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Red-footed boobies, Kilauea Point NWR, Hawaii

Develop the Relationship

Building a relationship between Friends and Refuge staff

One key factor in the success of a Friends group is the relationship its members have with the refuge staff.

Open and regular communication is critical to making these relationships work. Each group has a responsibility to understand each others' mission, responsibilities, talents, capabilities and shortcomings. The best partnership is where the parties tap into each other's strengths and use them to achieve a common goal.

One thing a Friends group can do to help build the relationship is to begin to understand how the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is structured, and therefore how the manager of your refuge gets things done.

Most refuges are headed by a Refuge Manager, who also has the administrative title of Project Leader. He or she oversees a staff of varying size and composition, depending on the refuge size and needs. (See the chart on the following page for an example of a "typical" refuge staff).

Your refuge manager answers to a chain of command within one of seven Regional Offices. Some refuge decisions may need to go through a complicated chain of command which may include U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service directors in Washington, DC. This bureaucracy can slow down the decision making process and can be very frustrating for the public. Talking with your Refuge Manager and people within the Regional and Washington offices can help you to understand how things work. Understanding how things work within the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will help Friends groups be better advocates in communicating the issues to the public. It will also help you to understand where the

"It takes time to nurture a working relationship. Be patient!"

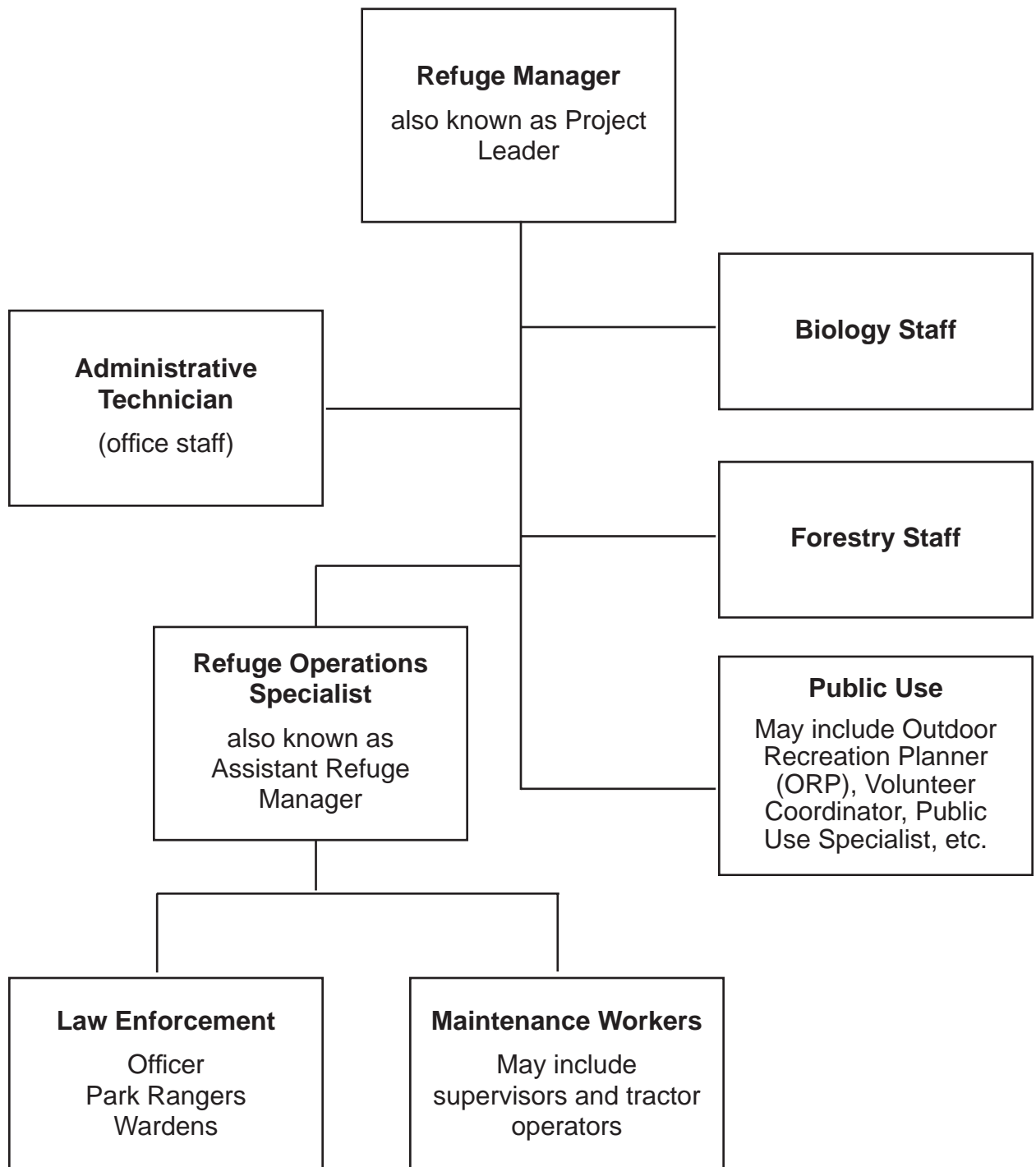
–Martin C. Kaehny, Refuge Manager, Eastern Neck NWR
(Refuge Manager Survey, NWRA, 1997)

