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December 9, 2008

Mr. Lane Green, Chairman  
Acquisition and Restoration Council  
<via email>

Re: Huguenot Memorial Park

Dear Chairman Green:

Thank you for the opportunity to share our concerns regarding the management plan for Huguenot Memorial Park scheduled on the December 11-12 ARC agenda. One Audubon of Florida staffperson, as well as the president of our local Duval Audubon chapter, served on the advisory committee to the City of Jacksonville, in the multi-year development of the management plan submitted September 3, 2008. Audubon has pledged to lend our expertise and volunteers to the plan's implementation, but some barriers remain to improved protections for wildlife at this park. Defenders of Wildlife joins us in supporting the common sense solutions proposed here.

We are encouraged that the proposed plan aims to remedy some of the resource abuses and public safety hazards that, as documented in the plan, have become commonplace at Huguenot. We also applaud the plan's proposals to limit dogs at the park, end nighttime beach driving, exclude parking on the cove-side mudflats, and establish a driving lane on the Atlantic beach on high visitation days. Nevertheless, this plan attempts to increase resource and public safety protections while maintaining intense beach driving. This will be expensive to implement and we have concerns the increased funding and staffing needed for implementation will not be available. The natural resources of Huguenot are of state-wide importance and we feel ARC has a vital role to play in ensuring these resources are afforded sufficient protections.

### ***Huguenot's Natural Resource Values***

Ft. George Inlet is one of only a few undeveloped inlet locations on Florida's Atlantic Coast and Huguenot's intertidal, beach and coastal strand habitats are invaluable to imperiled bird species. Huguenot is part of a federally designated critical habitat unit for federally threatened Piping Plovers; the Critical Wildlife Area in the park's dune interior supports the largest Royal Tern colony on Florida's Atlantic coast, as well as nesting Black Skimmers (state species of special concern) and Gull-billed Terns (Audubon's yellow list). This park historically supported nesting Least Terns (state threatened), American Oystercatchers (state species of special concern), and Wilson's Plovers (Audubon's yellow list) as well. The park's Atlantic beachfront provides nesting habitat for federally listed marine turtles, and the beach as well as the intertidal shoals in Ft. George Inlet provide critical stopover habitat for migrating Red Knots (federal candidate species). More than 1,000 knots use these habitats on peak migration days, representing a significant percentage of the dwindling *rufa* Red Knots in the world.

### ***Recent Recreational Uses and Challenges***

#### ***Public Health and Safety***

As Jacksonville's population has grown, so too have the numbers of beach drivers at this popular park. For example, on May 28, 2007, 7,089 people in 3,580 cars used Huguenot's 12,500 linear feet of drivable shoreline. Not only does this magnitude of use leave little room for wildlife, but it poses a significant challenge to maintaining public health and safety. As the tide

comes in nearly to the dunes, space for cars on the beach gets tight; cars occasionally become inundated and are even carried out with the tide. Between 2005 and 2007, there were nearly 40 vehicles damaged or completely lost. Further, the hazard beach driving poses to pedestrians is real: a child was run over in March of this year while playing in the sand—luckily, he survived. Lastly, beach drivers know if they relinquish their place on the beach to drive back to the restrooms at the campground, their space will likely be taken upon their return. So many individuals trespass in the Critical Wildlife Area to relieve themselves behind the dunes.

#### *Damage to Wildlife and Habitat*

Flightless chicks from the colony in the park's dune interior roam the beach to the shoreline late in the nesting season, where they are vulnerable to crushing by vehicles. In response to repeated crushing of chicks, the USFWS raised concerns in 2007 about these violations of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and requested the park temporarily close a portion of the driving beach. Additionally, the proximity of large numbers of vehicles near the boundary of the CWA has resulted in the abandonment of skimmers and other birds nesting in parts of the protected area. Beach night driving has proven problematic, most recently with a camper in 2007 found driving circles around a nesting sea turtle. During the day, trucks often drive out on the mudflats and inlet shoals, impacting the habitat and flushing imperiled species. Despite a leash law, dogs are regularly seen at Huguenot running off leash and disturbing federally and state-listed wildlife. For nesting birds, flushing of adults can easily result in the death of eggs or chicks. Alternately, long-distance migrants like Red Knots are obliged to meet strict metabolic budgets if they are to survive their migrations and breed successfully in the Arctic. Accordingly, they are especially susceptible to repeated disturbance events, which deprive them of the opportunity to feed and force them to expend energy fleeing the source of disturbance.

