

Wildlife refuges have never been just for wildlife. The 90 million-acre national wildlife refuge system also hosts military maneuvers, cattle, hunters, boaters and other "secondary" users.

"People are shocked when they learn that national wildlife refuges are not really refuges," says Karin Sheldon, an attorney for The Wilderness Society.

At Copalis National Wildlife Refuge, on Washington's rugged Olympic Peninsula, multiple use is as obvious as the roar of a Navy jet.

Bombing began at the refuge during World War II and intensified during the 1960s. The target practice with chalk bombs was grandfathered in when the series of islands were designated as wilderness in 1970. That meant A-6 jets continued to buzz the refuge at speeds up to 500 miles per hour, scattering seal lions and stressing nesting sea birds.

Since 1978, regional U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials have asked the Navy and Department of Interior to stop the bombings at Copalis. They point to a steady decline in nesting bird populations in the refuge. They say planes cause young chicks to topple from their cliff-top nests into the cold waters of the Pacific.

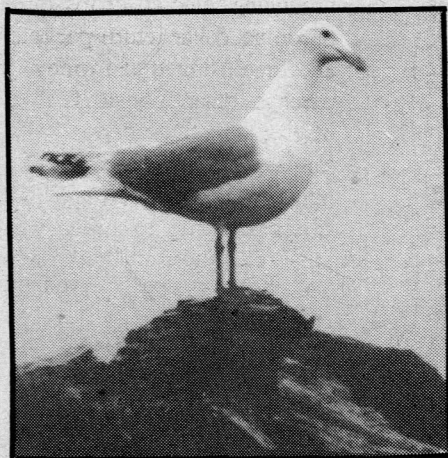
In 1989, the Copalis refuge manager made a formal determination that the Navy bombing runs were "incompatible" with the purposes of the refuge. But the bombings continued. The Navy refused again last May, when regional U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials and environmentalists asked it to cease taking runs for at least the four-month breeding season. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office in Washington, D.C., backed the Navy.

"It's a matter of national security," says agency spokesman Duncan Brown.

Armed with a 10-refuge lawsuit, environmentalists now intend to kick the Navy out. In October, the National Audubon Society, The Wilderness Society and Defenders of Wildlife filed two lawsuits against the Department of Interior in U.S. District Court in Washington state. The first focuses solely on Copalis National Wildlife Refuge; the second involves nine refuges, including seven in the West.

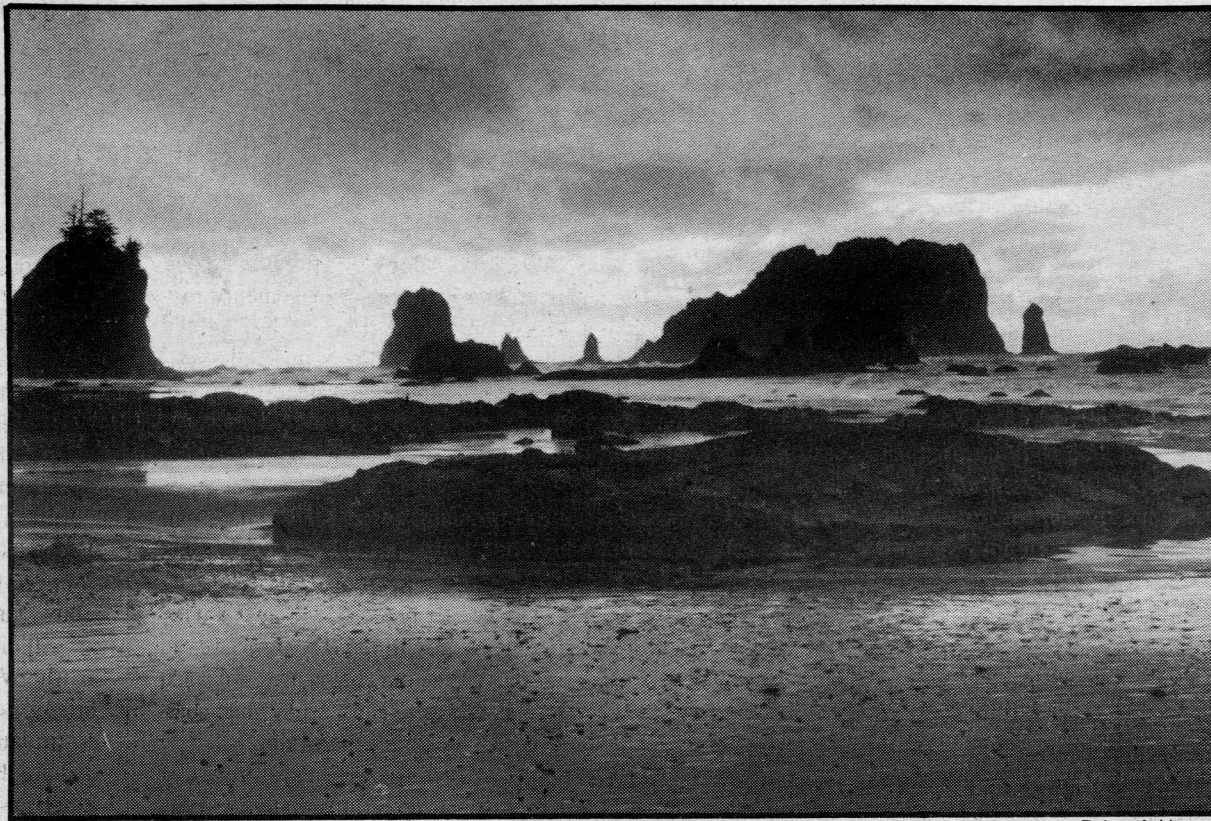
The groups charge that the director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service repeatedly issues permits for secondary uses on these refuges against the advice of refuge managers.