Keys to learning about your refuge

Groups that are the most effective get to know the system and its people. They:

- Learn how to cut through the red tape
- Understand the system
- Learn about their local regions.
- Develop relationships within their regions
- Identify who to talk to in order to get things done.

Typical Wildlife Refuge Staff *



* The diagram shows typical job categories one might find on a refuge. Refuge's staff vary according to the needs and size of the particular site.

Tools for learning about your refuge

- Talk about the hierarchy of the Fish and Wildlife Service with your refuge manager.

- Visit your Regional office – get a tour of all the departments. Meet the people that play a major role in management and decision making.

Use the tools each refuge offers:

- Annual Narrative Reports

- Comprehensive management plan or master plan, interpretive plans.

- Understand the focus of your local refuge and the issues that affect it.

- See the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service web page for a wealth of information about the FWS itself, its policies, programs and objectives (<http://www.fws.gov>).

A great resource for information about the Refuge System:

Refuge Reporter
James Clark, editor
Avocet Two, publisher
Millwood, VA 22646-0156
Phone/Fax 540-837-2152
Refrep@earthlink.net

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barriers may be in achieving the goals at your refuge.

Another thing Friends and the refuge staff can do to build their relationship is to understand the expectations they hold for one another. Each group should ask the following question: What expectations do the Friends and the staff of the refuge hold for themselves and each other in the relationship? It is useful to do some consensus building exercises. You will develop a list of guiding principles which clearly communicate the expectations of the two groups.

This is an important exercise that you can and should do with the refuge staff at some point. It is important to realize that some tension is to be expected. It exists in every relationship. Ask yourselves, “What are the undercurrents?” These are the issues that are critical to get into the open and discuss.

Some have likened the Friends/refuge partnership to a marriage, where, in order to succeed, each party must continue to be flexible, respectful, understanding, supportive, positive, and open to discussion and possible change. Developing a strong, open and supportive relationship takes time and effort by both the refuge staff and the group’s members.

“Stick with it! Let even the small refuges know they can benefit!”

