

RECEIVED
JUN 25 1997
FEDERAL AID

PROJECT STATEMENT

State: Rhode Island

Project title: Sapowet Management Area

A. Need:

The Sapowet Management Area is located on the easterly side of the Town of Tiverton, R.I., bordering the Sakonnet River, the eastern most entrance into Narragansett Bay (figures 1, 2, 3). The Tiverton - Little Compton region is unique by its location at the eastern limits of the state with land access only from Massachusetts and access from the rest of Rhode Island by a series of bridges that connect it to the mainland via the Sakonnet, Newport and Jamestown Bridges or to northern R.I. population centers via the Mt. Hope Bridge. The Division of Fish and Wildlife currently owns and manages 45,861 acres statewide for hunting, trapping, fishing and compatible fish and wildlife related recreations. Fish and wildlife management areas in Bristol - Newport Counties (the East Bay region), the area which comprises the Sapowet Area, total 2,616 acres or 3.1 % of the total land area of that region (83,830 acres). By comparison fish and wildlife management areas for mainland Rhode Island, comprising Providence, Kent and Washington counties, totals 43,151 acres or 7.3 % of the total land area of the region.

Population projections for Bristol and Newport counties prepared by the R.I. Division of Planning indicate that the human population will increase by 13,011 to 148,094 residents by the year 2020, an 8.8% increase. The human density for this area considering the projections is 1130 people per square mile, compared with 998 people per square mile on a statewide basis.

These comparisons highlight the need to acquire additional lands in order to fulfill the objectives of the Division of Fish and Wildlife which include providing recreational opportunities for hunting, fishing and compatible wildlife associated recreations for the citizens of the state. The Sapowet Area is easily accessible to population centers located in the Newport-Middletown-Portsmouth and Bristol -Providence regions. Public areas open to hunting, fishing and trapping in the East Bay region are limited causing the potential for crowding due to the limited area available. Hunting, fishing and associated wildlife recreation opportunities are in great demand as public lands are increasingly sought after by a growing number of participants in these activities. During summer months, the human population increases further as tourists flood into the state placing further demands on existing public lands. According to a 1991 National Survey of Fishing hunting and Wildlife Associated Recreation in Rhode Island, 97 thousand residents spent an average 20 days each fishing, 16 thousand residents spent an average 21 days hunting and 368 thousand enjoyed non-consumptive forms of wildlife associated recreation.

Another related concern for the East Bay region, resulting from the increase in human population, is the loss of wildlife habitat that occurs as a result of pressure to develop the land for housing, commercial and industrial purposes. The loss of habitat resulting from

these development pressures threatens the conservation of fish and wildlife values in the area, demanding action in order to counteract these negative consequences.

B. Objective:

To identify, evaluate, and acquire properties in the Sapowet Management Boundary Area (figure 4) that provide important fish and wildlife habitat values and which support public recreation for hunting, fishing and compatible fish and wildlife associated recreational activities.

C. Expected Results and Benefits:

Wildlife:

The Sapowet Management Area was acquired in several parcels during the late 1950's and early 1960's. The management area has not been added to since that time. Expansion of the area is necessary in order to fulfill the divisions objectives to acquire properties that provide important fish and wildlife habitat values and which support hunting, fishing and other compatible recreations. Additional acquisitions of land will serve to protect the ecological integrity of the overall Sapowet area and provide for the addition of upland habitats on which to implement wildlife management practices.

A significant portion of the existing management area is comprised of salt marshes and brackish water areas. Most of the surrounding uplands to the north and east are farmland which is privately owned and vulnerable to development pressures. Acquisition of these areas will afford the opportunity to extend protection to these habitats which in turn will provide new wildlife habitats that can be developed to enhance hunting and fishing opportunity as well as serve as a vital buffer to the salt marshes that form the core of Sapowet management area.

Parcels will be acquired within the boundary as they become available. We will immediately acquire approximately 42 acres of prime farmland habitat (Lacerda farm) comprised of cultivated fields, pastures and hedgerows. The area will be operated as a wildlife management area and public hunting area (figure 5).

The farmland habitats will be maintained by way of continued farming practices through a lease to a local farmer. Special lease conditions will be designed in order to allow farming of agricultural row crops and pasture such as corn, potatoes, vegetables, hay or silage. Turf grass will not be permitted to be grown on the farmland due to its limited contribution to wildlife habitat values and concerns for soil depletion. Approximately 36 of the acres will be cultivated in this way with the balance maintained in hedgerows and non tillable wet areas bordering wetlands.

