



Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge

Communication and Interpretive Plan

FINAL
January 12, 2016





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INTRODUCTION

This communications and interpretive plan is the beginning of an evolutionary process that will guide the development of future interpretive exhibits, educational programming, and outreach efforts at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. It represents the first step towards attracting new visitors, engaging urban audiences, strengthening relationships with urban partners, and enhancing the visitor experience at the Refuge. Intended to provide clear direction that engages all refuge staff and volunteers, this document identifies the vision, goals, objectives, and messages that will direct the development of urban partnerships, programs and facility improvements.

This plan also includes conceptual design ideas for refreshing facilities, including the visitor center, its retail store space, indoor and outdoor interpretive exhibits, and other public gathering areas that will increase the Refuge's visibility and involvement in the community.

At the startup meeting in November of 2014, the design team members collected information, ideas, and recommendations during an on-site field trip and workshop with Friends staff and board members, agency staff, and other existing partners. This document incorporates the vision, ideas, and opinions of many people from the community, from Friends of the Wildlife Corridor to community leaders in local government, parks, schools, and tourism.

Significance

Situated along the last bends of the Rio Grande deep in the south of Texas, Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge is located at the heart of a unique ecological crossroads where the climates of the desert Southwest, Gulf coast, temperate north, and the subtropical meet. Home to many rare species found nowhere else in North America, the refuge is celebrated for its unusual birds, mammals, butterflies, and plants.

Established in 1943 for the protection of migratory birds, the refuge covers more than 2,000 acres. It protects a remnant subtropical forest of the Rio Grande Valley, most of which has been lost to agricultural clearing and urban sprawl in a quickly developing area.

As an undisturbed island of rich biodiversity in a sea of cleared and altered lands, the refuge offers visitors a rare glimpse of how the area once looked before it was settled and a peaceful refuge from the rush of modern life.

Birding and ecotourism have a big impact on the Rio Grande Valley, bringing in \$463 million annually. The refuge is located at the junction of two major bird migratory flyways, including the northern-most extent of a migratory route used by many birds from Central and South America, and is considered one of the top birding destinations in the world. More than 400 bird species can be found at Santa Ana, one of the largest bird lists in the entire National Wildlife Refuge System.



Facilities

Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge has a visitor center that houses administrative offices, interpretive exhibits, an auditorium, and a nature store run by the Friends of the Wildlife Corridor. Exterior spaces immediately adjacent to the visitor center offer a variety of opportunities for visitors to enjoy and appreciate the Refuge, such as feeding stations, native plant gardens and interpretive panels. The refuge also has 12 miles of trails with overlooks and photo blinds as well as spectacular views of the landscape, the Rio Grande, and wildlife from its 40-foot viewing tower and 100-foot rope bridge canopy walk.

Although the visitor center serves the needs of the refuge's current audiences, it is not very welcoming to new visitors. Built in the 1970s, the bunker-like concrete building and dark breezeway is not very inviting. Visitors often miss the Iron Ranger payment station and have trouble locating the bathrooms. In addition, although the Border Patrol contact station was placed inside the breezeway to improve relationships with locals and visitors, it can seem intimidating to some.

Once inside the visitor center, the long foyer does not do much to draw people into the heart of the building, and the nature store seems to dominate the central area. The information desk does not function as well as it could for staff and volunteers, and the exhibits need updating and better spatial and thematic organization.

Visitation

Approximately 131,900 people visit Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge each year. The majority of visitors—64 percent—were non-local visitors who traveled more than one thousand miles to visit the refuge and other area destinations. Past visitor studies show that the Refuge has done an excellent job of providing recreational opportunities and programs to its existing core audience.

“Excellent habitat, friendly and helpful personnel, generally not crowded, good walking trails, and easy access to viewable birds and wildlife makes this refuge unique.”

— from *National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Survey 2012*

However, only 36 percent of people who visited Santa Ana lived within 50 miles of the refuge.

Local Demographics

Santa Ana NWR is located in Hidalgo County, one of the fastest growing counties in Lower Rio Grande Valley, a region with nearly 1.3 million people. The population in Hidalgo County is young, with a median age of 27. Nine out of ten residents in Hidalgo County are of Hispanic origin. About 35 percent live below the poverty level, and public transportation options are limited. Most of the local population lives in urban areas.

Reach of the Refuge

As part of the South Texas Refuge Complex, Santa Ana NWR has the potential to host large numbers of visitors from diverse backgrounds and provide the opportunity to engage urban audiences with conservation. The South Texas Refuge Complex includes lands located throughout more than 35 Texas communities with about 1.3 million people. An additional 1.7 million people live in the Mexican communities of Reynosa and Matamoros.

There are several urban communities within a 25-mile radius of the refuge, including McAllen, Pharr, San Juan, Alamo, Hidalgo, Mission, Edinburg, Donna, Weslaco, and Mercedes, as well as Reynosa in Tamaulipas, México.





SERVICE VISION, RECOMMENDATIONS & STANDARDS

This plan aligns with the work done by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at the federal level in response to changing realities and the need for a new approach for the 21st Century. It outlines how Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge will meet the vision and standards set forth in two guiding documents: *Conserving the Future: Wildlife Refuges and the Next Generation* and the *Urban Wildlife Conservation Program Standards of Excellence*. These two documents reflect the work of many U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employees from across the country to create a new vision for the future of America's national wildlife refuges.

“The conservation landscape has changed, the playing field has changed and the stakes have changed. Human demands on the environment combined with environmental stressors are creating an urgent need for conservation choices. The scale of issues and challenges we face is unprecedented and impacts us all.”

— from *Conserving the Future: Wildlife Refuges and the Next Generation*

Conserving the Future: Wildlife Refuges and the Next Generation

Completed in 2011, *Conserving the Future* articulates the new vision for the National Wildlife Refuge System:

“We seek to make wildlife conservation more relevant to American citizens and foster their engagement in and support of the National Wildlife Refuge System.”

Conserving the Future provides seven guiding vision statements and 24 recommendations organized under three main goals: Conserving the Future: Wildlife and Wildlands, A Connected Conservation Constituency, and Leading Conservation into the Future. The recommendations include expanding community partnerships; encouraging volunteerism; embracing urban America; telling the conservation story in new ways with the help of technology; enhancing opportunities to connect people and nature; and embracing, elevating and holding our interpretation and environmental education programs to the highest scientific standards.



Urban Wildlife Conservation Program Standards of Excellence

The goal of the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program is to engage urban communities as partners in wildlife conservation. Santa Ana NWR has the potential to host large numbers of visitors from diverse backgrounds and provide the opportunity to engage urban audiences with fish and wildlife conservation.

Eight standards serve as a framework for collaboration among the Service and urban communities, both on and off Service lands.

1. Know and Relate to the Community
2. Connect Urban People with Nature via Stepping Stones of Engagement
3. Build Partnerships
4. Be a Community Asset
5. Ensure Adequate Long-Term Resources
6. Provide Equitable Access
7. Ensure Visitors Feel Safe and Welcome
8. Model Sustainability



SANTA ANA NWR VISION, GOALS & OBJECTIVES

Vision

The new vision for Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge builds upon the earlier vision expressed in its 1997 Comprehensive Conservation Plan: “Santa Ana will continue to be a national model by providing compatible high quality wildlife-dependent visitor opportunities.” It should also align with the visions and recommendations in the Service’s *Conserving the Future* and *Urban Wildlife Conservation Program Standards of Excellence*.

Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge will take a leadership role in promoting wildlife conservation as a key community value by expanding its partnerships and programs and creating meaningful connections among the region’s rich mosaics of habitats, green spaces, wildlife and communities.

Goals & Objectives

1. Engage the urban communities within a 25-mile radius of Santa Ana NWR to better understand their perceptions of nature and the refuge, and to raise awareness about the refuge and its role in local and national conservation.
 - a. Intensify local promotion of Santa Ana NWR to increase awareness of, and a desire to visit, the refuge within the local urban community, especially among children, tweens and teens, families and Spanish speakers (Recommendation 13).
 - b. Lead urban residents to Santa Ana NWR and the South Texas Refuge Complex through incremental experiences that build confidence and interest in nature.
 - c. Expand the urban wildlife refuge partnerships with school districts and identify new partnership opportunities among demographically and geographically varied local communities in the region (Recommendation 13).
 - d. Create a bilingual strategic communications plan that educates the public about the Service and the refuge’s mission and accomplishments, promotes the value of natural areas and native plants and animals, and sparks local grassroots conservation movements (Recommendation 14). This should include both traditional and online media, such as social media, refuge websites, and QR (Quick Response) codes.