–Forrest W. Cameron, Refuge Manager, Malheur NWR (Refuge Manager Survey, NWRA, 1997)

Tools for Success

- Remember that day-to-day management of the refuge belongs to the refuge staff.
- Refuge staff performance evaluations are also the responsibility of refuge staff.
- In the same way, the refuge manager does not “manage” the Friends group.
- Get agency support. This may include getting to know the right people in the regional office and the Washington office.
- Involve the FWS people, but do not be deterred if they are not supportive. Wait out the non-supportive staff.
- Don’t do something that the refuge does not support.
- Stay in sequence with the refuge. Don’t go too fast into a project. Note that often the refuge is slower to act. Sometimes the Friends group may need to push things along. When making decisions, keep maintaining a good relationship in mind and be sure to discuss plans with the Refuge manager.
- Don’t go over the Refuge manager’s head, without his/her knowledge. This does not imply having to get their permission!
- Don’t let a personal conflict persist (e.g., Friends member versus refuge manager/staff).
- Sometimes the Friends may be in conflict with what the FWS wants to do. It is important to discuss these differences with the refuge manager. It’s okay to disagree, but it will hurt the relationship to “air your dirty laundry” in public.

A GOOD PARTNERSHIP IS . . .

- A true involvement of both parties.
- Everyone playing on the same team.
- Mutual respect for and understanding of each other’s mission.
- Open and regular communication between both parties.
- Refuge manager and the staff need to really want a friends group and give their time to support the partnership.

“I think managers / staff need to develop a trust relationship with groups. The groups need to get to know you, have little successes with projects and ideas and then expand. It takes a significant amount of time and personal attention (face to face rather than letters) to build this relationship.”

–Mick Erickson, Refuge Manager, Chase Lake NWR (NWR Refuge Managers Survey, 1997)

“Be prepared to share in management decisions and have a willingness to compromise.”

–Daniel Doshier, Refuge Manager, Crab Orchard NWR. (Refuge Manager Survey, NWRA, 1997)

How do we build the partnership?

Now that we have entered this relationship, how do we build a partnership?

Ask for a meeting with the refuge manager. Together you will make a preliminary identification of the kinds of things your group can do to assist the refuge. This begins the partnership building process.

Important topics to discuss with refuge manager:

Make a decision whether a Friends Group is needed or if it is the right time.

- Coordinate efforts with the refuge manager and get his or her personal support.
- The refuge manager must give the Friends personal attention and time.
- The refuge manager should encourage the entire refuge staff and volunteers to support the friends.

Discuss partnership opportunities.

- Exchange ideas on refuge needs and wants.
- Ask, “How can we help you?”
- Suggest ideas of how you can help. (Do your homework on what could be and needs to be done.)
- Review ideas how other established Friends Groups have helped other refuges.

Discuss roles

- Define the Friends’ role - the specific areas in which they will provide “support” to that refuge.
- Clarify what activities the Friends do and do not want to get involved with.

- Clarify what the Refuge manager and staff do and do not get involved in with regard to the Friends group.
- Clarify the difference between the refuge volunteers and the Friends. They have different purposes, although memberships often overlap.
- Educate yourself and others about the dynamics of partnerships.

Discuss rules of communication

- A philosophy of no surprises is a good idea.

Describe the long-term relationship with a formal agreement (Memorandum of Agreement or MOA).

Note: While this step is recommended to help clarify the relationship, it is not required for a Friends group to organize and support a refuge. Indeed, there may be reasons why a refuge manager and the Friends group do not want to develop an MOA (e.g., when the Friends group is focused mainly on legislation and does not qualify for 501 (c) (3) non-profit.)

Words of Wisdom From Other Friends Groups

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A couple of years are needed to establish the full trusting and supportive relationship. Even if it starts up easily, you all need time to build the relationship.

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A change in the refuge manager will require additional work to establish a new relationship. This may take time and require new strategies.

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Changes in membership of the Friends group can also impact the situation.

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Expect things to ebb and flow.

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Friends and the manager need to be patient, enthusiastic, persevere, stress teamwork, and commit to the partnership.

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Develop mutual respect for each other.

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Make a distinction between operational matters versus opinions, issues, etc.

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Remember that the process is dynamic and the relationship and issues will change over time.

