Federal Government Assaults Animals on Wildlife Refuges

The HSUS fights for wildlife

On June 17, 1983, just as Americans across the United States were beginning to turn their thoughts to pleasant-weather outdoor recreation, The HSUS gave formal notice that it will sue the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) for violating the Endangered Species Act and the laws governing the National Wildlife Refuge System at Florida’s Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge.

If the FWS carries out its intention, one of the few remaining slivers of the fragile Everglades that have stayed relatively pristine and untouched, Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, will be overrun by sport hunters searching for “trophy” deer antlers for their fireplace mantels. Over the course of three weekends, hunters as young as sixteen will be zipping (some in airboats) through this delicate swamp in the noisy, violent quest of an animal which has not learned to fear the high-powered rifle, the primitive musket, or the deadly tip of an arrow.

Why should Loxahatchee deer be wary of hunters? After all, they have never been hunted. They live on a wildlife refuge—the one place supposedly set aside by the federal government for wildlife.

But the opening of Loxahatchee to deer hunting is just another slip on the downward spiral leading to negation of the only system of federal lands established for the protection of the nation’s wildlife. Arrogant in its use of this particular refuge for “recreational” or “sport” hunting, the FWS has not even bothered to offer its stock excuse, “population control,” to legitimize the hunt on Loxahatchee. At least, up until now, the federal government has tried to present its activities on refuges as being “compatible” with the refuge purpose of preserving, protecting, and enhancing wildlife in its environment. But now, the FWS has even given up its flimsy rationalizations, and is blatantly planning to throw over the ideal of protecting wildlife in favor of protecting hunters’ opportunity to kill the animals.

The welfare of America’s wildlife and refuges is being sold for economic gain and recreational pleasure to hunters, trappers, and commercial developers. To date, there are 414 refuges composed of over 86 million acres stretching from the Arctic to the Florida Keys and from Maine to American Samoa. Almost all of these refuges have been touched in some way by natural gas exploration, predator control, pesticides, and commercial farming, ranching, and lumber industries. Over one half of all refuges are open to either hunting or trapping... or both.

All laws and regulations concerning activities on wildlife refuges stipulate (continued on next page)
that there must be no conflict with the fundamental principle of the refuges: to preserve, protect, and enhance wildlife in its environment. Now, however, what was once a network of "inviolate sanctuaries" is becoming a mere commodity—a federal system of playgrounds where wildlife and the pristine integrity of true refuges are destroyed. For the animals whose territories are invaded, the refuges have now become dens of noise, false security, pain, and death.

In 1982, over 386,329 animals were killed by hunters on this nation’s wildlife refuges. This figure includes 219 swans and 227,574 ducks. Among the 85,473 mammals blasted out of existence there were bobcats, mountain goats, majestic bighorn sheep, and tiny Sika deer. Incredibly, approximately 12,000 animals were crippled and left to die from frostbite, exposure, or starvation. And from 1980 to 1983, over half a million animals were trapped, mostly with the crushing leghold trap, which often causes animals to maim and chew their own legs off. To think this carnage takes place on land set aside by the American people as refuge! Ironically, this continuing and increasing destruction of animals on refuges is justified with euphemisms like "wise management," "sport and recreation," or "utilization of a renewable resource." The audacity of those terms is appalling. Refuges were created to protect wildlife, all wildlife. Yet, destruction prevails. Recreation and sport for the animals? Of course not! For people. Resource utilization for animals? No! For people.

So-called wise management is management which allows the "population" to survive, while people kill the individuals for which refuges are supposed to be home. Such refuges are not refuges at all; such as, they are a national disgrace.

The plight of the refuge system is the proverbial case of the fox guarding the chicken coop. The Secretary of the Interior decides what activities occur on wildlife refuges and, of course, the proposed activities are "compatible" with the original idea. Conveniently enough, however, the Secretary of the Interior also decides what "compatible" means. This power, in the hands of Interior Secretary James Watt, has thrown open the gates of refuges to industrial exploiters, trappers, and hunters.

