

Comment Period: Tuesday, March 26 – Thursday, May 9

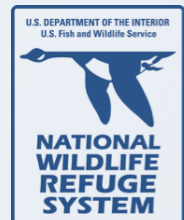
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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
National Wildlife Refuge System
Draft Interpretation Strategic Plan



STRATEGIC PLAN FOR INTERPRETATION IN THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM

Interpretation enables audiences to make meaningful connections to our natural and cultural resources and inspires them to develop their own land stewardship philosophy.

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

One of the goals of the 2011 vision document *Conserving the Future: Wildlife Refuges and the Next Generation (Conserving the Future)* is to make wildlife conservation more relevant to the public and foster their engagement in and support of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System). One of the most effective ways to reach diverse audiences and help them create a land and wildlife stewardship philosophy is through meaningful interpretation.

This strategic plan addresses this major goal and fulfills *Conserving the Future's* Recommendation 19 on interpretation. This plan makes recommendations on how employees, volunteers and partners can enhance interpretation communication, planning, delivery, and evaluation at national wildlife refuges, wetland management districts, and other field stations of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service).

Interpretation is a communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the audience and the resource. Interpretive programs in the Refuge System must convey thematic natural and cultural resource messages through personal and non-personal (i.e. publications, new media, social media, signs, and exhibits) opportunities. The interpretation strategy directs Service employees to engage a diverse and changing America and communicate a variety of meanings and values that are relevant to the public to ensure the long-term stewardship of America's natural and cultural resources.

Quality interpretation means using the tools of the profession in developing our interpretive products. There are several models that ensure quality interpretation, and we have identified two of these in the strategies. Using the *Interpretive Process Model* and the *Interpretive Analysis Model* ensure that we have identified the most critical interpretive elements of an interpretive product or service. Using a strategy to assess our work allows interpreters to identify elements of success in any interpretive effort. Effective interpretation ensures there are tangible and intangible links to the resource and opportunities for intellectual and emotional connections to

the meanings of the resource, using cohesively developed ideas. Effective interpretive products require skillful planning and delivery.

This interpretive strategy contains one overarching goal, five measurable objectives, and a variety of strategies and actions that will be carried out over the next 10 years. This approach will help us design programs for our employees, volunteers, and partners and help strengthen the Refuge System's overall interpretive program.

Below is a summary of our goal and objectives of this strategy:

GOAL: Strengthen, formalize, and institutionalize interpretation within the Refuge System to create a connected conservation constituency.

OBJECTIVE 1. Increase the capabilities and professionalism of visitor services staff at field stations to improve the effectiveness of our interpretation programs.

OBJECTIVE 2. Strengthen partnerships in order to maintain, improve, and expand quality interpretation.

OBJECTIVE 3. Invest in training and professional development to empower employees, volunteers, and partners to create and implement interpretive programs and products to meet our needs.

OBJECTIVE 4. Assess and develop effective interpretation delivery modes to reach diverse audiences.

OBJECTIVE 5. Monitor interpretive program planning, content and outcomes to evaluate effectiveness and guide future priorities.

II. PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

The goal, objectives, and strategies of this strategic plan will help define and provide direction for Refuge System interpretation programs over the next 10 years. Interpretation supports Recommendation 19 in the Refuge System's *Conserving the Future* vision document (2011), which directs the development of "... an interpretation strategy that builds upon current Service standards and guidelines, takes advantage of multiple modes of delivering messages, reaches diverse audiences, and measures the effectiveness of our programs in partnership with key government agencies, the National Association for Interpretation (NAI) and other professional organizations."

III. INTRODUCTION AND VISION

“The care of rivers is not a question of rivers, but of the human heart.”
- Tanaka Shozo

INTRODUCTION

Volumes of stories are found throughout our national network of lands and waters dedicated to the conservation of wildlife, fish and their habitat. Fish and Wildlife Service icons such as biologist and author Rachel Carson and editorial cartoonist “Ding” Darling used their pens to share some of these compelling stories with the public. The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 recognized the importance of public communication and engagement, embracing the art and science of interpretation as one of six priority public uses of the Refuge System. Interpretation has the power to unlock stories that can connect our natural and cultural resources with the interests and values of the American public.