Historically the vital habitat on the inlet's shoals was isolated from Huguenot-proper at low tide by a narrow, fast-running channel. Nevertheless, cars, swimmers and dogs regularly crossed over to these sovereignty submerged lands from Huguenot and disturbed the imperiled birds feeding there. In recent months, the inlet has shifted so that the channel runs north of the shoals, and they are now contiguous with the park at low tide. This new configuration was not considered in the protections currently included in the plan. Separated by a channel, the shoals were intended to be protected by the enforcement of a no swimming rule in the dangerous channel off the point. Now they are contiguous and too easy for cars and pedestrians to access.

#### *Proposed Solutions*

Early versions of the City's plan established a beach carrying capacity of 700 cars (one car per 12 feet of beachfront), closed the cove side to vehicles while allowing pedestrian access, closed the Point to driving seasonally when Red Knots are present, and excluded dogs from the beach, Point and cove areas. These measures would have been possible to implement at existing staffing and funding levels, and would not only have improved resource protection and public safety, but would have provided a new recreational experience for passive users at Huguenot.

However, due to pressure from beach drivers at the park, City staff has tried to provide a compromise plan that will maintain intense levels of beach driving while still trying to improve public safety and resource protection. As detailed in the plan, this will require significant funding and staffing increases to establish driving lanes, enforce rules, direct traffic, set up and break down protection areas, monitor tides, determine tide-related beach capacities, empty beach as the tide rises, survey and manage wildlife, and more. This plan embodies the good intentions of City staff attempting to allow historical, intense beach driving while trying to better fulfill their mandate to adequately protect the natural resources. Nevertheless, we have grave concerns that given the City's current economic straits and pressure from beach driving interests, the plan will not be funded sufficiently to be implemented.

If staffing is insufficient, the plan does not include provisions for how recreational use will be modified to ensure the resource is not impacted. Accordingly, we feel it is appropriate for ARC to

condition its approval to ensure there is accountability for funding and implementing the plan as proposed. Specifically:

- (1) **Huguenot should be subject to regular management reporting and review. We recommend two-year progress reporting, as well as a formal five-year land management review, even though the site is less than 1000 acres.** Given the past history of negative resource impacts at this park, as well as the challenging increases in management and funding proposed in the plan, it is appropriate for ARC to assess plan implementation and effectiveness. This assessment will also prove valuable when considering renewal of the City's lease of state lands in 2017.
- (2) **ARC should condition its approval on the hiring of a biological staffperson which is currently identified in the plan but not included in the list of staffing needs.** This position is essential to monitoring and management of natural resources at the park and has explicit staff assignments in the Shorebird Management portion of the Management Plan. Nevertheless, the position is not included on the current or proposed staffing lists in the plan. Additional staff capacity and skills will be necessary to implement the adaptive management of the park's resources and recreation proposed in this plan.
- (3) **ARC should condition its approval on assurances that if the plan is not fully staffed and funded, then reductions in vehicular use will be necessary.** For example, without additional staff to maintain driving lanes, direct traffic and establish daily capacities, a flat beach capacity of 700 cars per day should be established. Without a biologist, additional technicians and enforcement staff to post and enforce protected areas, the cove should be closed to cars year-round and the Point should be closed seasonally to cars during Red Knot migration.

We are eager to be part of the solution at this park and Audubon is in the process of organizing and training a corps of volunteers to assist the City of Jacksonville in shorebird monitoring and protection. Similarly, Audubon staff will participate in the shorebird management team the plan creates, to help the city address shorebird-related issues as they arise. Nevertheless, volunteers cannot replace adequate funding and staffing. We urge you to condition your approval on the provision of these important resources to ensure full implementation of this plan.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



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*Defenders of Wildlife is a non-profit conservation organization recognized as one of the nation's leading advocates for wildlife and its habitat. Founded in 1947, Defenders is headquartered in Washington, D.C., with field offices across the country, and approximately 1,000,000 members and supporters. Defenders advocates new approaches to wildlife conservation that will help keep species from becoming endangered, and employs education, litigation, research, legislation, and advocacy to defend wildlife and their habitat. Its programs reflect the conviction that saving the diversity of our planet's life requires protecting entire ecosystems and ensuring interconnected habitats.*