

# NISQUALLY

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Where the Nisqually River meets the Puget Sound in western Washington, Mount Rainier hovers above a delta wetland where Chinook salmon pass en route to the waters of their birth. This threatened fish will fight its way upstream—guided by an inner compass—to lay eggs and begin a new generation. But it is only one of the many incredible species inhabiting Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge. This refuge, established in 1974, protects 3,000 acres of habitat for thousands of western sandpipers, dunlin and other shorebirds who forage mudflats for worms, clams, crabs and shrimp. Within this rich landscape male Pacific tree frogs chorus in the night, harbor seals and river otters hunt, and wrens, rails and bitterns tuck themselves into the dense vegetation of freshwater marshes. These creatures have congregated at Nisqually for good reason—it is the last major unspoiled estuary in Washington. Most of the state’s other estuary ecosystems have been filled, dredged or developed. As a rare example of a once-abundant ecosystem, a large portion of this refuge has been designated a National Natural Landmark.

Among those who benefit from this protected landscape are 150,000 visitors a year, including thousands of schoolchildren from nearby Olympia and Seattle on field trips geared toward learning about this complex and fascinating ecosystem. Because of its proximity to these urban areas, the refuge has identified environmental education as its top priority for public use, also a priority provision of the refuge improvement act.<sup>16</sup> Recognizing the need to build understanding and support for the refuge system, Congress emphasized that the refuge system should place a premium on environmental education

Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge | © Terry Donnelly



and other “wildlife-dependent” recreational uses. But in the past six years, cuts in staff and program funding have led to the discontinuation or decline of important programs, such as the one that brought a local middle school to the refuge for a reforestation project. Nisqually’s goal is to serve 15,000 students a year with refuge education programs, but currently the refuge can only manage 5,000 and that is only with significant help from private partners.<sup>17</sup>

These and other reductions in outreach and education programs are combined with numerous other setbacks. The refuge has had to cancel freshwater wetland restoration projects, reduce invasive-plant control, discontinue waterfowl and shorebird surveys and seek private funding for the refuge’s top priority—restoration of the threatened Chinook salmon in the Nisqually watershed.



Chinook salmon | © Tom and Pat Leeson/leesonphoto.com