

LONGVIEW NEWS-JOURNAL

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Priceless treasure: Have fun exploring National Wildlife refuge

East Texas is officially in possession of another priceless treasure.

Saturday marked the official opening of the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge, 8,400 acres of pines and bottomland hardwood trees and the fauna that inhabit such rich natural abodes. The refuge, home to more than 220 species of birds, 22 species of amphibians, 46 species of reptiles and 93 species of fish, is a living, breathing textbook. It offers anyone who wishes to explore its walking and driving trails or attend any of the special events at the refuge a chance to study biology or the environment, or simply take in the area's natural beauty, now protected for future generations.

It was fitting that members of the Caddo Nation, descendants of the lake area's first known inhabitants, blessed the refuge's opening with traditional song and dance.

The refuge's placement at the site of the state's only natural lake may sound like the perfect place for a wildlife refuge, but it was a feat not easily accomplished. The site was once the site where about 3,000 workers toiled 24 hours, seven days at the Longhorn Army Ammunition plant, established in the 1940s. It was taken offline then closed in 1991. At that time, it would have been easy to write off the area as being beyond redemption. After all, the site once held five Superfund sites, but the lake has its ardent supporters, and they fought off a move to turn the former plant into an industrial park.

About 1,400 acres of the area remain barred to the public while clean-up by the Army continues.

Even though the industrial park was nixed, economic benefits to the surrounding communities was not. Visitors to the refuge will no doubt contribute to the tourist economy that has been sustained by the area's natural resources and other attractions.

Congratulations are in order to the many people who have worked since the land was transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2000 to help reclaim the area around the lake. Their efforts will pay off not only in the preservation of natural habitat but in an increase of appreciation for the marvelous works of nature right in our own backyard.