- e. Strengthen and nurture Friends of the Wildlife Corridor and other community partnerships (Recommendation 11).
 - f. Develop a strategy for recruiting, coordinating and supporting a more self-sustaining volunteer corps, while creating new opportunities for community involvement and implementing refuge priorities (Recommendation 12). This should include youth employment, job shadow, and leadership opportunities.
 - g. Where possible, provide technical assistance and materials for urban habitat restoration projects that reflect a community need and a conservation priority of the South Texas Refuge Complex (2015 Texas Gulf Coast Emphasis Area Conservation Priority Objective).
 - h. Provide an online bilingual resource library that includes State-approved curricula, activities, and wildlife and habitat resources to enhance educational, recreational, and restoration opportunities for teachers, community leaders, and the urban residents (2015 Texas Gulf Coast Conservation Emphasis Area Priority Objective).
2. Ensure that Santa Ana NWR is a welcoming, safe and accessible for visitors, and offers a variety of ways to enjoy, learn about, appreciate and help conserve refuge wildlife and wildlands.
- a. Continue to successfully serve the refuge's traditional audiences, including birders, naturalists and Winter Texans, and enhance their visitor experience.
 - b. Overcome barriers to appealing to local visitors, including modifying visitor center hours, transportation and accessibility to the Refuge and Border Patrol presence (Recommendation 16).
 - c. Update visitor center interpretive exhibits and infrastructure (Recommendation 18).
 - d. Develop an interpretation strategy that builds upon current Service standards and guidelines, takes advantage of multiple modes of delivering messages, reaches diverse audiences, and measures effectiveness (Recommendation 19).
 - e. Develop an environmental education strategy that inventories existing efforts, identifies priorities for investment of staff and funds and outlines basic standards for the refuge. (Recommendation 20). This should include identifying local priorities and school districts such as Pharr-San Juan-Alamo and McAllen Independent School Districts, developing State-accredited curricula and providing environmental education training for teachers.
 - f. Partner with state fish and wildlife agencies, other governmental bodies, conservation organizations and businesses to support and enhance appropriate recreation opportunities on the refuge (Recommendation 18).



TARGET AUDIENCES

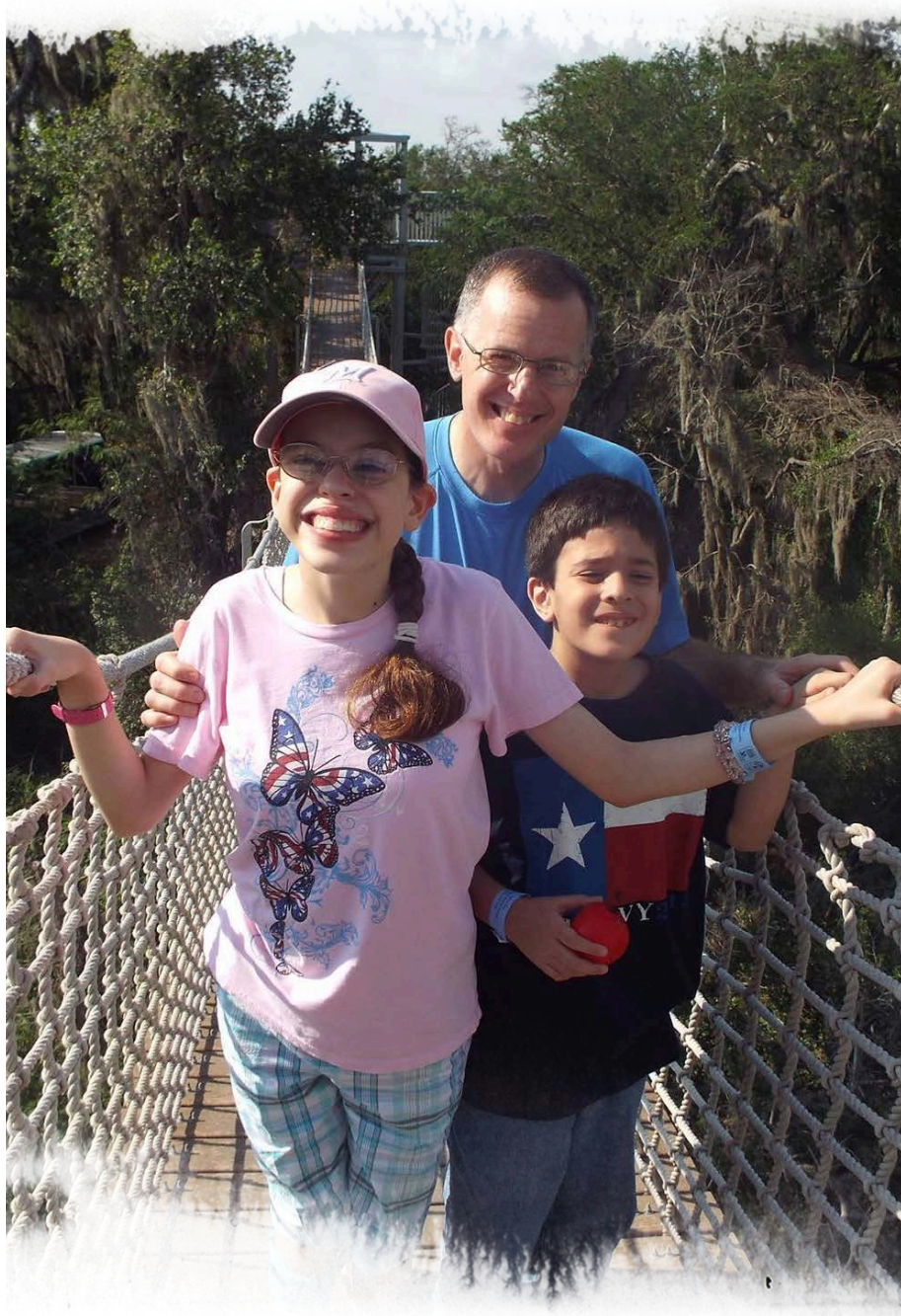
Conserving the Future expressly points out that engaging audiences who have never visited or even heard of the National Wildlife Refuge System, is critical to ensuring that future generations understand the value that the system provides. At the same time, however, traditional audiences must continue to be cultivated. Both groups are important stakeholders and necessary to meeting the long-term goals. To achieve its objectives, the refuge must engage both current audiences and new groups.

Conserving the Future recommends placing particular emphasis on reaching the following potential new audiences:

1. Culturally diverse Americans aged 18-34
2. Those reaching retirement age
3. Urban dwellers
4. Schools

Santa Ana is currently using a variety of strategies to engage two of these key audiences—retirees and schools—through its tailored programs, amenities and its existing partnerships with local Independent School Districts.

However, urban dwellers and culturally diverse Americans between the ages of 18-34 are currently an untapped potential. To attract new audiences, the refuge must offer relevant and dynamic opportunities for continued engagement in order to spark their desire to learn more about the refuge and plan a visit.



Reaching New Audiences

With only 36 percent of area residents visiting the refuge, locals living in adjacent urban areas are a major target audience. Most—nearly 90 percent—are Hispanic.

One factor that may contribute to low local turnout is the low number of Hispanic role models that expose youth to wildlife conservation in the Valley. There is a need to increase the number of such leaders and role models to give Hispanic youth, and their parents, the exposure needed to explore the opportunities in the field of conservation.

Hispanic Outreach

On October 1, 2015, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dan Ashe signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the League of United Latin American Citizens, (LULAC), the nation's oldest Latino advocacy group. "Together, we will work to increase participation by Latino families and kids in outdoor recreation and conservation," said Ashe.

The goal is to strengthen the relationship of the Latino Community to its natural heritage and recognize the historic role of Latinos in protecting and preserving the land, water and wildlife of our nation and in shaping our economic and cultural identity.

These values suggest that programs and interpretation that focus on family and relationships are likely to appeal to this untapped target audience.

The Director also recognized the importance of partnerships with Latino outdoor organizations such as HECHO (Hispanics Enjoying Camping Hunting and Outdoors). Another like-minded organizations include the Hispanic Outreach Access Foundation, which created Latino Conservation Week. Its goals are:

1. Provide Latino families and youth with outdoor recreation opportunities near their homes.
2. Demonstrate the Latino community's commitment to conservation.
3. Partner with Hispanic community leaders and organizations to support local and national conservation issues.
4. Inform policymakers, the media, and the general English- and Spanish-speaking public of the Latino community's views on important local and national conservation issues.

Latino Outdoors is another organization that has developed goals for involving Latinos in conservation. These include:

1. Identify, connect, and support the Latino outdoor leadership infrastructure

to build community and act as support and resource network.

