ADVISORY COUNCIL ON GAME AND FISH MINUTES

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2000

Richardson and Robbins Building Auditorium
89 Kings Highway, Dover, Delaware, 19901
Phone 302-739-5297, FAX 302-739-6157

ADVISORY COUNCIL

David J. Healey, Chair
Edward Montague, Vice Chair (Absent)
Mrs. Verna Price
J. Richard Berry
John W. Stewart
Joseph E. Calhoun
Garrett H. Arai
Ted Palmer
Ross Harris (Absent)

DIVISION OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

Andy Manus
Greg Moore
Lloyd Alexander
Bobby Hutchins
Tom Moran
Dawn Failing
Karen Kennedy

PUBLIC

5 Visitors

The meeting was called to order by Chairman David Healey at 7:30 PM.

Agenda Item 1. Russell W. Peterson Urban Wildlife Refuge (Wilmington Riverfront) and Northern Delaware Wetlands Rehabilitation Project Update (Andrew T. Manus and Tom Moran).

Director Manus distributed a brochure entitled, “Northern Delaware Wetlands Rehabilitation Program” and briefed the Council and audience on this wetland restoration program. Mr. Manus stated that the Division has been involved in this program for the last eight years.

Mr. Tom Moran gave a presentation on the history of the urban wildlife refuge currently being planned for an area just outside the city limits of Wilmington.

Mr. Moran stated that the Old Wilmington Marsh, also known as Dravo Marsh, is a 225-acre tidal freshwater marsh located along the Christina River just south of the City of Wilmington. This marsh is a remnant portion of a several thousand acre complex of tidal freshwater wetlands once present along the northern Delaware and Christina Rivers that were arguably among the nation's most valuable fish and wildlife habitats prior to the severe abuse and neglect inflicted over the past three centuries. The marsh is bordered to the south and east by the tidal Christina River, to the north and west by Interstate 95, and to the northeast by a former industrial area (Dravo Shipyard). Mr. Moran stated that this wetland complex is formed by the current confluence of the Christina River and the Little Mill Creek, which bisects the marsh and drains a 5,824-acre predominately urban watershed. The marsh is also traversed by several power transmission lines and a Norfolk Southern railroad line which separates the marsh into northern (98 acres) and southern (140 acres) sections. Prior to their degradation, daily tides flowed and ebbed through dense stands of wild rice, cattails, bulrushes, smartweeds, and other important wetland and wildlife plant species. This diversity of vegetation, for which tidal freshwater wetlands are known, provided important habitat for migratory waterfowl and other waterbirds including black ducks, pintails, green-winged teal, Canada geese, and various heron and raptor species. Also benefiting from this diversity of habitat types were an array of mammals, especially aquatic furbearers such as muskrats, beaver, and otters. Evidence of the abundance of wildlife in the area was supported by the popularity of the site among local waterfowl hunters and muskrat trappers.

Mr. Moran stated that today, because of the series of direct and indirect disturbances to the area, Old Wilmington Marsh supports only a fraction of the fish and wildlife it once did; however, although degraded, its ecological importance to the region has not correspondingly diminished. As one of the few large wetland complexes (200+ acres) remaining along the Christina River, its importance to remnant and recovering fish and wildlife populations, as well as other wetland functions and values, can not be overlooked. Restoring
and enhancing these various wetland functions and values, something achieved at similar sites within the region, could provide several ecological, recreational, and educational components long absent from this highly urbanized landscape. Because of its existing value and future potential, as well as its juxtaposition at the edge of a large urban area, the Governor’s Task Force on the Future of the Brandywine and Christina Rivers has identified the rehabilitation of Old Wilmington Marsh and its establishment as a wildlife refuge and environmental education center as an integral part of a comprehensive redevelopment initiative for the Wilmington waterfront.

The development of a refuge/environmental center (Russell W. Peterson Urban Wildlife Refuge/Education Center) at Old Wilmington Marsh is a tremendous opportunity to educate people about the value and rich heritage associated with wetlands and other aquatic ecosystems. Annually, an increasingly larger percentage of our population resides in urban and suburban areas. Unfortunately, the opportunities that these urbanized communities have to become educated about the functions and values of wetlands are inadequate. A Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife survey of needs in aquatic resources education presented to 306 elementary and high school teachers, community groups, nature centers, and state personnel indicated that wetland education was a priority topic. One possible explanation for this deficiency of wetland education opportunities among metropolitan residents is that urban wetlands are historically the most degraded and have received the least management and protection. The rehabilitation of the Old Wilmington Marsh and the establishment of the Wilmington Wildlife Refuge/Education Center can provide this needed environmental education opportunity in Delaware and more effectively educate the urban public about wetland functions, values, and their restoration process. In addition to providing environmental education and recreational opportunities to the residents of northern Delaware, the unique location of the Russell W. Peterson Urban Wildlife Refuge/Education Center at the edge of a city could demonstrate how both urban development along a waterfront and the existing natural resources can coexist in a symbiotic relationship if appropriate planning and commitment is accomplished.

