

SPORT FISHING PLAN

Ohio River Islands National Wildlife Refuge Parkersburg, West Virginia

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SPORT FISHING MANAGEMENT PLAN OHIO RIVER ISLANDS NWR

I. INTRODUCTION

Established in 1990, the Ohio River Islands National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) is located on the Ohio River from Shippingport, Pennsylvania to Manchester, Ohio. There are currently eighteen islands in the Refuge totalling 1020 acres. Through ongoing acquisition efforts, the Refuge has the potential to include all, or portions, of 38 islands located along 362 river miles encompassing up to 3,500 acres of wildlife habitat.

The Ohio River islands and their back channels are recognized for high quality fish and wildlife, recreation, scientific, and natural heritage values. These areas provide some of the region's highest quality riverine, wetland, and bottomland habitats, and are used by waterfowl, shorebirds, songbirds, warmwater fish, and freshwater mussels.

Refuge management concentrates on increasing the diversity and productivity of fish and wildlife populations endemic to the Ohio River. The stabilization of eroding shorelines, restoration of riparian habitats, and encouragement of natural succession are habitat management priorities. Resulting benefits are aimed at plant and animal species adapted to the mature forests and associated wetland and riverine habitats.

The islands are also important areas for people. Many types of public uses occur on and around the Ohio River islands. The relatively undisturbed nature of many of the islands make them popular spots for picnickers, pleasure boaters, nature buffs, and sportsmen.

II. CONFORMANCE WITH STATUTORY AUTHORITIES

The development of sport fishing programs on National Wildlife Refuges is based on various statutory authorities, regulations, and FWS policies. The Secretary of the Interior is authorized by the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended, and the Refuge Recreation Act of 1962 to permit sport fishing on any refuge within the Refuge System upon a determination that it is compatible with the purposes for which such areas were established. A determination that funds are available for the development, operation and maintenance of the program are also required. Specific information on FWS policy in the development of sport fishing programs on refuges can be found in the FWS's Refuge Manual (8 RM 6).

The Ohio River Islands NWR was established under the authority of the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956. The Refuge's primary purpose is "... for the development, advancement, management,

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conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources . . . " " . . . for the benefit of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, in performing its activities and services." All secondary uses, including wildlife-oriented recreation, are subject to analysis to insure compatibility with the above Refuge purpose.

III. STATEMENT OF OBJECTIVES

A. Ohio River Islands NWR Objectives

Protect, preserve, and restore the 38 islands identified in the Final Environmental Assessment (ORI NWR) through acquisition, easement, or management agreement.

Stabilize eroding shorelines, banks, and other areas where man-induced factors are resulting in direct loss of habitats.

Manage and restore endemic plant communities, including the mature bottomland hardwood forests that are endemic to the Ohio River Valley.

Control exotic species invasion, spread, and impacts to native habitats and wildlife populations.

Investigate, inventory, and manage freshwater mussel habitats and populations, with emphasis on endangered species.

Investigate, inventory, and manage the migratory bird resource in order to provide feeding, nesting, cover, and migratory "stop-over" habitat requirements for endemic species.

Assist in the re-establishment or recovery of endemic raptor populations, such as osprey and bald eagles.

Manage resident endemic wildlife populations for their continued existence on refuge lands, but at a level where they will not adversely impact the habitat for species of primary interest.

Provide on-site wildlife-oriented recreational opportunities that are not habitat-degrading or otherwise incompatible with the refuge purposes (day-use activities only).

Provide on and off-site environmental education services to the public, including students, civic organization, and other interested groups.

Provide support services for volunteer participation in refuge management and related activities.

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B. Sport Fishing Program Objectives

Provide for the wise use of renewable natural resources.

Provide an opportunity for sport fishing with minimal interference from other anglers and freedom to participate in a natural setting.

Provide sport fishing opportunity when such use will not be detrimental to the Refuge's primary objective and that will be compatible with other wildlife-oriented recreation.

C. Sport Fishing Program's Effect on Refuge Objectives

The sport fishing program, as described, will have no impact on Refuge objectives. The Service's ability to accomplish these objectives will not be enhanced or hindered by implementing this program.

The one exception to this is the Refuge objective of providing on-site wildlife-oriented recreational opportunities that are not habitat-degrading or otherwise incompatible with the refuge purposes (day-use activities only). A "compatible" sport fishing program for the Refuge would help to attain this objective.