We trace the history of the profession of interpretation back to the late 1800s, when naturalist and author John Muir was the first person to use the word “interpret” in reference to natural history. “I’ll interpret the rocks; learn the language of the flood, storm, and the avalanche. I’ll acquaint myself with the glaciers and wild gardens, and get as near the heart of the world as I can.” In 1920, a young protégé of Muir named Enos Mills wrote “The aim is to illuminate and reveal the alluring world outdoors by introducing determining influences and respondent tendencies. A nature guide is an interpreter of geology, botany, zoology, and natural history.” (*Adventures of a Nature Guide*). Freeman Tilden built upon Mill’s idea of revelation and incorporated it into his six principles of interpretation, saying “Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information.” (*Interpreting Our Heritage*, 1957).

If we consider Muir, Mills, and Tilden to be the fathers of interpretation, Rachel Carson could be considered the mother. Carson had a fifteen-year career with the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries (now the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service), where she wrote radio spots and numerous pamphlets and bulletins on conservation, using her unique ability to present complex science in clear poetic language that captivated readers and sparked their interest in the natural world. One of her most well-known works was a series called *Conservation in Action*, devoted to exploring wildlife and ecology on national wildlife refuges. After leaving government service, Carson authored inspiring books, such as *Under the Sea-Wind*, *The Sea Around Us*, *The Edge of the Sea*, and the posthumously published *Sense of Wonder*. But it was her final book, *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, that awakened society to our responsibilities of being good stewards of all forms of life.

Aldo Leopold, another prominent figure in our conservation history, wrote *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) using interpretive writing techniques to convey complex biological interrelationships and the concept of a land ethic. In the forward to the book he wrote: “Like winds and sunsets, wild things were taken for granted until progress began to do away with them. Now we face the question whether a still higher ‘standard of living’ is worth its cost in things natural, wild, and free. For us of the minority, the opportunity to see geese is more important than television, and the chance to find a pasque-flower is a right as inalienable as free speech.”

Building upon this legacy, many universities and colleges across the United States offer courses on interpretation. Additionally, the Service partnered with the National Park Service to provide *Interpretive Process Model* training based on Tilden's principles and David Larsen's *Meaningful Interpretation: How to Connect Hearts and Minds to Places, Objects and Other Resources*. Professional support is offered by the National Association for Interpretation (NAI). The NAI has become an international professional organization, hosting regional, national, and international training and conferences. It also provides an interpreter certification program and a variety of publications. Many Service employees have used the resources of NAI to improve interpretive program design and delivery.

VISION

In this time of rapid social, economic, and environmental change, our vision for interpretation throughout the Refuge System is to connect visitors and the diverse American public to natural and cultural resources and foster appreciation and understanding of, and a sense of wonder for, our nation's wildlife, plant, and habitat resources.

Interpretation in the Refuge System should:

- communicate our mission
- reveal the significance of each refuge resource
- facilitate the visitor finding personal relevance with the refuge resources
- be a key element in welcoming and orienting visitors to refuges through well-maintained and appropriately placed interpretive signs, publications, exhibits, and facilities
- connect the hearts and minds of our visitors with the places, objects, and resources we protect and provide visitors with intellectual and emotional opportunities to connect with natural and cultural resources
- be theme-based and use multiple approaches, formats, and media to interpret fish and wildlife resources and management activities, using technology where appropriate to maximize effectiveness
- reach multiple target audiences and be appropriate for each, connecting with people of various age, ethnicity, gender, culture, and lifestyle
- include an evaluative component to measure program effectiveness, using the results to make improvements
- create awareness and understanding of Service resources on-site, off-site, and in virtual settings
- implement minimum standards and best practices of interpretation (including sign planning and standards)
- make conservation relevant to citizens, permitting people to form their own intellectual and emotional connections with wildlife and natural and cultural resources
- be outcome-based, resulting in something of value for both the refuges and visitors, and instill a sense of stewardship
- connect people's lives and science-supported conservation practice to the health of the environment and human communities
- pursue outreach, volunteer, and partnership opportunities enhancing programs on and off refuges, and
- expand our levels of interpretive staffing and expertise through comprehensive training programs

IV. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

“We all know the stakes are high. We face ever greater acceleration of change and an ever more diverse public. Can your resource afford to communicate only one meaning? Can your resource afford to speak to only those who already agree? If your resource does not clearly communicate a variety of meanings and values that engender care for, what will it be like in fifty years? One hundred? Two hundred? Forever is a very long time. Interpretation can help. Be relevant or become a relic.” – David Larsen

Our most significant challenge is to adapt our interpretive programs to the continually changing face of America. This can only be accomplished by offering experiences that are relevant to diverse audiences with varied values, beliefs, and attitudes about fish and wildlife conservation.

