

Case Studies of the Sound

A Tale of Two Sounds by Bob Yaro

One way to envision the lasting benefits that creation of the Long Island Sound Reserve could provide is to imagine what the Sound's future would be under two scenarios. In the first scenario, the reserve is established, and in the second, development of the Sound's shoreline continues unabated. Both scenarios are outlined below, looking backward from the year 2040.

Scenario I: A Long Island Sound Reserve Protects and Reclaims the Sound's Resources

It is the year 2040, and a number of Long Island Sound communities, from Southold to Stamford, are celebrating their 400th anniversaries. The President of the United States participated in several of these celebrations, calling special attention to the role that the Long Island Sound Reserve played in inspiring the creation of a national coastal reserve.

Most of these celebrations focused on the Sound's protected and reclaimed shoreline. As a result of visionary action taken to create the reserve back around the turn of the century, dozens of natural areas have been protected and made accessible to the public. Other areas damaged by hurricanes or threatened by sea level rise have become public preserves and beaches. And literally hundreds of once damaged industrial and commercial waterfront areas have been reclaimed as created wetlands, wildlife habitats and waterfront parks, and have become focal points for restored downtown urban economies. Formerly distressed urban waterfront communities have become vibrant new mixed use and mixed income centers with quality access to the Sound.



In recent decades, the Sound has become renowned as one of America's premier natural and recreational resources. A fleet of windjammers carries visitors from all over the world to visit pristine beaches and coves and vibrant urban waterfronts, from Glen Cove to Bridgeport to Greenport. Excursion boats provide "up close and personal" voyages to the Sound's dolphin, whale and harbor seal habitats. A focal point for the Sound's vibrant tourist trade is the network of hundreds of waterfront inns located in what at the turn of the century had been known as "McMansions." When the superheated economy of that era subsided, many of these ostentatious mansions became too expensive to maintain as single-family homes, and were converted to retirement quarters for aging but still active baby boomers and bed-and-breakfasts for tourists.

The Sound also continues to be one of the nation's leading commercial and sport fishing centers, and its most productive oystering grounds. After lobster harvests plummeted back at the turn of the century, cleaner water and better stewardship of the Sound's natural areas resulted in the restoration of lobstering to late 20th century levels by 2010.

The dunes and bluffs of Long Island's North Fork have become a showcase of protected and restored habitat, and a focal point for natural studies in the estuary. The Grandifolia Dunes

Reserve in Riverhead, on the reclaimed site of the former Grandifolia Dunes Golf Course, has again become the east coast's foremost habitat for hummingbirds. This represents an exceptional turn around, after the site was wantonly bulldozed to create a golf course community just before the turn of the century. But its destruction became a wake up call to those concerned about the loss of the Sound's dwindling open spaces. And today it is a global center for the study of ecological restoration, part of a network of reserves that protects more than 30 miles of Long Island Sound shoreline. And it has become a living source of pride to everyone who loves the Sound and its protected and accessible shoreline.

Scenario II: Subdivided from Orient and Stonington to City Island

It is the year 2040 and a number of Long Island Sound communities, from Southold to Stamford, are celebrating their 400th anniversaries. But their celebrations are being held in parking lots and strip malls near the water, separated from the water's edge by a continuous line of "McMansions" and commercial developments. Unfortunately, the proposal back at the turn of the century to create a new Long Island Sound Reserve failed to catch on with public officials preoccupied with cleaning up damaged coastal properties following the destruction of the hurricane of 2003.

Many of the abandoned and underutilized waterfront industrial and commercial sites already derelict at the turn of the century remain unreclaimed four decades

The Story of Grandifolia Sandhills

(From comments made by Dr. Paul Adams, Professor of Biology, SUNY at Stony Brook, June 29, 2000, Listen to the Sound hearing, Southold, New York)