2. Rely on the growing community to provide mentoring opportunities to youth and young professionals.
3. Amplify programming through the existing social infrastructure and highlight the value of family-oriented programming for Latino communities.
4. Tell our stories as we define what it means to have a Latino/a identity in relation to the outdoors.

The Diversity and Outreach Branch of the Forest Service has developed guidelines for developing Hispanic outreach programs. Although not all Hispanic communities alike, they often share important similarities, including:

- Importance of the family and the role of the father
- Emphasis on personal relationships and social etiquette
- Religion in daily life

“Beyond just getting youth outdoors, we want to highlight and support a variety of pathways for youth to pursue this as a career with culturally responsive role models, especially valuing the knowledge of our elders.”

— latinooutdoors.org



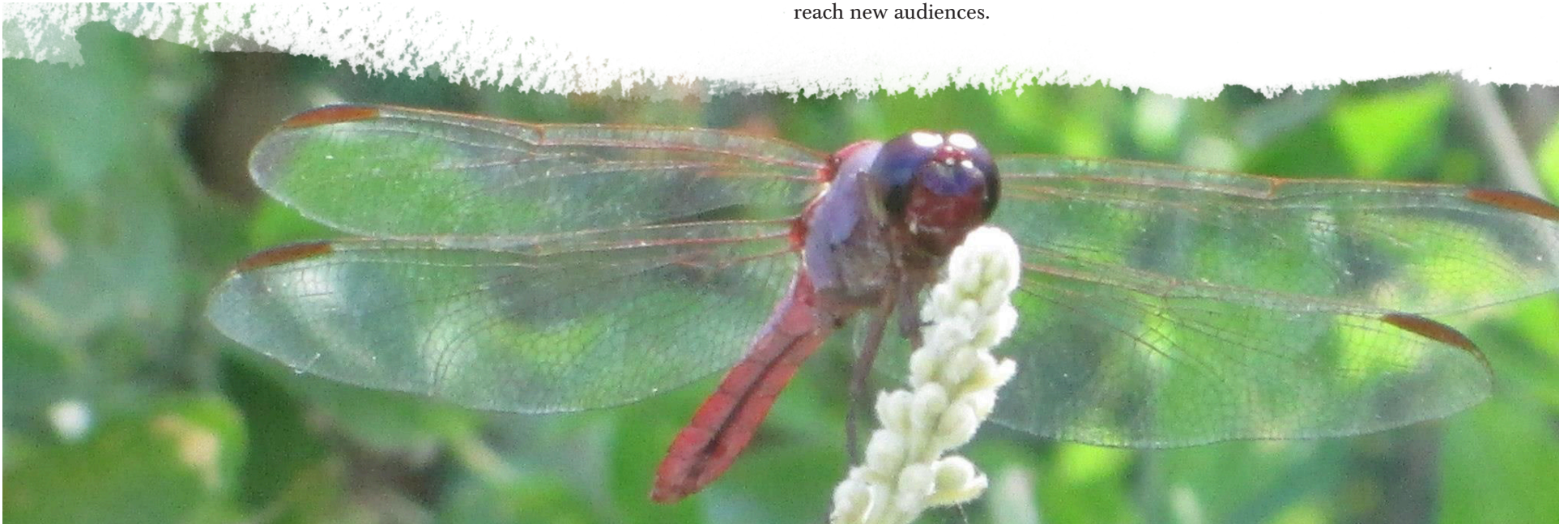
Hispanic Market Research

Studies suggest that the Hispanic general public was somewhat more ecologically minded than other members of the general public. They also indicate that Hispanics will be a major influence on the future of the conservation movement because of their greater cultural tendency of living in harmony with nature. This research suggested Hispanics are less likely to view nature anthropomorphically. In other words, they value nature more for its reflective and inspirational quality than competitive or sports-oriented recreational opportunities. They are more likely to seek nature for moments of tranquility, serenity, and connection than achievement such as miles hiked or birds counted. For more information, see *Hispanic Marketing* (2011) by Felipe and Betty Ann Korzenny.

Maintaining Current Audiences

While targeting new audiences is a major goal, it is very important not to take core constituents for granted, or assume the same outreach strategies will work for all of them. Birders, naturalists and Winter Texans often have different reasons for visiting and different needs.

Encouraging a sense of ownership and commitment among current audiences not only ensures their continued support, it also increases their interest and participation in volunteer programs, friends groups and community partnerships (Recommendations 11 and 12). Creating and maintaining committed supporters also creates informal brand ambassadors that can help promote the refuge and reach new audiences.



THEMES & MESSAGING

The themes and messages proposed in this plan are a blend of traditional and new messaging designed to appeal to urban audiences. They are organized by audiences and topics and align with draft messaging currently being developed at the federal level as part of the Service's new communication plan.

The overarching theme for the National Wildlife Refuge System, as presented in the Service's Draft Communication Plan, is: A "New World" Right in Our Backyard. A suitable localized version of that theme that encompasses all audiences for Santa Ana NWR would be:

Explore South Texas nature and discover rare plants and animals right here at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge.

Messages should be communicated and interpreted in engaging and accessible ways that are appropriate for different segments of the target audiences. Also, given the refuge's location along an international border, these messages should be bilingual whenever possible.





Themes and Messages for Refuge Exhibits and Programs

Themes and messaging at the refuge should highlight the uniqueness of the refuge's plants, animals and habitats in a way that inspires visitors to return, explore further and learn more about the refuge, the Service and the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Santa Ana NWR and South Texas Refuge Complex **Discover a whole new world**

One of the most biologically rich areas in North America, Santa Ana NWR is an ideal place to view wildlife and connect with nature. Come explore its unique habitats and discover rare plant and animal species found nowhere else in North America.

- Santa Ana NWR preserves the natural treasures of the Rio Grande Valley. Here you'll find a wide variety of birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, butterflies and dragonflies.
- Walking is one of the best ways to experience the scenic beauty and tranquility the refuge has to offer.
- One of the best birding spots in the United States, Santa Ana offers you the chance to see more than half of the bird species in North America, which come to South Texas to nest, rest and feed.
- More than 300 different species of butterflies have been recorded at Santa Ana NWR.

Mosaics of habitats support a wide variety of plant and animal species

Because Santa Ana NWR is located at the heart of a unique ecological crossroads, it is an undisturbed island of rich biodiversity in a sea of cleared and altered lands.

- Santa Ana NWR is located along the most southern stretch of the Rio Grande in an area where subtropical, Gulf Coast, Great Plains, and desert regions meet, creating nearly a dozen different habitat types.
 - Subtropical conditions support plant and animal species that don't occur to the north, such as Sabal palms, Texas ebony, and bald cypress as well as a variety of colorful birds, including green jay, kiskadee, chachalaca, altamira oriole, ferruginous pygmy owl, and gray hawk.
 - Desert-like conditions influence habitats that attract species like the yucca, barrel cactus, cenizo, lotebush, cactus wren, verdin, and Texas tortoise.
 - The temperate influence of the Great Plains draws species such as black willow, sugar hackberry, northern mockingbirds and migrating raptors such as osprey, broadwing hawk, and northern harrier.



FWS/Cristina De La Garza

- Gulf Coast habitat attracts waterfowl, shorebirds and wading birds including black-bellied and fulvous whistling duck, mottled duck, blue-winged, green-winged, and cinnamon teal, least grebe, anhinga, tricolored heron, white ibis, lesser yellowlegs, long-billed dowitcher and least tern.
- Tamaulipan thorn forest is an ecosystem unique to south Texas and northern Mexico. A thick tangle of thorny shrubs, mesquite trees and Texas ebony, the thorn forest provides excellent habitat and cover for many animals.
- Willow Lakes and Pintail Lakes are refuge wetlands that support lush semitropical woodlands and a diversity of birds and other wildlife.
 - There are four distinct plant and animal communities along Willow Lakes trail. Watch for Northern Beardless-tyrannulet nesting in the Spanish moss and great kiskadees hunting insects above Willow Lake.
 - Pintail Lakes: Look for elusive sora rails or least bitterns hidden in cattails and vermilion flycatchers in the tree tops.
- With over 95 percent of the original habitat in the lower Rio Grande delta cleared or altered, Santa Ana NWR protects part of a vital wildlife corridor along the Rio Grande that includes the remaining semi-tropical thorn forest that once dominated the area.

Santa Ana NWR and the South Texas Refuge Complex

Santa Ana NWR is part of the South Texas Refuge Complex, which was established to ensure that the unique biological richness of South Texas is preserved for the benefit of wildlife and people.

