National Audubon Society
Four Programs to Conserve Critical Habitat

North Dakota: the Garrison Diversion Unit

North Dakota's unique landscape of shallow alkaline lakes, sloughs, prairie marshes and potholes provides ideal breeding, feeding and nesting habitat for an immense number and variety of geese, ducks, shorebirds, gulls and other wildfowl. North Dakota produces more ducks annually than any other state except Alaska and provides critical habitat for such mammals and non-migratory bird species as the sharp-tailed grouse, prairie chicken, white-tailed deer and ring-necked pheasant.

This rich and productive landscape is severely threatened by the proposed Garrison Diversion Unit, a Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation project designed to irrigate 250,000 acres in North Dakota.

Completion of the Garrison Diversion Unit would have a devastating impact on prairie marshes, grasslands, National Wildlife Refuges and their associated wildlife. The project would destroy over 60,000 acres of prairie wetlands and harm an additional 13,000 acres of prairie marshes. It would ravage more than 61,000 acres of grasslands, including 43,000 acres of native prairie, and more than 4,000 acres of woodlands. Irrigation flows would require channelization of over 142 miles of streams and would have adverse impacts on a dozen National Wildlife Refuges in North and South Dakota. The project would also cause irreversible damage to eight unique areas of outstanding wildlife habitat, as well as federal waterfowl production areas, state game management areas and areas covered by federal wetlands easements.

The impact on wildlife, however, would extend far beyond North Dakota. The destruction of prime breeding habitat would mean, for example, an annual loss of as many as 178,000 ducks which would be felt in all states along the Central and Mississippi Flyways. Canadians feel that the project runs the risk of mixing waters from one side of the Continental Divide now draining north to Hudson Bay, with waters from the other side that now empty through the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers into the Gulf of Mexico. It has been estimated that the transfer of undesirable fish species, fish parasites and fish diseases from one system into the other would result in a potentially devastating reduction of the fisheries in Lake Winnipeg and Manitoba as high as 75%.

The economics of the Garrison Diversion Unit defy logic. Estimated costs for the project, originally set at $207 million, have now escalated to almost $1.2 billion. These costs reflect a subsidy of $3,886 per benefitted acre -- more than the land's <u>total</u> market value. Of the 38,000 farms in North Dakota, only about 1,000 would receive irrigation water from the project, resulting in a subsidy of well over $700,000 per benefitted farm. Yet the project would irrigate only 6/10 of one percent of the agricultural land in North Dakota; much of that is already farmed, albeit with dryland crops.

Despite the staggering costs and the devastating damage to wetlands and wildlife that would result from the construction of the project, the Interior Department has made Garrison a top priority. Following a seven-year stalemate, construction contracts are now being awarded. The Department, further, has recently requested authorization of $53.6 million, as part of an omnibus appropriations bill, the FY'85 Energy and Water Development bill, to proceed with the first major portion of the project; Congressional approval of this request -- which could be granted as early as June -- would result in damage to eight National Wildlife Refuges and would cause irreversible destruction of the most valuable of those areas threatened by Garrison. Unless decisive action is taken immediately, one of the nation's finest concentrations of wetlands and wildlife will be lost forever.

For over a decade, opposition to the Garrison Unit as authorized has been a priority of the National Audubon Society. The Society has expended well in excess of $500,000 in staff time and direct costs for lawyers, engineers and other experts and has had some success in delaying the project.

Because of the imminent threat that funds may be authorized this June, stopping Garrison has become an even more urgent priority. Our strategy includes two major objectives: deauthorization of the current project through legislative action; and development and adoption by North Dakota of an alternative plan which will address the legitimate water needs of North Dakotans. This second objective is particularly important because acceptance of a new plan will mean that a project similar to Garrison will not resurface--and have to be fought again--in the future.

Whether Garrison will or will not be built as proposed is a political decision. It is therefore essential to ensure that Congress oppose the project and vote for deauthorization. Building Garrison is not just a North Dakota decision: it involves not only over a billion dollars in taxpayers' money, but also represents an opportunity to demonstrate that the American people support efforts to trim the federal budget, to put a stop to wasteful public works projects of dubious benefit.

Convinced that the only way to achieve our objectives is through a major public education effort, the National Audubon Society is launching a three-year grassroots program which will include legislative activity centered in our Government Relations office, grassroots organizing and canvassing, litigation, media campaigns, coalition building, coordination with Canada, research and development of alternatives. We believe that when the facts are known, citizens and decision makers will unite to halt this unnecessary, costly and destructive project.