For each violation the refuges suffer, the cost to wildlife and the environment is exorbitant. The air, water, and plant life are poisoned by pesticides, fuel exhaust, oil spills, and even lead from spent bullets (recent studies show that the endangered bald eagles have been dying from lead poisoning, probably after eating ducks which have been shot). Noise from road vehicles (such as jeeps, snowmobiles, and airboats), drilling machinery, guns, hunters, trappers, and hunters, and mining equipment frighten and drive away birds and other animals, including endangered or threatened species, from the very land which should be sheltered to them.

The first national wildlife refuge was established by Theodore Roosevelt in 1903 when he realized that pelicans, herons, egrets, and other species exploiting to satisfy the demand for fancy hats were rapidly becoming extinct. The principles of preservation and protection were born with Pelican Island but they soon became merely "paper policies.

Beginning in 1949, the federal government began opening refuges to hunting and trapping. Over the years more refuges have been opened, but recently openings have been ballooning. In the last five years, fourteen refuges have been opened to trapping. From 1981 to 1983, thirty-five refuges were opened to hunting. The term refuge is now, in fact, largely meaningless.

Of the 220 refuges open to hunting, 172 harbor endangered species. Endangered species also try to live on seventy-five of the seventy-four refuges open to trapping. Here we have endangered species living on "refuges" in which their very lives are systematically and blatantly threatened by these so-called "wildlife-oriented activities.

The whole thrust of the Interior Department’s Fish and Wildlife Service refuge policy has been the ever-increasing use of the refuges for activities that benefit special interest groups at the expense of wildlife. Is the public aware of the vast array of refuges? Rarely. Not many refuges have been protected in our nation’s wildlife refuges.

Would you call this deer a "trash" animal? The disappointed trapper who was hoping for a coyote or bobcat would. This particular deer was accidentally caught in a trap on non-refuge land. Similar traps planted in many refuges throughout the United States also main animals unfortunate enough to step into their brutal jaws.

The eagle spotted fresh rabbit meat dangling from a tree. Beating its wings to keep it airborne, it tagged the rabbit in vain, finally dropping to the ground directly below the carcass. Slam! The bullet or arrow—both are in a trap set for bobcat. There it will stay until the trapper decides to check the trap. So healthy and free moments before, the eagle is now doomed to death from either starvation or a blunt blow from the barrel of a gun.

Never in its life has the deer heard a gunshot or the whir of an arrow cutting through the air. Hearing it now, it drops suddenly to the ground. The second it in its right shoulder penetrates its awareness for thirty seconds. It hears the sound again—this time close up—and dies.

There should be no place for hunting or trapping on refuges. Refuges are homes for wildlife, not playgrounds for people. People are guests.

Muskrats, bows and arrows, and leghold traps are among the cruel horrors tolerated on the very land which is supposed to protect animals. Many hunters are incapable of "clean kill"—the accurate shot that immediately kills. One government study reported that as many as 45% of bow hunters didn’t even know what part of the animal to aim at. Thousands of animals are crippled and abandoned, only to die later from gangrene, starvation, bleeding, or infection.

Other animals that die torturous deaths meet their fates in leghold traps. Although refuges are federal lands, there are no uniform regulations governing the activities of trappers. Depending upon the regulations of each refuge, they can check their traps from within hours to within days. What they find they may not want. A trap is set for a bobcat but it springs on the fragile leg of a cottontail rabbit or an owl. "What's a trapper to do?" To the trapper these are "trash" animals, unintentional victims of the cruel and barbaric leghold trap. The animals are either gurglingly kept or killed and discarded in the woods. The trap is reset; the trapper goes away.

Refuges are not sources of pelts, antlers, or heads. Whether the victim is a trapped animal to become one sixth of a fur stole, a "trash" animal only to decompose and become part of the woods, or an animal to be stuffed for display in a "trophy" case, it should have been protected in our nation’s wildlife refuges.

