

Testimony of Thomas A. Hook
Before: The Committee on Insular Affairs, Oceans and Wildlife
May 6, 2010
Representing: The Friends of Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge
Cambridge, Maryland

My name is Tom Hook and I have been the Volunteer Treasurer for the Friends of Blackwater for over 12 years. I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

In 2003, the Friends of Blackwater received the “Friends Group of the Year” award from the National Wildlife Refuge Association.

This year Zeeger DeWilde, one of Blackwater’s volunteers and a Member of the Friends of Blackwater Board received the prestigious NWRA 2010 “Volunteer of the Year Award”. Zeeger is here with me today and I would like to just touch on a few of this remarkable individual’s accomplishments.

Zeeger has:

- Visited more than 200 refuges and volunteered at many;
- Volunteered more than 12,000 hours over the past 20 years;
- Leads popular Eagle Prowls, and bird walks;
- Drives more than 2 hours from his home in Delaware to volunteer at both Blackwater and Eastern Neck;
- Leads our Butterfly Garden team, creating one of the finest butterfly gardens on the East Coast;
- Is active in wildlife monitoring, planting trees, and restoring both wetlands and wildlife habitat; and
- He is passionate about teaching others about nature.

Zeeger, please stand up.

I would also add that Blackwater Refuge and the Friends of Blackwater have received all four of the National Wildlife Refuge Association’s Annual Excellence Awards; Friends Group of the Year, Volunteer of the Year, Refuge Manager

of the Year, and Refuge Employee of the Year. No other refuge has received all four awards.

WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO

The Friends of Blackwater is a tax-exempt 501 c (3) organization of over 800 members and is an official “cooperating association” authorized by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. While most of our members are on the East Coast we have members from 29 states, Ireland and Germany.

The mission of the Friends of Blackwater is to:

“Support the purposes of the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge by working for the protection, preservation, and enhancement of these precious lands through advocacy, environmental education and outreach”.

Over the past 8 years volunteers at Blackwater contributed over 118,000 hours of volunteer support to the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. That is the equivalent of an average of 8 full-time employees. Or, the equivalent of a 25% staff increase for the Refuge. These are no-cost staff increases, no salaries and no benefits.

Nationally there were 37,942 volunteers in 2009. They provided 1,382,989 hours of service for wildlife and habitat restoration, environmental education, recreation, cultural resources, and maintenance. Over the past ten years the number of volunteers has increased by 49% and the hours have increased by 26%. Currently volunteers do about 20% of the work done on refuges.

MAJOR FRIENDS OF BLACKWATER PROJECTS, GRANTS, AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS (Not All Inclusive)

Major Projects

- Staffing the Blackwater Visitor Center that is open every day except Thanksgiving and Christmas,
- Conducting refuge and nature science programs two times a year for every 4th and 6th grade student in the Dorchester County Public School system,
- Staffing and supporting three Refuge Open Houses a year,
- Supporting the annual kids fishing derby,
- Supporting many wetland restorations,
- Conducting educational programs,
- Maintaining the Butterfly Garden,
- Producing and maintaining the Friends of Blackwater web-site,
- Installation and maintenance of the Eagle & Osprey video cams (live at the Visitor Center and on the web site),
- Supporting data entry tasks, analysis, and headquarters office support,
- Securing Grants for refuge projects, capital improvements, and events,
- Operating the Refuge Hunt programs.

Grants

- Over \$900,000 of grants and matching funds for refuge projects, capital improvements, research, and restoration.

Community Partnerships

- Partnered with the Dorchester County Public School system to conduct School Board approved educational programs for every 4th and 6th grader in the Dorchester County Public School system.
- Paid for and installed the tourist radio station for Dorchester County,

- Partnered with the Heart of Chesapeake Heritage Area,
- Partnered with the South Dorchester Folk Museum,
- Partnered with the Harriet Tubman State Park,
- Received a grant from the Maryland Heritage Area Administration for the Environmental Education Building,
- Partnered with Wild Birds Unlimited and NFWF to build the Pathways to Nature Observatory,
- Partnered with the Waterfowl Festival Foundation to construct 4 miles of hiking trails,
- Partnered with Dorchester County Highway Department for road repairs, boat ramp construction, and road maintenance.

WHY ARE VOLUNTEERS IMPORTANT?