Using the best available research on interpretation, we can create interpretive programs that speak to the interests and experience of diverse audiences. Whether individuals and groups appreciate and support the Refuge System for recreation, solitude, relaxation, rejuvenation, or just as places to spend time with family, we can help them make personal and lasting connections with our agency and conservation. New and innovative interpretation is one of the best tools for this task.

Basic interpretive messaging skills are needed for all employees and volunteers who engage the public and our partners. We will use existing training and develop necessary training to infuse the art of communicating interpretively throughout the workforce. This will be delivered in part through a new *Refuge Ambassador Program: Customer Services Skills for Communicating Conservation*. The goal of this program is to teach the fundamentals of good communication and basic understanding of interpretation to our employees and volunteers in order to build a public constituency that supports the Refuge System. The program will offer learning opportunities through multiple delivery methods including in-person, online, and blended-training components.

Anticipated budget and staffing constraints will also create challenges in terms of delivering quality and relevant interpretive programs. However, we will address these challenges, in part, by increased reliance on non-personal or self-guided interpretive methods and tools to meet the goals and objectives of this strategy.

V. GOAL, OBJECTIVES, STRATEGIES, AND ACTIONS

GOAL: Strengthen, formalize, and institutionalize interpretation within the Refuge System to create a connected conservation constituency.

OBJECTIVE 1. Increase the capabilities and professionalism of visitor services staff at field stations to improve the effectiveness of our interpretation programs.

Although there has been a steady increase in Refuge System visitors and volunteers, most field stations are limited by a lack of refuge staff professionally trained to conduct interpretive programs and other visitor services. Refuge System staff growth will likely not keep pace with

the demand for more visitor services programs, but building support internally among leadership, staff, and partners will allow us to connect with more visitors through quality interpretation.

To help explain the value of interpretation to delivering our mission, we will develop a variety of in-reach tools to demonstrate the need for investment and broad support among our leadership, staff, and partners.

STRATEGY 1.1: Ensure interpretation is recognized as critical to fulfilling the mission of the Refuge System.

Action 1: By July 2014, a national team will draft a revised 605 FW 7 Interpretation Policy to establish clear lines of responsibility and communication from the director down to field staff.

Action 2: By January 2015, a team will develop an in-reach strategy to help our leadership, staff, and partners at all levels understand how interpretation plays a critical role in achieving our mission. The team will work with communications staff on a clear coordinated message for this strategy.

Action 3: By January 2015, a team will establish a minimum interpretation standard for welcoming and orienting visitors to refuges, including those that are closed to the public or unstaffed. While welcoming people to refuges that are closed to the public may not make sense to some of the public, in reality, interpretive messages are particularly important for field stations that are closed to public entry. These locations should have a vibrant digital or online interpretation element for constituents and nearby communities to enjoy.

STRATEGY 1.2: For the most effective way to communicate the messages of the Refuge System to diverse and targeted audiences, and to build a broad constituency base, assure that every refuge is represented by a full-time interpretive visitor services professional who possesses formal education or training to plan and deliver quality interpretive programs and products. Additionally, at least one full-time visitor services position with education and background in interpretation is essential for supporting every urban refuge.

Action 1: By December 2013, we will examine the applicability of the 401 job series (general biological science) for Refuge System interpretive and visitor services programs to ensure that future staff possesses the necessary positive education requirements and experience to deliver quality interpretive programs.

Action 2: By January 2014, a national team will work with other offices and programs involved in leadership and workforce development to assess visitor services needs and make recommendations on how to improve interpretation program support.

STRATEGY 1.3: Increase visibility of interpretation by highlighting interpretive leaders and interpretive program and product success stories through print, web-based and social media outlets.

Action 1: By 2014, develop a plan with the Service's Division of External Affairs and others involved in communications to showcase excellence in interpretation across the spectrum of delivery methods.

Action 2: Assist in developing and delivering concurrent sessions on interpretation at the Urban Refuge Summit scheduled for September 2013. This will be done in conjunction with developing long-term programs to engage urban audiences over the next 10 years.

OBJECTIVE 2. Strengthen partnerships in order to maintain, improve and expand quality interpretation.

Partnerships at all levels are key to assisting us with delivering quality interpretation within the Refuge System. Partners have the potential to bring different points of view to solve problems, can add value to programs, reach target and under-served audiences and can provide resources to improve both the number and quality of programs and interpretive media offered on refuges. The best partners have a combination of attributes that are very compatible with our objectives, and we recommend collaborating with them whenever conditions permit. Local partnerships are also one strategic way to achieve interpretive goals while building a relationship with the surrounding communities and reaching target audiences.

