
Habitat Hotline Atlantic

Issues of Concern for Atlantic Marine Fish Habitat

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Creating Partnerships for Aquatic Habitat Restoration: The National Fish Habitat Initiative

There is a silent crisis going on in our nation's waters. Fish and other aquatic resources in the United States are declining at alarming rates, primarily due to habitat destruction. For the past 75 years, habitat alteration has been identified as a major factor in 75% of fish extinctions and 91% of Endangered Species Act fish listings. One hundred and twenty three aquatic freshwater species have gone extinct in North America since 1990. Hundreds of other fish, mollusks, crayfish, and amphibians are also imperiled. Of the 822 native freshwater fish species in the United States, 39% are at risk of extinction. Approximately 80-90% of the U.S. recreational fish catch and 75% of the commercial fish catch rely on estuaries for habitat, yet more than 32,600 acres of wetlands were lost annually between 1992 and 1997. An estimated 43% of federally listed threatened and endangered species rely on wetland habitats to some degree. In addition, non-native plants and animals are impacting natural ecosystems and have contributed to the decline of 42% of threatened and endangered species nationwide.

National Fish Habitat Initiative

So what's being done? In 2004, fisheries leaders and other interested parties came up with a solution: the National Fish Habitat Initiative (NFHI). NFHI is a nationwide strategy that harnesses the energies, expertise, and existing partnerships of state and federal agencies and conservation organizations. The NFHI intends to focus national attention and resources on common priorities to improve aquatic habitat health. The Sport Fishing and Boating Partnership Council initially suggested the idea of the NFHI in a report to the Secretary of the Interior and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Director. Encouraged by the recommendation, the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (IAFWA) joined with stakeholders to obtain a Multi-state Conservation Grant in order to develop a formal NFHI plan and begin implementation.

In early 2005, a NFHI Core Workgroup committee was established consisting of IAFWA members and other partners. Under the chairmanship of Doug Austen, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission, the Core Workgroup prepared a draft fish habitat plan for public comment, recruited more partners, and is currently planning for implementation of the final plan. The draft plan, The National Fish Habitat Action Plan: Investing in America's Aquatic Treasures, was released October 4, 2005 for public review and comment and is available on the NFHI website at www.fishhabitat.org. Partnerships have increased and now include over 50 conservation groups, 8 industry groups, 10 federal agencies, 21 state agencies and state partnership organizations, and 2 universities.

The National Fish Habitat Action Plan

The National Fish Habitat Action Plan's (Plan) mission is to "protect, restore, and enhance the Nation's fish and aquatic communities through partnerships that foster fish habitat conservation and improve the quality of life for the American people."

The National Fish Habitat Action Plan Goals

- Protect and maintain intact and healthy systems
- Prevent further degradation of fish and aquatic habitats
- Reverse declines in the quality of aquatic habitats
- Increase the quality and quantity of fish
- Increase self-sustaining aquatic systems that support a broad natural diversity of fish and other aquatic species.

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Four key approaches are outlined in the Plan to achieve its goals. One approach is to develop new partnerships and expand support of existing partnerships. A second approach is to mobilize national and local support for achieving fish habitat conservation goals. The Plan also suggests measuring and communicating the status and needs of aquatic habitats. Finally, the Plan calls for national leadership and coordination to conserve fish habitats.

According to the Plan, states will lead the development and implementation through the IAFWA and in cooperation with federal agencies, including the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). When the plan is complete and ready for implementation, a governing board and support staff will be established. The governing board will consist of 20 members with 5 state representatives, 5 federal agency representatives, 5 conservation or science or academic members, and 5 at-large members from industry, interstate management agencies, tribal governments, elected officials, and other interests. Initially, USFWS will house the core administrative staff, with support from NMFS. The staff will assist the Board in administering federal funds and implementing NFHI programs.

Project Funding

In 2005, approximately \$1.8 million was awarded for five Multi-state Conservation Grants for on-the-ground projects and continued Plan development. The U.S. Geological Survey provided \$100,000 to support fish habitat data collection at the IAFWA. The USFWS FY 2006 budget includes \$1million to support the NFHI.

Why Partnerships?

The partnership model has proven to be an effective way to establish cooperative working arrangements and to share financial and staffing resources. It is hoped that the NFHI fish habitat plan will be as successful as the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, also known as the Duck Plan, which was implemented in the 1980s to create partnerships for protecting and restoring millions of acres of wetlands used as waterfowl breeding areas. By the end of 2003, Waterfowl Management Plan partners had invested more than \$2.2 billion to protect, restore, or enhance more than

eight million acres of waterfowl habitat.

