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# The Illinois River: Federal Focus & Vision Remarks

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I would like to thank the State of Illinois, and in particular the Governor's Office and the Coordinating Council, for continuing to sponsor and support these conferences which help all of us affirm the importance of the Illinois River to the state, and to the nation. These conferences also help us recharge our commitment to making the river better for its own sake, and for the sake of fish, wildlife, and people who use its waters for life, and for renewal.

On the back of my business card is a quote from the Japanese conservationist Tanaka Shozo. He said: "The care of rivers is not a question of rivers, but of the human heart."

This conference will focus on many of the nuts and bolts of river conservation: partnerships, volunteer stewardship, restoration, watershed planning, research and monitoring, managing sediment, remote sensing, on-going state and federal programs and initiatives, river-based tourism, and community-based programs.

But the common thread, like a great river itself, is the human heart. The Illinois River will be better tomorrow than it is today because of the care people feel in their heart, and then act upon through their minds and their hands.

The Integrated Management Plan for the Illinois River Watershed released in January, 1997, still provides the blueprint for improving the overall health of the Illinois River. The plan's list of 34 recommendations help all agencies, units of government, organizations, businesses, citizens, and landowners see where they might contribute to a more healthy and sustainable watershed.

We live in a time when government at all levels is struggling with being relevant, mission-based, and focused. In a nutshell, we need a niche or we are forced to migrate.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has a clear mission to conserve, protect, and enhance fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. Our niche is defined by law and treaty which outline our Federal trust natural resources and responsibilities: migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, interjurisdictional fish, certain marine mammals, and the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Although we have not recorded manatees on the Illinois River yet despite hints of climate change, the Illinois and its watershed are very important for the other trust responsibilities. Since my niche for the past 26 years has been refuges, I want to focus my remarks on the Service's refuges on the Illinois River. But before I do, I want to emphasize that the other programs of the Service -- ecological services, migratory birds and state programs, fisheries, and law enforcement -- do important work on wetland protection and mitigation, migratory birds, contaminants, threatened and endangered species, and resource protection which benefit the Illinois River and its watershed.

The national wildlife refuges on the Illinois River are Chautauqua Refuge established in 1936 (with a major addition, the Cameron-Billsbach Unit, in 1958), the Meredosia Refuge established in 1973, and the Emiquon

Refuge established in 1993. These refuges, situated on a span of 125 miles of the Illinois River, provide 12,000 acres of habitat for fish and wildlife.

These Refuges are vital links for several reasons. They give waterfowl and other migratory birds places to nest and raise young, and perhaps most importantly, places to rest and feed during migration. Although modest in acres compared to the watershed, these Refuges provide habitat for 60-70 percent of the waterfowl that migrate along the Illinois River. Their importance has grown as habitat quality and quantity has changed elsewhere along the river.

With a mixture of backwater lakes, bottomland forests, floodplain wetlands, and small portions of upland forest, these Refuges also provide biological diversity and a place for resident wildlife to live. Channel catfish, bluegill, largemouth bass, crappie and white bass are just some of the fish that use the Refuges' backwater lakes to spawn and hatch young.

The benefits to people from these Refuges are high-quality lands and waters for future generations, and opportunities for fishing, hunting, wildlife observation and photography, and interpretation and environmental education.

So how do and will these refuges contribute to the greater vision of a healthy and sustainable Illinois River? There are three main ways: 1. improving what we have, 2. finishing what we start, and 3. reaching out beyond our boundaries.

First, improving what we have.

Nothing remains the same in nature. This is especially true in river systems, where seasonal cycles fueled new life and abundance. However, our needs for commerce, flood control, and agriculture have altered the natural rhythms of most major river systems, including that of the Illinois River. Where there is not regular rejuvenation, there is usually systematic decline. This is also true of our Refuges, and we must try to mimic natural processes to keep these areas productive. This productivity, as noted in the Refuge System's 1999 vision document "Fulfilling the Promise" is more important than ever since "our national habitat base has been reduced to a point where we must rely on refuges and other dedicated wildlife lands to produce a larger portion of public wildlife benefits." In short, we can not afford to have our refuges be anything but "all they can be."

On the Illinois River refuges, we will continue to make existing lands more productive. Here are some examples:

- The Chautauqua Refuge Environmental Management Program project, done in concert with the Corps of Engineers, that helped restore productivity to 2,100 acres of the south pool area for dabbling ducks and shorebirds, and 1,100 acres of the north pool for diving ducks and fisheries.
- The Weis Lake Project on the Cameron-Billsbach Unit restored 328 acres of wetlands through rock weirs and control structures in a partnership with Ducks Unlimited and the Service.
- The Emiquon Refuge wetlands restoration project which seeks to enhance 1,500 acres of wetland through a partnership with Ducks Unlimited, the Illinois Conservation Foundation, and the Service, in coordination with our next door neighbors, The Nature Conservancy and their 7,000-plus acres.

Second, finishing what we start.

We will continue to pursue acquisition of several thousand acres of land from willing sellers to complete the Meredosia and Emiquon refuges as outlined in the Comprehensive Conservation Plan approved last year. Every acre purchased and restored contributes to the overall health of the river for wildlife, and thus, contributes to the greater vision.

Third, reaching out beyond our boundaries.

When Bruce Babbitt was Secretary of Interior, he once said that refuges are a radiant and generative force, infinitely more important than our national parks. What he was getting at is not to rate refuges against parks, but that the Refuge System, due to its vast dispersion of lands across areas also important to agriculture and other uses, is well-suited to working with neighbors beyond our boundaries.

The Illinois Refuges have an active Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program that works in 23 counties along the Illinois River. The program is voluntary, relies heavily on a partnership approach, and leverages both ideas and funding from a variety of sources, including programs of the Dept. of Agriculture. Over the past 10 years, our efforts have restored approximately 6,000 acres of habitat on private lands. The Partners program remains an effective tool in influencing land use off-refuge to improve water quality and quantity on-refuge, as well as meeting the greater landscape needs of fish and wildlife.

Reaching out involves not only the land, but also the mind. Our refuges teach young and old alike the value of wild places and land stewardship through interpretive and educational programs. They offer opportunities to practice stewardship, and give something back, through volunteer programs and Friends of Refuges organizations. They serve as a base and sense of place to attract, nurture, and grow partnerships with communities, organizations, agencies, businesses, and citizens. They are, in short, radiant and generative forces. Although partnership today is a rather trendy term in government, for refuges, partnerships have been a way of life for a hundred years. We will continue that legacy and build upon it.

So there you have our vision and our focus for the future on the Illinois River:

- Improve what we have
- Finish what we start, and
- Reach out beyond our boundaries

We look forward to remaining an active partner for the greater vision of a healthy and sustainable Illinois River. Thank you.

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