Specific objectives for the site include:

- Restoring tidal, nutrient, and sediment exchange between the western portion of Wilmington Marsh, Christina River, and the Delaware Estuary, thus contributing to the healthy functioning of all systems.
- Improving water quality in both the marsh and estuary by increasing circulation and the volume of water exposed to the wetland’s filtering, nutrient uptake, and pollutant cleansing functions.
- Increasing biological diversity and improving wetland, riparian, and adjacent upland habitats for wetland wildlife including waterfowl, wading birds, shorebirds, raptors, passerines, aquatic mammals, reptiles and amphibians.
- Restoring and improving spawning, nursery, and feeding sites for several species of anadromous, estuarine and riverine fishes, such as striped bass, white perch, and alewife.
- Protecting and enhancing nesting and feeding habitats for osprey utilizing the marsh.
- Protecting and enhancing critical feeding habitat for the nearby Pea Patch Island Heronry, the largest heronry on the East Coast.
- Controlling nuisance plant species, such as phragmites and purple loosestrife, from usurping open-water habitats and reducing the heterogeneity of habitat types. This control of nuisance plant species would increase the diversity of more beneficial emergent vegetation.
- Reducing shoreline erosion along the marsh perimeter caused by storm events and increased stormwater runoff, using environmentally acceptable methods.
- Improving a variety of compatible recreational opportunities in wetland, estuarine, and adjacent upland habitats: including restoring and enhancing the aesthetic value of these areas.
- Increasing environmental education opportunities for both the general public and school groups in a highly urbanized area. Emphasis would be placed on the importance of tidal wetland functions, values, restoration, and protection.
- Providing an additional and unique visitor attraction to the Wilmington Riverfront while preserving the integrity of a complex wetland community.
- Adding a critical link in the chain of rehabilitated wetlands that are being restored and enhanced by the Northern Delaware Wetlands Rehabilitation Program, a watershed-based effort to reclaim an urban wetland corridor.
- Providing an opportunity for additional fish, wildlife, and wetland benefits that might be proposed for the marsh in the future.

A video on this program was also shown at the conclusion of Mr. Moran’s presentation.

Mr. Alexander reviewed the proposed stabilized regulations for resident (non-migratory) seasons for the seasons from 2001-02 to 2005-06. These seasons are essentially the same as the 2000-01 seasons with adjustments for changes in the calendar. The primary seasons are all based on the date of Thanksgiving.

Stabilized seasons have been in effect for many years. This process allows the Council and Division to focus on specific seasons that need to be changed based on changing populations or other biological factors. Recent expansions of the deer seasons are an example of "stabilized" seasons being adjusted for an expanding deer population. The annual review of all seasons was a waste of time and energy, as well as causing confusion. The stabilized season process allows hunters to plan their vacations years in advance.

The Council voted unanimously to adopt the proposed stabilized non-migratory hunting seasons for 2001-2005.


Mr. Alexander reported that the preparation of two environmental impact statements by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is well underway. The draft of the statement on managing snow goose populations is expected to be released for public comment in January. After the statement is reviewed and the comment period ends, a final statement is expected to be published this spring. This statement will lay out a management strategy for snow geese and may permit the use of new hunting techniques to lower the population to levels adopted as a goal.

A draft statement is expected to be published late this winter on the management of southern nesting (non-migrant or resident) Canada geese. After a public comment period, action is expected to allow states more flexibility in managing these birds.


Mr. Moore discussed a user conflict occurring at the Norman G. Wilder Wildlife Area. The conflict involves horseback riders interfering with legitimate hunting activities and distributing wildlife habitat. Mr. Moore explained that the Norman G. Wilder Wildlife Area is very popular for horseback riding activities. He stated that 20 miles of interior gravel access roads traverse the woodlands and fields of the area making it an ideal choice for riding activities. Mr. Moore went on to state that the Division supports multi use activities on the wildlife areas and that horseback riding is a legal activity. According to area regulations, horseback riding can occur on the Norman G. Wilder Area but horses are restricted to area roads open to vehicular traffic. The problem is some riders are getting off the established roads and making their own trails through the forest, fields and tax ditches. This has resulted in heated conflicts with hunters and dog trainers and some minor habitat destruction. Unauthorized horseback riding also poses a safety problem with riders venturing off the roads during the firearm deer hunting seasons and increasing the chance of an accidental shooting.

Mr. Moore stated the Division would be acting irresponsibly if they did not devise a remedy to preclude future conflicts, meet the needs of multi users of the area and protect wildlife habitat. To accomplish this objective, he stated that the Division is proposing to regulate where and when horseback riding can take place at Norman G. Wilder. He continued by indicating that the Division would designate a horseback riding trail with specific time periods of use. This schedule would be as follows:

1. Horseback riding prohibited during the firearm deer seasons and the spring turkey season.
2. September 1- January 31 riding restricted to Sue, Tarburton and Picnic Roads (Monday through Sunday). ON SUNDAY ENTIRE TRAIL WOULD BE OPEN.
3. February 1 – August 31 entire trail open EXCEPT FOR SPRING TURKEY HUNTING SEASON.
4. Trail rides greater than 25 individuals must notify the Division 2 weeks prior to the event.

Mr. Moore concluded his presentation by saying he thought the proposal was reasonable and that it would resolve the current issue in a responsible and sensible manner. He further explained that there was precedent established relative to this proposal in that the Division had
designated a horseback riding trail at the Nanticoke Area which had successfully resolved similar user conflicts at this area. Several members of the Council suggested that horseback riders be required to obtain a permit before using the trails. Better posting of information about riding was also discussed.

**THERE WILL BE NO ADVISORY COUNCIL MEETING IN DECEMBER.**

**AGENDA FOR THE 1/30/01 ADVISORY COUNCIL MEETING**

1. Horseback riding at N.G. Wilder.
2. Problems associated with crabbers at the Little Creek impoundments and possible management changes.

There being no further business, a motion was made, seconded and carried that the meeting be adjourned at 8:30 PM.

Sincerely,

Karen Kennedy, Recording Secretary