

Friends Conference 2003

Good Morning Friends!

I hope you had a wonderful weekend Conference and I'm sorry I wasn't here to share it with you. The only thing more important than Friends, is Family, and my wife's sister was married this weekend. We needed to be there.

I can't tell you how good it feels to look out on this group and how inspiring it is to think about the success and bright future that you represent for the National Wildlife Refuge System.

This will be my last occasion to address you as Refuge System Chief, so I wanted to take the chance to look back and reflect on our journey together over the past 6 years.

I'd like to take a snapshot of today and a quick look into the future.

The "friends movement" as we know it today, I guess really got started in 1993 with the Service and the "Ding" Darling Wildlife Society co-hosting the first training on Cooperating Associations in Florida.

In 1996, the Service, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, National Wildlife Refuge Association, and National Audubon forged and formalized a partnership that became the Friends Initiative. We started working in cooperatively to increase

the number and effectiveness of citizen-based, refuge support groups across the country.

At that time, I was the Service's Assistant Director for External Affairs and I saw the potential in that initiative. I joined some of you at the now historic Virginia Beach meeting where we laid the groundwork for what we see here today.

At that time, there were about 74 Friends groups and Cooperating Associations. What an incredible seed stock that has proven to be.

Around this time in our history, the National Wildlife Refuge System budget for operations and maintenance stood at around \$180 million. This is important because I believe that the inspiring growth in our Friends organizations and the significant expansion in our budgets is no mere coincidence.

So let's look at what's happened since then.

Passage of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, in 1997 – emphasis on managing as a system, partnership with communities, comprehensive planning.

Passage of the National Wildlife Refuge System Volunteer and Community Partnership Act of 1998. New emphasis on community partnership and volunteerism and new tools for support of Friends.

The Keystone Conference, in October 1998, was the first-ever gathering of all refuge managers, with the entire Service leadership, and many of you. One of my most vivid memories from Keystone is how those “Friends are Worth It” buttons became one of the “hottest” items at the Conference. Everybody wanted one.

As a result of Keystone, investing in Friends become one of our *Promises* to fulfill. We challenged ourselves to provide training workshops, mentoring and support networks, guidance for developing groups, and managers with the minds and tools to support these growing partnerships. And we’ve gone a long way to meeting that challenge.

The Friends Grant Program managed by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation has awarded more than \$800,000 through over 200 grants to more than 130 organizations. Those organizations support more than 100 National Wildlife Refuges in 45 states. And that partnership with NFWF is going stronger than ever.

We have supported publications and web sites assisting the start-up and capacity building efforts of Friends groups.

We have provided training opportunities to Friends groups and their members.

We have trained Mentor Teams and sponsored Mentor visits to help grow new groups and revitalize existing groups.

We have partnered in the interagency Volunteer.gov website to make volunteering with the Service easier and more convenient for the public.

We have provided volunteer and Friends training to our employees to improve their knowledge and skills in working with community organizations. And to break down some cultural barriers to building community partnerships.

We worked with the NWRA to design and bring about this Conference –
TWICE!!!

We've certainly had our fits-and-starts, but I think we've done well together. And as a result, you stand today as a legion of 225 groups and your numbers continue to grow and you continue to gain strength, individually and collectively.

And it is no coincidence that our budget today stands not at the \$180 million where it was in 1997, but at well over \$400 million. More than doubled, and still growing. And as a result, our refuges are stronger, individually and collectively.

You are now part of the fabric of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Ten years ago, that was not the case, but today, you are a part of our culture. Your well being is embedded and your defense is reflexive in people like Jim Kurth, Allyson Rowell, Rick , Elizabeth Souheaver, Kevin Kilcullen, Tony Leger, Trevor Needham, Nita Fuller, and many others who are today's and tomorrow's Refuge System leaders.

We could not do our work without you.

As I conclude I want to take a short look into the future and tell you about a Refuge System that is increasingly strong and secure because of the depth and the strength of its community partnerships. A community of Friends organizations, that are engaged and inspired by the individual refuges – the “people and places” that _____ spoke to us about at last year’s conference. But a community that is increasingly active and capable in supporting the Refuge System in its entirety. Seeing you all here today, makes me certain this vision is happening.

And I want to encourage you to continue to act as good friends must act. And from time to time, tell us not what we want to hear but what we must hear. Because we have made mistakes in the past, and certainly will in the days, months and years ahead.

And although I owe each and every one of you a huge debt of gratitude for the support you have offered during my tenure as Chief, I need to just say a few public thank yous:

Jim Kurth for being a remarkable partner and unflagging supporter of the Friends Initiative;

Allyson Rowell for always reminding me of our commitment and responsibility to the Friends Initiative;

Rick Lemon and the staff at NCTC for great support in training and mentoring workshops;

Jim Clark at NCTC for running the Refuge Academy and helping build the next generation of refuge manager who will build ever stronger community partnerships;

NFWF and NWRA for being steadfast partners, through thick-and-thin;
Friends of Blackwater (Frank and Arlene; Ron and Peggy)
Friends of Patuxent (
Friends of Bosque (Festival of the Cranes)
Pelican Island Preservation Society (For the vision and the motivation)
Friends of Upper Miss (George and Dorothy)
Friends of Willapa (bayside campfire that will always warm my heart)
Friends of Mississquoi (ultimate “campy” but warm, funny and inspiring
performance)

Friends of Every Refuge for all that you do to help us manage this great
system of lands and waters.

If the movie “The Graduate” were being re-made today, and Leonardo DiCaprio
was playing Dustin Hoffman’s part and cast, instead, as an aspiring wildlife
biologist. In that famous scene when Mr. Robinson leans into his ear and whispers
that one word of advice. I know what it would be —

“Friends”

Because Friends are Worth It!!!!

Thank you very much.