STRATEGY 2.1: Highlight how to use partners with expertise and an ability to improve and expand our interpretive programs at all levels. These partners could include federal, state, and territorial agencies; businesses; nonprofit organizations; and individual community members.

Action 1: By July 2014, a national team will draft an Appendix for this plan of successful interpretive delivery partnerships, success stories, and available resources, and share via *Visitor Services Connect* and other collaborative platforms.

Action 2: By December 2014, we will identify and assess gaps in the use of partnerships to support refuge interpretive programs and develop priorities to further cultivate partnerships to meet our program goals.

Action 3: By 2015, provide necessary tools, training, and resources to assist partners in delivering quality interpretive programs to priority audiences. We will work with other programs and partners to create standards and guidance, including information in the Service's sign handbook, that can be applied to outdoor skills and learning areas. The guide should use a variety of modes for distribution.

OBJECTIVE 3. Invest in training and professional development to empower employees, volunteers, and partners to create and implement interpretive programs and products to meet station needs.

Professional development and skills-based training for those responsible for delivering interpretive programs and products is a basic prerequisite for achieving success. We will develop interpretive champions who demonstrate and teach others how interpretation can and should address complex resource challenges and improve public understanding. All quality

interpretation includes certain basic elements that include: knowledge of the resource, knowledge of the audience, and appropriate technique, which need to be taught through training. Interpreters help audiences make emotional and intellectual connections to the resource so they are moved to care for the resource.

STRATEGY 3.1: Promote the use of the *Visitor Service Standards: A Handbook for Evaluating Visitor Services Programs* (Visitor Services Handbook)

Action 1: By 2014, create an expanded distribution plan for the Visitor Service Handbook to further reach field interpreters.

Action 2: By 2014, develop and offer distance-delivered training on how to use the Visitor Services Handbook, with an emphasis on using the interpretive analysis model.

STRATEGY 3.2: Deliver a new *Refuge Ambassador Program: Customer Services Skills for Communicating Conservation* that trains all employees in providing excellent customer service and includes the principles of interpretation, how to strengthen community relations, and how to increase support for the Refuge System. The program will be offered through a variety of delivery modes, with assistance from the NCTC and outside-agency customer service experts.

Action 1: Develop the basic components of an Ambassador program by December 2013 and assess options for its successful long-term delivery and evaluation.

STRATEGY 3.3: By 2013, a national team will update the interpretation sections of the “Visitor Services Career Pathways” handbook to reflect current needs, priorities, and initiatives in cooperation with other programs and offices addressing leadership and workforce development goals. As appropriate, we will develop a communications strategy to update staff of the changes to the pathways report.

STRATEGY 3.4: By 2014, design and incorporate a module on interpretation using the *Interpretive Process Model*, *Interpretive Analysis Model*, and the *Visitor Services Evaluation Handbook* for appropriate NCTC training course curriculum.

Action 1: By the end of 2014, include an interpretation module in Refuge Management Academy, Wage Grade Academy, Friends Academy, Stepping Up To Leadership, Advanced Leadership Development Program, External Affairs workshops, Service Employee Foundations course, and other training as appropriate.

STRATEGY 3.5: By 2013, develop a core interpretive competencies training matrix and professional development guidelines for collateral duty employees, supervisors of interpretation program leaders, entry, mid- and full-performance level employees, friends group members, and volunteers.

Action 1: By 2014, the Refuge System will develop formal partnerships with NAI, National Center on Accessibility, National Park Service, Aldo Leopold Foundation, and Eppley Institute to provide a progression of interpretive training opportunities

specifically developed to meet the needs of Service interpretive staff, volunteers, and partners.

Action 2: Beginning in 2014, annually train 40 Service employees in the Aldo Leopold Foundation's Land Ethic Leadership program.

OBJECTIVE 4. Assess and develop effective interpretation delivery modes to reach diverse audiences.

We will strive to offer a variety of delivery modes to welcome, orient and connect our visitors to the resources we protect that maximize our reach and program outcomes. A blended approach that combines traditional personal interpretation and self-guided components with web-based and mobile platforms can effectively reach multiple audiences. A strategic assortment of interpretive elements enable refuges to deliver program content to the public anytime, anywhere, with and without direct staff involvement. When interpretive staff is not available, quality interpretation can be provided through kiosks, signs, mobile programs, accessible facilities, wildlife observation and photography opportunities, websites and social media tools (including apps). For remote and closed refuges, the internet may be the only place most of the audience can learn about the incredible resources protected there. The Service's *Electronic and Information Technology Accessibility Standards* provide additional guidance on making these products accessible to the broadest range of users.

