

A Moving Marketing Message

By Bill O'Brian

The typical refuge visitor center doesn't have wheels. Starting this spring, one at Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge in New England will.

"Our primary objective is to take the show on the road," refuge manager Andrew French says of the mobile visitor center that is debuting this year. "There are 390 communities in the Connecticut River watershed, and they all have children. We need to reach out and meet them in their community."

French is doing that because it allows Conte Refuge to strategically engage the 2.3 million people – especially schoolchildren – who live in the 7.2-million-acre, four-state watershed. Mobility is the key, says French, when working a project area that stretches 400 miles from the Canadian border on the north to Long Island Sound on the south. French believes that traveling with a variety of partners from the conservation, education and recreation disciplines will strengthen the refuge's partnerships and increase awareness of the opportunities that national wildlife refuges offer.

The mobile visitor center is a colorful enterprise with swirling nature murals on the sides and a watershed map on the

back. "We think when people drive past us, they're going to say, 'Wow!'" says French. "We'll be a moving marketing message for the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Refuge System."

The mobile center is actually two trailers, one a 28-foot "immersion experience" trailer and the other a 16-footer in which eight portable exhibits will be stored. Each trailer is able to be pulled by a large pickup. With staffing help from Friends and partners, French plans to take the mobile center on the road for as many as 26 weeks a year – to schools, fairs and conferences.

Nothing to Read

The immersion trailer is a walk-through setting that represents Connecticut River Valley wilderness landscapes. "There's nothing to read. You'll just hear things, look at things, touch things and smell things," says French. The visitor enters the trailer at dusk in a wetland area, moves on past a vernal pool, then to a forest at night (hearing the sounds you'd hear in the woods) and finally to suburbia at dawn. It takes roughly three minutes to go through and is designed to whet one's appetite for eight portable exhibits, which will be set up outside the immersion trailer.

Seven exhibits have four panels each, and the eighth is a tilt table. The table is a replica of the Connecticut River

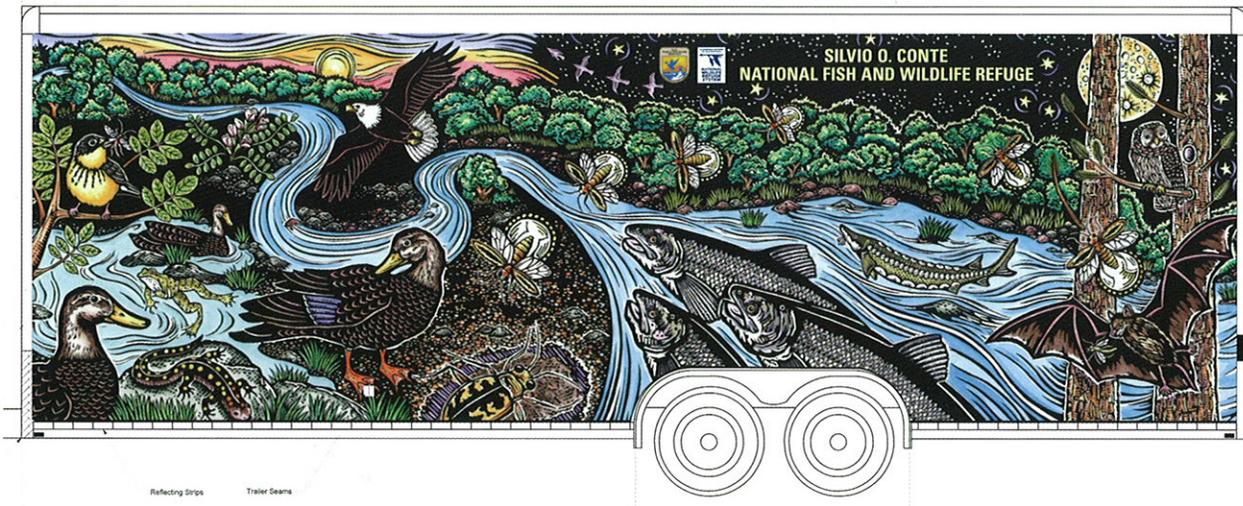
Valley ("complete with tributaries," French points out). It uses plastic beads to show how the watershed works. The panels introduce the National Wildlife Refuge System; describe the geology and natural history of the watershed and late Massachusetts Congressman Silvio O. Conte's dream to make the Connecticut "cleaned, swimmable and fishable"; offer suggestions on how to shrink one's carbon footprint; and present factoids about wildlife, habitat, bird and fish migration, biodiversity, endangered species, invasive species and the benefit of plants and animals to humans.

All of it is interactive and designed to be fun for kids of all ages. There are touchable oversize 3D models of caddisfly larvae, salmon eggs and dragonfly nymphs. There is a test-your-grip-against-that-of-a-bald-eagle station (humans lose that contest, big-time). It's all sprinkled with slogans like "You are what you drink" and "Do something little and be part of something big."

French recognizes that the mobile center, which cost \$450,000 all told (a fraction of a stationary visitor center), is a little different. "We're going to be refining our strategy on the fly with our partners," he says. But he strongly believes that beyond-the-boundaries outreach like this could be an important and versatile tool for the Refuge System. And he thinks that, in these difficult budgetary

times, schools up and down the Connecticut River Valley will welcome a visit from the mobile visitor center.

"If you're able to bring a quality program to a school, they're going to love you. You'll have a captive audience."



An architectural rendering of the side of the large mobile visitor center trailer, with mural work done by artist and illustrator Evon Zerbetz. (Cambridge Seven Associates Inc.)