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*“Very positive experience
– An excellent way for
the refuge to get the
public involved.”*

–Louis S. Hinds III,
Refuge Manager,
J.N. Ding Darling NWR
(Refuge Managers Survey,
NWRA, 1997)

*“It’s a very rewarding
and worthwhile experi-
ence and the benefits
outweigh the staff time
needed to support their
efforts.”*

–Burkett S. Neely, Jr.,
Refuge Manager, Arthur R.
Marshall Loxahatchee NWR
(Refuge Manager Survey,
NWRA, 1997)

Guiding principles for the Friends/U.S. Fish and Wildlife relationship

What follows is the list of expectations for the relationship between FWS and Friends groups developed at the culmination of the 1997 meeting in Virginia. It was signed by everyone present as a statement of principles:

We commit to abide by the following expectations that we hold for one another in the Friends-FWS relationship.

Expectations that the Friends hold for themselves in the relationship:

- That we will consistently and regularly communicate honestly and strongly.
- That we will work to protect the natural resource.
- That we will respect the concerns that the USFWS has regarding the relationship, i.e., that we will have reasonable expectations of them and what they can do.
- That we will be committed to the refuge mission, which means that we must know what the mission is and so we will educate ourselves.
- That we will be fully committed to keeping up our end of the partnership.
- That we will not undercut agency and refuge management, that the “dirty linens” will not be aired in public.
- That we will buy into a shared vision, that means a vision that both sides work to create.
- That we will help the Service personnel to be and feel productive.

Expectations that the Friends hold for the FWS relationship:

- “That they will put their money where their mouths are.” You talk the talk, can you walk the walk? Commit to training, to mentoring and to providing the resources that are needed. That the FWS will commit to doing what needs to be done to help make the Friends group effort succeed: it is not just the money.
- That they are making a long-term commitment to this effort, that the non-profit organizations are here to stay. That the commitment is consistent among refuge managers (both serially over time and at each refuge and across all refuges) and throughout the USFWS.
- That they will have a true sense of partnership, wherein there will be a “no surprises” philosophy and a full sharing of information in both directions.
- That the Friends efforts will have the support of the whole USFWS, and especially including the managers. The managers are critical but it needs to permeate the whole agency.
- That they will trust and respect us.
- That they will work to protect the natural resource.

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Expectations that the FWS hold for themselves in the relationship:

- View the Friends groups as a long-term, personal friendship. This implies dealing with them honestly, trusting and respecting them, appreciating them, being patient with them, not being negative about them, and using the full set of talents.
- We will work to sell it to our peers and to the troops. We will work to infuse support for Friends throughout the agency.
- Providing consistent follow-through and active support of Friends groups from the Washington office, the regional offices, and the field.
- We understand what it takes to have a Friends group and then make the commitment.
- That we will help you help us. We will teach you about the government systems to make your job easier. We will give you the information that you need to do your job and to give you the information before you read it in the media.
- That we will help the Friends to be and feel productive.

Expectations that the FWS hold for the Friends in the relationship:

- To protect the resource.
- To be independent advocates. That they will learn how to influence governmental systems. That they will be advocates for the good of the system at the local and national level. That they might help to raise funds to benefit the refugees.
- That they will respect and trust the Service employees.
- That they will understand and respect the operational pressures and boundaries that affect the Service (Give the Service the room they need to make management decisions.)
- To provide a positive community influence. Be our doorway to the public.
- To assist in accomplishing refuge projects. The Service's resources are limited and sometimes we need you to help us to finish a project.

Relationship Building Checklist

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| Meet with the refuge staff to clarify the roles of the Friends group and the Refuge in the relationship. | |
| Gain the personal support of the Refuge manager. | |
| Learn all you can about the Refuge. Do your homework. | |
| Ask Refuge staff, "How can we help you?" Bring some ideas of your own. | |
| Establish clear rules of open and regular communication. No surprises. | |
| Give the relationship time to grow. | |

