Natural History of the Island

Three major biological communities—swamp, marsh, and upland forest—provide a refuge for a variety of native plants and animals. The island is a wild vignette near the heart of metropolitan Washington, D.C.

Cattails, arrowhead, and pickerelweed in the marsh areas provide the habitat for marsh wrens, redwinged blackbirds, and kingfishers. Turtles, frogs, and muskrats abound in the waters below. Willow, ash, and maple trees root on the mudflats and create the swamp environment favored by the raccoon in his search for crayfish. The higher central spine of the island forms the upland forest with its characteristic elm, tulip trees, red maples, and oaks. Downy woodpeckers, chickadees, and wood thrushes share the treetops with gray squirrels, while cottontails and chipmunks find a haven on the forest floor below; red and gray foxes have also been known to inhabit the island.

The plants and animals, protected by law, may be observed in their natural environs on 2 1/2 miles of foot trails.

About Your Visit

The parking area is accessible from the northbound lanes of George Washington Memorial Parkway on the Virginia side of the Potomac. A causeway connects the island to the Virginia shore. Telephone (202) 426-6922 or (703) 557-8990 for schedule of hours and services available.

For Your Safety

Please watch your footing on the uneven surface of the gravel causeway. Children should not be allowed to run on it, and adults should wear flat shoes. Be careful not to trip or fall while climbing the memorial steps; they are unusually low, and may be slippery when wet.

Administration

Theodore Roosevelt Island is a part of the National Capital Region, which is administered by the National Park Service of the U.S. Department of the Interior. Inquiries should be addressed to Theodore Roosevelt Island, Turley Run Area, George Washington Memorial Parkway, McLean, VA 22101.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

Washington, D.C.
Theodore Roosevelt Island is an 88-acre wilderness preserve located in the Potomac River at Washington, D.C. It was appropriated by Congress in 1912 to memorialize President Theodore Roosevelt's contributions to conservation.

Natural Resources Prior to Roosevelt

On the untimely death of William McKinley in 1901, Theodore Roosevelt was elevated to the Presidency at the youthful age of 42. By this time, the land, forests, and wildlife of America had been exploited for more than 100 years. About four-fifths of the prime forested lands had been leveled. Millions of acres of second-growth seedlings persisted as logsgers burned over their acreage. The land was overcut, overplowed, overgrazed, and overmined. Soil fertility was becoming exhausted. Rainwatered hillsides eroded into gullies, rivers overflowed, and rich farmland was carried downstream, lost forever in river mudflats. Wildlife had been decimated and the swelling numbers—onethird of the wild bird population. Some native wildlife species had been destroyed, and those that remained, heavy and voracious, were being rapidly eliminated.

The consequence of lost resources had not yet dawned on the public mind. But the new President was uniquely fitted to meet the challenge. His belief in conservation grew from his boyhood enthusiasm for outdoor life, recording his outdoor experiences and collecting scientific specimens. Even as President, he was recognized by professionals as the “First American Naturalist” and conservation an inseparable part of the democratic creed.

After 1632, when Charles I granted the island to Lord “Analostan,” which was derived from a local Indian name. The second George Mason died in 1792, leaving the island to his son John, who built a fine brick mansion on it, converting the island into one of the finest farm estates in the area. Mason's Island. His son, also named George Mason, is known for writing the Virginia Declaration of Rights and helping to draft the Federal Constitution. The island remained in the possession of the Mason family for 125 years, and thus became known as “Mason's Island.”

The island was reserved for conservation. During his tenure in office, the U.S. Forest Service was created and the Federal Constitution. The nearly extinct bison herds were saved. The Reclamation Act authorized irrigation of arid lands. National wildlife refuges were established. The national forests were saved. The island was purchased for the purpose of making it a gift to the American people. Acceptance was authorized by Act of Congress, May 2, 1932. Federal funds for construction of a permanent memorial were approved September 13, 1960, and work began in July 1963. Formal ceremonies on October 27, 1967, dedicated the memorial to the continuing spirit of the great conservationist.

The Memorial

Theodore Roosevelt Island is managed as a national area in living tribute to the energetic President who frequently sought recreation in the solitude of the forest. Visitors today may retreat here, from the pressures of urban life, to gain renewal of spirit and deeper appreciation of man's relationship to his environment.

Appropriately, the formal memorial designed by Eric Gugler is located in the northern center of the island, lending itself to the natural surroundings. A 17-foot bronze statue of the Nation's 26th President, executed by Paul Manship, stands in front of a 30-foot high shaft of granite, overlooking the island harbor. A 21-foot granite terrace is composed of a perimeter promenade encircled by a water-filled moat over which footbridges provide access to the memorial. From this terrace rise four 21-foot granite tablets, inscribed with the tenets of Roosevelt's philosophy of citizenship.

Ultimately no nation can be great unless its greatness is laid on foundations of righteousness and decency.

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