

Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge
Trumpeter Swan Translocation Project

Issues/ Action Items

February 6, 1997

Background:

- In November of 1996 a cooperative project to translocate trumpeter swans (TRUS) to Utah was initiated by UT DWR, USFWS, and USU. A sample of 20 TRUS and 2 tundra swans (WHSW) were captured at Harriman State Park (HSP) and released during the hunting season at BRMBR. Six TRUS and 2 WHSW were legally harvest during the hunting season. Three other birds were recovered after the season and probably died of hunting related causes. Another sample of 37 TRUS were released at BRMBR in December after the close of the hunting season.
- Prior to project implementation several meetings were held with various parties. The Refuge staff recognized the need to involve all interested parties and to have consensus among key players before moving forward with the project. In particular, the Pacific Flyway Trumpeter Swan Study Committee met in Salt Lake to discuss details of the proposed project. At that meeting the UT DWR expressed that they would be willing to permit the import of TRUS to Utah under the following 2 considerations:
 1. The issue of liability to hunter's who may unintentionally harvest a TRUS during the WHSW hunt needed to be resolved.
 2. The translocation project could only proceed if it was done in a way that allowed the collection of scientifically legitimate data as to the success of the translocation and the mortality/survivorship of the birds.

The hunter liability issue was settled in 1995 through the EA and FONSI on WHSW harvest regulations prepared by the USFWS. As a result, in 1996 a limited take of 15 TRUS was allowed in Utah. Other swan season restrictions were also placed on Utah.

The UT DWR and the BRMBR staff felt that it was critical to implement the translocation in a scientifically and professionally sound manner. Previous efforts to deal with the Tristate swans followed minimal protocol and resulted in little if any ability to analyze success or failure of the project. Because of the hunting issues in Utah the partners insisted that data be collected to determine any difference in hunting vulnerability between TRUS and WHSW. For years, the lack of statistically rigorous data has fueled the arguments over swan management in Utah. The UT DWR and the BRMBR staff cannot overemphasize the importance of acquiring sound data upon which to make management decisions regarding swans in Utah.

The Study Committee agreed with the draft Utah proposal and gave it the second highest priority for implementation relative to the RMP swan populations (mid-winter swan surveys were the highest priority). The BRMBR proceeded to

initiate funding of the project through a Cooperative Agreement with the UT DWR. UT DWR coordinated the project with USU. Katia Engelhard was selected as a PhD candidate and prepared an in depth proposal for the project. The proposal was reviewed and approved by Katia's graduate committee and Dr. John Kadlec, Dean of the college of Natural Resources at USU.

The project proceeded as planned. Vegetation data collection began in August and swans were moved to Utah in November.

Issues:

- The harvesting of 9 TRUS in Utah has aroused considerable animosity among some special interest groups, especially certain members of the Trumpeter Swan Society (TSS). Some members feel that they did not have enough input into determining the protocol of the research. Some individuals claim they had no idea that TRUS were being intentionally subjected to hunting in Utah. Even though mortality from other aspects of RMP management actions has been much greater, the 9 deaths caused by legal hunting are unacceptable. The issue here appears to be hunting.
- There is distrust between some members of TSS and the various agencies involved. Personal criticism of people's credentials and professional abilities is rampant. Some people have indicated that they believe data is being withheld from them and they are being intentionally misinformed. This type of criticism is detrimental to any forward progress towards resolving issues.
- There appears to be some lack of consensus among the USFWS as to the goals/objectives of the Pacific Flyway Management Plan for RMP Trumpeter Swans. Is the goal to limit swan numbers at HSP or to establish a southern migration route?
- Communication between all parties has been difficult in the past and continues to create difficulties at both the local and flyway levels. No simple mechanism is in place to exchange information. The multi-faceted nature of the management makes it difficult to know who is in charge.
- Conflict over data exchange between different parties remains unresolved. Although timely progress reports on the Utah project have been produced, others feel that all (i.e. raw) data should be released. Because of the nature of the research with USU and the use of the data for thesis and publication preparation it may not be appropriate to release some types of data, particularly when the possibility exist for that data to be misrepresented.
- The changes in the Utah hunt regulations are apparently being looked at as a model for resolving conflicts between TRUS recovery and WHSW hunting in other flyways. Since this is the case it would seem appropriate for regional and Pacific Flyway coordinators to provide leadership on implementation and resolution of conflicts.
- The possibility of legal action taken against the USFWS by special interest groups is of concern. Coordination of the project must be improved within the agency.

- The USFWS must continue to facilitate decision making by collecting biologically and statistically meaningful data. A single year's data is not adequate for assessing vulnerability nor is the low number of TRUS at HSP in a single year indicative of a trend.
- Increased monitoring throughout the flyway is critical to assessing the success of all aspects of RMP management. In 1996 the vast majority of RMP TRUS were unaccounted for. Were the birds still in the Tristate area or did they move to suitable wintering areas?

Actions:

- Continue with the translocation project as planned. Minor logistical modifications to the sampling protocol have been discussed by the Utah cooperators and will be further reviewed by USU. (UT DWR, BRMBR, USU)
- Improve communications and dissemination of information within the USFWS, between State Agencies, the Pacific Flyway and the TSS. (USFWS)
- Resolve the issue of what data is to be turned over to the public and when. (USU, UTDWR)
- Attend Pacific Flyway meeting in March to discuss issues with the Study Committee and to coordinate procedures among the USFWS partners. (Vickie Roy)