

HUNTERS SHOULD EMBRACE EFFORTS TO IMPROVE REFUGE SYSTEM

By JIM WALTMAN

LIVING IN WASHINGTON, D.C. THE LAST COUPLE OF YEARS, I THOUGHT I'D HEARD EVERYTHING. BUT NOTHING COULD HAVE PREPARED ME FOR ALSTON CHASE'S OUTRAGEOUS MISCHARACTERIZATION OF AUDUBON'S ACTIONS TO CONTROL OVERGRAZING, JET SKIING, MILITARY MANEUVERS AND OTHER INAPPROPRIATE USES IN THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM. CHASE HAS IGNORED THE FOCUS OF OUR EFFORTS AND INSTEAD HAS FALSELY ACCUSED US OF TRYING TO BAN HUNTING AND FISHING IN THE REFUGE SYSTEM AND EVEN OF OPPOSING ACTIVE WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT. HUNTERS SHOULD REJECT CHASE'S RHETORIC AND LOOK OBJECTIVELY AT THE SYSTEM'S REAL PROBLEMS.

Nearly a century ago, Boone and Crockett Club founder Theodore Roosevelt established what would become the greatest system of wildlife habitats in the world. During his presidency, Roosevelt reserved more than 50 refuges for the nation's migratory birds and big game. Conservationists like Roosevelt, George Bird Grinnell, Gilbert Pearson, and Ding Darling used persuasion and creativity to protect habitat. For example, in the late 1920's Audubon and B&C raised funds to acquire more than 30,000 acres of pronghorn habitat in Nevada and then donated the area to establish the Charles Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge - a refuge that was later expanded to over half a million acres. This month, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) dedicated the 500th national wildlife refuge in West Virginia's Canaan Valley.

The Refuge System is the only network for federal lands established specifically to conserve and manage fish and wildlife — the "multiple use" philosophy was never intended to apply to these areas. The National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 authorized the Secretary of the Interior to permit "secondary" uses on refuges, but only after demonstrating that such uses are "compatible" with the specific purposes for which the refuges were established. The principle behind Congressman John Dingell's law was clear: in allowing public use on refuges, the burden of proof should be to show that a proposed use was not detrimental before it could be allowed, not on the refuge manager to prove that a use was harmful in order to disallow it. In Dingell's own words, "extreme caution" should be exercised in allowing public use in these special places.

A quarter century ago, the es-

teemed Leopold Commission on Wildlife Management warned that, despite Dingell's law, the Refuge System was being undermined by "picnic grounds, camping facilities, improved swimming beaches, motorboat marinas, water skiing, baseball fields, bridle paths, target ranges, and other assorted forms of play which only obliquely related to refuge purposes."

Four years ago, echoing the concerns raised by the Leopold Commission and the findings of more than a dozen similar reviews since then, FWS reported that nearly two thirds of the nation's refuges were undermined by harmful activities. The problems ranged from water skiing through wading bird rookeries, to over-grazing of waterfowl nesting areas, and even military practice bombing of marine mammal haul-out sites. These and other harmful activities were authorized by FWS mostly because political pressure from local special interests or members of Congress. The problem was so bad at the Sheldon Refuge that the refuge manager told the New York Times that the area was being run "like a commercial cattle ranch."

In October, 1992, Audubon and several other conservation organizations sued FWS and the Interior Department for allowing harmful activities in the Refuge System. The lawsuit challenged specific refuges. These included cattle grazing at Colorado's Monte Vista refuge that reduced waterfowl production; jet skiing and jet boat racing through the Havasu refuge in California and Arizona that harassed rails, grebes, and other birds; and low-level training by Marine Corps jets — conducted with FWS approval — that harassed endangered Sonoran pronghorns and desert bighorns at Arizona's Cabeza Prieta refuge. The lawsuit also made a tenth claim, supported by the 1990 FWS reports that similar problems were occurring on refuges across the country.

To its credit, the Interior Department settled our lawsuit in October, 1993. They agreed to comply with current refuge law by reviewing all refuge uses and to modify or phase out those uses that are not found to be compatible with purposes for which the individual refuges were established.

Sportsmen and other conservationists from across the country have praised the settlement. But to hear Chase and a few misinformed outdoor writers tell it, Audubon and the Clinton Adminis-

tration have conspired to ban hunting and fishing in the Refuge System. Nothing could be further from the truth!

Audubon has long recognized that hunting can be an effective wildlife management tool as well as an appropriate recreational use. In fact, Audubon and the other groups involved in our lawsuit have supported legislation that would continue to allow hunting while improving the Refuge System's administration. Senator Bob Graham's bill has also been supported by the National Wildlife Federation, the Izaak Walton League, the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and even the National Rifle Association. Would Chase call these groups anti-hunting?

For its part, the Clinton Administration has opened more new refuge hunting and fishing programs (17) in its first two years than the Bush Administration did in its final two. Apparently Chase hasn't done his homework.

The opportunity for the public to hunt and fish in the Refuge System is safe. Unfortunately the refuges themselves are not. In addition to the numerous inappropriate uses that continue two years after we filed the lawsuit, real threats to refuges include inadequate water supplies, meager budgets, poor planning, and encroaching development.

Audubon has worked clearly with sportsmen and women to tackle these very real problems. We've worked with waterfowlers to secure adequate water supplies for a dozen refuges in California's Central Valley, with fisherman to ban jet skis that scattered bonefish and harassed wading birds in several Florida Keys refuges, and with hunters to reduce cattle grazing that has degraded habitat at many western refuges such as Montana's Charles M. Russell Refuge.

