PUBLIC USE REVIEW

REPORT

St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge

Region 4
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Public Use Review Report
St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge
July 2001

[Signatures and dates]

Refuge Manager
Date

Area Supervisor
Date

Chief, Division of Visitor Services and Outreach
Date

Regional Chief, National Wildlife Refuge System
Date
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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Station: St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge is a 12,358 acre undeveloped barrier island located just offshore from the mouth of the Apalachicola River in Franklin County, Florida. The island is dissected by dune ridges running east and west. In between these dune ridges are freshwater lakes and sloughs. The refuge is managed to preserve in a natural state the ten distinct habitats found there.

Reviews: A Public Use Review was conducted January 17 - 19, 2001. This was the first public use program review for this station.

Review Team: The 2001 Review Team included Donna Stanek (R4-RO), Robin Will (St. Marks NWR), and Margaret O’Connell (Okefenokee NWR). The team conducted self-guided tours, and participated in guided tours/interviews with Project Leader Terry Peacock. The review team also interviewed the Office Assistant, the Biologist and the Maintenance staff.


Staff (at the time of the review):

- Terry Peacock, Project Leader
- Monica Harris, Deputy Project Leader
- Thomas Lewis, Biologist
- Charlotte Chumney, Administrative Assistant
- John Gay, Engineering Equipment Operator
- Dale Shiver, Forestry Technician
- Equipment Operator, Robert Gay
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge protects a remnant of barrier island habitat that was once found all along the north Florida coast. There are opportunities to provide a balanced, albeit small public use program that can meet the basic needs of the visiting public and obtain management’s goal of maintaining a relatively primitive atmosphere.

In January 2001, a Public Use Review Team visited St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge, Apalachicola, Florida to conduct a review of the station’s public use program. The purpose of the review was to evaluate how the station was meeting the Minimum Public Use Standards, complying with the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997, and incorporating the tenets put forth in the “Fulfilling the Promises” document.

The team found that the refuge staff was attempting to address most of the elements and standards, but with staff and budgetary limitations, they are finding it difficult to address all of the elements completely. The visitor services program suffered from neglect in the past, but the manager and staff are committed to enhancing the program. Even with minimal staff and budget, there is still potential to build and establish a basic and viable visitor services program.

The team offered specific recommendations for improving access, visitor orientation services, and the infrastructure. Other suggestions involve program development, conveying key resource messages on and off-site, and reaching out to new audiences. Since the refuge is on an island there is a concern regarding carrying capacities and providing a quality experience. Public use will need to be closely monitored to avoid adverse impacts. Visitor use may eventually need to be limited through a permit system or other program.
STATION PROFILE

Location:
Offshore from the mouth of the Apalachicola River in Franklin County, Florida.

Purpose:
The refuge was established in 1968, “for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose for migratory birds.”

Significance Statements:
The refuge is one of the last uninhabited barrier islands remaining on the Florida Panhandle.

Several endangered species utilize the refuge, including sea turtles (for nesting), red wolves, wood storks, piping plovers, and other State-listed species.

The refuge serves as a stop-over point for trans-Gulf migratory birds.

Primary Management Objectives:
Restore and maintain a diverse pre-1700 plant community.

Protect and enhance habitat for threatened and endangered species, waterfowl, and other migratory birds.

Maintain a primitive use concept, and provide educational opportunities to enhance visitors’ understanding and appreciation of natural resources.

Key Issues:
A concession contract is needed to provide transportation to the island and tours of the island. Currently, different individuals are providing transportation; only a few have started to provide guide services on the island. The refuge does not receive any proceeds from the operations.

A delicate balance must be maintained to provide public use opportunities and still maintain the island’s primitive nature.

The feral hog population is a management concern. The refuge staff control feral hogs, reducing the number of hogs available for hunter harvest. The staff needs to decide whether to maintain staff control over the population or increase the number of feral hog hunts to achieve population reductions via public hunting.
Bicycling is currently permitted on the island and must be monitored and evaluated to determine impacts.

The staff must determine whether to re-establish freshwater fish on the island and continue to allow the harvest of freshwater fish or manage the island ponds for shorebirds.

