget for operating and maintaining refuges nationwide grew from about \$179 million in fiscal year 1997 to \$391 million in fiscal year 2004.

CARE’s goal is not simply to convince Congress to provide more refuge funding every year. Instead, the group advocates for budgets that effectively meet the needs for habitat conservation, visitor services, law enforcement, and essential maintenance of facilities, trails, duck blinds, and equipment. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which manages the National Wildlife Refuge System, needs adequate funding to keep visitor centers open, run environmental education programs for children, and properly manage, conserve, and restore fish, wildlife, and habitat. Over the past decade and more, those needs have grown dramatically greater than any budget approved by Congress.

- The Refuge System has a backlog of deferred maintenance projects that exceeds \$2.6 billion. Each year that funding from Congress falls short of basic needs, the Refuge System postpones maintenance projects such as repairing roofs, replacing rotted boardwalks, and repaving roads. As funding perpetually lagged, deferred maintenance has snowballed.
- The Refuge System needs biologists, environmental educators, and other staff to operate refuges day to day, including programs for school children, services at visitor centers, and management of fish, wildlife, and habitat. Because of funding shortfalls, the system now has an operations backlog of more than \$1 billion and needs 2,740 “mission critical” non-law-enforcement personnel.
- The National Wildlife Refuge System also has an alarming shortage of law enforcement professionals. The International Association of Chiefs of Police estimates that the Refuge System needs about 850



The Refuge System's needs have grown at a greater pace than any budget approved by Congress, leaving the system with an alarming shortage of law enforcement professionals to protect public safety and natural resources.

full-time law enforcement officers to effectively protect public safety and natural resources across its large land base. However, in 2009, the system had about 210 officers. The Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that it would cost \$36 million annually to hire 210 additional law enforcement officers — which would only bring law enforcement staffing to *half* the level recommended by police chiefs.

- According to the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Refuge System requires at least an additional \$15 million in funding each year to simply keep pace with inflation and maintain management capabilities. Otherwise, rising fuel and electricity prices, cost-of-living adjustments for staff, and other annual expenses must be paid with dollars that should fund operational needs such as habitat restoration, interpretive programs for the public, or fixing washed out trails.
- Refuges nationwide are literally being overrun by invasive plants and animals. The Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that at least 2.3 million refuge acres are badly infested with invasive plants such as mile-a-minute and kudzu. Non-native wildlife such as Burmese pythons and nutria are devastating native wildlife populations and habitat across a growing swath of the system.
- In 2009, the National Wildlife Refuge System grew by more than 50 million acres when President George W. Bush established four new marine national monuments, including one at the Marianas Trench in the western Pacific. Although this was a major conservation victory, properly monitoring and protecting islands, deep sea trenches, and highly migratory fish, wildlife, and bird species requires new staff, boats, and other resources that are not currently funded by Congress.

To effectively meet daily operational needs and meaningfully reduce the crippling maintenance backlog, CARE estimates that the National Wildlife Refuge System requires annual funding of approximately \$900 million. This figure is based on extensive analysis of Fish and Wildlife Service budget data and very specific staffing, maintenance, facility, equipment, and other needs identified by refuge professionals across the country. It's in this context that funding from Congress and CARE's goals for future Refuge System budgets must be considered.

### Budget See-Saw

Congress reversed course and cut the Refuge System's budget by more than \$15 million in fiscal year 2005. The budget remained relatively stagnant the following year and in fiscal year 2007 returned to essentially the same level Congress had provided in fiscal year 2004. During this period, budget cuts and uncertainty about annual funding levels forced the Refuge System to eliminate staff and develop plans to make even deeper personnel cuts if necessary. Independent experts sounded the alarm about the impacts caused by funding shortfalls. Management Systems International, which conducted a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of the National Refuge System, concluded in 2008 that the system would be unable to "maintain its level of operational activity from one year to the next" because of dramatic decreases in purchasing power. The Government Accountability Office reached similar conclusions that year.