Using Partnerships for Success

The Blackfoot River Challenge in Montana used the partnership model and is another example of a successful habitat restoration partnership. The Blackfoot River runs 132 miles through some of the most productive fish and wildlife habitat in the Northern Rocky

Mountains. In 1988, declining fish populations in the Blackfoot River raised concern and a basin-wide study was initiated on the fish populations and their habitats. The results of the study showed a decline of native west-slope cutthroat trout and bull trout. The collective impact of years of mining, timber harvest, grazing, and water withdrawals led to the poor condition of the Blackfoot River and its resources. The Blackfoot River Challenge, a grassroots group, was formed to coordinate the management of the Blackfoot River, its tributaries,



Figure 1. Reconstruction of an irrigation canal with a fish ladder on Chamberlain creek, a tributary stream of the Blackfoot River. Source: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (<http://montanapartners.fws.gov/mt5c.htm>).

and nearby lands. The group includes private landowners, federal and state agency representatives, local government officials, and corporate landowners. The group initiated a variety of projects to address the problem of declining fish populations. The results to date are impressive.

Significant progress has been made in improving aquatic habitat in the watershed. For example, over 300 miles of fish passage barriers were removed (Figure 1). Restoration efforts focused on 32 miles of instream habitat and 51 miles of riparian habitat leading to restoration of 2,100 acres of wetlands and 2,300 acres of native grasslands. In addition, the group secured 54,500 acres of perpetual conservation easements. Thirteen self-cleaning fish screens were installed on irrigation ditches and numerous feedlots were removed from streams.

The Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership is another example of a partnership approach for protecting, conserving, and restoring aquatic resources. The Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership (SARP) was formed in 2001 to address the many issues related to the management of aquatic resources in the southeastern United States.

SARP Focus Areas

- **Public use** — Increase recreational fishing and other sustainable uses of aquatic resources by the public.
- **Fishery mitigation** — Provide high quality angling opportunities at water development projects.
- **Imperiled fish and aquatic species recovery** — Reduce the numbers of imperiled species in the Southeast.
- **Inter-jurisdictional fisheries** — Protect, conserve and restore interjurisdictional fisheries in the Southeast.
- **Aquatic habitat conservation** — Aquatic habitats have appropriate biological, chemical and physical integrity to support healthy functional communities.
- **Aquatic nuisance species (ANS)** — Prevent and control the impact of invasive species on the ecological, economic and societal values of the Southeast.

The SARP is a cooperative effort with partners from state and federal entities (13 southeastern states, the USFWS, the NMFS, the Atlantic and Gulf States Marine Fisheries Management Commissions and the Gulf and South Atlantic Regional Fishery Manage-

ment Councils), academia, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, and industry representatives. Partners work together to advance on-the-ground restoration of aquatic resources including habitats throughout the Southeast. SARP hired an Aquatic Nuisance Species Coordinator to help state wildlife agencies develop ANS management plans. The Coordinator will also help develop a pilot rivers study with The Nature Conservancy that will be used as a template for watershed management in the Southeast. The SARP Strategic Plan outlines specific on-the-ground habitat and species goals and objectives.

What next?

The NFHI Core Workgroup met October 19-20, 2005 to review and incorporate public comments on the draft action plan. The Workgroup will revise the draft action plan and expects to complete Fish Habitat Action Plan in March 2006. After completion and adoption, formal implementation will commence. The plan will build upon existing local and regional approaches to protect fish habitat and provide resources needed to help existing and new programs strengthen and increase their protection of aquatic habitats.

For more information, visit the National Fish Habitat Initiative website at www.fishhabitat.org.

New York Governor Announces Over \$9.1 Million to Improve Long Island Water Quality and Habitats

In November, New York Governor George E. Pataki announced more than \$9.1 million in grants to Long Island communities to improve water quality and protect and restore habitats throughout the Peconic and South Shore estuaries. The grants are being funded through the Clean Water/Clean Air Bond Act and the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF).

“The Peconic and South Shore Estuaries are unique and important ecosystems that offer tremendous environmental, recreational, economic, and educational opportunities,” Governor Pataki said. “We have made significant progress in protecting and restoring these water bodies, and these grants will continue our efforts to improve water quality and estuary habitats on Long Island.”

The Governor announced grants totaling more than \$2.5 million for the Peconic Estuary and nearly \$6.65 million for the South Shore Estuary. These awards will support projects to reduce pollutants from entering the estuary through stormwater and non-point source runoff; restore habitats and install fish ladders and eelways to allow migration for upstream spawning; and make improvements to wastewater treatment plants.

The 1996 Clean Water/Clean Air Bond Act authorized \$30 million for water quality improvement projects for the Peconic and South Shore Estuaries. To date, the Bond Act has supported more than 100 projects to clean up and protect these estuaries. The State

EPF, which has been fully funded by Governor Pataki, has provided more than \$1.3 billion for more than 4,000 projects statewide, including \$109 million for 290 projects on Long Island.

The Peconic Estuary system is located on the eastern end of Long Island, between the North and South Forks. The Peconic Estuary Plan protects and improves the Peconic Estuary system’s water quality to ensure a healthy and diverse marine community. The plan was drafted in order to preserve and enhance the integrity of the ecosystems and natural resources present in the study area, to optimize opportunities for water recreation, to promote the social and economic benefits of a clean estuary system, and to promote public awareness and involvement in estuary management issues.