The refuge has an office/visitor contact station on the mainland in the town of Apalachicola. The local Estuarine Reserve has an office, visitor center, aquaria facility and hiking trail in close proximity to the refuge office.

**Message(s):**
The Service must balance preservation and management of the refuge/barrier island.

The refuge is one of the last remaining undeveloped barrier islands along the Florida coast. It represents the “real” Florida.

The island has a rich history.

The refuge plays a significant role in the management of red wolves and other endangered and threatened species.

The refuge is part of a national system of refuges.

**Audience(s):**
Local residents
School children (K - 12)
Retirees
Tourists

**Visitor Experience Objectives:**
To understand and appreciate St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge, visitors must have opportunities to:
- explore the various island habitats (upland ridges, maritime forests, wide sandy beaches)
- experience the primitive nature of the island
MINIMUM VISITOR SERVICES REQUIREMENTS

A. Develop a Visitor Services Plan: Through Comprehensive Conservation Plans and a visitor services plan, set goals, determine measurable objectives, identify strategies, and establish evaluation criteria for all visitor services. Careful planning provides the visitor with opportunities to enjoy and appreciate fish, wildlife, and plants, and other resources. As a result, the public will develop an understanding and will build an appreciation of each individual's role in the environment today and into the future.

Current Status:
St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge does not currently have a Visitor Services Plan.

Recommendation(s):
When the Comprehensive Conservation Plan is completed, a Visitor Services Plan for St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge should be developed within a year.

When developed, the Visitor Services Plan will outline goals and objectives, identify strategies and establish evaluation methods for all aspects of the program. This plan will provide more detailed information based on the guidelines established in the Comprehensive Conservation Plan. The overall goal of the Visitor Services Plan will be to develop and define methods and opportunities for the visiting public to develop an understanding and appreciation of fish, wildlife, and plant resources and define their role in the conservation and protection of those resources at St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge.

The other nine requirements in which the visitor services and education program will be detailed are:

Welcome and Orient Visitors
Provide Quality Hunting Opportunities
Provide Quality Fishing Opportunities
Provide Quality Wildlife Observation and Photographic Opportunities
Develop and Implement a Quality Environmental Education Program
Interpret Key Resources and Issues
Manage for Appropriate Recreational Opportunities
Communicate Key Issues with Off-site Audiences
Build Volunteer and Partnerships with Refuge Support Groups

B. Welcome and Orient Visitors: We will assure that National Wildlife Refuges are welcoming, safe, and accessible. We will provide visitors with clear information so they can easily determine where they can go, what they can do, and how to safely and ethically
engage in recreational and educational activities. Facilities will be high-quality, clean, well-maintained, and accessible. We will treat visitors with courtesy and in a professional manner.

Current Status:
Directional signs lead visitors to boat access to the refuge. Signs direct visitors off of Highway 98 and into the town of Apalachicola. Getting to the office from Highway 98 is somewhat confusing and at the end of the road (Market Street) there is no sign telling visitors which direction to go. There is an orientation kiosk at the foot of the stairs leading to the office. The refuge has a general brochure, hunt brochure, fishing brochure, and bird list. All but the bird list are in the new format. Essentially, the basics are covered, but there is room for improvement regarding entrance and directional signing.

The office/visitor contact station is on the second floor of a building rented from the Harbor Master. The main entrance door is solid and peeling and the shades were drawn on the one window that would allow a visitor to see into the area. A desk and portable reception counter are located inside the door; they block some of the wall-mounted exhibits. The refuge brochures are not readily visible, (they are located in a rack on the back side of a panel). The exhibits are well-maintained. Staff offices are near the exhibit area, so staff can easily hear visitors and come out of their offices to greet them and answer questions.

St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge is an island accessible only by private boat or boat-for-hire. There are adequate signs from Highway 98 to the boat ramp but no refuge orientation information is provided at the boat ramp. On the island, orientation kiosks are located at the boat ramp at Indian Pass, at West Pass, and mid-island near the maintenance yard and crew quarters. Trails are not marked and visitors are left to wander on their own, unless they are with a guide.