- The South Texas Refuge Complex includes the Laguna Atascosa, Lower Rio Grande Valley and Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuges. These three refuges are found on the most southern tip of Texas where the Rio Grande meets the Gulf of Mexico.
- Combined, these refuges create a much-needed wildlife corridor that includes approximately 190,000 acres and provide important habitat for the many species that rest, nest, feed and live here. Many of these species can only be found in deep South Texas, including the highly endangered ocelot and several types of birds that draw wildlife watchers from around the world.
- Santa Ana NWR was established in 1943 for the protection of migratory birds for the benefit of wildlife and the enjoyment of people. Thousands of birds from the Central and Mississippi flyways funnel through the area on their way to and from Central and South America.



US Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Wildlife Refuge System **Conserving Your Wildlife is What We Do**

We are the nation's only system of public lands and waters dedicated to conserving wildlife now and in the future. The future of wildlife is dependent on this work.

- The Refuge System has been conserving and protecting our nation's wildlife since 1903. There are more than 560 wildlife refuges and 38 wetland management districts, covering 150 million acres of land nationwide.
- Texas has 20 refuges at key wildlife areas throughout the state. Santa Ana NWR is part of the South Texas Refuge Complex, which is known worldwide for its biological diversity.
- Our conservation professionals are dedicated to the Refuge System and understand that in order to have healthy people, we must have a healthy planet. This will ensure that America's rich wild habitat is maintained and available for people to enjoy. Let us share our passion with you! Explore the wild places that Santa Ana NWR and South Texas Refuge Complex have to offer.
- Staff and volunteers at the refuge are your neighbors, friends and relatives. You can help us conserve wildlife by creating habitat in your own back yard and by visiting, volunteering, or supporting the refuge.

Urban Messaging

Locals are the main audience for messaging at urban refuge partnership sites. These messages are intended to generate interest in conservation and encourage families to visit the refuge.

The Value of Nature and Outdoor Recreation

Connecting with Nature Can Improve Your Life

Unplug and discover the perks of nature at Santa Ana NWR. Natural areas provide opportunities for people to stay active, boost creativity and relax from hectic schedules, improving mental and physical health in the process.

- Outdoor recreation and access to nature play a vital role in the physical, psychological, spiritual well-being, health and development of people of all ages, especially children, who tend to be healthier, happier, have increased creativity and better social skills.
- With over 95 percent of the original habitat in the lower Rio Grande delta cleared or altered, Santa Ana NWR protects part of a vital wildlife corridor along the Rio Grande that includes the remaining semi-tropical thorn forest that once dominated the area.

Wildlife Refuges are Valuable for Communities and People

The National Wildlife Refuge System provides jobs, supports local economies and provides places where people can enjoy healthy activities. We're dedicated to supporting communities, lifestyles, cultures and economies.

- Birding and ecotourism have a big impact on the Rio Grande Valley, bringing in \$463 million annually.
- Explore your natural heritage and connect with family and friends in a peaceful setting at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge.
- Green spaces provide places for people to stay active, boost creativity and relax from hectic schedules.
- Learn how to create your own personal refuge with native plants and wildlife-friendly gardening ideas at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge.
- Wildlife refuges support clean air and water for area communities.

Visit Your Local Wildlife Refuge

Discover a Whole New World, Right in Your Backyard

Santa Ana NWR is a whole different world waiting for you to explore, full of plants and wildlife you may not have seen before. Come see what the Lower Rio Grande Valley once looked before it was settled.

- Nature is a short drive away. Santa Ana NWR is less than 25-miles away from the McAllen–Edinburg–Mission metropolitan area and may be much closer to you.
- Santa Ana NWR offers a wide variety of physical activities people can enjoy in the great outdoors, such as walking, birding, photography, and spending time with family while enjoying nature.
- Discover the natural treasures of the Rio Grande Valley, home to rare species found nowhere else in North America. At Santa Ana NWR, you'll find a wide variety of birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, butterflies and dragonflies, including about 450 different plants, 45 mammal species, 22 varieties of fish and 50 species of reptiles and amphibians.





STRATEGIES & TACTICS

To build the next generation of refuge supporters, the Service's Draft Communication Plan recommends strategies designed to take target audiences on a journey from their everyday world to the refuge.

The specific tactics chosen to support these strategies were informed by the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program's Standards of Excellence. The result is a three-pronged strategy that aligns the standards with Santa Ana's current program goals and resources:

1. Meet Audiences Where They Are
 - Know and Relate to the Community
 - Connect Urban People with Nature via Stepping Stones of Engagement
2. Build Interest Through Engagement
 - Be a Community Asset
 - Build Partnerships
 - Ensure Adequate Long-Term Resources
3. Create Unique On-Site Experiences
 - Ensure Visitors Feel Safe and Welcome
 - Provide Equitable Access
 - Model Sustainability

1. Meet Audiences Where They Are

Connect with—and learn more about—urban audiences by creating a refuge presence in places where they already feel comfortable.

Before you can connect urban residents with nature, you first must understand what is important to them. Working with existing programs and providing interpretation within the community will increase the comfort levels of all involved, refuge staff and urban residents alike.

Santa Ana NWR has already developed strong urban refuge programs, including successful schoolyard habitat projects with the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District (ISD). Schoolyard habitats are currently being developed at Jack McKeever, Sorensen Elementary, and Dr William Long Elementary Schools, with plans to expand to other schools within the ISD in the near future. This partnership will be used as a model to develop similar partnerships in other school districts to enhance education opportunities and urban habitats.

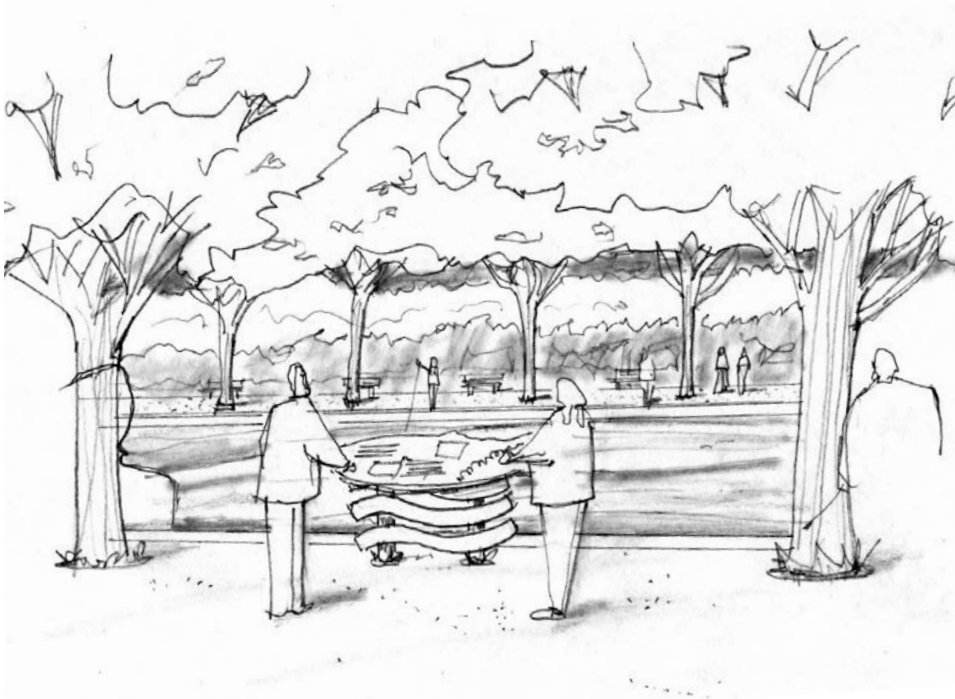




Santa Ana NWR is also currently in the planning stages with several other possible long-term partners, including local municipalities, non-profits and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to find suitable locations and fine-tune messages that will engage urban audiences. These include the cities of Alamo and McAllen, especially their parks and recreation departments and their Chambers of Commerce.

Suggestions for activities included local events, such as birding and butterfly festivals, farmers markets and Neighborhood Growers Association plant sales. Possible off-site habitat and interpretive areas include parks and trails, libraries, and lodging and transportation hubs such as hotels, RV parks, bus stations and the airport. Other opportunities and ideas included:

- McAllen Convention Center is an ideal place for interpretive exhibits and programs intended for both visitors and locals. These would align with the convention center's own goals, which is expanding to include more amenities for locals and visitors, including a new RV park near the McAllen Nature Center just for birders. In addition to new hotels and shopping, the convention center also plans to include a new trail to the nature center. For example, the man-made pond at the convention center is an ideal place for programs and interpretation about urban fishing. And since the pond has evolved over time into its own ecosystem, it also provides a great location to interpret ecosystem change and the importance of wildlife habitat in urban settings.
- Enhance unused plots within the Cities of McAllen and Alamo with native plants to create a network of green spaces out of unused open space. These "pocket parks" could be interpreted as mosaics of native landscapes and serve as vital stepping stones, both figuratively and literally, to the refuge.
- Hike and Bike trails provide a good connected network for families and users to recreate outside. Many are along side levees and irrigation canals and provide a great opportunity to make a connection to native plants, especially since the City of McAllen is looking to incorporate more native plants to reduce maintenance and water use. Adding shade structures would encourage visitors to view wayside interpretation that could built excitement and interest in visiting the refuge.





