

Introduction

Listen to the Sound: It's History and 2000 Campaign

In 1989, conservation leaders on the shores of Long Island Sound came together to develop a strategy to protect and clean up this national estuary. As one of the first national estuaries selected in 1985 as part of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's National Estuary Program, federal and state agencies and citizens of the region were in the midst of developing a Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan.

As the research commenced, many raised concerns whether the citizens of the Sound would have a voice, join together and thus influence this comprehensive planning process. From these circumstances, the National Audubon Society, under the leadership of David Miller, and through the dedicated organizational work of Jane-Kerin Moffat, created, designed and implemented the Listen to the Sound program. It was in the spring of 1990 when the National Audubon Society launched Listen to the Sound, asking the people of the Sound to listen to its plight and in turn become the voice for Long Island Sound. Fifteen citizen hearings were held from Groton to New York City to Southold from Memorial Day to the 4th of July, 1990. Testimony was received from close to 500 citizens and hearings attended by over 1,500 individuals. Over 200 local, state, regional and national organizations co-sponsored the citizen hearings and provided valuable insight to the needs of Long Island Sound.

The Listen to the Sound vision and mission was simple – to create a comprehensive citizens' agenda for the future of Long Island Sound. In the book that followed the hearings, *Listen to the Sound; A Citizens' Agenda*, it stated:

“Our vision for Long Island Sound is of waters that are clean, clear, safe to swim in and charged with life. It is a vision of waters nourished and protected by extensive coastal wetlands, of publicly accessible, litter-free beaches and preserves, and of undeveloped islands of abundant and diverse wildlife, of flourishing commercial fisheries, of harbors accessible to the boating public, and of a regional consciousness and way of life that protects and sustains the ecosystem.”

The citizens agenda had sections on hypoxia and nitrogen pollution, polluted run-off, pathogen pollution, habitat loss, fish, bird and wildlife concerns, as well as recommendations regarding local, state and national programs and funds to implement the needed actions. In fact, the Listen to the Sound citizens' agenda was designed to influence the public policy efforts for Long Island Sound and the Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan being developed by the Environmental Protection Agency. The Listen to the Sound citizens report stated that the campaign:

“...has given Long Island Sound a voice. The voice of hundreds of people who live in and around the Sound, people who care deeply about its future, and echo a common vision for change. Through 15 Audubon-sponsored citizen hearings, people from all walks of life talked about key concerns and proposed recommendations for a sustainable future. This citizens' agenda for the future has a collective mission of restoring the sound through an ethic of sustainable development. The ethic must set limits on growth and balance the needs of all the species in the ecological system.”



Tony Prentice/North Fork Audubon Society

Shortly after the citizen summit in 1991, which unveiled the Listen to the Sound agenda, the Long Island Sound Watershed Alliance was formed to link the 200 plus organizations involved to work together to implement the plan. This alliance and agenda puts forth its energies to influence the federally funded Long Island Sound Study. Over the next two years, the Study's Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP), the governmental blueprint for the Sound clean-up, incorporated most of the Listen to the Sound recommendations and was thus supported by citizens and elected officials throughout the Long Island Sound region.

Great achievements were made from the creation of the EPA Long Island Sound office, spearheaded by Connecticut – U.S. Senator Joseph Lieberman (who called for its creation during Listen to the Sound), to New York Governor George Pataki's Clean Water/Clean Air Bond Act in 1996, which had \$200 million earmarked for Long Island Sound. The Clean Water/Jobs Coalition of industry, labor and environmental groups was formed, two governors' agreements for Long Island Sound programs were signed and the waters of Long Island Sound became cleaner with a basin-wide 25% reduction in nitrogen pollution.

Long Island Sound was becoming a national success story and its focus on water quality over the past decade was understandable. However, critical elements of Long Island Sound's restoration plan still needed more and adequate attention. Open space and living marine resources are issues that still needed further programmatic and funding support. It was determined that it was time (on the tenth anniversary of Listen to the Sound) to re-energize its citizens, host new citizen hearings and focus on where the land meets the water – coastal habitat.

Audubon again launched a Listen to the Sound campaign, which focused on establishing a comprehensive network of open space and natural areas along the Sound's rim, as well as providing for more opportunities for public access and habitat restoration. The concept of a Long Island Sound Reserve was identified as a means to accomplish these goals.

Save the Sound became a project co-sponsor as did the well-known tri-state organization, Regional Plan Association. Save the Sound is a regional organization dedicated to the Sound's protection and coordinates the Long Island Sound Watershed Alliance, a grassroots network of some 200 organizations brought together by the first Listen to the Sound campaign. Save the Sound is also a leader in habitat restoration efforts taken under the CCMP. Regional Plan Association (RPA) has made incredible strides in land use policies for much of the 20th century. They use their influential position as a planning organization to improve the quality of life in the tri-state area, and bring extensive planning and mapping expertise to the project.

Ten citizens hearings were scheduled around Long Island Sound in May and June of 2000. The National Audubon Societies of New York and Connecticut, with local Audubon chapters, Save the Sound, Regional Plan Association and many other organizations concerned about the Sound's future joined under the campaign banner "Listen to the Sound 2000."



Mary Mulcahy

Panelists Bob Yaro of Regional Plan Association and Marilyn England of Audubon New York's Theodore Roosevelt Sanctuary.



NYS Governor George E. Pataki cuts the ribbon at a park opening.