The Sapowet marsh attracts a variety of resident and migratory waterfowl (ducks and geese) and supports hunting for these species during fall seasons. A small number of duck blinds (4 or 5) are built and maintained on the marsh for this purpose. The multiple tidal creeks and potholes within the marsh provide many other potential blind setups for

hunters using small boats and canoes. During winter, black duck is the primary duck species using Sapowet salt marsh with other species including American widgeon, gadwall, mallard and mergansers also found there.

Canada goose populations, particularly resident birds, have grown significantly in numbers in the state over the last several years with substantial populations using the east bay region. Presently, opportunities to hunt geese from field blinds over decoys is limited to private property. We plan to establish two or three pit blinds in the newly acquired agricultural fields to the northwest of Sapowet Marsh that will support waterfowl (goose and duck) hunting. A hunting program will be established similar to one operated on the South Shore Management Area where blinds are reserved for full or half day hunting by parties who make some form of advanced reservation and are required to hunt with decoys. Recently, the closure of the regular goose season has severely curtailed hunting opportunities for these species. Special early or late goose seasons for resident birds have additional restrictions placed on them in the east bay region due to migrant geese mixing with resident flocks. Once the regular goose season is restored, potentially 420 hunter days of goose hunting could be supported by the newly acquired fields. An additional 250 days of waterfowl hunting will be provided by the Sapowet marsh area.

Upland and small game species in the area include pheasant, woodcock and cottontail rabbit. Ring-neck pheasant are stocked at the Sapowet management area during the hunting season as a put and take hunting opportunity. Pheasant stocking takes place along the narrow state property bordering the salt marshes with much of the hunting occurring in private unposted fields northwest of the management area. The new land acquisitions will permit improvement of stocking operations by distributing birds into new habitats, dispersing the hunting pressure and improving the quality of the hunting. We expect that the area will support 350 to 400 hunter days of pheasant hunting and 100 days of small game hunting annually.

Wildlife observation and other non-consumptive forms of recreation will be enhanced by new acquisitions. The newly acquired habitats will protect these lands from potential development enhancing ability to observe and photograph wildlife and the natural habitats of the Sapowet Area. Many forms of recreation are possible in the area ranging from such active forms as boating and photography to passive forms such as enjoying the aesthetics, scenery of the habitats and wildlife observation. The Sapowet area, with the new acquisition, is expected to provide at least 500-600 days of non-consumptive recreation annually.

Fisheries:

The Division of Fish and Wildlife owns and maintains the Sapowet Fishing Area which is located north of the tidal creek into Sapowet marsh and west of Puncatest Neck Road bordering Sakonnet river. The fishing area consists of 26 acres of beach, marsh and tidal creeks abutting the Sapowet management area. The fishing area has parking for 20 to 30 cars. A cobblestone boat ramp is available for launching small powerboats, sailboats or cartopped boats. Shore fishing is available from over 2000 feet of natural beach facing

the Sakonnet river and pier fishing is possible from the tidal creek bridge. Fishing for important recreational gamefish such as striped bass, bluefish and squeteague are very popular in this area. Other important recreational species include tatau and winter flounder. Area use:

D. Approach :

The Division of Fish and Wildlife will identify and evaluate parcels which meet the objectives of this plan. All properties acquired in this area will be managed and controlled by the Division of Fish and Wildlife. The Division will work in cooperation with other agencies within the Department of Environmental Management as well as private organizations such as the Nature Conservancy and Champlin Foundation to acquire properties which extend the objectives outlined in the plan.

Properties will be acquired by using one or a combination of methods within the project area as follows:

1. Purchase fee simple with seller donation (in-kind match). The seller in this method would donate 25% of the property's value to the Division. This donated value would become the match necessary for acquisition via Pittman-Robertson / Dingle-Johnson Projects.

2. Purchase fee simple with state funds. The Division will acquire parcels of land, as they become available, at their appraised value, using state moneys as the 25% match for Pittman-Robertson / Dingle-Johnson Projects.

3. Control of land without purchase. In this method, land within the acquisition area would be controlled by one of the following methods: conservation easement, donation of development rights or life use of property.

The Division will attempt to acquire additional parcels as they become available which are within the acquisition boundary (an area of approximately 750 acres) in order to expand Sapowet Management area and further the objectives of the Division. With the addition of the Lacerda farm, the Division will own and manage approximately 234 acres or 31% of the area within the acquisition boundary.

Key personnel for this project are:

Michael Lapisky, Deputy Chief Wildlife Resources, Federal Aid Coordinator

John O'Brien, Deputy Chief Freshwater Fisheries

Brian Tefft, Principal Wildlife Biologist

Lisa Pointek, Land Acquisition Supervisor

Jay McGuinn, Associate Civil Engineer

E. Location:

The location of the Sapowet Management Area is shown on the following series of maps (figures 1,2,3,4)