Recommendation(s):
The basics for welcoming and orienting visitors are covered, but improvements are needed to better aid the visitor.

1. Improve/replace directional signs along Highway 98 to both the boat ramp and to the office/visitor contact station. The current signs are difficult to read (too small, too much text). (Consider partnering with the Estuarine Reserve to cooperatively purchase/install signs to direct visitors to both facilities.)

2. Replace the kiosk at the office with a three-paneled model that provides more information about the refuge, the Refuge System, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
3. Display/distribute information about the refuge/Refuge System at the nearby Estuarine Reserve facility. Offer to provide Reserve information at your facility.

4. Replace/repair the office door and open the shades to provide a more welcoming look in the office.

5. Work with the City of Apalachicola to enhance and better maintain the office/visitor contact site. This area has quite a bit of potential as a creek side walk and observation area.

6. Work with the City to repair the boat ramp at the office/visitor contact station. Sign the handicapped parking area and improve the directional signs leading to the ramp.

7. Provide a kiosk at the Indian Pass boat ramp, the West Pass boat ramp, and at the 14-mile site as it becomes developed.

8. Replace the kiosks on the island.

9. Reprint the bird checklist in the new standard format.

10. Update the refuge home page as needed.

C. Provide Quality Hunting Opportunities: Hunting is an appropriate use of wildlife resources of the National Wildlife Refuge System, when compatible. Hunting programs will be of the highest quality, conducted in a safe and cost-effective manner, and to the extent practicable, carried out in accordance with State regulations. See 605 FW 2, Hunting.

Current Status:
The refuge is open to white-tailed deer, sambar deer, and feral hog hunting. All hunts require permits but only the sambar hunts are quota hunts, with 200 permits issued in a blind drawing. Currently, there are no limits on the white-tailed deer hunts. There are three five-day hunts and weapons are limited to archery and muzzleloaders (primitive weapons). Feral hogs can be taken during any hunt. The refuge imposes bag limits, based on biological census data.

The staff spends a considerable amount of time assisting hunters in getting to the island. Problems arise as hunters are trying to land their boats; they are often swamped and the staff essentially conducts a “salvage operation.” The refuge staff also spends significant amounts of time assisting hunters in getting their game out of the field and to the check stations.
Waterfowl hunting occurs within Big Bayou, an area surrounded by refuge lands.

Recommendation(s):
1. Impose a limit or quota on all hunts - the island is too small to safely accommodate unlimited numbers of hunters. Eventually, all hunts may need to be quota hunts with an associated fee.

2. Maintain the sambar hunt at its current 200 permits.

3. Limit white-tailed deer hunts to 300 permittees.

4. Require hunters to use one of the licensed captains in the area to transport them and their gear to and from the island to eliminate the extensive staff time currently devoted to assisting hunters in getting to their camps. This could be part of a concession operation or be limited to a few local operations.

5. Establish a youth hunt for feral hogs. Currently, there are no youth hunting opportunities on the refuge. This would provide an excellent method for introducing local youth to hunting.

D. Provide Quality Fishing Opportunities: Fishing is an appropriate use of wildlife resources on units of the National Wildlife Refuge System, when compatible. Fishing programs will be of the highest quality, conducted in a safe and cost-effective manner, and to the extent practicable, carried out in accordance with State regulations. See 605 FW 3, Fishing.

Current Status:
There is limited fishing on St. Vincent Refuge since access to the ponds is difficult at best. Fishing is permitted from April through September. The current status of the fisheries in the ponds is unknown. It is believed that there are little to no sport fish due to an extended drought in 1999 and that the ponds need to be restocked. There has been some discussion regarding how to best manage the ponds. The ponds may be more valuable as shorebird habitat than as a fisheries resource.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service does not own below the high tide line and any surf fishing that may occur along the shoreline is considered off-refuge.

Recommendation(s):
1. Request that the Fisheries Assistance Office in Panama City conduct some feasibility research on the ponds before any decision is made regarding their management.
2. Initiate surf fishing clinics for local youth.