Without the time and efforts contributed by volunteers, refuge management would have no choice but to forgo most if not all of the projects outlined in my written testimony.

At Blackwater this would mean:

- Fewer and less valuable educational programs, fewer or no bird tours, fewer or no school education and orientation programs, fewer or no guided tours for the public,
- The Visitors Center instead of being open 363 days a year would be open occasionally, and would be have to be staffed by Refuge staff,
- Fewer recreational facilities and opportunities like the photo blind, paddling and hiking trails, the Observatory and the Education Center,
- No hunt program,
- Less marsh, wetland, and forest restoration,
- Refuge staff would not have the behind-the-scenes support for their never-ending task of refuge maintenance, biological studies, data entry, and special projects.

Most importantly the public would be denied the rich diversity of the educational and recreational experiences the Blackwater Refuge has to offer.

There is a current event that I would like to discuss that illustrates how Refuge staff and volunteers work together to solve problems, address emergencies, and get the job done; that's the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

The oil spill will pull Fish and Wildlife Service and National Wildlife Refuge System staff from around the nation as well as Friends & volunteers who will certainly play not only a role at the front line, but also in support roles in the background. Friends and volunteers are often people who simply want to help staff run refuges more efficiently. However in the case of the oil spill, Friends with appropriate experience and training will work on the front line. For example cleaning oiled wildlife through the FWS approved contractor, e.g. "Tri-State", a wildlife rehabilitator. But Friends & volunteers will play a much more significant role behind the scenes, making sure that volunteers and staff on the front line have food, water, and the resources they need to keep fighting the oil slick.

And what you'll likely never see is the Friends and volunteers who will pick up the slack at refuges nationwide as their staff is called to the Gulf for their expertise in helping wildlife. Volunteers will rise to the occasion – not for the glory or recognition but to help get the job done. They will mow the fields, greet visitors during what for many refuges is the beginning of the highest visitation season of the year – and generally do whatever needs to be done to ensure their refuge continues running.

But, as we have seen before, volunteers and Friends cannot do it alone. The National Wildlife Refuge System is

underfunded, and the President's proposed budget cut will have a profound impact on volunteers. Unfortunately in the real world volunteer programs are often the first to go. The President's budget for next year includes an overall \$3.5 million cut to the Operations and Maintenance accounts of the System – and a \$4 million cut to the Visitor's Services program. Unless Congress restores funding, regardless of how meaningful this legislation is, volunteers will lose their ability to help.

While volunteers work for free, it doesn't mean Refuge staff can just ask them to show up and walk away. Volunteers have to be trained, and managed so they can properly do what they are asked to accomplish. They will do their jobs over and over again, but there is an initial investment. Cutting Visitor Services and Operations funding is cutting off a resource that may never return.

THE VALUE OF VOLUNTEER COORDINATORS

Blackwater is not the only refuge with a Friends Group or a Cooperating Association. There are over 220 such volunteer groups across the nation supporting the refuge system.

However, there is no coordinated Volunteer management and community partnership efforts across the Refuge System that would define a consistent policy, and provide a forum for sharing good practices.

In June of 2003 I testified before this committee on HR 2408 recommending that they “consider expanding the act to provide funding for more Volunteer Coordinators, and make the funding available for additional full-time or part-time positions, in order to provide more refuges with this critically needed support.” This legislation will respond to that request

and establish the value of volunteer programs within the refuge System.

We constantly receive requests from people who want to volunteer for a few hours, or a few days a week or a month, or who want to work on a particular project, or who have a particular skill or interest. My point is this. If we at Blackwater, in a rural county with a population of just over 30,000 are in a position of attracting the volunteers that come to us, I am certain there are many refuges across the country in the same position, but do not have the ability to take advantage of those potential resources. Which means the valuable resources of many "Volunteers" for the refuge system are not serving the refuge system or are going somewhere else to volunteer. The bottom line is the refuge system is missing out on valuable volunteer talents and expertise that are there, and are free for the asking.

Before I close I would like to acknowledge the support and encouragement the Friends of Blackwater receives from the management and staff of the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. Suzanne Baird, our Refuge Manager, Tom Miller our Ranger, and the entire staff of the refuge, are truly our partners. We love what we do, and it would not be possible without the management and staff support we receive from the refuge.

I would like to thank the committee and staff for the opportunity to testify this morning, and I would be glad to answer any questions.