

Steward Training



Part 4c: Disengaging from Hostile Interactions

Engagement vs. Enforcement: The Role of Volunteers & Non-LE Staff

Only USFWS law enforcement officers can legally enforce refuge regulations. Staff and volunteers should defer to officers when faced with serious infractions or hostile visitors. The primary role of non-enforcement staff and volunteers is to provide education and information to the public in a productive and engaging manner. For instance, a refuge park ranger notices someone trespassing in the dunes. If they feel comfortable, they can approach the individual and provide information about dune habitat disturbance and remind the visitor that this area is closed. If the visitor becomes agitated, the ranger can emphasize the wildlife first mission of the Refuge System and recommend a nearby location that allows dune or expanded beach access. If the visitor's behavior continues to escalate, the ranger should acknowledge that they do not see eye to eye, step away, and report the issue to a wildlife officer or refuge manager and/or your supervisor (use the 'Witness Observation Form').

Noticing Early Warning Signs

It can be hard to disengage from a combative conversation when we are passionate about the topic. Watching for early warning signs can help diffuse a situation before it happens. Is the visitor's face or neck flushing? Are their hands clenched? Have they pulled their shoulders up toward their ears? Has the volume of their voice increased? Step away, report the incident, and take the time you need to compose yourself.



Brainstorming Worksheet: Reframing Interactions

Practicing difficult exchanges before they happen can help us keep our cool under pressure. How would you redirect the following interactions in a constructive manner?

This is public property! I have the right to go wherever I want.

What do you mean the birds are stressed by us getting close? If they were stressed out, they would fly away!

No one else is here, how can we be causing that much erosion?

I have a bird feeder in my back yard, how is that any different than feeding animals here?

I have excellent eyesight - I would never walk into a bird's nesting area!

I've been walking this beach for 20 years and never seen an issue with birds or stepped on a nest. Why would we change things now?

Don't worry, my dog is friendly! He won't disturb the birds at all.

Why is so much of the beach closed for just a few birds?