

OP-ED

Fish, Wildlife, Climate Change and a New Conservation Legacy



By Tom Strickland and Sam Hamilton



Tom Strickland, left and Sam Hamilton

For more than a century, America's hunters, anglers, and outdoor explorers have been among the first to warn the nation of threats to the great landscapes and wildlife of our continent. And since President Teddy Roosevelt – himself an avid hunter – established the world's first wildlife refuge at Pelican Island in Florida, they also have been the first to respond.

Today, climate change poses a new threat to our nation's land, fish, wildlife, and water. And, once again, America's outdoor enthusiasts are among the first to witness its effects. Hunters are seeing wildlife migration patterns shift because climate change has affected the location and abundance of food supplies; anglers are seeing fish populations dwindle as river and lake temperatures rise; and boaters are seeing rising sea levels overtake wetlands and marshes near coastal communities that are vulnerable to floods and hurricanes.

For too long, the impacts of climate change have been clear to Americans who live and recreate on the land, but nearly invisible in the priorities and policies in Washington D.C.

But now, with a new Administration and a growing sense of urgency among citizens, it is time for our country to rise to the challenge that climate change poses to the places we love.

President Obama and his Administration have gotten off to a fast start in changing our

nation's energy policy, in tackling the pollution that is causing the planet to warm, and in preparing for the effects that a changing climate will have in our world.

Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar recently announced that the federal department that oversees one-fifth of the nation's landmass - including the National Wildlife Refuge System, the National Park System, and the National System of Public Lands - has developed a first-ever coordinated and comprehensive framework for managing the impacts of climate change on America's water supplies, wildlife, and landscapes.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service plays an important and integral role in the Department of the Interior's coordinated climate change response strategy.

The Service has released a draft Climate Change Strategic Plan focusing on helping fish, wildlife and plants adapt to changing climates. As part of this plan, we will expand efforts to capture and store carbon in the ecosystems we manage, such as in hardwood forests and other natural carbon sinks.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has already made great progress. For example, in partnership with the Conservation Fund, American Electric Power Company, and Entergy Inc., we have developed an innovative carbon sequestration program that started a decade ago in the Lower Mississippi Valley and now includes wildlife refuges across the country. While restoring native habitats to bolster populations of wildlife and migratory birds, together we have added more than 40,000 acres of habitat to the National Wildlife Refuge System and reforested more than 80,000 acres, sequestering 30 million metric tons of carbon over the project's 99-year lifetime.

The Service will also help create a network of locally-driven, solution-oriented Landscape Conservation Cooperatives that will allow federal, state and local partners to develop shared science capacity to inform conservation actions that help priority species and habitats withstand the impacts of climate change.

To cite an example of the visionary partnerships we plan to replicate, at Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge in North Carolina, efforts are underway to combat saltwater intrusion from rising sea levels. We're working with The Nature Conservancy, Duke Energy, and other partners to create a management response that includes building resilience into the land and connecting Refuge lands to other important habitat.

We are also prepared to walk the walk when it comes to reducing heat-trapping pollution by playing a key role in the department's broader Carbon Footprint Project.

These steps represent an ambitious Department-wide approach that acknowledges climate change is bigger than any agency or organization. It also needs your support and input.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

That's why we hope you will visit a national wildlife refuge soon and talk to our wildlife professionals about how climate change is affecting our world and what you can do to help. We also hope you will learn more about our strategic plan for climate change and give us your feedback at <http://www.fws.gov/climatechange/>

A crisis, it is said, is an opportunity we can't afford to waste. Let's tackle the impacts of climate change with determination. Let's build a clean energy economy that creates new jobs. And let's build a conservation legacy for America's future hunters, hikers, anglers, birders, and boaters to enjoy for all time.