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U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service  
Merritt Island  
National Wildlife Refuge  
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# News Release



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
April 15, 2004

Contact: Cheri M. Ehrhardt, Natural Resource Planner

## **What should we do for Mosquito Lagoon?**

- What?** CCP Public Scoping Meeting:  
Future Management of Southern Mosquito Lagoon
- When?** Thursday, April 29, 2004  
5:30 pm - 8:30 pm
- Where?** North Brevard Public Library, Titusville  
2121 S Hopkins Ave.
- Why?** To review ideas regarding future management of Mosquito Lagoon  
and to develop the foundation for a preferred management alternative
- Contact:** 321.861.0667  
Cheri Ehrhardt, Natural Resource Planner  
Dorn Whitmore, Refuge Ranger Supervisor  
Ron Hight, Refuge Manager

## **Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge**

### **Refuge Purposes**

The primary purpose of the Refuge is "...for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds" 16 USC §715d (Migratory Bird Conservation Act). Refuge purposes cover migratory birds (e.g., waterfowl, shorebirds, and neotropical migrants), threatened and endangered species, and native wildlife and habitat diversity.

### **Refuge Background Information**

Located along Florida's east central coastline in Brevard and Volusia counties, Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1963 to provide protection for migratory birds, threatened or endangered species, and native wildlife. The Refuge includes over 140,000 acres within the Indian River Lagoon system, one of the most productive estuaries in the US. The Refuge is highly important for many species, including the Florida scrub-jay, southeastern beach mouse, Curtiss' sand reedgrass, lesser scaup, black and red drum, seatrout, West Indian manatee, loggerhead sea turtle, green sea

turtle, and leatherback sea turtle, as well as neotropical migratory birds, shorebirds, and hundreds of thousands of waterfowl. The Refuge serves 16 wildlife species listed by the federal government as threatened or endangered. Further, the Refuge serves an additional 4 wildlife species listed by the State of Florida as threatened or endangered; an additional 30 wildlife species listed by the federal government as species of special management concern; an additional 12 wildlife species listed by the State of Florida as special management concern; and an additional 31 plant species listed by the State of Florida as threatened, endangered, or commercially exploited (totaling 93 species listed by the federal and state governments as endangered, threatened, management concern, or commercially exploited). Under the priority bird species for the Peninsular Florida Physiographic Area, the Refuge serves 12 species of birds considered of extremely high priority, 34 high priority species, 29 moderate priority species, and 31 species of special local or regional interest. The Refuge serves key life history needs for a variety of species, including nesting beaches for sea turtles, spawning sites for fish, nurseries for juvenile fish and sea turtles, bird rookeries, bald eagle nesting habitat, and overwintering sites for shorebirds and waterfowl. Further, the Refuge is designated an Outstanding Florida Water, Essential Fish Habitat, candidate Marine Protected Area, and Globally Important Bird Area, and it is an eastern gateway to the Great Florida Birding Trail. In addition, the Fort Ann site on the Refuge is an Honorary Historic Landmark in Brevard County, Florida.

Exotic species, continuing habitat loss, pollution, increasing public use demands and activities, and ongoing growth of the human population impact the resources of and those relying upon Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge. The diverse habitats and wildlife of the Refuge continue to experience impacts from ongoing development adjacent to the Refuge, within the Refuge, and along the Indian River Lagoon.

### **CCP Background Information**

Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge is in the process of developing a 15-year management plan [Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP)], as required by Congress in the 1997 National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act. A draft document is anticipated to be available for public review and comment in mid 2005. To this end, staff are currently developing future management alternatives to address a variety of issues, including the listed priorities.

- Spread of Exotic, Invasive, and Nuisance Species
- Threats to Threatened, Endangered, and other Imperilled Species
- Threats and Impacts of an Increasing Human Population and the Demand for Public Use Activities
- Management/Maintenance of Impounded Wetlands
- Coordination between Intergovernmental Partners
- Decline in Migratory Birds and Habitats

### **Public Use Activities on MINWR**

Under the 1997 NWRSA, Congress outlined six priority public uses for refuges: **hunting, fishing, participating in environmental education and interpretation, and observing and photographing wildlife.** The Refuge is committed to continuing to provide high quality, compatible opportunities for all of these priority public uses, including hunting and fishing in Mosquito Lagoon. As part of our CCP, the Refuge is required to examine all public use activities that occur and insure they are compatible with the Refuge's purposes. Our preliminary review indicates that most public use activities are compatible or may require only minor changes. However, in Mosquito Lagoon use has expanded rapidly and we are considering implementing changes to minimize wildlife and habitat impacts and improve fishing behavior.

