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Antelope, Red Rock Lakes NWR, Montana

The Core Group

Forming the Core Leadership

Every Friends group has its own unique story about how it got started. Most have stories of bumps and bruises along the way and also stories of great successes.

In some cases, one or two people recognized the need, talked with the refuge manager and formed a group.

In other cases, an issue arose that galvanized people into action — these people wanted to protect or establish a refuge and organized a group. In addition, there are cases where the refuge staff developed positive relationships with the community and the refuge was perceived as a good neighbor. In these cases, a Friends group formed because they were interested in helping their “neighbor in need.”

Regardless of the reason for organizing, all groups got their start with a core group of community leaders who recognized the need for a Friends group.

A strong core group is essential to beginning the process of forming a Friends organization.

While some of these groups are now mature with large memberships and budgets, each has also experienced great achievements while they were fledgling groups with a handful of dollars and only a few members.

The Story of . . .

Ding Darling Wildlife Society

Ding Darling Wildlife Society got its start in 1982 as a cooperating association to support the mission of the refuge by offering interpretive and environmental education opportunities to visitors. The Society has grown to about 1,000 members. The local members donate 22,000 hours

in volunteer time and contribute about \$50,000 to fund projects for the refuge annually. After eight years of deriving income from a few shelves of books, membership dues and donations, the Society enclosed a visitor center deck to make a sales area. Recently, they

launched a drive to raise \$2 million to build a new visitor center. So far, they are approaching the halfway mark, and when they do, they plan to break ground.

“We are involved with the friends group because we can see results of our efforts; we have contributed financially; we have freely given our time because we believe that we are saving taxpayer dollars, while deriving great satisfaction for ourselves.”

—Robert Jones, Okefenokee Wildlife League, Inc.,
Folkston, Georgia (Friends Survey, NWRRA, 1997)

There are some common factors involved in forming the core leadership and beginning the process of organizing a group.

- ❑ Two to five highly dedicated, like minded people, are needed to start the process.
- ❑ The core group engages in dialogue with the refuge manager and staff to discuss the need for a Friends group.
- ❑ The core group begins to attract and recruit members to the board.
- ❑ The core group begins the work of developing a successful relationship with the refuge staff, and creating a vision and mission for the Friends group and building the organization.

A GOOD LEADER

- Can lead without being overbearing.
- Has or is able to develop community connections.
- Has a flexible style.
- Has the ability to motivate and hold members accountable.
- Makes needed changes in board members in a diplomatic way.
- Is able to recognize talents and match them with what needs to be done.

The Story of . . .

Friends of Parker River NWR

Friends of Parker River National Wildlife Refuge started in 1992 when its community was embroiled in a piping plover versus people controversy. With less than 50 members, the Friends helped to resolve the controversy. The piping plover was a protected species and the

Friends gained support from both the community and federal legislators. With only a handful of dedicated volunteers, this group sponsored a community-wide piping plover festival, which has since become an annual event. As a result of the work performed by this group,

the local community now sees the refuge as a valuable natural resource and is promoting ecotourism as a primary industry.

Where to look for core leaders

Environmental organizations

School Board

Service clubs (Kiwanis, Lions)

Features, newspaper ads or letters to editor

Refuge volunteers

Conservation committees

City Council

Chamber of Commerce

Universities, technical schools

Students and teachers

Religious groups

Societies (historical, garden clubs)

Council on Aging, elder services

Sports enthusiasts (hunting, fishing)

Refuge neighbors

Other refuge partners

Look for core leaders who have:

- A real concern for the refuge.
- Some organizational skills.
- A willingness to “work” and not simply advise.
- Time to commit for an indefinite period and energy to get the friends group started.
- Enthusiasm.
- An ability to adapt to local geographical and cultural needs.

“All journeys begin with the first step.”

–Ed Bristow, Atlantic Audubon and Friends of Forsythe NWR

What can I do to get them involved?

- Make phone calls
- Attend public meetings
- Prepare refuge slide shows
- Write letters to the newspaper
- Write feature articles
- Personal visits
- Ask prominent people in community for recommendations

Words of Wisdom From Other Friends Groups

The motto of the Walnut Creek Refuge Friends group is “Panic Forward!” That is, if you do not have the knowledge, skill, abilities, or money you think you need – just go out and get it.

“

Be careful about who you choose for board leadership; this start-up group can make or break the process.

~

Be sure to not “just take anybody,” — be sure to match people with needed skills.

~

Don’t be too limiting in creating your image or too narrow in your focus.

~

Develop a network so that you have others to turn to for answers and advice. The network can be other refuge Friends groups or other non-profit groups in your area.

~

Identify a resource person with non-profit experience to provide advice.

~

Speak with one united voice.

~

Study the successes of others.

~

Keep a sense of humor.

~

Get out and enjoy the refuge!

”

“Realize it will take time, six months to a year to get things going.”

Advice from Friends at
the 1997 facilitated meeting in Virginia.

Now What?

Now you've got two or three people interested in beginning the work of forming a group. What's next? Building relationships.

Begin by building a relationship with the refuge staff:

- Set up a meeting with the refuge manager
- Brainstorm ideas
- Begin networking

Resources

- ✓ *Your Refuge Regional Office*
- ✓ *The National Wildlife Refuge Association*
- ✓ *US Fish and Wildlife Service Friends mentoring team*
- ✓ *Other established Friends groups (refuges, parks, libraries, hospitals, etc.)*
- ✓ *Other volunteer based organizations and other volunteer/leadership centers*
- ✓ *Local Audubon groups and other local environmental organizations*
- ✓ *Academic institutions*
- ✓ *Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE) which is comprised of retired business people*
- ✓ *RefugeNET(<http://www.refugenet.org>)*

*The Friends of
Mashpee NWR's
motto is
"Just do it!"*

Core Group Checklist

Identify one or two people willing to start the process and take on a leadership role.	
Begin a preliminary assessment of achievable goals the group can accomplish to assist the refuge.	
Communicate with refuge staff to begin relationship building process.	
Make a decision as to whether a Friends group is needed or if it is the right time.	
Begin putting together a Board of Directors.	
Network with other Friends groups.	
Begin to attract and recruit members.	
Be willing to assess the group's viability, board structure and goals.	
Be willing to develop abilities, skills and knowledge through training sessions.	

