

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

**Statement of the Honorable Richard H. Baker,
Member of Congress**

Sixth Congressional District, State of Louisiana

U.S. House of Representatives

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March 30, 2000

Chairman Saxton and members of the Subcommittee,

I would like to thank you for holding this hearing on H.R. 3292, my legislation to establish a National Wildlife Refuge at Cat Island--a beautiful and pristine tract of land in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana. I am always pleased to tell others about my district and my home state of Louisiana. Although I am sure that the subcommittee has had plenty of opportunity to hear the Louisiana perspective--probably more than you would like--due to my friend and fellow Louisianian, Congressman Billy Tauzin.

It is my pleasure to tell the subcommittee about a unique location in West Feliciana Parish that we call Cat Island. Actually, Cat Island is not really an island at all. It is a peninsula created by the meanderings of the Mississippi River. Cat Island is one of very few locations throughout the reaches of the Lower Mississippi River Valley that is not, nor has it ever been, protected by a levee or major flood control efforts. The result is that the Mississippi River continues its natural flood cycle and Cat Island has remained relatively undisturbed by human development. This natural condition alone is one very good reason for Cat Island to be preserved.

Cat Island contains forests that include one of the highest densities of virgin bald cypress trees in the Mississippi River Valley. One of these trees is magnificent. It is roughly 17 feet wide with a circumference of 53 feet, making it the largest known bald cypress tree in the United States. In fact, I want the subcommittee to know that many of the bald cypress trees in the proposed Cat Island Refuge are estimated to be 500 to 1,000 years old. Cat Island also supports a wide variety of other vegetation such as overcup oak-bitter pecan, hackberry-elm-ash, and nuttall oak-ash-sweetgum. Roughly 80 percent of the proposed refuge is wooded.

I want to provide the subcommittee with a brief description of the types of wildlife that Cat Island currently supports as well. Songbirds such as the Acadian Flycatcher, the Yellow-throated Vireo, the Yellow-throated warbler, the Eastern Wood-Pewee, the Summer Tanager, the Northern Parula, the Yellow-billed Cuckoo,

the Red-eyed Vireo, the Indigo Bunting, the Yellow-breasted Chat, and the Painted Bunting are all supported by the habitat at Cat Island. Other species such as Wood Storks, Great Egrets, Snowy Egrets, Cattle Egrets, Glossy Ibis, White Ibis, and the Yellow-Crowned Night Heron also inhabit Cat Island. Because of its Mississippi River location which is a major migratory bird migration corridor, Cat Island provides a safe habitat for various species of migratory birds that travel up and down the Mississippi River Valley. In fact, I understand that the Migratory Bird Commission has recently made funds available for the establishment of this refuge.

Hunting and fishing are very popular at Cat Island. There are large populations of whitetail deer, turkey, rabbit, squirrel, bobcat, racoon, and mink. The waterfowl population includes mallard, wood-duck, gadwall, ring-necked duck, and green-wing teal. In fact, it is estimated that Cat Island is the winter home of as many as 25,000 mallard ducks. Furthermore, this area is considered to be an ideal habitat for the Black Bear. However, there are only a few sightings of Black Bear reported each year. The various ox-bow lakes and sloughs are ideal for largemouth bass, bream, crappie, catfish, and crawfish.

I believe it is important to act in an expeditious manner to insure that this land and its variety of wildlife remain preserved. Land use changes, development, and more increasingly urban sprawl, are putting pressure on our nation's remaining natural areas. We must act, where appropriate, to preserve these lands. Cat Island, with its rich history and heritage, is only 30 miles from Baton Rouge. This close proximity will mean easy access to the proposed reserve for anyone who wants to hunt, fish, or just get away from the city. Furthermore, the impact this refuge will have on education and research will be tremendous. Elementary and secondary school students will have the opportunity to see conservation in action, while students at Louisiana State University and Southern University will have the opportunity to contribute greatly to research and preservation efforts.

Without action at this time, my district and constituents could lose the opportunity to have the Cat Island Refuge. While the landowners are willing to sell, and indeed have worked closely with us to create the proposed refuge, this may not always be the case if Congress fails to act. I feel it is necessary for the subcommittee and the House of Representatives to act expeditiously.

There are two actions that Congress should take in order to make this proposed refuge a reality. First, my legislation, H.R. 3292, should be adopted. I believe it is important for Congress to take a leading role in the establishment of national wildlife refuges or national parks. Unilateral actions by the Administration in the past have ignored local and state government wishes. By adopting H.R. 3292, Congress can continue its leadership role in protecting our nation's natural treasures.

