

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND
RELATED AGENCIES

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We have already made a difference and more is yet to come! The old “Rust Belt” is turning green. Children from the city can now experience the outdoors safely. The “child” in all of us can do the same. This is what we want. This is what the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge represents to the people of Detroit and southeast Michigan. This is a model for making nature a part of everyday urban life. We are a place for people that promotes habitat for wildlife. Together with our novel partnerships, we are introducing people to the joy of wildlife and wild places and giving them the opportunity to interact.

The Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge is within an hour’s drive from 7 million people, yet is carved out of critical pieces of habitat along the lower Detroit River and the western shore of Lake Erie. There are nearly 6,200 acres of critically important habitat now preserved or waiting to be restored within the refuge boundary -- lands owned or cooperatively managed with The Nature Conservancy and the Lake Erie Metropark -- and extending from the Ohio/Michigan line north to Detroit along I-75. This bolsters roughly 8,000 additional acres of natural holdings of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources as well as nearly 5,000 acres of conservation lands coordinated with Canadian partners. Altogether our network forms stepping stones of nature for native wildlife to nest, rest, spawn, forage, and... people to thrive.

Our flagship, the Refuge’s Humbug Marsh, is a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance and is ranked as “globally imperiled” habitat in the Michigan Natural Features Inventory. It serves as vital habitat for 51 species of fish, over 90 species of plants, 154 species of birds, 7 species of reptiles and amphibians, and 37 species of dragonflies and damselflies. Bald eagles and osprey, once absent from the skies, have returned to the Detroit River ecosystem. Lake sturgeon, once rare and numbered roughly 2,000 in the 1970’s for all 5 Great Lakes, are now documented at more than 5,000 in just the Detroit River and adjacent Lake St. Clair! Walleye was in a crisis state, and today it is a world-class fishery. In fact, the early calculations of the interagency index revealed that 2018 was the biggest walleye year class anyone had ever seen. “The Walleye Capital of the World” is within yards of the Refuge Gateway fishing pier!

There is a transformation occurring in Detroit that is a model for urban-wildlife corridors across the nation. Detroit was ground-zero in the industrial revolution; we built the nation and then created the infrastructure that won World War II. But then times got bad our people and environment suffered. Everyone realized we couldn’t continue to pollute our precious waters as in the past, and our coastlines are worth more than we realized. The Clean Water Act, sponsored by our very own Congressman, the late John D. Dingell Jr., provided the impetus to preserve natural areas in this coastal zone. Economically, the name “Detroit” had become synonymous with communities broken and blighted. But Detroiters are some of the strongest people you’ll

know; and our pride of place and ingenuity and resolve run deep. When the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge was created in 2001, it was as a result of a great public outcry against a proposed development on the last undeveloped U.S. mile of native habitat along the river. The Refuge validates Detroiters' pride and reinforces our dignity and worth; because we know "if we can bring wildlife back in Detroit, we can do anything". Like a Phoenix from the ashes, the Detroit of today is about rebirth, renewal, and honoring our past. Today, we are restoring one-time industrial brownfields to important public green space and wildlife habitat. Detroit is rapidly becoming a mecca for urban wildlife and environmental justice: a sustainable, healthy community for all. We are changing the perception of the Detroit River from that of a polluted 'rust belt' river to one of an international wildlife refuge that reconnects people to nature, promotes outdoor recreation, improves quality of life, and enhances community pride. Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge, like urban refuges across the nation, is a community asset that is a neighbor who lives 'just around the corner'. People don't have to plan a vacation to experience nature and the personal enjoyment it brings, as they might for a trip to Yosemite; they can get it at their neighborhood refuge.

With past investments we've been able to do great things. Additional investments will allow us to do many more great things. There is a decade long Great Lakes Restoration Initiative investing millions of dollars to clean up and remediate old industrial sites. Our Visitor Center sits on such a site! We found that these sites can be rehabilitated with clean up and natural engineering. The Refuge visitor center overlooks the Trenton Channel (where the Walleye come en masse!), Lake Erie and a wonderful wildlife area at Humbug Marsh. Much progress has been made and the results are astonishing when you consider that this was all heavy industrial property at one time. The Humbug Marsh Unit is a testimonial to perseverance and the foresight of people like the late John Dingell, the late Peter Stroh (Stroh Brewing Company - Detroit) and the late Canadian Deputy Prime Minister, Herb Gray. This was the inception of the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge! The smile on people's faces when they see their own wilderness is a sight to behold, worth every penny! Now, they own a piece of the land and they share it with their wild brethren. Mr. Dingell, you are to be commended.

