



Wilderness Character Monitoring on the National Wildlife Refuges

Natural Resource Program Center

The National Wildlife Refuge System, administered by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS), is the world's premier system of public lands and waters set aside to conserve America's fish, wildlife, and plants. The Refuge System includes 556 National Wildlife Refuges and 38 Wetland Management Districts.

Background

In 2010 the USFWS chartered the Wilderness Character Monitoring Committee to establish standards consistent with the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) Inventory and Monitoring Strategy and to ensure that monitoring is:

- 1) Purposeful, practical and cost-effective, and
- 2) Integrated across disciplines and geographic scales.

All of the major federal land management agencies are utilizing common definitions to collect data on the wilderness areas that they manage. Data will be collated into a national wilderness character database, developed through collaboration with the USFWS NWRS Inventory and Monitoring Initiative, the National Park Service I&M Division, and the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute of the US Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station. This summer, interns will collect wilderness character data on the NWRS for the first time.

Goal

The goal of the Wilderness Character Monitoring Committee is to inventory wilderness character in every refuge with designated wilderness by 2014, the Wilderness Act's 50th anniversary.

What is Wilderness Character?

The four qualities of wilderness character – untrammeled, natural, undeveloped, and providing solitude – are based on the statutory language of the Wilderness Act. These qualities were further defined in the 2008 technical report, "Keeping it Wild: An Interagency Strategy to Monitor Trends in Wilderness Character Across the National Wilderness Preservation System."

Key monitoring questions were also developed from the four qualities. Indicators consistent across areas were developed from the questions; and at the refuge level there were measures developed for each indicator.



Wilderness Fellow Corey Anco at Izembek NWR

The Four Qualities of Wilderness Character

Untrammeled	wilderness is essentially unhindered and free from the <i>actions</i> of modern human control or manipulation
Natural	wilderness ecological systems are substantially free from the <i>effects</i> of modern civilization
Undeveloped	wilderness retains its primeval character and influence, and is essentially without permanent improvement or modern human occupation
Providing Solitude	wilderness provides outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation

Why Preserve Wilderness Character?

The Wilderness Act of 1964 mandated the preservation of wilderness character. The NWRS has 18% of designated wilderness, comprising 21 million acres. After over 40 years there is still a lack of consistent inventory and monitoring of wilderness as well as the ability to measure how it is affected by stewardship. To ensure the last remaining wilderness is not lost, monitoring can maintain the preservation and true wild nature of these areas for present and future generations. Monitoring provides an assessment of the trends of wilderness character to develop refuge wilderness stewardship. This also provides the ability to evaluate impacts of proposed actions on wilderness character and allows defensible stewardship decisions. By preserving wilderness character, the USFWS demonstrates leadership in wilderness stewardship across the National Wilderness Preservation System.



Recent Okefenokee Fire, Credit: Wilderness Fellow Ben Weiss

What's Happening Today?

As a first step, refuges from six regions are participating in a wilderness character monitoring pilot program during 2011. Ten Wilderness Monitoring interns are currently at refuges to assess wilderness character at selected NWRS wilderness areas. These Wilderness interns are responsible for the majority of wilderness character monitoring and are expected to work collaboratively with refuge and regional staffs to determine which measures of wilderness character to evaluate.

Wilderness character monitoring data will be largely derived from existing information at refuge headquarters or through other sources.

For more information:

Nancy Roeper
National Wilderness Coordinator
NWRS Division of Natural Resources
Nancy_Roeper@fws.gov
(703) 358-2389

Or

Peter Dratch
Senior Biologist
NWRS Inventory and Monitoring
Peter_Dratch@fws.gov
(970) 266-2923

<http://www.fws.gov/refuges/NaturalResourcePC/>

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Wildlife Refuges Participating in 2011 Wilderness Character Monitoring Pilot Program	
Region 2	Kofa, Imperial, Havasu, Cabeza Prieta
Region 3	Agassiz, Seney
Region 4	Okefenokee, St. Marks, Chassahowitzka
Region 5	Edwin B. Forsythe, Moosehorn, Great Swamp
Region 6	Ft. Niobrara, Valentine, Charles M. Russell, Red Rock Lakes
Region 7	Kenai, Izembek, Becharof