Florida's Everglades

Florida's Everglades, once haven to teeming colonies of wading birds, millions of alligators and the now-endangered Florida panther and wood stork, is in serious jeopardy. Droughts and floods caused by poor water management are killing off and driving out wildlife, and washing away the soils that support the lush vegetation of the glades.

For thousands of years, the Everglades thrived on a cycle as natural as the seasons. Collected from streams and wetlands, water in the Kissimmee River flowed some 100 miles into Lake Okeechobee, and continued slowly southward in vast sheets through the Everglades sawgrass to the east and the Big Cypress Swamp to the west.

Today, water reaches the Everglades only through a series of man-made ditches, canals and diversions. The once meandering Kissimmee River is now a straight drainage ditch, and its life-sustaining marshes--originally 40,000 acres in extent--now cover fewer than 8,000 acres. With the destruction of these wetlands has come the loss of the natural filtration process so important to water quality.

The survival of the Everglades depends on water--clean water in the correct amount and at the correct time. But since people began controlling the water flow into the Everglades, the natural balance has been drastically altered. More than 400 trillion gallons of excess water were dumped into the Everglades last year alone, inundating vital habitat. In dry years, when Florida's water users scramble for the limited supply, the Park may go without during the hot summer months when water is most critical for wildlife.

The results of more than a century of this haphazard tampering have been devastating to wildlife. The number of wading birds in the Park has decreased by 90% since the 1930's. The nesting activity of the wood stork--officially listed as endangered in February of this year--has decreased by 50% since 1979.

Florida's Governor Bob Graham has proposed a new "Save the Everglades" campaign. His objectives are to re-establish the natural ecological functions of the Everglades, improve the overall management of water, fish and wildlife, and recreation in the Everglades and avoid further damage or degradation to the system.

The National Audubon Society has established a special Everglades Task Force, led by our Florida office and comprised of wildlife professionals from throughout our staff, to make sure that the Governor's program to insure the survival of the Everglades succeeds. The Task Force will work with the Florida Cabinet, Legislature, state and federal wildlife agencies and Congress to guarantee prompt action to restore this magnificent natural treasure. As important, it will work with Audubon chapters and members in the state to garner public support for the program and to educate all Floridians to the importance of the Everglades and to the urgency of acting now to save it.

Among Audubon's immediate objectives are: pressing the Army Corps of Engineers to carry out the Park's emergency Seven-Point Plan to distribute excess flood waters over a wider area of the Park; working for new federal legislation to insure that adequate water reaches the Park in correct amounts at the proper time; asking Congress to authorize and fund the Army Corps of Engineers to restore the Kissimmee River and its vital wetlands; and supporting state and local efforts to fill the Aerojet Canal, which diverts the natural flow of water away from the Park and damages marine life along south Florida's coast.

Bringing effective public support and its own expertise to bear, the National Audubon Society will play a key role in this unprecedented effort to save the Everglades and the river and wetland habitats that support Florida's still-magnificent but severely threatened wildlife and wild lands.

The Platte River

Although other western rivers may be more spectacular, the Platte, which flows some 1000 miles through Colorado, Wyoming and Nebraska, supports some of the most productive riparian habitat in the country. It attracts most of the world's lesser sandhill cranes, most of the mid-continent population of white-fronted geese, hundreds of thousands of ducks, uncounted songbirds, numerous bald eagles, and some of the world's few remaining whooping cranes.

Cranes which winter over thousands of square miles in Texas, New Mexico, and Mexico and whose nesting grounds reach from central Canada to Siberia, rely for several weeks during migration on a shrinking stretch of habitat along the Platte in Nebraska. Today, the remnants of this habitat are the most endangered of the cranes' life requirements.

The Platte is in trouble. Critical habitat of national and international significance along the Platte is being lost at an accelerating rate. Conversion of wet prairies to other uses is eliminating vital habitat and the river itself is in danger of becoming a mere trickle.

The Platte has already been transformed by a century of diversion and development: a large portion of it has been corralled in the largest reservoir in Nebraska; much of it is controlled behind 14 other dams in three states; and over 70% of the original flow is removed annually for use in irrigation by 40 different canals and 25 pumping stations. Yet requests for more development and diversion have reached what would amount to one and a half times the remaining available instream flow of the river. In fact, it is estimated that if all the water diversions now planned for the Platte are carried out, it will be normally dry within the next decade.