IV. ASSESSMENT

In order to properly assess the fishery resource on the Refuge, both habitat and fish populations need to be addressed briefly.

A diversity of deep and shallow water habitats have been created by currents which hydraulically shape the islands. The characteristic island shape (tear-drop or crescent) continues underwater usually forming a round shallow front and narrow pointed toe which extend up and downstream, gently sloping, for some distance.

Substrates associated with island aquatic habitats are variable and include muck, detritus, silt, clay, sand, gravel, cobbles, riprap, emergent and submergent stumps and logs (drift and in-situ mortality), and emergent and submergent aquatic beds. Substrate type is a function of current velocity and pattern. Sand, gravel, and cobbles are predominantly associated with the island heads where high current velocities keep these coarser substrates clean of fine sand and silt. Island sides and toe are usually a combination of sand, silt, clay, muck, and detritus.

A total of 55 species of fish have been collected by the WV DNR and FWS in the vicinity of the islands. The shallow water areas

against the islands, particularly the back channels, are important nursery areas for a variety of game fish. Young-of-year freshwater drum (Applodinotus grunniens), channel catfish (Ictalurus punctatus), bluegill (Lepomis macrochirus), and spotted bass (Micropterus punctulatus) utilize the shallow water areas of many islands. These shallow areas are in turn major feeding areas for piscivorous fishes [such as spotted bass, white bass (Morone chrysops), hybrid striped bass, largemouth bass (Micropterus salmoides), and sauger (Stizostedion canadense)]. Forage fish include emerald shiner (Notropis antherinoides) and gizzard shad (Dorosoma cepedianum). Other minnows, such as river shiner (Notropis blennius), sand shiner (Notropis stramineus), and bluntnose minnow (Pimephales notatus), are common.

With regard to the impacts on the fishery resource itself, it would be safe to say that opening the Refuge to sport fishing will have a negligible impact. The 18 Refuge islands consist of only 1020 acres scattered along 362 miles of the Ohio River. Ohio's 1992 recreational use survey indicated that when looking at fishing pressure on a river-wide basis, only a small percentage occurs on island habitats. The overwhelming majority of fish harvest occurs at dam tailwaters and main channel borders.

The respective state agencies are engaged in active management programs on the Ohio River. The Service presumes that state fishing regulations are adequate to protect the long-term existence of fish species occurring on and around Refuge lands.

The ability of the Refuge to effectively control access to the resource should be addressed as well. The question of whether the FWS has authority to control activities occurring over submerged refuge lands is related to the riparian ownership determinations. The DOI Solicitor stated that all lands and waters occurring within the lowest low water line around said islands are part of the National Wildlife Refuge System and are subject to applicable refuge jurisdiction. The FWS can therefore control activities on these waters pursuant to our authorities such as those granted by the National Wildlife Refuge Administration Act.

However, the difficulty of enforcing the regulations necessary to restrict sport fishing around the islands must be considered. Restricting offshore anglers from using Refuge waters would be extremely difficult and unpopular. Refuge boundaries offshore are not discernable by the visiting public in many cases. The Ohio River's status as a navigable waterway also presents implications regarding access.

The restriction of sport fishing would actually force the Refuge to more actively manage anglers now that the Refuge fishing

program has been formally considered. The Refuge may be required to undertake numerous administrative and law enforcement functions which could prove unwieldy. Restricting fishing would actually require more funds and manpower than "officially" opening the islands to fishing.

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V. DESCRIPTION OF THE SPORT FISHING PROGRAM

A. Guidelines for Sport Fishing Program

The Service permits sport fishing on refuges where it contributes to or is compatible with refuge purposes. Refuge areas may be opened to sport fishing only after a determination is made that funds are available and this activity is compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established. In addition, the sport fishing program must be consistent with principles of sound fishery management and other-wise be in the public interest. Administrative procedures and guidance for Refuge fishing programs can be found in the FWS Refuge Manual (8 RM 6).

B. Areas Open to Fishing

All Refuge lands/waters will be open to sport fishing. Areas will only be closed to fishing if safety concerns merit such action or if any resources are threatened by fishing activities.

Currently, no such conditions exist and all 18 Refuge islands and their waters are open to sport fishing.

C. Species to be Taken

Species to be taken and method of take will be in conformance with applicable state laws governing sport fishing.