The eagle still clings to the tree branch. With its wings beating, it temporarily looses its balance and takes a close look to find the bobcat it thought it was after. The bobcat now has only a 50% chance of escaping; the trapper’s gun may be trained in its direction. The HSUS is doing all it can to stop the wasteful, inhumane, and unnecessary destruction of wildlife on all refuges. In short, we are dedicated to making refuges true sanctuaries for wildlife.

What The HSUS Is Doing

In recognition of the refuges' dire need for protection from commercial exploiters, hunters, and trappers, The HSUS...:

● Will sue the Fish and Wildlife Service to stop the Loxahatchee hunt.

● Is preparing legal and legislative action to stop the wasteful, inhumane, and unnecessary destruction of wildlife on all refuges. In short, we are dedicated to making refuges true sanctuaries for wildlife.

● Is conducting a major study on the treatment of and conditions affecting wildlife on refuges, concentrating especially on trapping and hunting, so that we may most effectively publicize destruction and achieve wildlife protection.

● Is seeking necessary funding to conduct this major program of ensuring the safety of refuge wildlife.

Every year The HSUS Mid-Atlantic Regional Office demonstrates against sport hunting on the Great Swamp Wildlife Refuge in New Jersey. Between 50 and 125 people take time off from work and school to appear in December weather and make a stand against this cruel practice.
the expense of wildlife. This situation will only worsen in the future, as hunters, trappers, and other destructive users clamor for more openings, confident the Interior Department will listen sympathetically.

Two directives from the Department of Interior encapsulate in a grim nutshell the official attitude at FWS headquarters in Washington:

...The Service recognizes hunting [on refuges] as an acceptable and legitimate form of wildlife-oriented recreation.... Also, the listing of harvestable species should be expanded to coincide with State regulations where feasible....

...We believe that there is potential to expand economic uses in such areas as grazing, haying, farming, timber harvest, trapping, oil and gas extraction, small hydro-electric generation, concessions, commercial hunting and fishing guides, guided interpretive tours, and commercial fishing. We believe that if you use innovation and creativity, and, if necessary, a redirection of efforts, these as well as other uses can be expanded....

The "inviolate sanctuary" ideal is in tatters. What was once a haven for wildlife has become a death trap. And the refuge system is being used as a pitiful political pawn, being shoved about at the whim of the Secretary of the Interior and his associates.

Much damage has been done to the once majestic wildlife refuges of the United States, refuges which may never fully recuperate. But it is not too late to put an end to the shameful exploitation of what remains. That's why The HSUS is fighting the decision to open Loxahatchee. That's why the FWS will face us in court if it insists on opening this refuge to deer hunters.

This is the first time in the history of refuges that there has been an active and orchestrated push from the federal government to allow hunting and trapping on refuges. In response to this and other atrocities to wildlife, The HSUS has expanded its wildlife protection program and has launched a major campaign to protect these victims of greed and cruelty. The term "refuge," according to the Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, means "shelter or protection from danger or distress." It's time for the government to cease permitting the brutal destruction of wildlife, and reaffirm these refuges as places for sanctuary.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

• You can help protect wildlife on refuges by letting your U.S. congressmen and representatives know that you want refuges to be true sanctuaries for wildlife and that you want cruel wildlife exploitation banned. Also, please write letters to Congressman Morris Udall (D-AZ) and Senator John Chafee (R-RI) asking them to hold congressional hearings aimed at stopping abuse of wildlife on refuges.

• In a separate letter, urge your congressmen to support H.R. 1797, a bill before the House of Representatives "to end the use of steel-jaw, leghold traps on animals in the United States and abroad."

• You can reach senators and representatives at the following addresses:
  The Honorable (Senator's name)
  The U.S. Senate
  Washington, DC 20510
  The Honorable (Congressman's name)
  The House of Representatives
  Washington, DC 20515

• Finally, help The HSUS in our fight to protect refuge animals and other wildlife from falling victim to inhumane destruction. Your tax-deductible contribution will help us continue our legislative, legal, and educational battles to protect not only these animals but all animals from painful and untimely deaths. You are the only voice these animals have. Please use the enclosed postage-paid envelope to send your contribution today.

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