Copalis may be the most graphic example of a national wildlife refuge compromised by destructive uses, but it is not unique. A survey conducted by the



Glaucous winged gull

Robert Ashbaugh



The outer coast of Washington

Robert Ashbaugh

Wildlife 'refuges' play host to bombers, cattle and jetskiers

Fish and Wildlife Service in 1990 found that 63 percent of the country's more than 450 national wildlife refuges nationwide are plagued by incompatible and often harmful activities. A survey of the seven Western refuges named in the lawsuit demonstrates a wide variety of conflicts.

- Camas National Wildlife Refuge, Idaho. Cattle grazing is degrading wetlands and upland areas at this 10,600 acre refuge just north of Idaho Falls, charges the environmentalists' lawsuit. The refuge is home to large flocks of migratory waterfowl, as well as greater sandhill cranes, trumpeter swans, mule deer and antelope.

- Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, Ariz. The Air Force uses the air space above the 1,000 square mile refuge southeast of Yuma for training that includes air-to-air gunnery missile firing and low-altitude supersonic flight. Frequent sonic booms and other loud noises startle the desert bighorns and Sonoran pronghorns in the refuge and may inhibit their abilities to forage and breed, says Jim Norton, a staffer at The Wilderness Society's Santa Fe office.

- Havasu National Wildlife Refuge, Ariz. Recreational powerboating and jet-skiing are driving away black-necked stilts, grebes, herons and egrets that breed on this 38,000-acre refuge along the lower Colorado River, the lawsuit charges.

- McNary National Wildlife Refuge, Wash. Beach use, swimming and picnicking disturb migratory birds that rest, nest and feed in this 3,600 acre haven along the waters of the Columbia and Snake rivers, southeast of Richland.

- Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge, Colo. Cattle, sheep and goats compete in this 14,000-acre San Luis Valley sanctuary with bald eagles, whooping and sandhill cranes, white-faced ibis and other species, the lawsuit charges.

- Umatilla National Wildlife Refuge, in Oregon and Washington. This 24,000-acre refuge along the Columbia River suffers from heavy public use, including airboats, jetskis and motorboats. The lawsuit says these activities damage wildlife habitat and displace important feeding, resting and nesting areas for up to 350,000 waterfowl.

- Turnbull National Wildlife Refuge, Wash. Cattle grazing is degrading water quality and wildlife habitat at this 15,500-acre refuge located southwest of Spokane in the eastern part of the state, charges the lawsuit.

