

The FWS Refuge Volunteers Program: A Model for Mentoring

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- The National Wildlife Refuge System's Friends Program was established in 1996 to encourage and organize community involvement in activities of the refuge system.
- Friends groups are community-based citizen support groups that increase the visibility and support of individual national wildlife refuges and the system nationwide. There are more than 200 Friends groups nationwide.
- A national Friends Mentoring Program was developed to help provide customized help and training for Friends groups that are just getting established or for capacity-building of existing groups.
- The Fish and Wildlife Service recognized that there are issues that are best resolved at the particular refuge with staff and Friends board members attending a mentoring workshop.
- The intent of the mentoring visit (workshop) is to facilitate development of relationships and respect between staff and Friends, recognize skills and interests of board members and Friends, and plan future Friends projects. Another goal is to foster a shared vision.
- The Mentoring Team consists of two persons – a Refuge Manager Mentor and a Friends Mentor. This provides both perspectives to help deal with specific issues and questions.
- The Mentoring Visit usually involves two days. The Mentoring Team visits with the refuge staff and then separately with the Friends board members.
- The Team will get a tour of the refuge and the opportunity to understand refuge management, management issues, threats and conflicts, as well as the local community. The second day is broken into two major sessions. The first is usually a strategic planning session in which both refuge staff and Friends board members participate together. In some cases, this is the first chance for everyone to get to know each other. During this time the entire group works on identifying needs at the refuge and projects that could be done. These are grouped into categories and then the group identifies the top priority needs/projects. This gives the Friends Board some projects that they can pursue depending upon the skills, time, and dollars available.
- The remaining session is devoted to specific needs of the Friends Board and normally only the Friends participate. Subjects that can be covered include Board Development, Roles and Responsibilities of Officers and Board members, Fund-raising, Membership, Volunteer Recruitment, etc.
- Friends Groups that are interested in having a mentoring visit have to submit an application. This is reviewed by the National Program office and current mentors to determine if the group is ready for a mentoring visit, if it will be beneficial, and what kind of

mentoring is needed (i.e., start-up or capacity-building). From this, refuges are selected for mentoring and mentors are assigned to conduct the visit.

- In addition to mentoring there are several other training opportunities or resources available for Friends Groups. These include training courses at the National Conservation Training Center (<http://training.fws.gov>) in Shepherdstown, W. VA:
 - Developing and Working with Friends Organizations
 - Sales Outlets: Beyond Bookstores
 - Volunteer Recruitment and Management

- Two publications that the Fish and Wildlife Service produces as tools for Friends organizations are:
 - *Taking Flight: An Introduction to Building Friends Organizations*
 - *Taking Flight and Building Your Nest Egg*

- Finally, there are several web sites available that provide list serves and resources for Friends organizations:
 - <http://friends.fws.org>
 - www.refugenet.org (National Wildlife Refuge Association)
 - www.nfwf.org (National Fish and Wildlife Foundation)

- Contacts for questions related to mentoring:
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