3. Work with a partnering agency or organization to conduct a youth fishing derby on the mainland.

E. **Provide Quality Wildlife Observation and Wildlife Photography Opportunities:**

*Wildlife observation and wildlife photography are appropriate wildlife-dependent recreational uses of Refuge System lands. Visitors of all ages and abilities will have an opportunity to observe and photograph key wildlife and habitat resources of the refuge. Viewing and photographing wildlife in natural or managed environments will foster a connection between visitors and natural resources. See 605 FW 4 and 605 FW 5.*

**Current Status:**

There are a number of roads open to foot traffic on the refuge, however, there are no trail signs or directional signs, so visitors are on their own in exploring the island. There are no observation platforms or towers or designated photography sites on the island or on refuge-owned lands (Mile 14 site) on the mainland. The area behind the office along Scipio Creek is undeveloped, yet has some very picturesque views.

**Recommendation(s):**

1. Work with the City of Apalachicola in developing an observation area along Scipio Creek behind the office. Include interpretive panels and a spotting scope in the plans.

2. Develop an accessible trail and observation platform to the marsh at the Mile 14 site.

3. Develop a formal trail system on the island using existing roads, so visitors can follow a defined route and be more comfortable in finding their way around the refuge. Provide directional signs, and orientation/interpretive information.

4. Develop and initiate a Special Use Permit System for guides taking visitors to the island. This should include mandatory training and an orientation to the refuge.

F. **Develop and Implement a Quality Environmental Education Program:** *Through formal, curriculum-based environmental education tied to National and State standards, we will advance public awareness, understanding, appreciation, and knowledge of key fish, wildlife, plant, and resource issues. Each refuge staff will assess their potential to work with schools in providing an appropriate level of environmental education. We may support environmental education through the use of facilities, equipment, educational materials, teacher workshops, and study sites that are safe and conducive to learning. See 605 FW 6.*
Current Status:
Currently, the refuge staff occasionally provides tours and programs to schools and other groups on request, averaging about ten presentations per year. Through a good working relationship with the Estuarine Reserve some material about the refuge and its wildlife and management programs are included in the Reserve’s education program.

Recommendation(s):
1. Work with the local school system and teachers to develop curriculum-based activities that can be used in the schools and on-refuge. [Seek assistance from Garry Tucker, RO - phone # 404/679-7356.]

2. Train volunteers to lead group education programs on the refuge and to conduct programs at the schools.

3. Develop at least two “canned” programs that volunteers and staff can take to the schools. Suggested topics include: importance of barrier islands to wildlife and people, wolf tracking techniques, and fire management.

4. Conduct at least one teacher workshop each year, (this can be based on Project Wild or Project Learning Tree).

5. Work more closely with the Estuarine Reserve to incorporate more information about refuge resources and management in their education programs. Offer to orient their education staff, and provide refuge staff/volunteers to assist with Reserve programs.

G. Interpret Key Resources and Issues: We will communicate the most important fish, wildlife, habitat and other resource issues to visitors of all ages and abilities through effective interpretation. We will tailor messages and delivery methods to specific audiences and present them in appropriate locations. Through heightened awareness, we will inspire visitors to take positive actions supporting refuge goals and the Refuge System mission. See 605 FW 7.

Current Status:
The current methods used to convey information about the refuge and key resources include refuge brochures and limited kiosk panels.

The key resources/issues are: endangered species, trans-Gulf migratory birds, the refuge’s importance as one of the last uninhabited barrier islands in Florida, the island’s rich cultural history, and the importance of fire.
Recommendation(s):
Initiate the following strategies to provide more interpretation of the refuge’s key resources and issues:

1. Develop an interpretive trail through the various habitats on the island using the existing road system.

2. Highlight the National Wildlife Refuge System and the local estuarine system.

3. Develop guides for shells and tracks. Develop activities for groups.

4. Train volunteers and/or local Audubon Society members to conduct weekend tours seasonally.

5. On the mainland, work cooperatively with the Estuarine Reserve to develop and install interpretive panels along the Reserve’s existing trail (near the refuge office). The panels could convey site-specific conservation messages relevant to both agencies; both agency emblems could be displayed on the panels.