2. Building Interest Through Engagement

Enhance existing programs and create new ones that will capture the attention of urban audiences.

Revising or creating programs that appeal to urban audiences requires an in-depth knowledge of the needs, desires, and motivations of local residents. Becoming a community asset and partnering with other local agencies and organizations is the best way to acquire that knowledge. Community outreach programs that provide opportunities for audiences to interact with refuge staff and spokespeople should be a top priority.

“We do not want to ‘recreate the wheel’ or do programming for the sake of doing new programs. Many good programs already exist and there are a variety of organizations working to get more Latino communities connected with conservation. Often what is missing is some connectivity and extra support.”

— *Latino Outdoors website*

Online Engagement

Many of our target audiences, particularly youth, interact online, and McAllen has more smart phones per capita than most places. Social media and online activities, such as contests and games, are one way to capture the attention of this critical audience. These could be linked to refuge programs and events and encourage them to participate.

Several social media tools are approved for use by refuge headquarters, including Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, and Instagram. Social media should be used in accordance with Department of the Interior social media policy and social media guidelines, which are at www.fws.gov/home/socialmedia.

Facebook is the Service’s primary tool for interacting with citizens. Daily posts are recommended, three to five posts a week at a minimum. Other social media tools should be used as staff time and resources allow.

Local Schools

Santa Ana is currently involved in a high level of engagement with students through school group tours, district partnerships, and teacher training. These environmental education programs are a high priority, and should be evaluated, improved and expanded where possible.



Churches

Many Hispanics value religion in daily life, so outreach to churches and religious groups are ideal locations and groups to promote the value of the refuge as a place for contemplation and tranquility and encourage visits. They are also great opportunities to advertise family-oriented programming such as Senior Day, Mom & Tots activities, and other multigenerational programming.

Community Centers

With the emphasis on family, places and organizations where families go for basic services are great places to promote the value of the refuge as place to connect and improve the physical and mental health of all family members and to advertise family-oriented programming. These places and organizations could become partners in a variety of programs and events, such as habitat restoration and pollinator gardens.

Friends of the Wildlife Corridor

Enlisting the help of core constituents such as friends groups in the refuge's urban community outreach efforts is one way to keep established audiences engaged while extending the outreach capabilities of refuge volunteers and staff. They could be encouraged to meet with urban audiences to share their excitement for and knowledge of the refuge.

To help keep current core audiences engaged in the refuge's urban community outreach efforts Santa Ana currently has an active and engaged friends group, the. The main fundraising support for both the Santa Ana and Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuges, the group runs the nature store at the visitor center. Sustaining efforts to keep this highly motivated audience engaged is important.

While targeting new audiences is a major goal, it is very important not to take core constituents for granted, or assume the same outreach strategies will work for all of them. Birders, naturalists and Winter Texans often have different reasons for visiting and different needs.



3. Creating Unique On-Site Experiences

Enhance or supplement on-site programs and update facilities to maintain core audiences, increase visits and cultivate repeat visitors.

The visitor center is a gateway to the refuge. Its exhibits and audiovisual programs introduce visitors to its wonders and help prepare them for a rich experience out on the refuge. The main goal of interpretation and staff interactions should be to encourage visitors to get out and explore the refuge itself.

It's important to have the visitor feel that the refuge is a safe place to explore, and first impressions are very important. Recruiting more staff and volunteers from the local community will help make visitors feel more welcome. Other important factors in making visitors feel welcome include ensuring adequate long-term resources for both programming and for equal access to the refuge.

“Beyond just being ‘recipients of programming’ we want to see ourselves reflected in leadership and decision-making capacities of the conservation movement.”

— *Latino Outdoors website*

Despite the age of the facility and its exhibits, Santa Ana's visitor center currently meets the needs of the refuge's traditional audiences. However, to attract new visitors and meet the vision and standards recently adopted by the Service, the visitor center and its exhibits need upgrading.



APPROACH & WELCOME

The approach to the visitor center should feel more welcoming. Currently, there is little to encourage visitors to approach the building. Its dark breezeway and bunker-like concrete building need to be lightened, softened and made more approachable. New paint, better lighting, and additional graphics would help make it more welcoming. In addition, improving sightlines from the parking lot to the building, adding wayfinding signs and relocating the iron ranger and Border Patrol office would improve its overall functionality.

Large graphics and welcoming text on the building itself, as well as a stylized river graphic on the cement ground would let visitors know they have arrived at a friendly place that welcomes them. Additional graphics within the breezeway would help draw them into the visitor center and out onto the refuge itself.

Less concrete and more nature-scaping would help soften the building, while removing or pruning some of the existing vegetation could make it more friendly and approachable. More seating, both inside and out of the breezeway as well as on the trail, would also help make the refuge approach more welcoming.

Art, such as mosaics or murals, as well as evocative sculptures would create ties to the local community and foster a feeling of inclusion. Simple interpretive elements in the parking lot, along the adjacent Malachite Trail, and outside the building could include teasers and factoids and introduce key messages and themes. These could function as an introductory experience for first-time visitors by focusing on information that will help visitors unaccustomed to natural environments feel more comfortable exploring the refuge.

CONTACT STATIONS

Once inside, visitors are greeted by staff and volunteers at a new welcome desk that is closer to the entrance and wraps around the outside of an existing office. Two other smaller contact stations allow staff and volunteers to interact with visitors without a physical barrier. When not staffed, these areas function as exhibit spaces with storage areas. The old desk will be removed, and the windows on the existing “fish bowl” office could be tinted to provide privacy for staff and volunteers and to hide office clutter. Hiring a professional office organizer to help develop workflow and storage solutions would maximize available space and resolve clutter issues.