In 2008, the budget see-saw began to tip in a more positive direction. Under the leadership of U.S. Representative Norm



Dicks (D-WA) and with active advocacy by CARE, refuge friends groups, and citizens across the country, the National Wildlife Refuge System's budget grew from \$398 million in fiscal year 2007 to \$503 million in fiscal year 2010. Although this is a positive step, it is far from the approximately \$900 million CARE estimates is required annually to meet Refuge System operational and maintenance needs.

The Izaak Walton League, National Wildlife Refuge Association, and other CARE member groups are now concerned that President Obama's fiscal year 2011 budget request — which he submitted to Congress on February 1 — starts the budget see-saw tipping back the wrong way. The President requests about \$499.5 million for the Refuge System, which is \$3.3 million less than the current budget (and \$18.3 million less than this year when factoring in inflation). Not only does this request fail to cover the annual cost of inflation, it does not provide resources the Refuge System needs to make continued progress on daunting challenges nationwide.

To continue the momentum that Congress has built over the past three years and work toward meeting the Refuge System's full funding needs, CARE urges Congress to provide \$578 million in fiscal year 2011 for the Refuge System's operations and maintenance budget.

## Refuge Investments Benefit Fish, Wildlife, and Local Economies

Fiscal responsibility is a goal we all share. However, some investments make good sense even in tough economic times, and this could not be more true in the case of wildlife refuges.

First, refuges are engines of economic growth in communities across the country, returning \$4 in local economic activity for every \$1 appropriated by Congress. The Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that in 2006, refuge visitors spent \$1.7 billion locally, which supported nearly 27,000 private sector jobs and generated about \$540 million in employment income.

Second, refuges provide opportunities for close-to-home recreation that becomes even more attractive to families when the economy is struggling. In 2009, more than 42 million Americans visited National Wildlife Refuges, which can be found in all 50 states and are increasingly accessible to suburban and urban population centers.

If budgets begin eroding once again, the Fish and Wildlife Service could be forced to cut refuge costs by eliminating staff, reducing visitor center hours, or canceling interpretive programs that directly benefit the public. In fact, the president proposed to cut the Visitors Services Program by \$4 million — a program that directly benefits our children and communities.

## Citizens Key Advocates for Health of Wildlife Refuges

More than a century ago, concerned citizens convinced President Roosevelt to protect a tiny Florida island for endangered birds. Their advocacy and his leadership laid the foundation for a system of wildlife refuges that now spans more than 150 million acres throughout the United States and halfway around the world. Today, citizens can play an equally important role in safeguarding, supporting, and strengthening their National Wildlife Refuges.



Refuges nationwide are literally being overrun by invasive plants and animals, such as this nutria, that are devastating native wildlife populations and habitat.

Here are a few things you can do:

- **Contact your U.S. Representative and Senators and urge them to support CARE's request for \$578 million for the National Wildlife Refuge System budget.** In a tough budget climate, it will be even more important for Ikes to make their voices heard in support of refuge funding. Watch for action alerts this spring.
- **Join a refuge Friends group.** More than 200 nonprofit groups have been established by local citizens to support refuges in or near their communities. Friends groups raise funds to support essential refuge needs, do hard work to remove invasives or maintain trails, and run interpretive programs. To find a Friends group near you, visit [www.refugeassociation.org/new-friends-connect/indexfrgp.html](http://www.refugeassociation.org/new-friends-connect/indexfrgp.html).
- **Volunteer at a local refuge.** This can be done with an established friends group or on your own. League members have the skills and experience to tackle just about any volunteer project. Contact your local refuge manager, express your interest in helping, and then work with the refuge manager to organize and mobilize your volunteers. Read the League's *Chapter Manual* for pointers about volunteering on public lands.

With active engagement from all of us, our National Wildlife Refuge System will protect fish, wildlife, and habitat for our enjoyment — and for generations to come.

—Patrick Woolford is Communications and Program Assistant at the National Wildlife Refuge Association ([www.refugeassociation.org](http://www.refugeassociation.org)). Scott Kovarovics is Conservation Director of the Izaak Walton League of America.