H. Manage for Appropriate Recreational Opportunities: The National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act, as amended by the National Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, states that compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses are the priority public uses of the National Wildlife Refuge System (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and interpretation) and will receive enhanced consideration over other general public uses. Volunteers, partners, recreation fees and concessions are tools available to assist in managing these uses. We will only permit other uses when we determine that they are legally mandated, provide benefits to the Service, occur due to special circumstances, or facilitate one of the priority wildlife dependent recreational uses. See 605 FW 1, General Guidance, and 603 FW 1, Appropriate Refuge Uses.

Current Status:
This review did not find any inappropriate public uses occurring on this refuge.

Recommendation(s):
Continue to manage for appropriate uses only.

I. Communicate Key Issues with Off-site Audiences: Effective outreach depends on open and continuing communication between the refuge and the public. This communication involves determining and understanding the issues, identifying audiences, crafting messages,
selecting the most effective delivery techniques, and evaluating effectiveness. Achieved results will further the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System and purposes of the refuges. See the National Outreach Strategy: A Master Plan for Communicating in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and America's National Wildlife Refuge System: 100 on 100 Outreach Campaign.

Current Status:
The staff participates in two to three large local events each year. The staff also works with the media, sending out news releases and working with radio and television stations to highlight significant events and stories, such as red wolf management.

Recommendation(s):
1. Develop a cadre of volunteers who can represent the refuge at local events.
2. Develop an outreach trunk on red wolves and other significant refuge stories, to be checked out to local schools and organizations.
3. Conduct one “Community Day” annually on the refuge.
4. Conduct a series of target group tours - potential support group members, Congressional staff, and media.
5. Develop outreach packets on key topics, such as barrier island values, red wolf management, and fire management/wildfire.

J. Build Volunteer Programs and Partnerships with Refuge Support Groups: Volunteer and refuge support groups fortify refuge staffs with their gift of time, skills, and energy, and are integral to the future of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Refuge staff will initiate and nurture relationships with volunteers and refuge support groups, and will continually support, monitor, and evaluate these groups with the goal of fortifying important refuge activities. The National Wildlife Refuge System Volunteer and Community Partnership Enhancement Act of 1998 strengthens the Refuge System’s role in developing effective partnerships with various community groups. Whether through volunteers, refuge support groups, or other important partnerships in the community, refuge personnel will seek to make the refuge an integral part of the community, giving rise to a stronger Refuge System.

Current Status:
The refuge uses a few volunteers sporadically for a variety of tasks, but there is no consistency in the program. The staff is in the process of constructing two RV pads at the 14
Mile Site and will begin recruiting for campers as soon as construction is finished. There is not a support group or any on-going partnerships with any support groups such as Audubon or a local garden society. There have been some recent efforts to establish a relationship with local scout groups.

Recommendation(s):
1. When the RV pads are completed, recruit for volunteer campers; seasonally at first, eventually expanding to year-round.

2. Develop volunteer job and project descriptions that meet the refuge needs, to strengthen recruitment efforts and align the volunteer program with refuge needs.

3. Develop a volunteer training and orientation program.

4. As the volunteer program grows, begin recruiting from Girl/Boy Scouts, Elderhostel and Americorps, especially for one-time large-scale projects.

5. Reach out into the local community to recruit 10 - 15 local citizens as volunteers and potential support group members. This group would serve as the core group to build upon.

K. Other Topics

Fees:
Currently, the refuge charges a fee for the one sambar deer hunt only. It may become necessary in the future, as demand increases and costs to manage hunts increase, to charge fees for all hunts.

Concessions and Guide Services:
St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge is an island and is only accessible by boat. Recently, local individuals have been starting to provide transportation services to and from the island. Some individuals are also beginning to provide guide services. Currently, there are no controls or guidelines in effect for these transport/guide services. It is strongly recommended that the refuge institute a Special Use Permit System for transportation and guide services to the refuge, that would include mandatory training and an orientation to the refuge, its habitats, wildlife, and management. Permits should be limited in number and permittees should be required to meet certain criteria and standards.

