

Wetlands, Migratory Birds, and Ecotourism Workshop

David M. Larson

On October 24–25, 2000, a most extraordinary conference was held in Essex County, MA. Approximately eighty representatives from state and federal governments, conservation and environmental organizations, and resorts and reserves met in a concerted effort to advance wetland and migratory bird conservation by engaging academic and regulatory agencies with commercial and local governmental concerns.

The Wetlands, Migratory Birds, & Ecotourism Workshop was organized by the Institute for Wetland Science and Public Policy of the Association of State Wetland Managers (ASWM). This workshop was the continuation of a series of meetings that began in 1989 in the Yucatan. The most remarkable aspect of this workshop was its scope – a more ambitious agenda is hard to imagine.

While the ranks of birders, wetland managers, and ecotourism experts increase, loss of wetlands and migratory bird habitats continues at an alarming rate. This conference was designed to connect these groups, fostering mutual support. The goals of the meeting were to help protect and restore migratory birds and wetland habitat, to build networks, to exchange how-to information, to facilitate on-the-ground projects, and to provide a context for follow-up on pressing items, such as the Gulf of Maine initiative.

On Tuesday in Newburyport the conference featured an impassioned and persuasive lecture by Ted Eubanks, President of Fermata, Inc. (www.fermatainc.com). Fermata has been at the forefront of efforts to develop rational, economically-viable conservation initiatives, such as The Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail. Of critical importance, according to Ted, is the development of local initiative and support for an ecotourism/conservation effort. Absent such an agreement, projects are doomed to failure. With agreement, and careful planning and development, both nature and the local economy can prosper.

Bill Gette, from the Massachusetts Audubon Society's Joppa Flats Education Center, continued the program with a discussion of ecotourists, using an encompassing big-tent approach. Like Ted, he emphasized the economic benefits of ecotourism. In contrast, Lisa Mead, Mayor of Newburyport, MA, focused on the costs of conservation and ecotourism, in terms of increased traffic, infrastructure demands, loss of tax base, and friction with local residents. Her lack of data on economic benefits points to a need for better cost-benefit analyses and better outreach from conservation organizations. Indeed, the need to engage the local populace, and the necessity for popular support for conservation initiatives was echoed by many speakers during the workshop.

One of the more engaging speakers of the first day was Anne Galli from the Hackensack Meadowlands Development Commission. She addressed techniques for

engaging students, teachers, and the community in wetlands conservation using the example of the highly successful Meadowlands restoration project in northern New Jersey, as well as The Wetlands Institute in Stone Harbor.

Jim Corven from Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences described the importance and scope of the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN). WHSRN is an organization that facilitates and coordinates the designation of critical sites used by shorebirds, collaborative and cooperative interactions between sites, and outreach and informational efforts.

The first day of the workshop finished with a continuation of the address by Ted Eubanks, detailing the benefits of ecotourism to the local economy.

Day two was convened at Castle Hill in Ipswich, MA, and started with a presentation on the nuts-and-bolts of wetland site design by Jon Kusler from ASWM. Jon, one of the organizers of the meeting, spoke about the design of the visitor/wetland interface, including the layout of boardwalks, the location of parking lots, and the importance of toilet facilities.

Following Jon's address, two concurrent sessions addressed "Building Community Partnerships" and "Building International Birding, Wetlands, & Shorebird Networks." In the latter session, Wayne Petersen described the Important Bird Areas Program (IBA) as it relates to Massachusetts, and its importance for bird conservation. Other speakers discussed ecotourism in Cuba, the importance of respect for indigenous peoples in Mexico, and the LakeNet/Monitor International coordination of lake conservation initiatives.

The next session included presentations on a private, for-profit, ecotourism reserve in the Yucatan; on the West Indian Whistling-Duck/Wetlands Conservation project in the Caribbean; and on a variety of case histories of wetland/ecotourism paradigms. Finally, the workshop concluded with an open discussion about how to develop a wetland, migratory bird, and ecotourism plan.

So, were the ambitious goals of this workshop met? Perhaps they were, in part. Undoubtedly all of the participants came away from this meeting with a more comprehensive understanding of the blessings and curses, and the economic benefits and costs of ecotourism as a means to engage local communities and tourists in the preservation of wetlands and migratory birds. The question-and-answer breaks after presentations were arguably more significant than the lectures, with participants commenting on sources of information, websites, paradigms, and pitfalls. On the other hand, the lack of involvement of the business community and citizenry of Newburyport is indicative perhaps of the tension between ecotourism, conservation, and community values and priorities. The fact that the mayor of Newburyport, a city that is highly dependent on tourist income, could not enumerate the benefits of ecotourism says quite a bit about the current state of ecotourism awareness in Massachusetts. 

David M. Larson is the Production Editor for Bird Observer, a veteran meeting attendee, and a rookie journalist. He attended the meeting as a guest of the ASWM.