The National Audubon Society, long concerned with protecting the Platte and its adjacent lands--over a thousand acres of which are contained in our Lillian Annette Rowe Sanctuary near Gibbon, Nebraska--is mounting a concerted effort to promote conservaton of the river and its valuable riparian habitat.

With the leadership of our West Central Regional office in Manhattan, Kansas, and calling on the resources of our Rocky Mountain Regional office in Boulder, Colorado, and our Lillian Annette Rowe Sanctuary, Audubon proposes to augment its work to save the Platte through a multi-faceted program of research, education and action, with the ultimate goal of achieving a river management plan which takes into account the needs of all users--including wildlife.

Our research will include determining the needs of the various users and, with the help of state and federal agencies, identifying those critical habitat areas in need of special protection. Our educational effort will, with the help of local chapters, reach out to local schools, civic groups, landowners, industry, policy makers and others to increase understanding of and appreciation for the wildlife resources of the Platte River Basin. Audubon staff will pay particular attention to working with local landowners, farmers, ranchers, municipalities and industry to encourage and assist in proper management of critical private habitat holdings.

And we will, as well, continue to build coalitions and work effectively with the other conservation groups which are also concerned about the future of the Platte.

The Platte, while it may not be the most majestic river in the west, supports what is undoubtedly the most spectacular array of wildlife. With its multifaceted approach to solving the problems facing the Platte, Audubon hopes to save this immensely productive and critically important habitat from, quite literally, running dry.

California's Tuolumne River

Rivers, which turn our turbines, irrigate our fields, supply our drinking water and carry our sewage out to sea, are our nation's workhorses. But they are much more than that: they are vitally important to wildlife. Yet this riparian habitat, one of the most valuable types, is disappearing. Only two percent of the lower 48 states' rivers remain in their natural condition.

Saving California's Tuolumne River, 150 miles east of San Francisco in the Sierra Nevada, has long been a focus of efforts by Audubon and other conservation groups. John Muir and his Sierra Club tried to rescue the Tuolumne 80 years ago. They lost and the Hetch-Hetchy Valley was flooded behind a dam. Since then, conservationists and river lovers have continued to try to protect the remaining wild stretch of the river.

Today, that effort has reached a critical stage, with the last wild stretch of the river threatened by a project to produce surplus electric power. The proposed project, if allowed to continue, will impound and drain one of the premier whitewater and wilderness rivers in the country--a river which already has five dams and powerhouses, a huge reservoir, and 90% of the flow of which already provides power and water for Californians.

The river registers over 10,000 users per year for the commercial boating industry and 1000 pounds of fish per acre for recreational fishing. With its adjacent lands, it provides critical habitat for two of the largest deer herds in neighboring Yosemite National Park, for several endangered and threatened species--such as the Southern bald eagle, the prairie falcon, the snowy owl and the mountain lion--and for over 200 species of birds and 210 species of land vertebrates.

The National Audubon Society has made saving this last wild stretch of the Tuolumne the centerpiece of its river conservation effort and is in the forefront of the current push to obtain Wild and Scenic status for the river.

The Federal Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, passed in 1968, provides a mechanism for protecting rivers while still allowing reasonable use. The wild and scenic rivers movement began in a rush, but has recently lost its momentum. Audubon and other groups fear it is now slipping dangerously backwards: not only have no rivers been designated in the last four years, but, in February 1983, a California judge revoked the protected status of five rivers, representing 16% of the total mileage of federally protected rivers in the country.

The National Audubon Society sees protection of the Tuolumne, therefore, as urgent from both the standpoint of protecting the river itself and of breathing new life into the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

The immediate objective is to get an acceptable bill passed by Congress designating the Tuolumne a Wild and Scenic River. Five bills have already been introduced, ranging in protection from pure Wild and Scenic designation for the main stem of the Tuolumne to designating the river while authorizing the very project which would destroy it.

Using the resources of both its Government Relations office in Washington and its Western Regional office in California, the National Audubon Society has been playing a key role in creating citizen awareness of the threat to the Tuolumne and of the urgency of saving it. Through public education, aimed at both citizens and decision makers, Audubon has helped garner the significant support in California that has convinced one of the sponsors of the power project to pull out. Our Government Relations staff has already testified in front of both the Senate and the House and will continue to marshal its resources in support of designation of the Tuolumne.

Getting a good bill in Congress will not only be a major contribution to breaking the logjam that has inhibited the effectiveness of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Saving the Tuolumne, we hope, will mark the renewal of our nation's commitment to its free-flowing rivers.