Eventually, in addition to permitted guide services, the refuge may need to institute a concession operation if the demand to visit the island increases to the level where restrictions on visitation becomes necessary. The concession would operate regularly scheduled tours...
with limited numbers of visitors, and could possibly provide boat, canoe and kayak rentals.

The permit system and/or concession operation will help the refuge staff maintain the island’s primitive and relatively undisturbed nature, and provide quality wildlife-oriented experiences for the public. A carrying capacity for the island should be determined and used to manage the permit program and/or concession.

Mean High Tide:
The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service maintains ownership/jurisdiction to the mean high tide line on the island. This poses some problems in controlling access and some beach-related recreational activities. In addition, the Service does not own any of Big Bayou, which extends fairly far into the refuge and poses some management problems during waterfowl hunting season. Big Bayou is opened to waterfowl hunting, yet the refuge does not have jurisdiction over the area. It is recommended that the Service investigate acquiring Big Bayou, including the bottoms and below the mean high tide line.
"FULFILLING THE PROMISES" RECOMMENDATIONS

Fulfilling the Promise, developed in 1999, serves as the guidepost for the National Wildlife Refuge System. Every field station has an obligation to support the vision statements and recommendations outlined in the “Promises” document.

Below are the key elements of the document which pertain most directly to Public Use Management on refuges. The following observations and suggestions reflect the station’s existing and potential capacity for supporting specific “Promises” recommendations.

A. WILDLIFE AND HABITAT

The Vision:
Wildlife Comes First - Refuges are places where wildlife comes first.
Comments: The staff demonstrates the “managing for wildlife first” philosophy and meshing a balanced public use program into that wildlife management strategy while maintaining the primitive nature of the refuge.

Models of Land Management - The System is a model and demonstration area for habitat management which fosters broad participation in natural resource stewardship.
Comments: Due to its relatively undisturbed and undeveloped nature, St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge offers a unique opportunity to observe and study how barrier islands on the north Florida Coast would have evolved if they had remained in their natural state. The refuge offers a look into the past.

Specific Recommendations:

WH16 - Identify thresholds of wildlife disturbance for public use programs and develop associated standards and mitigative techniques that can be applied, as appropriate, by individual refuges to reduce conflict and achieve balance between public use and wildlife.
Comments: The staff is very cognizant of the need to develop and manage a balanced public use program that does not significantly impact wildlife and the unique primitive nature of the island. As part of the Comprehensive Conservation Plan the proposed public use components will be evaluated on a regular basis to ensure that future impacts do not occur.

WH19 - Develop an outreach and interpretive program on refuges which specifically demonstrates and conveys to the American people the importance of sound land management for the conservation of native fish, wildlife, and plants.
Comments: The refuge has made some efforts in reaching out and working with the community. If the recommendations made in this report are fully implemented the refuge will have an excellent outreach and interpretive program focusing on conservation management.
B. PEOPLE

The Vision:

*A Legacy of Wildlife* - A strong and vibrant System provides an enduring legacy of healthy fish, wildlife, and plant resources for people to enjoy today and for generations to come.

Comments: The refuge provides some opportunities for visitors to enjoy the natural resources. As the visitor services program grows, so will these opportunities.

*A Place Where Visitors Feel Welcome* - Visitors find national wildlife refuges welcoming, safe, and accessible, with a variety of opportunities to enjoy and appreciate America’s fish, wildlife, and plants.

Comments: There is room for improvement in this area, but the refuge is making strides to provide improved signs and information on the island and at key sites on the mainland to serve those visitors that cannot get out to the refuge.

Opportunities for Public Stewardship - Visitors and local communities recognize refuges as national treasures, actively participating in their stewardship and standing firm in their defense.

Comments: There have been some efforts in working with the local community and organizations. The refuge staff recognizes that there is a greater need to do more in this area.

*A System to Appreciate* - Americans know that each wildlife refuge is a part of an enduring national system. They understand and support the System’s tremendous contribution toward wildlife conservation.

Comments: This concept will be incorporated in all interpretive and educational materials developed by the station.