Freeman Tilden said that "Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts...." Refuges should consider using art and demonstrations to transcend language and cultural barriers and reach out to new audiences. Performing arts may include storytelling, poetry reading, dance, drama, or music. Demonstrations may include historical vignettes, living history, or recreational safety and skill displays.

STRATEGY 4.1: Leverage existing financial resources to implement interpretive standards for welcoming and orienting visitors as defined in the Visitor Service Evaluation Handbook and through our national Sign Guidelines.

Action 1: By December 2013, all field stations should have entered their interpretive facilities, signs, and kiosks into the centralized regional property database system including scheduled update and maintenance of this property.

Action 2: By December 2014, each region will evaluate interpretive facilities and identify and prioritize those needing support.

Action 3: By December 2015, the Service will identify funding strategies for supporting the highest priority trails, outdoor exhibits and signs, photography and observation blinds, and learning areas in a more systematic and integrated approach.

Action 4: By June 2014, the Service will develop a long-term strategy addressing interpretation of Refuge System cultural and historical resources that can be integrated seamlessly into other guidelines, best-management practices, and digital media programs.

STRATEGY 4.2: Each refuge without bi-lingual staff or volunteers should identify any need for services to reach those with limited English proficiency (LEP) (Executive Order 13166).

Action 1: By December 2016, where applicable, each refuge will develop and implement a system to provide identified services for LEP persons in the local community.

STRATEGY 4.3: Use the Visitor Services Handbook to evaluate programs and their relevance to the diversity of the local community

Action 1: By 2015, using teams of field and regional visitor services professionals and/or others from sister agencies, states, colleges, and universities, each Region will use interpretive analysis models to identify and share model interpretive programs.

Action 2: Engage with the workforce planning team to explore local hire or other options to diversify our interpretive workforce.

STRATEGY 4.4: Embrace the use of emerging technologies to broaden and improve delivery success.

Action 1: By 2014, share practical application and successful examples of innovative message-driven technological experiences on a sharing site such as Visitor Services Connect.

Action 2: By December 2014, the Service will draft an Indefinite Delivery Indefinite Quantity (IDIQ) contract for new interpretive media/technology delivery methods including, but not limited to, virtual field trips, digital photography, podcasts, interactive Web-cams, and social media apps.

Action 3: By December 2014, the Service will develop a Center of Expertise that will research and provide technical assistance and support for using emerging technologies for interpretation.

Action 4: By 2015, the Service's Center of Expertise will develop a pilot program for providing virtual access to refuges for remote and urban audiences. We will work with the Service's Digital Media working group to develop these programs.

STRATEGY 4.5: Refuges should consider using art and demonstrations to transcend language and cultural barriers and reach out to new audiences.

Action 1: By 2014, share innovative and successful interpretation-through-art examples via a sharing site such as Visitor Services Connect.

OBJECTIVE 5. Monitor interpretive program planning, content, and outcomes to evaluate effectiveness and guide future priorities.

Regular and consistent evaluation is vital to determine the strengths and weaknesses of a field station's programs and products. Putting together a knowledgeable evaluation team, gathering the proper information, and asking the most effective evaluation questions will help stations develop a successful interpretive plan. Through the use of other experts in the field of visitor services, field station staff will gain a fresh perspective that will breathe new life into their interpretive offerings.

STRATEGY 5.1: Measure output and outcomes from non-personal interpretation

Action 1: By 2015, the Headquarters Office will create Refuge Annual Performance Planning (RAPP) measures to capture non-personal interpretation (i.e., signs, kiosks, digital media, and outdoor skills and learning areas).

STRATEGY 5.2: Every refuge should do an annual visitor services self-review and have a complete review by an outside team every 10 years using the Visitor Services Evaluation Handbook.

Action 1: By 2016, Regional Visitor Services Chiefs will ensure 25% of their refuges will have conducted a Visitor Services Review using the Visitor Services Standards Handbook. The review may be accomplished by teams of field and regional visitor services professionals and/or others from sister agencies, States, or colleges and universities.

STRATEGY 5.3: Field stations will take feedback from reviews and incorporate them into annual work plans.

STRATEGY 5.4: By 2015, each refuge will develop an Interpretive Plan (as part of their Visitor Services Plan) using the results of their visitor services review. The plan will address the range of interpretive opportunities including programs, publications, signs, exhibits, websites, social media, and other methods.

STRATEGY 5.5: By 2014, review and include more focused questions in the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) approved Refuge System visitor survey to help evaluate the effectiveness of our interpretive programs.