

# Categories of a Long Island Sound Reserve Program

## Creating a Long Island Sound Reserve Program

From Old Saybrook to the Bronx, from Greenwich to Oyster Bay, and from New Haven to Southold, there are outstanding opportunities to create a Long Island Sound Reserve. Citizens from the ten Listen to the Sound hearings came forward with suggested sites from small public access areas to islands in the middle of Long Island Sound. In

Appendix A of this report, a complete listing of all the sites suggested is organized in a matrix format. Highlights from these recommended sites are listed below and organized by the major categories recommended in the citizens' agenda chapter.

In reviewing these categories and highlighted sites, it is important to recognize that the Long Island Sound coastline is a disappearing resource. Without a reserve program, many of the examples described may no longer exist several years from now.



Tony Prentice/North Fork Audubon Society



David Kunsler

With these threats in mind, here is a complete description of Long Island Sound Reserve recommended categories and representative examples provided to us during the Listen to the Sound 2000 hearings.



Twin Islands

## Coastal Bays and Points

**This category represents some of the most ecologically significant sites on the Sound. Coastal bays are nurseries for marine life, as well as critical habitat for shorebirds. Coastal points provide vital staging areas for migratory shorebirds and in many instances shelter breeding needs.**



Tony Prentice/North Fork Audubon Society

**In New York state, an example of a critical point and bay is the new Nissequogue River State Park. These coastal lands at the mouth of the Nissequogue River stretch out into Long Island Sound, while providing a mixture of inlets and coves.**

**In Connecticut, there are numerous coves and bays at the mouth of the Connecticut River. These areas provide vital habitats. Development pressures are mounting on the remaining open spaces and wetlands adjacent to the Sound and are no where more pressing than where the Connecticut River empties into the Sound.**

## Dunes and Bluffs

**These habitats are vanishing before our eyes. Once abundant along the north shore of Long Island, as well as in pocketed areas in eastern Connecticut, dunes and bluff habitats are few and far between. Dunes protect interior lands from storm damage and provide vital wildlife habitat. Bluffs provide scenic vistas, as well as bird habitats.**

**The best example of these unique dune and bluff habitats is the Grandifolia Dunes outside of Riverhead, New York. As described earlier in the case statement chapter, the loss of the Grandifolia Dunes is a tragedy. It can only be hoped that the other dune and bluff habitats at the neighboring KeySpan property are purchased by New York state and made into a state park. The Sound cannot afford losing anymore of this vanishing habitat.**

## Barrier Beaches

**These beaches provide for wildlife and bird habitats, as well as incredible recreational opportunities. One of the most pronounced barrier beaches on Long Island Sound is Long Beach, adjacent to the Great Meadows Marsh in Stratford, Connecticut. These beaches provide a natural barrier between wetland complexes on the Sound and its open waters, and host a vast diversity of wildlife. Rare and endangered shorebirds such as the Piping Plover breed along its shore. Increased development pressures and unmanaged recreational activities threaten the future of this habitat.**

It is critical that private lands along this barrier beach be acquired from willing sellers and that recreational rules for protected shorelines be enforced. On the New York side of the Sound, a similar barrier beach stretches eastward from Southold towards Orient Point. Numerous sites along this corridor are in need of permanent protection.

## Islands

Throughout Long Island Sound, there are unique islands. Many of these islands off the Connecticut shoreline from Branford to Norwalk have become part of the Stewart McKinney Wildlife Refuge. They provide a haven for a diversity of bird species, marine mammals, as well as nurseries for marine life. Many islands have been designated by National Audubon Society as Important Bird Areas due to their unique habitats.

Several islands remain unprotected and should be purchased and transformed into state parks or added to the existing McKinney Refuge. Calves Island, off the coast of Greenwich, Connecticut, needs to be purchased using Land and Water Conservation Funds and incorporated into the McKinney Refuge System. In New York, both David's and Huckleberry Islands should become state parks and have passive recreational opportunities. Both of these islands are threatened by development proposals.

## Underwater Lands

As one travels several hundred yards off shore along the coastline of Long Island Sound, some of the most biologically rich and productive areas are found. In these waters, the underwater lands provide critical habitat to marine life, from oysters and clams to flounders and bunker to sea grass and other marine vegetation. As part of the Long Island Sound Reserve, it is important to set aside the most productive of these sites from unnecessary disturbance. In many instances, habitat restoration is critical for native marine vegetation. There are numerous examples of critical underwater lands throughout the Sound, whether in the Stony Brook harbor or the shellfish beds off Oyster Bay or the critical habitats along the near shores where the Housatonic and Connecticut Rivers enter the Sound. While these areas are known for their biological benefits, the reserve program should embark on a more comprehensive review of underwater lands, rank their condition and set forth appropriate conservation measures.



Marian Heiskell



## Public Access Sites: Urban, Suburban and Rural

Long Island Sound has some of the most limited public access of an estuary its size in the nation. At each citizen hearing, people called for more public access whether along some of the rural shorelines on the North Fork, or the suburban coasts of Fairfield County, Connecticut, or on the urban shores of New York City. Everyone emphasized that we should increase public access to Long Island Sound.