Specific Recommendations:

**P3** - Provide each refuge with access to responsive, professional, public use management staff. The level of assistance needed at each refuge is identified in Comprehensive Conservation Plans, operational evaluations, and interregional reviews. Refuges, regional offices, and the Division in Washington will have public use staffs with the skills and abilities needed to efficiently and effectively meet the needs of the public and fulfill the System mission.

Comments: Currently, there is not a visitor services specialist assigned to this refuge. There is a critical need to fill this position. Many of the recommendations made in this report will be impossible to implement without dedicated staff.

**P4** - Develop and implement policy that gives clear guidance to refuge managers for determining appropriate and compatible public uses of the System, and provide clear, consistent guidance and support for the timely phase-out of those public uses not in line with such policy.
Comments: There are no inappropriate or non-compatible public uses occurring on this refuge currently. Completion of the Comprehensive Conservation Plan will help ensure that none are instituted in the future.

P7 - Forge new and non-traditional alliances to broaden support for the System by establishing citizen and community partnerships on all staffed refuges. [volunteers, citizen groups, local business community, national organizations, and corporations]
Comments: There is a need to establish a support group for this refuge.

P8 - Strengthen partnerships with states, Tribes, nonprofit organizations, and academia.
Develop new policies and authorities for establishing formal relationships with the business community.
Comments: Although the refuge is in Florida, it is not in an area that is saturated by tourism. There are opportunities to establish partnerships with local businesses and organizations. The nearby Estuarine Reserve provides an excellent opportunity for an expanded partnership.

P9 - Update and strengthen the System's 100 on 100 outreach campaign. The revision should incorporate provisions of new legislation, complement the Service’s National Outreach Strategy, seek support from nontraditional constituents, and take advantage of the outreach potential of the System’s centennial in 2003. [outreach: special events, Congressional relations, media relations, outdoor classrooms, Centennial; in-reach to Service employees]
Comments: The staff will begin developing special events and community days. The refuge does have good Congressional relations but should have a Congressional staff day to strengthen those relationships.

P10 - Build a broader base of public support for wildlife conservation by reaching out and involving a larger cross section of the American public in our public use programs and community partnership efforts.
Comments: Tourism is growing in this part of Florida, and the refuge does offer a chance to reach not only local visitors, but out-of-state travelers as well with the Service’s conservation messages.

C. LEADERSHIP

The Vision:
Best and Brightest - The Service identifies and mentors America’s best and brightest to staff refuges and be future leaders within the System and the Service.
Comments: Refuge staff are encouraged to participate on all levels and attend training as needed to further their careers and increase their skills.
An Esprit de Corps - An Esprit de Corps and passion for refuges and the System are embraced by refuge employees throughout the Service.

Comments: Staff at St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge work well together, with individuals taking on roles and responsibilities not traditionally linked to their positions.

Specific Recommendations:

L2 - Establish a systematic recruitment, training, and mentoring program to hire the best and brightest, while creating a diverse workforce.

Comments: The Project Leader is always looking for the “best and brightest” to place in refuge positions.

L4 - Promote opportunities and an environment for career-long education and personal development for all employees.

Comments: Refuge staff are encouraged to go to training to improve their skills and abilities to better perform their duties.

L7 - Amend the “National Wildlife Refuge System Administrative Provisions” in the Code of Federal Regulations to make the Blue Goose a permanent design element on refuge boundary signs and refuge primary entrance signs. Direct the Service committees for signing and graphic standards to incorporate the Blue Goose in current and future guidelines. [boundary signs, primary entrance signs, publications, video jackets, homepages, exhibits, other media]

Comments: As the refuge replaces entrance signs, and develops interpretive and educational signs and materials, the Blue Goose will be incorporated in accordance to policy.

L11 - Fully implement and integrate the provisions of the Refuge Improvement Act into operations and activities of the System. [Six priority wildlife-dependent public uses: wildlife observation, wildlife photography, hunting, fishing, interpretation and environmental education; Service’s efforts evaluated regularly with stakeholders.]