## Mosquito Lagoon

The southern portion of Mosquito Lagoon is managed by Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge. It is this portion of the Lagoon where the Refuge is considering changes.

### Overriding Intent for Future Management

Our overriding intent regarding future management of Mosquito Lagoon is based on public scoping, internal and intergovernmental scoping, and the Wildlife and Habitat Management Review and involves:

- increasing the quality of the Mosquito Lagoon experience for priority public use activities such as fishing;
- decreasing negative behaviors of users such as
  - running the flats,
  - humping/bumping redfish,
  - scarring the seagrass beds with propellers, and
  - dredging the bottom;
- decreasing negative impacts to and disturbance of wildlife and habitats, including addressing
  - decreased waterfowl usage and
  - wildlife behavioral changes (e.g., lesser scaup have shifted to feeding at night);
- restoring rookery island nesting to historic levels;
- protecting seagrass beds and Essential Fish Habitat; and
- minimizing the cumulative impacts on Mosquito Lagoon.

### Components of Any Management Approach

Any management approach developed for Mosquito Lagoon will need to include:

- buy in and self regulation by users,
- increased ethical behavior,
- education/outreach,
- low sign density,
- adaptive management (to respond to changing conditions and information), and
- research and monitoring.

### Mosquito Lagoon Bullets

- The Refuge's portion of Mosquito Lagoon is roughly 21,000 acres, with about half in shallow water flats with water depths of less than 3 feet.
- Prop scarring has been documented in specified locations and Refuge staff perceives the problem to be extensive in Mosquito Lagoon.
- The Lagoon is billed as the Redfish Capital of the world with numerous line test world records.
- The types of fishing have changed dramatically. New technology and equipment (e.g., flats boats, GPS, fish finders, and aerial photographs) are allowing fisherman to fish shallower portions of the Lagoon. We are not sure what impacts this is having on fish stocks or wildlife.
- Currently, about 50 fishing guides are under permit, and this number has been as high as 79.
- Over the last 10 years fishing has been the fastest growing public use category and has nearly tripled from 1990-2000 to over 123,000 annual boats.

- Over 2 million people live in the two resident and two adjacent counties (i.e., Brevard, Volusia, Orange, and Seminole) of the Refuge. According to long-term forecasts, these four counties are anticipated to reach 2.9 million by 2015.
- The entire Refuge currently hosts over 650,000 annual visitors. This visitation is anticipated to increase, including use in Mosquito Lagoon.
- Bird use of rookeries has declined. We have observed people on and around these islands.
- In the last 25 years we have seen a decline in diving ducks (e.g., scaup, mergansers, redheads, and canvasbacks) using the Lagoon. We are not sure if this decline is related to an increase in public use or to a wider continental decline.
- We do know there has been an increase in nocturnal feeding behavior in lesser scaup. We do not know if this is related to day time boating activity or other factors.
- Studies have established that boating disturbance can negatively impact waterfowl and other water birds.
- Water quality data indicate an elevated level of petroleum hydrocarbon and copper anti-fouling elements, but we can not determine if this higher level of contamination is the result of increased fishing or higher levels of traffic in the Intracoastal Waterway.
- We do know that key fish spawning and settlement sites are located within the Refuge's portion of the Lagoon. We do not know if these sites are impacted by public use activities.
- We do know that the Lagoon serves as a juvenile sea turtle nursery. We do not know if public use activities impact this.
- The Lagoon provides key habitat for a variety of species and has prime seagrass beds, which are similar to those dating back to the 1943 benchmark.

## **For More Information**

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### **Email Addresses:**

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### **Website:**

<http://merrittisland.fws.gov>

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95 million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses the more than 540 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.