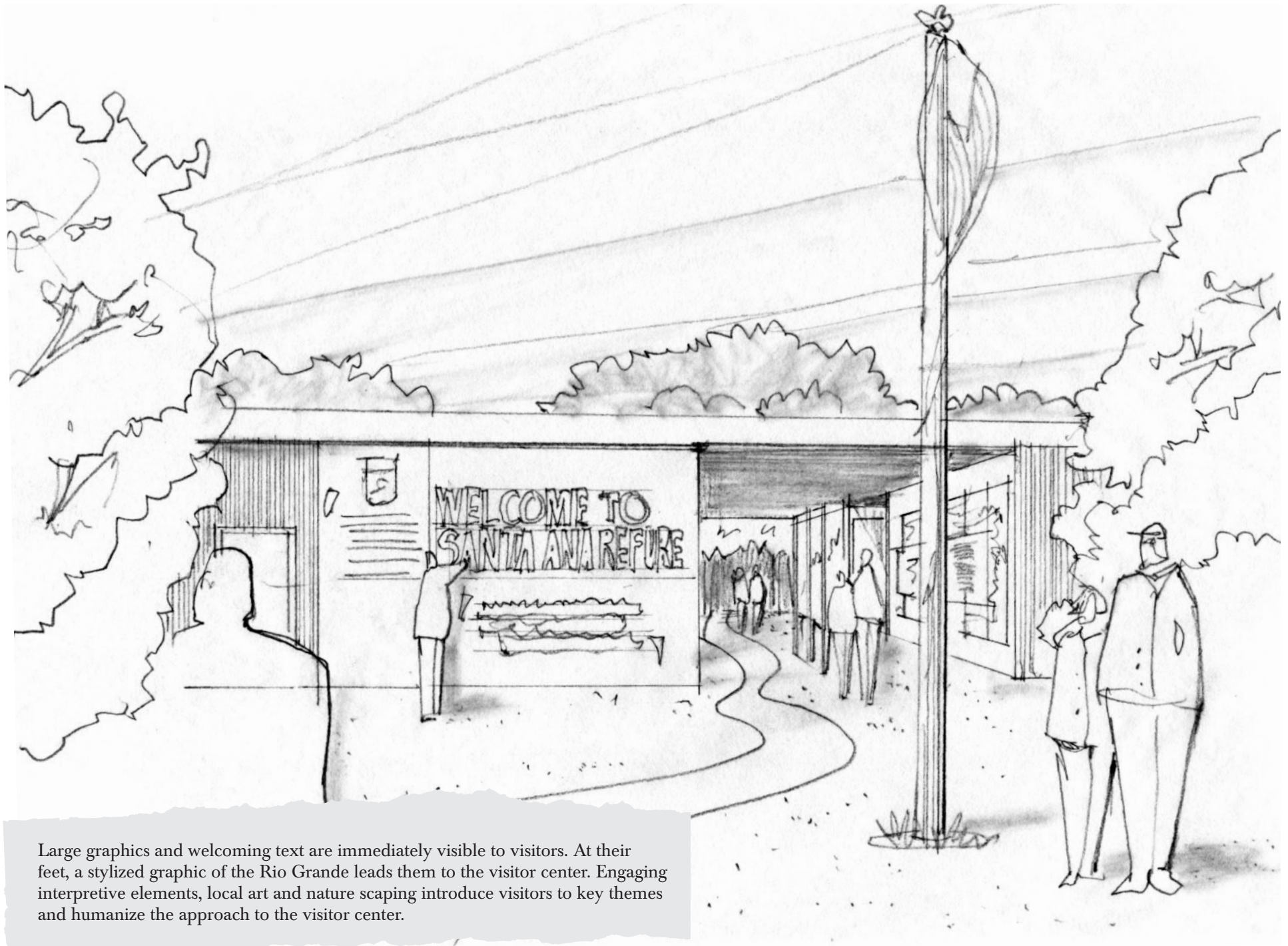
AUDITORIUM

Relatively simple changes to the auditorium could make the space more welcoming and functional, such as improving storage, unbolting the seats, changing lighting, updating speakers, and moving the projector and podium to the back wall.

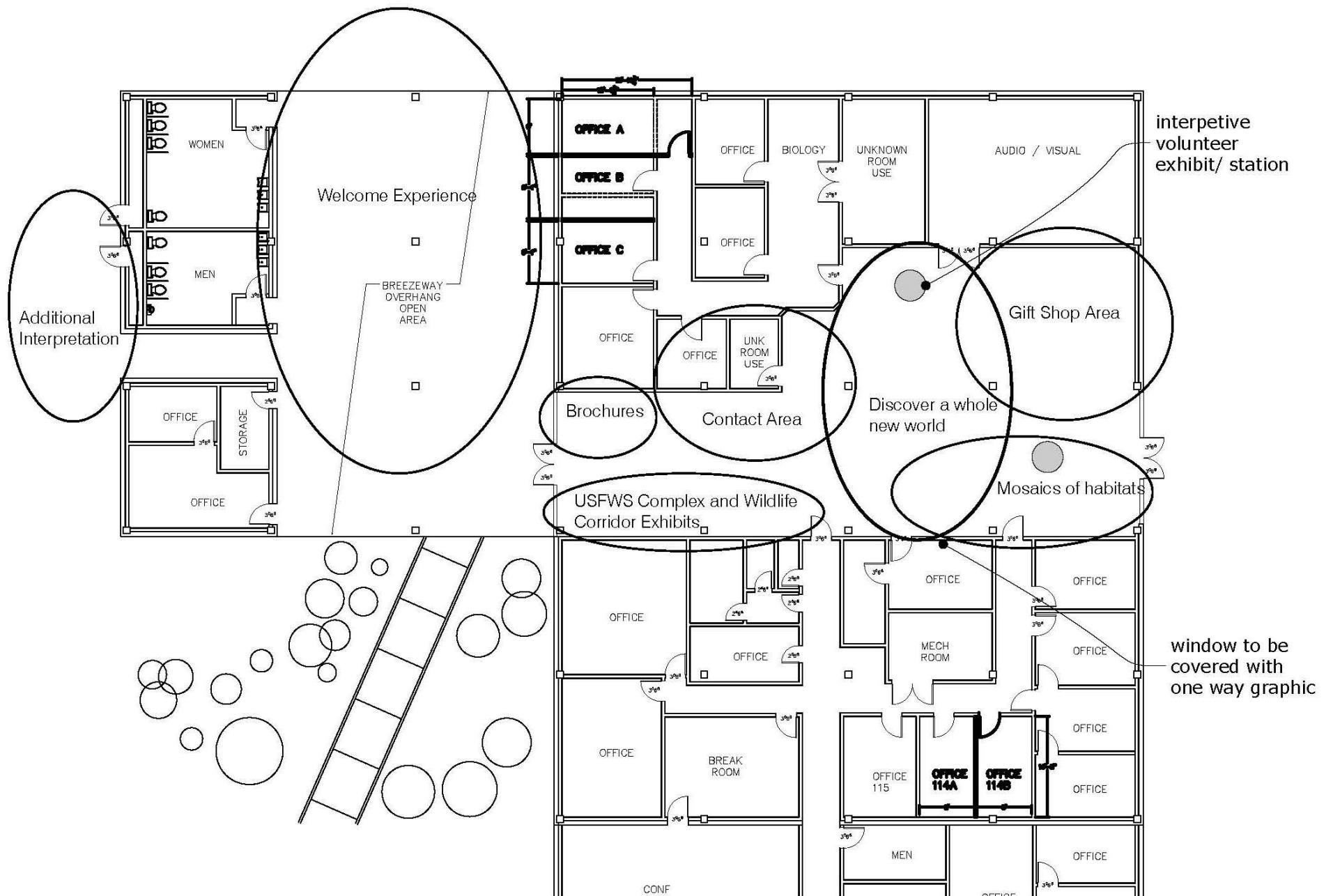
EXPLORE YOUR REFUGE

Exhibits and native plantings outside both the front and back doors of the visitor center could be modified or relocated as needed to encourage visitors to explore the refuge by establishing clear sightlines, which would help ease anxieties about walking into the unknown or getting lost. Additional interpretive elements would also help pique visitor curiosity and make them feel safe within the environment. These continue to major decision points that inspire visitors to continue exploring the refuge.





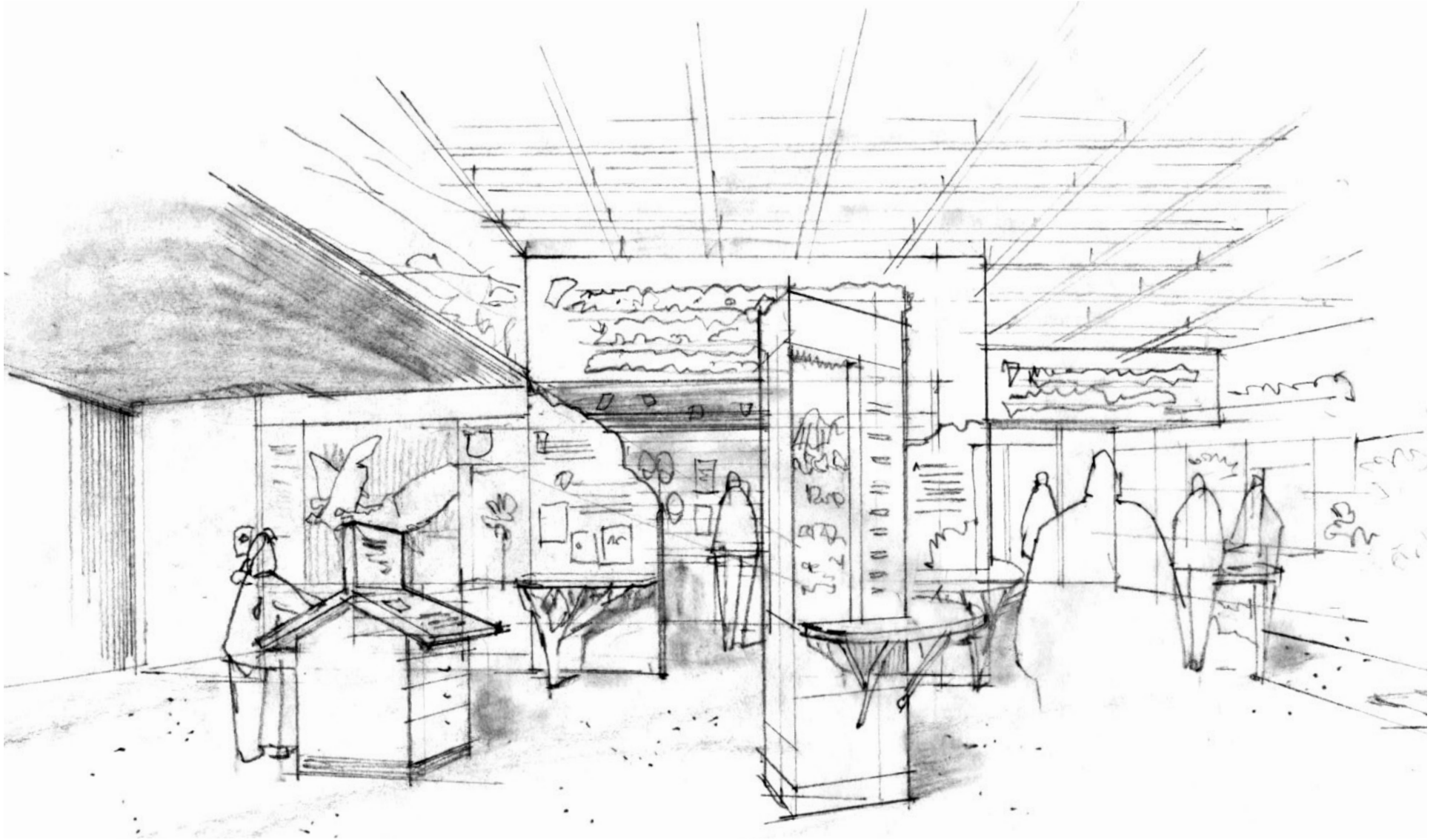
Large graphics and welcoming text are immediately visible to visitors. At their feet, a stylized graphic of the Rio Grande leads them to the visitor center. Engaging interpretive elements, local art and nature scaping introduce visitors to key themes and humanize the approach to the visitor center.