Comments: When the Comprehensive Conservation Plan is completed and implemented, the public use program at this refuge will be fully integrated and balanced, providing opportunities for the six priority public uses.
ACTION LIST

High Priority

Improve/replace directional signs along Highway 98 to both the boat ramp and to the office/visitor contact station. The current signs are difficult to read (too small, too much text). Consider partnering with the Estuarine Reserve to cooperatively purchase/install signs to direct visitors to both facilities.

Replace the kiosk at the office with a three-paneled model that provides more information about the refuge, the Refuge System, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Display/distribute information about the refuge/Refuge System at the nearby Estuarine Reserve facility. Offer to provide Reserve information at your facility.

Replace/repair office door and open the window shades to provide a more welcoming look.

Review the refuge home page and update as needed.

Impose a limit or quota on all hunts; the island is too small to safely accommodate an unlimited number of hunters. Eventually, all hunts may need to be quota hunts and associated fees.

Require hunters to use one of the licensed captains in the area to transport them and their gear to and from the island to eliminate the extensive staff time currently devoted to assisting hunters in getting to their camps. This could be part of a concession operation or be limited to a few local operations.

Develop or define a trail system on the island using existing roads so visitors can follow a defined route and more easily find their way around the refuge.

Work with the Estuarine Reserve to incorporate more information about the refuge and its management in their education programs.

Conduct an annual “Community Day” on the refuge.

Conduct a series of target group tours - potential support group members, Congressional staff, and media.

When the RV pads are completed, recruiting for volunteer campers; seasonally at first, eventually expanding to year-round.

Develop volunteer job and project descriptions that meet the refuge needs, to strengthen
recruitment efforts and align the volunteer program with refuge needs.

Develop a volunteer training and orientation program.

Evaluate progress in accomplishing the goals established in the Visitor Services Plan annually; establish new priorities as needed.

Medium Priority

When the Comprehensive Conservation Plan is completed, a Visitor Services Plan for St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge should be developed within a year.

Work with City of Apalachicola to enhance and better maintain office/visitor contact site.

Establish a youth hunt for feral hogs.

Develop an accessible trail and observation platform to the marsh at the Mile 14 Site.

On the mainland, work cooperatively with the Estuarine Reserve to develop and install interpretive panels along the Reserve's existing trail (near the refuge office). The panels could convey site-specific conservation messages relevant to both agencies; both agency emblems could be displayed on the panels.

Develop and initiate a Special Use Permit System for guides taking visitors to the island. This should include mandatory training and an orientation to the refuge.

Work with the local school system and teachers to develop curriculum-based activities, that can be used in the schools and on-refuge.

Train volunteers to lead group education programs on the refuge and to conduct programs at the schools.

Work closely with the Estuarine Reserve to incorporate more information about refuge resources and management in their education programs. Offer to orient their education staff, and provide refuge staff/volunteer to assist with Reserve programs.

Develop guides for shells and tracks. Develop activities for group tours.

Train volunteers and/or local Audubon Society members to conduct weekend tours seasonally.

Develop a cadre of volunteers who can represent the refuge at local events.
Reach out into the local community to recruit 10 - 15 local citizens as volunteers and potential support group members.

Low Priority

Provide kiosk at the Indian Pass boat ramp, the West Pass boat ramp, and at the 14-Mile Site as it becomes developed.

Replace the kiosks on the island.

Work with the City to repair the boat ramp at the office/visitor contact station. Sign the handicapped parking area and improve directional signs to the ramp.

Reprint the bird checklist in the new standard format.

Request that the Fisheries Assistance Office in Panama City conduct some feasibility research on the ponds before any decision is made regarding their management.

Initiate surf fishing clinics for local youth.

Work with a partnering agency or organization to conduct a youth fishing derby on the mainland.

Work with the City of Apalachicola in developing an observation area along Scipio Creek behind the office. Include interpretive panels and a spotting scope in the plans.

Develop at least two "canned" programs that volunteers and staff provide at the schools.

Conduct at least one teacher workshop each year.

As the volunteer program grows, begin recruiting from Elderhostel and Americorps, especially for one-time large-scale projects.