Despite the overwhelming evidence that wildlife refuges are being overrun, environmentalists say reform has proceeded at a snail's pace.

The refuge system "tends to be the poor stepchild" of the nation's public-land systems, says Wilderness Society attorney Karin Sheldon. "Nobody pays a whole lot of attention to it."

The refuge system also lacks a central legislative covenant. Unlike the National Park System, the National Wildlife Refuge System does not have a core law that provides national management standards for the entire system. Each refuge has its own mission, ranging from wildlife habitat protection to increased duck production. Some even exist to improve public grazing lands.

In the 1960s, Congress attempted to buttress the refuge system with a more solid legal foundation. The Refuge Recreation Act of 1962 limited recreational use of refuges to those activities "compatible" with refuge wildlife goals. The 1966 National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act formally brought all the refuges under a single roof and required that all secondary uses of refuges be "compatible" with the purposes for which individual refuges were established.

But the definition of compatibility was left to the discretion of the secretary of the Interior, so the laws did little to change the management focus at most refuges, says Sheldon.

The passage of another law, the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act of 1964, probably promoted environmentally destructive activities, she says.

This law provides the refuge's host county with money for roads and schools based on a percentage of the receipts generated by the refuge. "This puts pressure on refuge managers to continue or expand money-making uses," Sheldon points out.

Together, these laws create a system where on-the-ground managers and national agency decisionmakers are often

at odds over management practices. In Idaho's Camas National Wildlife Refuge, for instance, the refuge manager determined in 1981 that "grazing precludes managing for the best interests of wildlife." But the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has not eliminated or reduced grazing levels, although a drought has forced a temporary 50 percent reduction, according to refuge manager Charles Peck.

As for why cattle haven't been removed from the refuge, Peck says, "There's probably not a field employee in any agency that wouldn't like to be totally free from anything but pure science. We'd like to be able to make management decisions without the influence of economics or politics, but the secretary of Interior doesn't take his orders from us."

Environmentalists hope the lawsuits will force the secretary of Interior to heed the recommendations of refuge managers. Their hand is strengthened by the fact that at five of the 10 refuges cited in the suits, U.S. Fish and Wildlife officials have already

determined the incompatibility of secondary uses.

But the real goal of the lawsuits is to provide momentum for the passage of a new organic act that would put the refuge system in the same league as the National Park System.

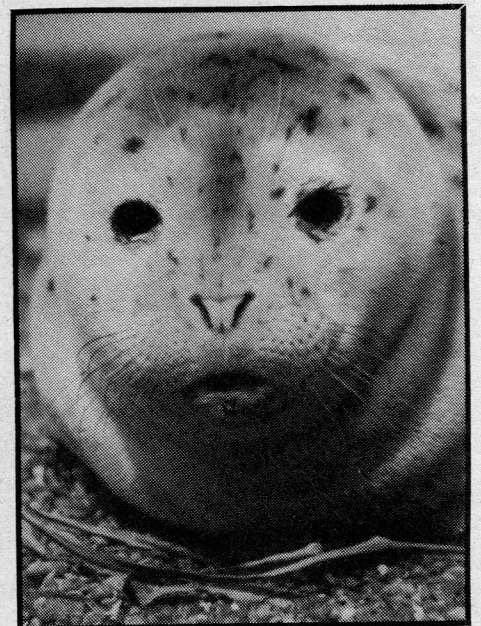
Reform bills were introduced last year by Rep. Gerry Studds, D-Mass., and Florida Sen. Bob Graham, D. They specify strict national standards for determining which secondary activities are compatible with wildlife protection on the refuges. Graham promises to reintroduce his legislation early in next year's session.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service remains opposed to reform legislation. At congressional hearings last year, Director John Turner said there was no need for reform because his agency was already addressing incompatible secondary uses.

But Karin Sheldon doesn't expect much from internal reform:

"Over the last quarter-century, there has been a steady stream of reports by blue-ribbon committees, the General Accounting Office and outside interest groups about the shortcomings of the refuge system," says Sheldon. "Legislation is necessary and long overdue."

— Kristy Ratliff, Paul Larmer



Harbor seal

Robert Ashbaugh