Floor Plan
nts



A new welcome desk relocated closer to the entrance and just outside of an existing office makes it easier to greet visitors and directs the flow towards the exhibits.



Additional informal contact stations allow staff and volunteers to mingle with visitors more easily, providing opportunities to foster stronger relationships. When unstaffed, they function as exhibits and storage space.

APPENDIX

Conserving the Future: Wildlife Refuges and the Next Generation Excerpts

In the summer of 2010, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employees began the process of charting the course for the National Wildlife Refuge System's next decade. Their charge was to build on the foundation of the System's last strategic plan, *Fulfilling the Promise* (1999), and create an updated vision for the future of America's national wildlife refuges.

This new vision seeks to not only further the System's mission, but also to raise the Service's profile in the broader national conservation effort. Strategic, collaborative, science-based landscape conservation – along with effective public outreach, education and environmental awareness – is the only path forward to conserve America's wildlife and wild places. It provides six guiding vision statements and 24 recommendations organized under three main goals

Goal 1. Conserving the Future: Wildlife and Wildlands

Vision 1: We are caring stewards of the world's premier system of lands and waters dedicated to the conservation of fish, wildlife, plants and the healthy, resilient habitats that sustain them. We are catalysts and leaders for conservation, known and trusted for scientific excellence, professionalism and commitment to partnerships and public service.

Vision 2: We embrace a scientific, adaptive, landscape-level approach to conserving, managing and restoring refuge lands and waters, and work to project conservation benefits beyond our boundaries.

Recommendation 1: Incorporate the lessons learned from our first round of CCPs and HMPs into the next generation of conservation plans, and ensure these new plans view refuges in a landscape context and describe actions to project conservation benefits beyond refuge boundaries.

Recommendation 2: Develop a climate change implementation plan for the National Wildlife Refuge System that dovetails with other conservation partners' climate change action plans and specifically provides guidance for conducting vulnerability assessments of climate change impacts to refuge habitats and species as well as direction for innovation in the reduction of emissions and improved energy efficiency on federal lands.

Recommendation 3: Undertake a rapid top-to-bottom assessment of the status of all Refuge System land protection projects and complete a report that will inform development of a plan for the strategic, future growth of the Refuge System.

Recommendation 4: Ensure future land protection efforts are based on explicit priorities, rigorous biological planning and conservation design that support achieving quantifiable conservation and population objectives that are developed in cooperation with state fish and wildlife agencies.

Recommendation 5: Use all of the Service's conservation tools, especially Partners for Fish and Wildlife, to work nationwide to project conservation benefits beyond refuge boundaries, leveraging resources through partnerships with other governmental agencies, conservation groups and private landowners and achieving mutually shared and scientifically sound restoration and protection goals around refuges.

Vision 3: We are committed to a culture of scientific excellence, adhering to the highest standards of integrity and transparency, and are viewed as valued contributors to the broader scientific community.

Recommendation 6: Provide each refuge with access to resources to fully implement the principles of adaptive management.

Recommendation 7: Institutionalize a purpose-driven, nationally coordinated effort to inventory and monitor wildlife and habitats to obtain data that inform planning and management decisions; and develop a state-of-the-art data management system that can be integrated with the broader scientific community and key partners.

Recommendation 8: Create a new, quadrennial report on the state of the Refuge System starting in 2015, as part of an effort to report on the status and trends of wildlife and habitat in the System and ensure that all data gathered are easily accessible and shared widely among the Service, the scientific community and the public.

Recommendation 9: Develop and clearly articulate a research agenda for the Refuge System that is management-oriented and grounded in the testing of assumptions, with the explicit purpose of reducing uncertainty in our planning and management decisions.

Recommendation 10: Become a major contributor to the scientific community by sharing information and data; publishing scientific findings; participating in professional societies; and engaging with local, regional and national organizations and communities to solve conservation problems.

Goal 2. A Connected Conservation Constituency

Vision 4: Engage the American people, so that we better understand their expectations and they are increasingly aware of the National Wildlife Refuge System and its role in conservation.

Recommendation 11: Develop and nurture active and vibrant friends groups or community partnerships for every staffed refuge or refuge complex.

Recommendation 12: Develop a national strategy for recruiting, coordinating and supporting a more self-sustaining volunteer corps, while creating new opportunities for community involvement in implementing refuge priorities.

Recommendation 13: Create an urban refuge initiative that defines excellence in our existing urban refuges, establishes the framework for creating new urban refuge partnerships and implements a refuge presence in 10 demographically and geographically varied cities across America by 2015.

Vision 5: Every employee is fluent in the ecological and societal benefits of the System and is a tireless ambassador to all Americans.

Recommendation 14: Create a strategic communications plan that educates the public about our mission and accomplishments, and creates a positive, professional 'brand' for the System.

Recommendation 15: Develop integrated mechanisms for using web-based and other emerging technologies to store and share data, communicate within the System, and inspire and educate visitors and the public.

Vision 6: Refuges are welcoming, safe and accessible for visitors, with a variety of ways to enjoy, learn about, appreciate and help conserve America's wildlife.

Recommendation 16: Conduct a new, independent analysis of refuge law enforcement to measure progress and identify needed improvements.

Recommendation 17: The Service will work closely with state fish and wildlife agencies to conduct a review of its current hunting and fishing opportunities, especially opportunities currently offered for youth and people with disabilities. Based on this review, the Service and states will work cooperatively to prepare a strategy for increasing quality hunting and fishing opportunities on national wildlife refuges.

Recommendation 18: Support and enhance appropriate recreation opportunities on national wildlife refuges by partnering with state fish and wildlife agencies, other governmental bodies, conservation organizations and businesses; and by updating relevant policies and infrastructure.

Recommendation 19: Develop 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 and other professional organizations.

Recommendation 20: Develop an environmental education strategy that inventories existing efforts, identifies priorities for investment of staff and funds, and outlines basic standards for all refuges.

Goal 3. Leading Conservation into the Future

Vision 7: Our workforce is diverse and inclusive, shares a passionate conservation ethic, and works together as a cohesive whole.

Recommendation 21: Assemble an evaluation team consisting of Service and Refuge System leaders to report to the Service Directorate on opportunities for organizational realignments or programmatic efficiencies.

Recommendation 22: Within the next 10 years, make our workforce match the diversity in the civilian labor workforce. Recruit and retain a workforce that reflects the ethnic, age, socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, and language diversity of contemporary America.

Recommendation 23: Revisit Fulfilling the Promise and seek innovative ways to address the recommendations therein to reinvigorate our commitment to leadership development.

Recommendation 24: Develop and mentor Refuge System employees so they are fully equipped to accept the responsibilities of leadership at all levels in the Service

Urban Wildlife Refuge Program Standards of Excellence

The goal of the Urban Wildlife Refuge Program is to engage urban communities as partners in wildlife conservation. Excellence may be achieved through the eight standards that serve as a framework for collaboration among the Service and urban communities, whether such collaboration is on or off Service lands. The eight standards are:

1. KNOW AND RELATE TO THE COMMUNITY
2. CONNECT URBAN PEOPLE WITH NATURE VIA STEPPING STONES OF ENGAGEMENT
3. BUILD PARTNERSHIPS
4. BE A COMMUNITY ASSET
5. ENSURE ADEQUATE LONG-TERM RESOURCES
6. PROVIDE EQUITABLE ACCESS
7. ENSURE VISITORS FEEL SAFE AND WELCOME
8. MODEL SUSTAINABILITY

These standards support the Program's goal and the Service mission to conserve wildlife for the continuing benefit of the American people.

Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Survey Highlights

Nearly all (95%) visitors who participated in the survey at Santa Ana NWR indicated that they were citizens or permanent residents of the United States. These visitors were a mix of 46% male (with an average age of 61 years) and 54% female (with an average age of 59 years). Visitors, on average, reported they had 16 years of formal education (equivalent to four years of college or technical school). The median level of income was \$50,000-\$74,999.

Activities

The primary reasons for visitors' most recent visits included bird watching (58%), hiking (14%), and wildlife observation (12%). Almost all visitors also used the Visitor Center during their trips (97%), mostly to stop to use the facilities (85%), visit the gift shop/bookstore (84%), or view the exhibits (83%).

Surveyed visitors reported that they spent an average of 4 hr at Santa Ana NWR during one day there, while the most frequently reported length of a day visit, the modal response, was 8 hr (23%). Most visitors indicated they were part of a group on their visit to this refuge (89%). Of those people who indicated they traveled with a group, visitors primarily traveled with family or friends.

Surveyed visitors participated in a variety of refuge activities during the 12 months prior to completing the survey (fig. 6); the top three activities in which people reported participating were bird watching (91%), wildlife observation (69%), hiking (55%), and photography (47%).

Local vs. Non-local Visitors

Some visitors (36%) lived in the local area (within 50 mi of the refuge), whereas 64% were non-local visitors. For most local visitors, Santa Ana NWR was the primary purpose or sole destination of their trips (75%; table 3). For most non-local visitors, the refuge was one of many equally important reasons or destinations for their trips (59%).

Local visitors reported that they traveled an average of 22 mi to get to the refuge, while nonlocal visitors traveled an average of 1,016 mi. The average distance traveled for all visitors to this refuge was 540 mi, while the median was 120 mi. Figure 4 shows the residences of visitors traveling to this refuge. About 57% of visitors traveling to Santa Ana NWR were from Texas.

Transportation Issues

Visitors use various types of transportation to access and enjoy refuges. While many visitors arrive at the refuge in private vehicles, alternatives such as buses, trams, watercraft, and bicycles are increasingly becoming a part of the visitor experience. When asked specifically about using alternative transportation at Santa Ana NWR, some visitors thought alternative transportation would enhance their experience (35%) while others thought it would not (18%). An additional 46% of surveyed visitors indicated they were unsure.

US Fish & Wildlife Service's Draft Communications Plan Excerpts

Objectives

The following objectives are designed to strengthen the NWRS moving into the future and will guide strategy for the NWRS communication. The objectives align with the Conserving the Future vision document.

1. Increase awareness and build desire to visit in person or virtually
2. Strengthen quality of relationships and brand recognition
3. Increase number of volunteers
4. Increase membership in Friends organizations

Strategy

Building the next generation of refuge supporters will require audiences to truly experience the wonder of the Refuge System, whether that experience takes place virtually or in person. Our plan is designed to take our target audiences on a journey – from their everyday world to ours. This journey will involve three key “stops” along the way.

STOP 1: Meeting Audiences Where They Are – We need to bring the best of the Refuge System straight to our audiences; meet them in the places they're already visiting within their local communities. Activities outlined in this section of the plan include local events, national media outreach and partnership development to further disseminate campaign messages.

STOP 2: Building Interest Through Online Engagement – Many of our target audiences, particularly youth, interact online. Our plan includes activities that will engage people online through a series of activities that capture their attention, such as contests and games.

STOP 3: Creating Unique On-Site Experiences – Many refuges already have compelling community engagement programs. Our plan includes activities designed to supplement these programs, increase visits and cultivate repeat visitors.

Overarching Theme and Messages

Overarching Theme: A “New World” Right in Our Backyard

Message 1: Discover a Whole New World, Right in Your Backyard

Each wildlife refuge is a new world to explore, full of plants and wildlife you may not have seen before.

- Your refuge adventure will be truly different than what you can see and do in everyday life. You will be offered an intimate and accessible view of wildlife and wild places.
- Refuges provide homes for millions of migratory birds and hundreds of threatened and endangered species so that they have a chance to survive.
- These unexplored areas are closer than you might think; there is a wildlife refuge located within an hour’s drive of most major U.S. cities.
- In addition to appreciating wildlife of all kinds and breathtaking scenery, you can also enjoy world-class recreation activities such as birding, photography, fishing, paddling, hiking, and hunting at National Wildlife Refuges.
- Refuges provide more than 2,500 miles of water and nature trails.
- A new world is just a click away – visit www.fws.gov/refuges for more information and to plan a trip to your local refuge.

Message 2: See Wildlife You Can’t See Anywhere Else

If you love animals, you’ll love exploring National Wildlife Refuges. Discover rare wildlife that you otherwise wouldn’t find.

- Refuges provide homes for millions of migratory birds and hundreds of threatened and endangered species so that they have a chance to survive.
- At refuges you’ll find wildlife in greater numbers than in most any other area, living, in many instances, in their natural homes. This offers great opportunities to observe and experience North America’s most beloved wildlife species.
- Discover new and different wildlife at a National Wildlife Refuge – visit www.fws.gov/refuges for more information and to plan a trip to your local refuge.
- Help make a difference and be a part of the future by volunteering at your local wildlife refuge. Visit your local refuge to find out more.

Message 3: Visit a Natural World that You Thought No Longer Existed,
Where Wildlife and Wild Lands Still Flourish

Visiting a National Wildlife Refuge is like taking a trip back in time to discover a natural world.

- Because refuges are dedicated to conserving wildlife and their homes, they offer a step back in time for visitors today and for generations to come.
- You can experience peace, calm and solitude not often found in everyday life.
- At your local refuge, you can renew your tie to local cultural heritage by viewing ancient and historic sites, strengthening the connection between wildlife and people.
- Create lasting memories with family and friends by visiting a National Wildlife Refuge.
- Take a step back in time at a National Wildlife Refuge – visit www.fws.gov/refuges for more information and to plan a trip to your local refuge.
- If you can't make the trip to a refuge, take your virtual trip back in time at www.fws.gov/refuges.

Message 4: Wildlife Refuges are Valuable for Communities and People

The National Wildlife Refuge System provides jobs, supports local economies and provides places where people can enjoy healthy activities.

- We're dedicated to supporting communities, lifestyles, cultures and economies.
- The National Wildlife Refuge System provides an oasis for people to stay active, boost creativity and relax from hectic schedules, improving mental and physical health in the process.
 - National Wildlife Refuges offer a wide variety of physical activities people can enjoy in the great outdoors, such as hiking and paddling.
 - According to a study by researchers at the University of Kansas, outdoor recreation and access to nature play a vital role in the physical, psychological, spiritual well-being, health and development of people of all ages, especially children, who tend to be healthier, happier, have increased creativity and better social skills.
- In 2011, the Refuge System generated \$2.1 billion in economic activity.
- In 2011, the Refuge System supported more than 34,000 private sector jobs.
- The Refuge System hires thousands of youth each year.

- Wildlife refuges support clean air and water for the communities in which they operate.
- According to a study by researchers at North Carolina State University in April 2012, being close to a National Wildlife Refuge increases the value of homes in urbanized areas.

Message 5: Conserving Your Wildlife is What We Do

We are the nation's only system of public lands and waters dedicated to conserving wildlife now and in the future. The future of wildlife is dependent on this work.

- The Refuge System has been conserving and protecting our nation's wildlife since 1903.
- There are more than 550 wildlife refuges and 38 wetland management districts, covering 150 million acres of land nationwide.
- Our professionals work in tandem with state and local partners to conserve wildlife and their homes nationwide using scientific principles.
- You can help conserve wildlife and their homes in your community by volunteering at your local wildlife refuge. Visit your local refuge to find out more.
- Help us conserve wildlife nationwide – visit www.fws.gov/refuges for more information and to plan a trip to your local refuge.

Message 6: Our People are Passionate about What They Do

National Wildlife Refuge System professionals care about the land and wildlife they work every day to help protect.

- These trusted experts use all the tools at their disposal – including the latest in environmental science and technology – to make refuges great places for wildlife and for people.
- Our environmental professionals are dedicated to the Refuge System and understand that in order to have healthy people, we must have a healthy planet that ensures America's rich wild habitat is maintained.
- Let us share our passion with you – visit www.fws.gov/refuges for more information and plan a trip to your local refuge.