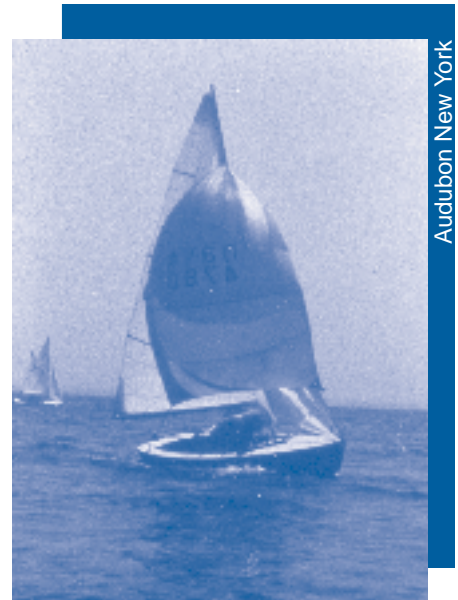
Paul Adams

- "Grandifolia Sandhills in Riverhead...[is a] wooded area of several hundred acres with a mile of frontage on Long Island Sound...probably the single most pristine area located on Long Island Sound anywhere in the State of New York."
- "The site is named for the dramatic, beautiful and extremely rare dwarf beech trees that clothe the bluffs above the Sound."
- "According to the New York State Natural Heritage Program...the Grandifolia Sandhills may [be] the finest example of maritime pygmy beech forest anywhere in the world. The forest provides habitat for hummingbirds" ...and is "one of the few places on Long Island where hummingbirds still breed."
- "In 1994...I urged...that the Riverhead bluffs area be accorded outstanding natural coastal area status because of imminent threats to the Sandhills...nothing was ever done and the beech forest was bulldozed in February of this year."
- "Grandifolia Sandhills are now also known as the Traditional Links Golf Course."

"There is something profoundly wrong with a system that allows the destruction of the finest example anywhere in the world of a magical, ecological community for the transient pleasure of a few hundred bored golfers."

later, and off-limits to the public. In some cases contaminated brownfield sites continue to leach chemicals into the Sound; and in others, these have been reclaimed for waterfront office buildings. The remaining natural areas once proposed for the Long Island Sound Reserve have instead become new golf course subdivisions, waterfront industrial parks and power generating plants.

Recreational boating and commercial and sport fisheries began to decline after the turn of the century, as first lobsters, and then other fisheries declined. And aging baby boomers from Long Island and Connecticut retired in droves to the coastal villages along the protected shorelines of New Jersey, the Carolinas and the Chesapeake, rather than face rising taxes and diminished quality of life in the waterfront communities of Long Island, Westchester and Connecticut.



At the celebration of Southold's 400th anniversary, a few old timers remembered a time when the North Fork's dunes, bluffs and farms adjoining Long Island Sound remained largely open and undeveloped. And a few of them also remembered when the bulldozers destroyed the hummingbird habitat on the Grandifolia Dunes property and the coastal farms and forests of nearby Jamesport. But these resources were just a memory, as were the golf courses of the early 21st century, abandoned when this golfing craze ended a decade later. Long Island Sound itself was not something that anyone gave much thought to, walled off as it was by a nearly continuous band of subdivisions and waterfront industrial areas. Where once it had defined the region's quality of life, only four decades later it had become just an afterthought, known only as the nation's least accessible and least attractive coastline.



A Tale of Opportunity: Urban Habitat Restoration

by John Atkin

Imagine yourself several hundred feet from a major water body, or within yards of a river flowing into Long Island Sound, and not even knowing it's there. Now imagine having lived in a region of the Sound for your entire life, and not even knowing a river is there. Now imagine how difficult it would be to finally "discover" this river, and realize that it is there, but lined with junkyards, highways, industry, and barbed wire fences. Welcome to the Bronx, New York. Nearly 1.2 million people live in this borough of New York City, where the Bronx River flows into the Sound, and some of those residents have actually experienced that scenario.

It is obvious from this scenario that much has to be done to preserve, restore and "discover" open space and habitat in our urban centers. Through the foresight of the Long Island Sound Habitat Restoration Initiative (LISHRI), over 450 potential sites have been identified for restoration around Long Island Sound. Of those over 50 are in urban areas of our coast, and of those 18 are in the Bronx. That's right, the Bronx.



Shoreline scene along the Bronx River.

Tidal wetland restorations, riverine migratory corridors, freshwater wetland restoration and even shellfish reefs are suggested and feasible. Additionally, the City of New York Parks and Recreation Department's Natural Resources Group among other government agencies and not-for-profits are active players in LISHRI. Small restoration projects such as Hunt's Point Riverside Park along the Bronx River, and Soundview Park along the Sound, have already occurred but, obviously, much more has to be done.

Long Island Sound has its remaining pristine reaches in eastern Long Island and eastern Connecticut, but still remains the nation's most urbanized estuary. Over 20 million people, nearly 10% of this nation's population, live within 50 miles of the Sound, placing great stress on the water body. Collectively we dump one billion gallons of sewage, usually treated, into the Sound every day. Our towns and cities continue to develop along its shores, adding more impervious surface that speeds up run-off, and adding stress to an aging infrastructure of waste water treatment plants and storm water systems.

Residents are enjoying these areas for recreating, fishing and as put-ins for canoes and kayaks. Funding for more small and large restorations and access points is necessary, but the residents have now identified the need for this access, and the elected officials now have the will to seek the funding. Maybe the next generation won't have to discover a river in their backyard, but will innately know it's there because their parents knew it was there.

It is clear that the urban areas around our estuary have to be part of a reserve, more green jewels in the necklace that connects all of us around the Sound, so that all can understand and appreciate its beauty, and understand how the ecosystem connects humans to the natural world.