

Don't Take Away Our Refuge.

National Wildlife Refuges are sacred spots for the American people to enjoy our nation's remarkable wildlife in a natural setting. The Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge in western Palm Beach County is a perfect example how important refuges can be in metropolitan areas like South Florida. Loxahatchee is the only remnant of the Everglades left in Palm Beach County.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service does an admirable job managing the Loxahatchee Refuge – also known as Water Conservation Area 1 – through a 50-year lease agreement with the landowner, the South Florida Water Management District.

Unfortunately, the South Florida Water Management District now wants to take management of the Refuge away from the Service.

The terms of the lease agreement are based on a series of 13 performance measures, including one specifically dedicated to maintenance control of four invasive exotic species in the Refuge: Australian Pine, Brazilian Pepper, Old World Climbing Fern and Melaleuca.

The District charges that Refuge staff are not eradicating invasive exotic plants fast enough, despite meeting 12.5 of 13 invasive species performance measures – a 96% success rate. This hostile takeover is a political power grab, pure and simple.

Keeping Loxahatchee as part of the National Wildlife Refuge system is in the best interests of those who use the park most. The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge system is to promote the conservation and restoration of wildlife with an emphasis on public outreach and education.

If we lose management of the Loxahatchee Refuge to the state, this area will go back to being a Water Conservation Area, where wildlife conservation, outreach, and education are simply not part of the mission.

I am a regular visitor to the Loxahatchee Refuge. As a 23 year resident of Palm Beach County, and as a Board member of Audubon Society of the Everglades, the birds and wildlife protected here are an integral part of my life. And I'm not alone. Over 300,000 people visit the Refuge each year. Many visit just to catch a glimpse of one of the more than 250 species of birds that rely on this habitat.

Thanks to its excellent wildlife viewing opportunities, our Audubon Society hosts 11 field trips to the Refuge each year. As an example of how to manage land for

conservation, we focus 3 of those field trips on invasive species management to help shed light on the ongoing struggles of the dedicated Refuge staff.

Audubon Society of the Everglades also helped co-found the popular Everglades Day Festival at the Refuge to educate the community on Everglades restoration and to showcase the magic of the River of Grass. This year over 3,300 attended the one-day event, now in its 17th year.

Are we really about to lose Florida's largest and only South Florida Metro Area National Wildlife Refuge because one-half of one goal remains unmet? The National Wildlife Refuge system's focus on wildlife preservation and public access far outweigh those available in state water conservation areas. I am adamantly opposed to the State of Florida's plans to take over the Loxahatchee Refuge. In this time of rapid growth and urbanization, we humans need open green places in which to escape and relax for sanity's sake.

No one benefits from losing a National Wildlife Refuge; not the public and certainly not the State. In this time of dwindling resources, partnerships and collaboration among agencies is the key to doing more with less. The District needs to work with the State of Florida, the U.S. Department of the Interior, and members of Congress to look for additional sources of funding for exotic plant control on the Refuge.

Let's look for solutions to this very real challenge. The community and the wildlife will thank you.

Sincerely, Susan Davis