Hunters and anglers should reject the cynical rhetoric of Alston Chase and others who would divide us. Instead, we must rekindle the cooperative spirit that made the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge possible and work together to address the real conservation issues that face the National Wildlife Refuge System. The system certainly needs our help.

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WHILE SPORTSMEN OIL THEIR WEAPONS IN PREPARATION FOR HUNTING IN WILDLIFE REFUGES THIS FALL, THEY SHOULD BE FOREWARNED: THIS SEASON COULD BE THEIR LAST. VERY QUIETLY THE CLINTON ADMINISTRATION IS SEEKING TO BAN RECREATIONAL AND ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES — INCLUDING HUNTING, FISHING, SWIMMING, CANOEING, CAMPING, PICNICKING, HAYING, FORESTRY AND FARMING — FROM MOST, OR ALL, OF THE NATION'S 510 WILDLIFE REFUGES. AND WHILE CONGRESS HAS SUCCEEDED IN FORCING THE POSTPONEMENT OF THIS POLICY, PRESERVATION IDEOLOGUES WITHIN THE WHITE HOUSE CONTINUE TO PREPARE THE WAY FOR ITS EVENTUAL IMPLEMENTATION.

The gambit began in October 1992 when several activist groups, including The Wilderness Society, sued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which runs the refuges, charging that on nine sanctuaries the agency had illegally permitted "secondary activities" — including recreation—to occur, even though these uses, they said, were incompatible with preservation, deemed the "primary" purpose of these places. And further the suit alleged the Service broke the law when it authorized such secondary uses elsewhere in the refuge system without first proving they were compatible with preservation.

Although the propriety of sports and natural resource harvests in sanctuaries have long been debated, this challenge nevertheless seemed unjustified. Such activities are clearly permissible by law, and are allowed under appropriate circumstances. Ever since the first sanctuary was established in 1903, managers were given considerable freedom to decide how to run their reserves. This flexible approach was sound ecological policy, recognizing that since each area is unique and subject to changing environmental conditions, a single national policy would do more harm than good. The same commitment to multiple use was evinced by the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966. Organizing refuges into a system, it authorized the Interior Secretary to "permit the use of any area within the system for any purpose, including but not limited to hunting, fishing, public recreation and accommodations."

The lawsuit therefore should

have been easy for the Service to win. But last October the administration settled the suit out of court, giving away the store to environmentalists — a decision that coincidentally occurred after Wilderness Society President, George Frampton was appointed Assistant Secretary of Interior, thus being transformed from plaintiff to defendant. In that agreement the Service promised to produce a plan showing how it will terminate outdoor recreation in each refuge "expeditiously" unless stringent conditions were met.

Some plaintiff organizations, including The Wilderness Society, insist that it was not their intention to halt hunting and fishing altogether. Nevertheless, the administration, suggesting the settlement gave it no choice, launched a "compatibility" study transparently designed to severely curtail, or terminate, outdoor recreation, stipulating, in part, that the Service shall "terminate every use that...is incompatible with the primary purposes of the refuge on which it occurs, unless FWS makes a written determination...that any such use...is compatible with the primary purpose of the refuge..."

While this constituted a formidable legal obstacle to recreation, the bigger aim was philosophical: to replace the Service's stewardship conservation ethic with a preservationist, hands-off approach. Rather than allowing such acts as maintaining dikes that protect wetlands or cultivating vegetation to improve bird habitat, it would implement the same regime of benign neglect that is decimating biological diversity in the national parks.

Fashioning these new priorities, the Service proposed diverting funds from recreation to "biological diversity," endangered species and land acquisition (whose budget would increase 188 percent). Simultaneously, it announced that there might not be sufficient funds for recreation. So although refuges already covered 92 million acres (an area larger than the state of Nevada), it planned to purchase more, even as, pleading poverty, it would close these places to most public use.

Naturally, duck shooters and others cried foul, and Congress reacted.

In June, Senator Don Nickles (R-Okla) inserted language into the Service's appropriations package directing that "current activities be continued." Given little option, Service Director Mollie Beattie issued a press release promising "no hunting programs on national wildlife refuges will be halted this fall."

Beattie's emphasis was clearly on "this fall." And indeed, Nickles' measure will only delay the anti-recreation juggernaut, not stop it.

The Service still intends to reprogram monies toward its purist objectives. Meanwhile, with the help of environmental groups it is composing a policy statement called "Refuges 2003" to institutionalize these priorities. Ostensibly intended to prevent "political meddling," this effort's real purpose is to render wildlife policy immune from public accountability by making it more difficult for Congress or future administrations to change. By creating a paper trail that gives preservation highest priority, it provides a record activists can use to prevail in future lawsuits aimed at ending activities they oppose.

Pandering to a small clique of elitists, the Clinton administration has narrowed the Service's political constituency until it could sit on the head of a pin. That's the name of the game in preservation politics these days. As environmentalism becomes more extreme and less representative, its adherents pursue their agendas in ways that avoid public debate. And as Congress evinces growing hostility toward a preservation purism that abuses property rights and favors insects and rodents over people, these perfectionists depend less on legislation than they once did. Rather seeking new laws, they bend old ones, relying on favorable decisions from magistrates, who, coming from the same privileged class, share their arrogance.

After all, the last thing they want is to let the people decide.

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CLINTON SHARPSHOOTERS TAKE AIM AT HUNTERS

By ALSTON CHASE

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