

LISTEN TO THE SOUND 2000

Hearings show public support LI Sound protection

By Graham Cox

Testimony from hundreds of citizens at ten citizen hearings around Long Island Sound strongly supports creation of a system of reserves. This network of protected natural areas will help preserve the remaining undeveloped and undisturbed sites on the Sound as well as existing parks and refuges.

In close cooperation with the Regional Plan Association and the Save the Sound coalition, Audubon has now proposed a concerted public-private program to conserve and protect these reserve sites before they are overwhelmed by development or closed off to meaningful public access.

Noting that great strides have been made in the last decade to restore water quality in Long Island Sound the danger today and in the next few years is that the general public will have only very limited access to a water resource they have paid to clean up.

"As each decade passes, more and more of the coastline is developed, leaving only small remnants for birds, wildlife and citizens to enjoy. At current rates of growth, less than a decade remains to protect what is left of the Sound's shoreline...Ironically, most of the citizens who have bankrolled the clean up of the Sound will be prevented from visiting its waters and enjoying the rewards of these investments," according to the Listen to the Sound 2000 Citizens' Agenda report.

According to the report, this reserve system will preserve, restore and improve stewardship on the shoreline and adjacent areas. It will provide for increased public access to these reserve sites, but remain consistent with conserving ecological values.

"Our goal will be to protect the vast majority of remaining undeveloped shoreline parcels through concerted municipal, state, federal and private conservation initiatives," the report says.

Further, restoring resources destroyed or debased by pollution will "recreate a critical mass of wildlife habitat, wetlands, accessible urban waterfronts and other resources." Improving stewardship at existing public parks is also needed, according to the report, plus adoption of model local codes and regulations requiring development setbacks, vegetative screening and buffer areas. Also needed is public education to discourage damaging activities, such as applying chemical lawn fertilizers on land next to the Sound and tributary waterways.

"What is at stake is the very soul of the Sound and its waterfront communities and the integrity of the Sound's ecological systems....80

percent of the Sound's wetlands have already been destroyed. Only a handful of state parks are truly accessible to the general public. Most town beaches in New York and Connecticut limit access to local residents only...10 percent of the shoreline remains undeveloped and these lands are under tremendous growth pressure from "MacMansions, golf course communities, marinas and office parks," according to the report.

The report proposes eight categories of reserve sites and lists specific locations that should be included. The categories are:

- Coastal bays and points, critical for birds and marine life;
- Dunes and bluffs, the fastest disappearing habitat;
- Barrier beaches, always evolving but in need of buffer land protection;
- Small islands, a necklace of jewels around the Sound;
- Underwater lands where marine life needs to thrive and rejuvenate the marine ecosystem;
- Public access sites, many in urban areas, often as small as street ends that dead end on the Sound;
- Habitat restoration areas, now polluted but potentially valuable habitat; and
- Existing public and private conservation sites that are threatened by surrounding development or need better care.

The report listed five ways to support the creation of a reserve system and spelled out specific government and private actions that could be taken in both New York and Connecticut. Step one would be to create a Long Island Sound Open Space Plan by 2003, updated every two years, and used to guide state and federal expenditures for acquisition and conservation.

Step two would be to set up a Long Island Sound open space account using state funds from their annual budget appropriations. This should start at \$100 million with matching federal funds from various sources. Step three calls for local community assistance and planning programs, giving local governments the planning tools to manage their shorelines. Funding for this planning is needed in addition to what is now available in the coastal zone management program.

Step four recognizes that there are many sites along the shore in private hands but managed for habitat values. The agenda proposes offering voluntary partnerships with the states for conservation purposes and in return the state could purchase easements for conservation, for providing scenic or trail access, or could provide tax incentives for conservation actions.

Step five proposes that additional public funds must be spent on better



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Pictured above is a scene along Long Island Sound. At right is a Piping Plover.

stewardship at existing public parks or wildlife refuges along the shore. Dunes are in need of reclaiming, parking lots and camping areas better designed, native plant species used to revegetate habitat, new and less obtrusive bath-houses and comfort stations built, new nature interpretative trails and programs put in place, research and monitoring programs also put in place, and protection on buffer lands considered.

The report suggests outlines for federal and state legislation to establish a framework for the reserve system, and proposes a joint governor's agreement between New York and Connecticut, similar to the agreements signed in 1994 and 1996 to tackle water pollution problems. The report also describes the many steps local governments can take to contribute to

the reserve system and discusses what private land owners can do to design and implement conservation plans on their properties.

"Through the Listen to the Sound citizen hearing process, we heard a chorus of voices in support of the Long Island Sound Reserve concept. This agenda reflects the citizens' energy, commitment and thoughtful suggestions to make a Long Island Sound Reserve system successful. It is imperative that government leaders at all levels heed these voices and work to make the Long Island Sound Reserve program a reality," the report concludes.

Audubon New York encourages you to get a copy of the Listen to the Sound 2000 report and get involved in this critical effort.

LISTEN TO THE SOUND 2000 NOW AVAILABLE...

Get your edition of the *Listen to the Sound 2000* report. This nearly 150-page book provides information regarding restoration of suggested sites surrounding and including Long Island Sound. It also highlights testimony of witnesses at the 10 Listen to the Sound hearings in the year 2000. Send \$10, which includes shipping and handling, with your name and mailing address to: Listen to the Sound 2000, Audubon New York, 200 Trillium Lane, Albany, NY 12203.