The greater Detroit area community is joining forces, creating phenomenal partnerships with seemingly unlikely cohorts. Restoration and management support come from multiple sources: government, yes, but also industry, philanthropists, and private local donations. Energy companies, steel producers, manufacturing businesses are just some who are working with conservation organizations and governments, teachers, hospitals, and private citizens to enhance conservation lands and healthy communities. With past investments since 1998, we've seen tremendous progress. With additional investments, we will go even further. Remediation projects under the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) continue to clean up Areas of Concern such as the Detroit River. Riverine bottomlands are being re-claimed, especially in the Conservation Crescent on the south end of Grosse Ile which borders the Saint Lawrence Seaway. Since 2010, the Federal Government has spent over \$2.5 billion cleaning up the Great Lakes. Now, it behooves us to transform these resources into useful urban amenities -- many of which can sustain migratory waterfowl. There are ample examples within the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge boundary to demonstrate these opportunities:

- 51 soft-shoreline engineering projects along the coastal waters
- the soon-to-open John D. Dingell, Jr. Visitor Center in the Refuge Gateway

- a world-class fishing pier for a free-to-the-public, quality fishing experience
- a dock for the Michigan Sea Grant school ship thus allowing 4th and 5th grade students to experience a hands-on limnology learning experience
- a kayak launch and as a landing opportunity along the Blueway Water Trail system

Together with county, state, and international partners we have more than 12,000 acres in conservation status for people and wildlife. We are systematically attacking invasive species and creating vital wetland habitats; and the wildlife have responded. In addition to bald eagles, osprey, beaver and sturgeon returning to the Detroit River, the western Lake Erie basin is now a haven not only for the canvasback but, a myriad of other diving ducks such as the lesser and greater scaup and redheads. As an indicator of biological diversity, diving ducks bring a value of millions of dollars to the urban wildlife system. But more work needs to be done. Controlling invasive species requires a sustained effort to maintain viable habitat. Dikes, recently damaged from high water, require reconstruction in order to best manage water impoundments for wildlife. Shorelines need stabilizing and habitats require restoration to enhance resiliency in the face of rapidly changing climate. Restoration of wild celery (*Vallisneria americana*) beds would greatly enhance the viability of the refuge which serves as a migratory stop over for diving ducks such as the canvasback, the King of all ducks. With additional investment and professional staff, the new visitor center -when opened - would be able to host tens of thousands of people, support a diversity of community events, and maintain additional trails to make nature a part of everyday urban life. An additional investment of \$400,000 in coastal wetlands and habitat, along with \$350,000 for programmatic support, and \$250,000 to provide the much needed assistance in the opening of the Refuge Gateway with the world-class fishing pier, the visitor center and additional refuge units to the 7 million people in our neighboring communities. All in an effort to offer additional public access and quality recreational experiences that are the hallmark of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

And, as is the case throughout the country, federally appropriated dollars in Detroit have a significant multiplying effect. For example, the IWRAlliance and partners have been able to turn a \$70K federal investment with the City of Trenton and the Downriver Linked Greenways into \$25 million of economic impact on the surrounding communities supporting not only the Refuge, but also benefitting the greater metropolitan Detroit area. The neighboring City of Trenton has become a “Trail Town” spurring new development as it connects with the Refuge and 100 miles of the Downriver linked Greenway trail and Blueway River trails, reaching within a half mile of every home and connects millions of residents to each other across Downriver. The addition of this greenway also brings \$881,000 in added health benefit to the communities (Active Communities / Transportation Research Groups).

Investment in the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge is an investment in our communities. The percentage of people living in urban areas throughout the world has increased from 29% in 1950 to 49% in 2007, and projected to reach 60% by 2030.

Today, 80% of all U.S. citizens live in an urban area. Many urban residents are disconnected from the natural world and the Metropolitan Detroit area is no exception. That is why it is so exciting to see the growth and development of the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge and how it is making natural experiences part of everyday urban life. Residents can find peace of

mind in a walk on the forest trail, watch the sun rise while fishing on the pier, enjoy the peaceful river as they kayak the coastline, or enrich family outings biking safely with their children along the greenway trail. **Making nature a part of everyday urban life develops the next generation of conservationists.** With a successful international wildlife refuge in their backyard with thriving wildlife, people feel the dignity of their unique home and improve their quality of life.

I have testified before you today about our great wildlife refuge and all we have achieved; but, perhaps the single most poignant aspect of my testimony is what I represent, a lifetime of adventure. Ever since I was old enough to be outside, alone, I have cared about the environment around us. The great outdoors has a way of mesmerizing you. Once exposed to it, there is no turning back. Being alone in nature is very special. It's just you with the wind, the water and the waves. Then, all of a sudden, you realize that you are not alone, there are other life forms all around you in a vast expanse of openness. What an awe - inspiring feeling!

I only hope that what I am doing here today will enable others to share in this experience.