Secondly, Congress can appropriate the necessary funds to complete the negotiated contract for purchase of the land to create the proposed refuge. I intend to request \$6 million from the House Appropriations Committee for the purchase of the land necessary to create this refuge. The land will be purchased by the Nature Conservancy and will eventually be transferred to the U.S. Fisheries and Wildlife Service (Service). Furthermore, the Nature Conservancy has agreed to fund Operation and Maintenance costs for the first three years following the creation of the refuge.

In its January 2000 Environmental Assessment and Land Protection Plan, the Service describes several alternatives or scenarios regarding the creation and scope of the proposed Cat Island Refuge. The first alternative is one of no action. I agree with the Service that this is not a preferred option. Without any additional protections, there is no guarantee that the Cat Island area will be preserved. Currently, the largest landowner in the area is willing to sell its property to the Nature Conservancy. If this transaction does not

take place, this land will remain available only to private landowners and those individuals that lease these lands for hunting or fishing. Access for recreational and educational purposes would be dramatically diminished. One troubling aspect of this option is that the ability to protect the bald cypress trees would be placed at risk. Furthermore, the local community would lose any additional revenue that may be available from increased tourism and from the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act. I am sure that the subcommittee will agree with me that this is really not an option at all.

The second option outlined by the Service would establish the Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge on up to 36,500 acres of land. Currently, H.R. 3292 only authorizes the purchase of 9,477 acres to create the refuge. This is land that is owned by The Timber Company, a wholly owned subsidiary of Georgia Pacific. This landowner has agreed to sell this land and as I have previously mentioned has actually negotiated a contract to sell this land to the Nature Conservancy. Land acquisition beyond this 9,477 acres will by necessity involve additional landowners, up to roughly 10 according to the latest information I have received. However, the acquisition of the entire Cat Island peninsula would offer the Service the greatest opportunity to protect and enhance wildlife, waterfowl, and fishery preservation. This larger land acquisition would also provide easier access to the refuge for the public due to its close proximity to major highways. Finally, under this scenario, West Feliciana Parish would receive an estimated \$200,000 under the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act each year to compensate for lost property tax revenue.

The third option would limit the land acquisition to 22,000 acres. This option allows for the management of the best waterfowl habitat in the area. Furthermore, the more ancient hardwoods would fall under the protection and management of the Service. Cooperative agreements between the existing landowners that use a portion of this land for agriculture purposes would allow this activity to continue. Incidentally, these same arrangements would be implemented should the larger 36,500 acre option be chosen. The Service also states that the maximum level of protection of habitat would not be possible and public access restricted.

There is significant enough local support for the establishment of the Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge that I believe landowners, the local government, and the state government will support the creation of a 36,500 acre refuge. In fact, local and state support for this project is quite high. The following jurisdictions and interested parties have expressed support for this project:

- West Feliciana Parish Police Jury;
- The Town of St. Francisville;
- The West Feliciana Parish Tourist Commission;
- Governor Mike Foster;
- James Jenkins, Secretary of Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries;
- Louisiana State University;
- The Tunica Trace Scenic Area Preservation Committee;
- The American Bird Conservancy;
- The Baton Rouge Audubon Society;
- The Louisiana Wildlife Federation;
- The Black Bear Conservation Committee;
- Donald T. Bollinger, Chairman and CEO, Bollinger Shipyards, Inc.; and,
- International-Matex, Tank Terminals.

As the subcommittee can see, there is widespread support for this project not only from the local and state governments, but also from local industry, and state and local conservation organizations. Furthermore, I have been contacted by my constituents in support of the creation of this refuge. In Louisiana, we pride

ourselves on some of the best hunting and fishing in the nation. And, I can assure you that my constituents are looking forward to public access to a well managed Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge for the purposes of fishing for trophy largemouth bass and hunting whitetail deer. It is imperative that the Service design and implement a wildlife and fishery management program that will enhance habitat as well as access for sportsmen in this area. One of the reasons that Cat Island has not been overrun by development or stripped of its natural resources is because of the efforts of Louisiana sportsmen who love the outdoors and who work hard to preserve areas for hunting and fishing.

The only expressions of concern that I have heard regarding the creation of the proposed refuge relate to the use of this land for crawfishing. While I know that most of the country is unfortunate in that they do not share our love of "mud-bugs", the subcommittee should know that there are few occasions that can surpass a good crawfish boil. I am sure that Mr. Tauzin can attest to that if there is some doubt among the members here today. Each year, when the floods of the Mississippi have been good, commercial and local crawfishermen harvest crawfish from the proposed refuge. I would like for the Service to work hard to ensure that this long-term practice is continued without disruption or difficulty.

I strongly support the creation of a Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge and have worked hard to advance this proposal. I encourage the subcommittee to carefully consider this proposal. I hope in the near future that the subcommittee will favorably report H.R. 3292 with some conforming amendments. This would be a great service to my constituents and the state of Louisiana for which I would be personally grateful.

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