

**NAWPA COMMITTEE  
MARINE WILDERNESS & PROTECTED AREAS WORKING GROUP**

**CASE STUDY OF MPA ESTABLISHMENT – KEY WEST NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE AND THE  
FLORIDA KEYS WILDERNESS  
FLORIDA, U.S.A.**



Recreational angler



Nesting loggerhead sea turtle



Great blue heron

**KEY MESSAGE**

*Long-term residents, recreational fishing guides, and other commercial users that rely on the natural resources of an area can work together to achieve protection for marine areas. Such collaboration resulted in an agreement between the State of Florida and the Fish and Wildlife Service to allow the use and enjoyment of recreational fishing and other appropriate activities and prohibit uses contrary to wilderness protection, in the waters surrounding the refuges, even though the surrounding marine areas itself is not designated wilderness.*

**BENEFITS**

- World-renowned back country fishing experience (for species such as bonefish, tarpon and permit) draws half a million visitors a year.
- Habitat and protection for endangered fish, wildlife, plants and migratory birds
- Opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation in the wilderness
- Support for the recreation tourism industry that accounts for 33-75% of the region's economy

**CRITICAL STEPS**

- In the early 1900s, the hunting community and other conservationists brought attention to the millinery industry's overexploitation of migratory birds particularly within their main breeding grounds.
- In 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt established the Key West Refuge.
- In 1938 and 1958, respectively, the Great White Heron and National Key Deer Refuges were created in areas adjacent to the Key West Refuge.
- In 1975, the U.S. Congress designated most of the Lower Florida Keys refuges as Wilderness, adding another layer of long-term protection.
- In the 1980s, a dramatic increase in residential growth and tourism in the Florida Keys resulted in a significant increase in recreational and commercial use of the nearshore marine waters surrounding refuge islands and in associated activities on the islands themselves.
- In 1992, the Fish and Wildlife Service and State of Florida, after significant public input, signed the Backcountry Management Plan creating vessel exclusion zones where they prohibited personal watercraft, airboats, water skiing, and aircraft landings but still allowed traditional water-based activities such as fishing, boating, and diving. They also established special buffer zones and no-entry areas near sensitive wildlife habitat.

- The personal watercraft community continues to fight use restrictions.

### **LESSONS LEARNED**

- Embracing stakeholders who rely on healthy ecosystems for their livelihood can bolster public support for a marine protected area. For example recreational fishing guides believed the quality of the backcountry fishing experience was threatened by user groups that did not require or value the wilderness character of the Florida Keys.
- Longtime local residents who may benefit from increased tourism, still value and will fight to protect the natural resources that initially drew them to the area.

**FACT SHEET**  
**KEY WEST NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE AND THE FLORIDA KEYS WILDERNESS**  
**FLORIDA, U.S.A.**

**Name:** Key West National Wildlife Refuge and the Florida Keys Wilderness

**Location:** Lower Florida Keys, Florida. Key West NWR is part of the Lower Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuge Complex, which also includes Great White Heron NWR and National Key Deer Refuge.

**Size:** 200,000 acres, with only ~2000 acres of emergent land. The Florida Keys Wilderness includes 2,278 acres of mangrove islands and sandy beaches in the Key West NWR and also 4,268 acres throughout the other refuges of the Complex.

**Year Established:** Key West (1908); Florida Keys Wilderness (1975).

**Purpose:**

- "... a preserve and breeding ground for native birds." Executive Order 923 dated August 8, 1908.
- "...so as to provide protection of these areas...and to ensure...the preservation of their wilderness character..." (Wilderness Act of 1964, Public Law 88-577.)

**History:**

- In 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt issued a directive creating Key West National Wildlife Refuge to protect breeding grounds for migratory birds, whose feathers were highly valued in the millenary industry, that were threatened with extinction.
- On January 3, 1975, Public Law 93-632 designated certain lands in the Key West, Great White Heron, and National Key Refuges as a part of the National Wilderness Preservation System.

**Status:**

- The open water and submerged lands within the Lower Florida Keys refuges are owned by the State of Florida. The USFWS co-manages these areas through a Management Agreement with the State.
- The three Lower Florida Keys refuges represent the last of the offshore islands in the lower Florida Keys available as critical nesting, roosting, wading and resting habitat to over 250 avian species.
- Sandy beaches along the mangrove islands provide nesting sites for the endangered Atlantic green and loggerhead turtles and are the only breeding site in the U.S. for the endangered hawksbill turtle.
- The lower Florida Keys refuges provide tremendous opportunity for wildlife dependent recreations and are known worldwide as a truly unique "backcountry" fishing experience.
- Although the wilderness only includes the land areas of the refuges, the marine habitats benefit greatly from the wilderness designation. Coastal mangroves, which have become greatly depleted elsewhere in the Florida Keys, provide important feeding grounds for

many predatory fish and act as a nursery for juveniles of many economically important species. The health of the critical submerged seagrass meadows are closely linked ecologically to the mangroves and the bird colonies they harbor.

### **Backcountry Management Plan**

Until about 1990, the Refuge Complex had been very successful at protecting sensitive wildlife nesting habitat and populations of many migratory birds had recovered dramatically from their decimation in the early 1900s. But soon after, dramatic increases in public uses, such as unrestricted boater access, inhibited effective wildlife protection. With the introduction of personal watercraft, recreational users could now access areas that were previously inaccessible. This activity also significantly degraded the quality of the backcountry fishing experience. The USFWS and State of Florida's Department of Natural Resources became worried that their successful conservation efforts could be threatened by overuse and poorly managed access.

In 1992, with significant public input, the USFWS and State of Florida developed the [Backcountry Management Plan](#) (BMP), as their formal management agreement is commonly known. To curtail the detrimental impacts while also allowing traditional water-based activities such as fishing, boating, and diving, the BMP designated vessel exclusion zones throughout Key West NWR and most of Great White Heron NWR. Personal watercraft, airboats, water skiing, hovercraft, and aircraft landings were prohibited in these areas. Special buffer zones with idle speed, no motor, or no entry areas were also established near sensitive wildlife habitat. After the establishment of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary in 1990, the Lower Keys refuges were designated by NOAA as Existing Management Areas under the Sanctuary's marine zoning program. This joint management approach facilitates the comprehensive protection of natural resources.

These layered and contiguous conservation and management designations, including National Wildlife Refuges, State-managed waters, and National Marine Sanctuary, reflect the complex nature and interconnectedness of the Lower Keys ecosystems. The designated wilderness areas integrated within this system help protect the most sensitive wildlife and habitats. Periodic review and revision of the BMP facilitates continued public and other stakeholder input. Although public comments reveal much opposition to the buffer zones, recreational fishing guides and environmental tourism groups support the zones as essential for protecting the unique nature of the Lower Keys backcountry and for maintaining its appeal to visitors seeking a unique experience not available elsewhere in the Florida Keys.