

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

**Testimony Submitted to the
Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife & Oceans
of the
House Committee on Resources
Regarding H.R. 4442
The National Wildlife Refuge System Centennial Commemoration Act**

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, the undersigned hereby request that the following testimony, submitted by mail, be included in the record of the Hearing that was conducted on June 15, 2000. We thank you for your consideration.

March 14, 2003, a scant two and one half years from now, will mark 100 years of service and benefits to all Americans from our National Wildlife Refuge System. It was on that day in 1903 that President Theodore Roosevelt signed an Executive Order setting aside a six acre tract of Public Lands in the Indian River on the East Coast of Florida.

The events leading up to the "Bully" actions of one of our most respected and beloved Presidents are vital components of our American History. The frontier had closed. Many Americans felt a terrible sense of loss in the aftermath of the destruction of tens of millions of buffalo, elk, antelope, deer and other mammals; and the slaughter of literally billions of interesting, useful and lovely birds to satisfy culinary appetites and adorn the headwear and clothing of women's fashions. Efforts begun in the final quarter of the 19th Century by numerous concerned individuals and a dozen or more committed organizations reached important stages of fruition as the 20th Century opened. Thus, even before that small island in the Indian River came to the attention of the Conservation President, important steps had been taken, people and resources had been committed, and vital preliminary successes had been achieved. Such events and the people that made them happen deserve to be recognized and made a part of the 100th year recognition of that concluding, unobtrusive action by President Roosevelt.

As he signed his name to that brief legal document, President Roosevelt launched one of America's most important fish, wildlife, plant and habitat conservation measures. Although initiated without fanfare, and perhaps without a complete vision of the future dimensions and tenets of a system of lands dedicated to conserving America's biota, it was a bold action. Had he known where the protection of that tiny, but vital colony of brown pelicans would carry our wildlife conservation efforts in 100 years, he most certainly would have called out a military band, or two, and held a vibrant celebration on the White House lawn that Saturday.

Well, Mr. Chairman, we know where that tiny island with its 2400 pelicans has led this Nation: well on its

way to building a highly successful program that places the protection of wildlife above all other benefits to be derived from this unique system of lands and waters. Today, it is a System that spans the entire spectrum of biomes within our country. Today our National Wildlife Refuge System, 521 designated units in all States and U.S. Territories, provides safety and shelter for hundreds of millions of migratory birds throughout their annual, continent-wide wanderings, and hundreds of thousands of large mammals, small mammals, fish, reptiles, and amphibians. Today, it includes more than 93 million acres of prime habitats for fish, wildlife and plants, and it continues to grow as underrepresented ecosystems are identified and plans for new refuge units are completed. Today, it is striving to open its gates to increasing numbers of Americans for education, recreation and renewal. Today, it places the United States in the forefront of worldwide efforts to make peace with our planet and its other inhabitants, to harmonize and make sustainable our demands upon the resources so that future generations may know these wonders and pass them along undiminished.

This effort to retain a heritage that has shaped us as a Nation and as a people has been recognized and furthered by other Executive actions, by caring volunteers, the generous donations of individuals and companies, and by the 50 Congresses that have realized the benefits to the natural resources and the citizenry by not only expanding the size but more recently the comprehensive planning and purposes of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Although not completed, the Refuge System provides a continuing wildlife/wildland legacy to people in all the 50 States and the Territories.

Theodore Roosevelt went on to establish 51 National bird reservations before leaving office in 1909, and in his own words, in 1913, described his actions: **"Even more important was the taking of steps to preserve from destruction beautiful and wonderful wild creatures whose existence was threatened by greed and wantonness. The establishment by Executive order "of fifty-one National bird reservations distributed in seventeen States and Territories" at once placed the United States in the front rank in the world work of bird protection."** (Theodore Roosevelt, Autobiography 1913). During his Presidency, Mr. Roosevelt utilized authorities given him by Congress to establish several reservations for large mammals including, in 1908, the first unit of the Refuge System acquired by purchase of lands, using Congressional Appropriations, the National Bison Range in Montana.

It is a stellar record! Today, it is an important element in our society, and it is time to prepare to celebrate its first 100 years of growth, development and success. So, today we appeal for passage of legislation that will allow all our citizens to partake in a celebration of a premier American idea and heritage. And, with early passage of the National Wildlife Refuge System Centennial Commemoration Act of 2000, a grateful nation will have an opportunity to plan for, conduct and participate in appropriate events and other celebratory products and features to honor its beginning. In our opinion, it is vital that the Commission authorized by this bill begin its important planning and other work as soon as possible, certainly by early next year.

Respectfully Submitted by:

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