Governor Pataki of New York state has announced a program, where he has dedicated 25 million dollars over the next 5 to 10 years to create state-owned, public access sites. This initiative will connect more people to the Sound and build a stronger constituency for its protection.

In some areas, public access must be delicately balanced with the town's home rule. Many town parks on Connecticut shores only allow entrance to local residents. While respecting these historic ordinances, the reserve program must be creative in providing more public access sites and opportunities so the greater society can be served.

Examples of new public access sites include a small boat launch and beach area near Southold, New York. Near Huntington, New York, the new Nissequogue River State Park will provide public access for boaters and beach strollers alike. In Connecticut, there are opportunities in urban settings for boat launch sites in New Haven and Bridgeport. And in New York City, there are brownfield sites that could be cleaned-up and restored to become part of a network of passive parks and boat access points. In Westchester, the concept of street-end access points was raised as an example. These sites were described as primarily for those who would like access to a view of Long Island Sound and enjoy their lunch on a park bench. While small in size and scale, street end access points with 6 to 10 parking spaces can provide yet another important connection to Long Island Sound.

The states of Connecticut and New York and communities across the Sound need to aggressively pursue public access sites and ensure that they are a major element of their open space plans under a Long Island Sound Reserve program.



## Habitat Restoration Areas

Under the Long Island Sound Habitat Restoration Plan (EPA – 1997) and the September 2000 Habitat Restoration Memorandum of Understanding, between EPA, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the states and conservation groups, hundreds of habitat restoration sites have been identified. They range from planting native sea grasses in Long Island coves, to restoring shoreline habitats in the Bronx, to enhancing tidal wetland systems along the Connecticut shoreline, to restoring fish passages in its rivers. The habitat restoration plan and program outlines the major habitat categories along Long Island Sound and prioritizes its actions based on this work.

At every Listen to the Sound hearing, there was testimony in support of habitat restoration. In addition, there was equal support to embrace the current habitat restoration plan and make it a major component of the reserve program. Funding for these habitat restoration projects is critical and by being linked to the reserve program it is hoped that more federal, state and local dollars could be utilized. A complete listing of all the habitat restoration sites and a reference to the Habitat Restoration Plan is in Appendix A.

## Private and Public Conservation Lands

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Already, there is a strong foundation of protected lands on the shores of Long Island Sound. These lands are in federal, state or local government or in private conservation ownership. For example, the Stewart McKinney Wildlife Refuge with its host of coastal islands, as well as the Great Meadows Marsh, is a biological treasure. In Connecticut, Hammonasset State Park is one of several shoreline and beach sites which offers swimming, beach bathing, hiking and a host of other recreational activities. In New York, Sunken Meadow State Park and the new Nissequogue River State Park provides access to the Sound and activities such as fishing and picnicing.

Local parks exist on Long Island, Westchester and Connecticut and vary in size and purpose. The Edith Read Sanctuary and Marshlands Conservancy in Westchester provide hiking trails and educational opportunities to learn the wonders of a tidal marsh. Town parks in other locations vary from beach going areas to picnic areas with scenic vistas. The private conservation lands are wildlife sanctuaries or have nature centers for educational programs. Connecticut Audubon's Milford Point Education Center provides a unique learning experience for those who visit the Sound.

The common trend to all of these already protected sites is that they have adjacent lands that are threatened by development. Whether they are river corridor lands upstream from Hammonasset State Park or development proposals on barrier beaches near Milford Point or the sub-division of a large estate neighboring one of New York's



state parks on Long Island's north shore, priority must be given to purchase and protect lands next to these sites. The Stewart McKinney Wildlife Refuge has been expanding over the past decade as new critical coastal islands or marshlands are available on the real estate market. Calves Island off Greenwich is a perfect example and needs to be purchased by the federal government as quickly as possible.



As part of the reserve program, a clear strategy needs to emerge to purchase lands to expand our parks system, whether federal, state, local or private. These parks and protected lands are the foundation, the roots and base of a Long Island Sound Reserve system. All protection and stewardship action will build upon these conservation successes. Therefore, buying lands or easements from willing sellers adjacent to our currently protected areas can only protect the integrity of the Long Island Sound Reserve system.

## SITES THREATENED TODAY

Below is an example from each state of a critical land protection project under review as this report was printed. These are but two examples of the scores of lands currently threatened by development around the Sound.

- KeySpan at Riverhead/Wading River and Jamesport, New York – two parcels totalling over 1,500 acres of open space on the north shore of Long Island.
- Griswold Airport in Madison, Connecticut – 42 acres of critical habitat adjacent to the Hammonasset State Park.

## Conclusion

These categories provide the framework for the Long Island Sound Reserve system. It is a system that is flexible and balances recreational and ecological needs. By enhancing our existing protected areas, creating new parks, restoring more habitats and providing increased access, a Long Island Sound Reserve system can be created that will benefit all for generations to come.