The aim was to gather public input and mobilize public concern to create a comprehensive system of protected open space – a Long Island Sound reserve system – around the estuary. The program called for the people who live, work or play near the Sound to attend and share their views about the natural treasures that they cherish along its rim, their concerns and their vision for the future. These hearings were their opportunity to once again be the voice for Long Island Sound.

In that spirit, we came together to focus strongly on restoring and protecting the Sound's coastal habitats, which sustain its fisheries and other wildlife. It was determined that society needs to do more to safeguard the land's natural capacity to filter and break down pollution before it reaches the Sound. Few unprotected open sites remain along the shore, and most of these are likely to be developed within the next decade unless we mobilize quickly to save them.

The Sound is an extraordinary scenic and recreational attraction in the heart of the country's most densely populated region. The costs of restoring and protecting it are public costs and the public deserves the opportunity to have a connection to this resource. Yet the Sound's shore is among the least publicly accessible in the country and, as water quality improves, its parks, beaches and shoreline preserves – the jewels of the shoreline – are increasingly overwhelmed by the public. Society needs more public access sites to protect what we already have from overuse. Overall, governments need a strategy that connects people to the Sound, while protecting the remaining outstanding sites threatened by development.

Outstanding New York sites currently at risk include: Riverhead's Grandifolia Dunes, home to a unique dwarf forest; and east, several miles of largely undeveloped bluffs – the largest remaining stretch of open land on the Sound. This site was lost to development during the Listen to the Sound hearings. Further east, Gardiner's Island, home of the last old growth forest stand on the east coast is a critical part of our natural heritage. Outstanding Connecticut sites include the 29-acre, virtually undeveloped Calves Island off Greenwich, the barrier beach to Great Meadows salt marsh at Stratford, and 42 acres of uplands and tidal wetlands next to Hammonasset Beach State Park in Madison.

Long Island Sound urgently needs a comprehensive system of open space protection to safeguard habitat and water quality, and to make the Sound more accessible to the public. Already, the Sound and its citizens are paying the price.

Loss of essential habitat – breeding areas, food sources and shelter – have diminished the abundance and diversity of the Sound's wildlife and the productivity of its fisheries. Paving the land's surface and hardening the Sound's edges have increased polluted runoff and decreased the land's capacity to absorb and break down the pollutants before they wash into the Sound. In the past century, before regulatory programs halted the trend, the Sound had lost at least a third of its estuarine wetlands and most of the (now rare) upland coastal meadows and forests, and have despoiled much that is left.

Although the Sound lies in the midst of the most densely populated region in the country, its

shores are among the least accessible in the nation, and its public beaches, park lands and refuges – the jewels of its shoreline – are increasingly overburdened. The public bears the cost of restoring the Sound and deserves more opportunities to enjoy it.

Few unprotected open areas remain along the shores and the pressure to develop them is intense. Unless society acts now to protect them, they will soon be lost forever. There have been several successes over the past year, such as the creation of the new Nissequogue River State Park on the Sound by Governor Pataki and Connecticut increased funding and implementation of open space protection projects. While the governors of New York and Connecticut support the reserve concept, it is Listen to the Sound's task to create the public movement, direction for its implementation.

The Listen to the Sound project provided some possible criteria for land conservation and coastal projects. In preparing for the hearings, sponsoring organizations urged citizens to consider priority sites for protection, including:

- critical land and underwater habitat, with limited access;
- research sites, with limited access;
- potential habitat restoration sites;
- coastal watershed buffer lands;
- beaches and coastal park land for public access;
- publicly accessible docks and boat launch areas;
- reclaimable urban waterfronts for public access;
- lookout sites for public access; and
- lands integral to public vistas of the Sound.

In addition, citizens were asked to consider conservation tools that might be appropriate to help achieve their vision for the Sound, including:

- federal, state, municipal and private funding sources and partnerships;
- public and private stewardship and partnerships;
- purchase of fee title or easements from willing sellers;
- state and local planning and regulatory programs; and
- smart growth initiatives.

On April 1, 2000, the annual conference of the Long Island Sound Watershed Alliance, organized by Save the Sound, initiated public discussion of the reserve concept by examining different kinds of reserves and their potential relevance for the Sound. Regional Plan Association prepared geographic information system (GIS) maps of Long Island Sound's coasts for precise identification of undeveloped sites that are protected, unprotected or have the potential for habitat restoration or waterfront reclamation. At the Listen to the Sound 2000 hearings, citizens created the reserve concept by making recommendations on which sites should be protected and possible ways of getting the job done. Following the hearings the project sponsors agreed to prepare this citizens agenda report, which summarizes each hearing and then presents a blueprint, based on testimony received, for establishing the reserve. A citizens' conference on strategies to implement the blueprint will follow in the spring of 2001.

This report presents the results of Listen to the Sound 2000. The following chapters provide a blueprint for the Long Island Sound reserve concept from over 200 testimonies at the ten citizen hearings. Equally important were the over 600 individuals attended the hearings and others sent letters, e-mails and written comments. All of this material is the basis for the citizens' agenda for the reserve concept and the list of open space projects in need of attention. After reviewing this compelling call to action, there is a summary of each of the ten hearings.

It is the hope of Audubon, Save the Sound and Regional Plan Association that this report will provide the vision, direction and blueprint to make the next chapter of Long Island Sound's restoration and protection a reality for all of its citizens and critters alike.