



January 8, 2016

An open letter to the American people:

As I've watched the events unfolding at Malheur National Wildlife Refuge over the last several days, the image of an American flag obscuring the welcome sign at the wildlife refuge seems especially ironic.

American flags fly proudly at all 564 national wildlife refuges, signaling that these places are owned and managed by and for all Americans. Like all national wildlife refuges, Malheur is public land. The sign that is obscured reads "Welcome to Your National Wildlife Refuge" - it is a place for all of us to enjoy and we all benefit from its many natural resources. Only now, armed occupiers restrict the entrance to this public resource.

For 108 years, the Malheur Refuge has been conserved as an oasis in the desert for the benefit of wildlife and people. It is a quiet, frozen landscape now, but as spring approaches, trumpeter swans, snow geese, and scores of waterfowl will arrive in this valley to rest and feed in a unique complex of wetlands, lakes and meadows along their migration up the Pacific Flyway. Up to 66 percent of all waterfowl traveling the Pacific Flyway may stop at Malheur - and it provides habitat for over 300 other species of birds, as well as mule deer, pronghorn antelope and other mammals.

Malheur was designated a refuge in 1908 by President Theodore Roosevelt, himself an avid wildlife watcher and hunter. When Roosevelt became president in 1901, bison were nearly wiped out, the plume trade decimated egrets and herons, and the once common passenger pigeon was gone in the wild. Roosevelt saw a dire future for America's wildlife unless we, the people, took action to protect important wildlife habitat areas. By the end of his presidency, he had created 51 national wildlife refuges in 17 states, including Malheur.

Today, the National Wildlife Refuge System is a world-class conservation network extending over more than 150 million acres of spectacular lands and waters from the Maine Coast to the Pacific Islands, but including the recently expanded Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument the Refuge System now manages 573 million acres for conservation. Refuges are managed for "wildlife first," but not only for wildlife. More than 200 volunteer Friends groups exist to support their local refuges. Each year, more than 40,000 people volunteer their time on a national wildlife refuge, welcoming more than 47 million visitors. In 2018, the Refuge System

will celebrate the 150th anniversary of the creation of the first area set aside for wildlife conservation - the Pribilof Islands which were protected by President Ulysses S. Grant in 1868 and now a unit of the Refuge System.

Refuges are a meeting place for people of all political stripes and walks of life: hunters, anglers, birders, ranchers, hikers, school children, researchers, teachers, photographers – and they are community resources. They attract tourism dollars, provide shared natural resources, and often include cooperative uses like farming and grazing in partnership with neighbors.

The management of every national wildlife refuge, by law, requires public input and collaboration. And this is why every wildlife refuge is a little different – it reflects the needs and desires of the community around it.

And despite what the Malheur intruders would like people to believe, ranchers in the West have been working in collaboration with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for decades. The [Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program](#), in particular, works directly with ranchers and other private landowners to help them improve the wildlife habitat values of their lands. This 25-year-old program has helped 45,000 landowners restore more than 1 million acres of wetland habitat, 3 million acres of upland habitat and 11,000 miles of streams.

The success of the Malheur Refuge over the years has depended on this collaborative, community- and partnership-based approach to conservation. Together groups are working on eradicating devastating invasive carp from Malheur Lake, and an impressively diverse working group came together to create the refuge's 15-year management plan.

The current conflict at Malheur Refuge does nothing to further this collaborative approach to conservation. As the Refuge Association, we work with refuges and communities across the nation and we know how hard it is to strike compromise and balance. The diversity of people who use and love wildlife refuges and the open lands of this nation bring many perspectives and sometimes-competing interests.

However, if the occupiers are attempting to make a point about federal ownership and management of land, they are sadly misguided in their approach. By taking over the refuge headquarters, these occupiers have evicted refuge staff from their homes and workplace, caused local schools to close, closed the county courthouse for at least one day, and placed the refuge's friends and neighbors in a very awkward and frightening position.

Is it all perfect? Of course not. Can we all be doing more to conserve our heritage and balance the needs of our communities? Absolutely. But the truth is, as Americans we have more in common than we realize when it comes to our love for our land, and so we must all keep our focus on what we can accomplish together.

Draping the American flag over a national wildlife refuge may hide its name, but it doesn't hide the fact that this place belongs to every American. It was set aside for all of us to use and enjoy in perpetuity. A few angry men holed up in a refuge museum cannot deter the rest of us from keeping an American promise to conserve wildlife for future generations.

The Refuge Association would like to thank all the local ranchers, recreationists, non-profit partners, Friends members, and refuge staff who have worked for years to make Malheur a world-class resource for so many Americans.

Sincerely,

David Houghton
President, National Wildlife Refuge Association

The National Wildlife Refuge Association is the only nonprofit that protects and promotes the world's largest wildlife conservation network: the National Wildlife Refuge System.