D. Manpower & Funds

Annual staff requirements are expected to be only 4-5 staff-days per year to complete the following: update the Sport Fishing Plan, prepare reports, respond to public inquiries, and ongoing assessment of environmental impacts related to the program. Although all Refuge staff will be involved in these tasks, the majority of these responsibilities will be shared by the Refuge Operations Specialist and the Outdoor Recreation Planner. Salary expenses will approach \$800.00 / year.

No expenses related to leaflet printing are expected. The brief statements necessary to address the fishing program can be added to the general refuge brochure.

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VI. MEASURES TAKEN TO AVOID CONFLICTS WITH OTHER MGMT. OBJECTIVES

A. Biological Conflicts

Fishing on the Refuge can be divided into two categories: fishing from the island shores and fishing from boats around the islands. In order to properly evaluate the effects of angling on the biological resources of the islands, fishing must be looked at in this manner.

Fishing from the island shorelines occurs mainly during the summer months and in conjunction with other "beach" activities. Because access to the islands requires a boat, very few visitors fish from the shoreline to begin with. Most people observed fishing from the shoreline were with other visitors who were engaged in unrelated beach activities. In other words, "the father was fishing while mom and the kids were picnicking, swimming, etc." Therefore, it is safe to say that fishing was not the primary activity of these visitors and they probably would have been on the Refuge even if fishing was prohibited. Therefore, the additive disturbance to shoreline wildlife and habitat created as a result of allowing shoreline fishing is negligible. The Refuge beaches are already open for day-use activities and to restrict fishing in these areas would serve no purpose. In addition, Refuge personnel have observed no conflicts between anglers and other Refuge visitors on the beach.

Angling from boats around the Refuge islands is obviously the preferred method. This type of use is different from shoreline use and the resulting impacts on the Refuge's biological resources need to be addressed separately.

The vast majority of fishing around the islands occurs between April and November which coincides with other water based recreational pursuits. To properly evaluate the effects that boat anglers have on island resources, recreational boating needs to be addressed collectively. Boaters can participate in several activities during the course of their day, and generally speaking, wildlife react similarly to watercraft in close proximity to the islands regardless of what activity the boaters are engaged in (skiing, sunbathing, joyriding, or fishing).

The Refuge has already prepared several documents which address the environmental impacts of recreational boating to island resources. Within current regulations, motor boating around or adjacent to the Refuge has been determined to be compatible with Refuge purposes. Powerboating, water skiing, jet skiing, and waterfowl hunting have all been determined to be compatible activities and are currently allowed on the Refuge.

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B. Public Use Conflicts

Depending on which estimate is used, somewhere between 30% and 50% of the recreational users on the Ohio River are anglers. Competition for space can be a problem at dam tailwaters and main shore areas with limited access. However, the Refuge currently does not have lands in these categories. Overcrowding on the Refuge island beaches is due to recreational boaters, not anglers.

The majority of Refuge anglers fish by boat in the morning and evening, and experience little direct competition with power boaters and waterskiers who are generally out mid-day. The Refuge has received no complaints or witnessed any conflicts between anglers themselves or with other Refuge visitors during the past three years. There is not a public use conflict related to angling on the Refuge at this time, nor is one expected to develop.

C. Administrative Conflicts

No administrative conflicts are evident at this time.

VII. CONDUCT OF THE SPORT FISHING PROGRAM

A. Refuge-Specific Fishing Regulations

No refuge-specific regulations are required to implement this program. Applicable state fishing regulations and existing Refuge regulations are adequate to protect Refuge resources.

B. Anticipated Public Reaction

The general public's reaction to "officially" opening the Refuge to fishing is expected to be minimal. The vast majority of the public thinks the waters surrounding the islands are already open to fishing. The Service's administrative actions involved in opening the Refuge to fishing will go unnoticed.

C. Media Selection for Publicizing Fishing Program

The Refuge Fishing Program will be publicized in a variety of ways. The General Refuge Brochure will contain information on fishing opportunities, kiosks placed on-site will contain fishing information, and news releases to appropriate media along the river will be distributed.

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D. Angler Requirements

Refuge anglers will be required to comply with all applicable state fishing regulations while fishing refuge waters, including licensing requirements. Refuge-specific regulations already in effect will also be enforced. These include regulations which prohibit night use, fires, woodcutting, littering, etc. These restrictions are targeted at all visitors and would apply to any anglers using the Refuge as well.