The South Shore Estuary Reserve extends from the Queens/Nassau County line eastward approximately 75 miles to the Village of Southampton in Suffolk County. The Estuary Reserve includes interconnected bays and tidal tributaries that provide important habitats and support the largest concentration of water-dependent businesses in New York State. A Comprehensive Management Plan for the South Shore Estuary was completed in 2002. The objectives of the plan are to improve and maintain water quality, protect and restore living resources, expand public use and enjoyment of the estuary, sustain and expand the estuary-related economy, and increase education, outreach, and stewardship programs with the estuary community.

Local Organizations Receive \$3 Million to Help Restore Local Rivers and Chesapeake Bay

Community-based organizations and local governments throughout the Chesapeake Bay watershed will launch 88 Bay and river restoration projects thanks to \$3 million in grants provided by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the Chesapeake Bay Program. The Chesapeake Bay Small Watershed Grants, announced in July by U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Mid-Atlantic Regional Administrator Donald S. Welsh, USDA Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth, and National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Executive Director John Berry, aim to accelerate the restoration of the Chesapeake Bay and its rivers by providing funds to help local communities restore their part of the Bay watershed.

“The Small Watershed Grants Program fosters the type of partnerships and collaboration necessary in improving the Chesapeake Bay,” said EPA’s Welsh. “By linking the resources of the federal government and the dedication and knowledge of local organizations, we can work together to help speed the restoration of this national treasure.”

At an event announcing the grants in Pennsylvania, U.S. Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth said, “The USDA Forest Service is pleased to see forests being emphasized in the Chesapeake Bay Small Watershed Grants program. The conservation, restoration, and stewardship of trees and forests is essential to our local communities and to the health of the rivers and streams that feed the Chesapeake Bay.”

Projects funded by the program include creating rain gardens that reduce polluted runoff, planting streamside forest buffers that prevent erosion, and restoring underwater grasses that provide critical habitat for fish and animals. Programs will take place across all six states in the Bay’s 64,000 square-mile watershed – Delaware, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia – and in the District of Columbia.

In addition to building the capacity of local organizations, this year’s grants will manage or protect approximately 23,000 acres of critical fish and wildlife habitat including wetlands, oyster reefs, and underwater grasses. Grant recipients will plant more than 209 miles of forest buffers and improve an additional 32 miles of streams that drain into the Bay. More than 10,000 community volunteers will actively participate in the projects, while some 24,000 citizens will

be educated through the dissemination of outreach materials.

“By partnering with the communities in the watershed, the Program is investing in and engaging those people who are most concerned about the health and future of the Chesapeake Bay,” said National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Executive Director John Berry. “These projects have a direct impact at the local level on improving water quality in our streams and rivers and conserving critical habitat for our region’s diverse fish and wildlife species.”



Coastal marsh restoration (Source: U.S. Fish & Wildlife image library, <http://images.fws.gov/>).

In the past six years, the Small Watershed Grants Program has provided \$14.3 million to support 439 projects throughout the Bay watershed. These grants have been used by recipients to leverage an additional \$43 million from other funding sources, resulting in \$57 million in support of local community watershed restoration efforts since 1999.

Proposed projects are reviewed by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and selected based on set criteria paralleling commitments set forth in the Chesapeake 2000 Bay restoration agreement. The agreement calls on Bay states and the District of Columbia to combine efforts with watershed organizations to restore local water quality and the living resources of the Bay watershed. Projects

funded through the Small Watershed Grants Program assist local groups in gaining experience and technical expertise needed to improve watershed protection in their communities.

Primary funding for the Chesapeake Bay Small Watershed Grants Program is provided by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Chesapeake Bay Program Office. Additional funding partners include the USDA Forest Service, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Chesapeake Bay Trust, the Keith Campbell Foundation for the Environment, and the Western Pennsylvania Watershed Program.

For a complete listing and map of the 2005 Small Watershed Grants recipients in your area or state, please visit the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation homepage at <http://www.nfwf.org> or the Chesapeake Bay Program at <http://www.chesapeakebay.net/smallwatergrants.htm>.

Around the Coast: Spotlight on New Hampshire's Designation of No Discharge in Coastal Waters

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has approved New Hampshire's request to designate its coastal waters as a No Discharge Area. This designation applies to all of New Hampshire's coastal waters, and means that discharges of treated and untreated boat sewage would be prohibited within three miles of the shore.

New Hampshire is the second state in New England to designate all of its coastal waters as No Discharge. "This designation means cleaner beaches, cleaner shellfish beds, and cleaner boating," said Robert W. Varney, regional administrator of EPA's New England Office. Boat sewage can lead to health problems for swimmers, closed shellfish beds, and the overall degradation of marine habitats.

Before making a No Discharge designation, EPA and the state ensure that there are enough pumpout facilities where boaters can get their holding tanks pumped out. New Hampshire's coastline has an estimated 4,593 boats, of which only 962 are large enough to have a "head" or toilet on board. The pumpout facilities include five that are fixed or shore based, and one that is a pumpout boat.

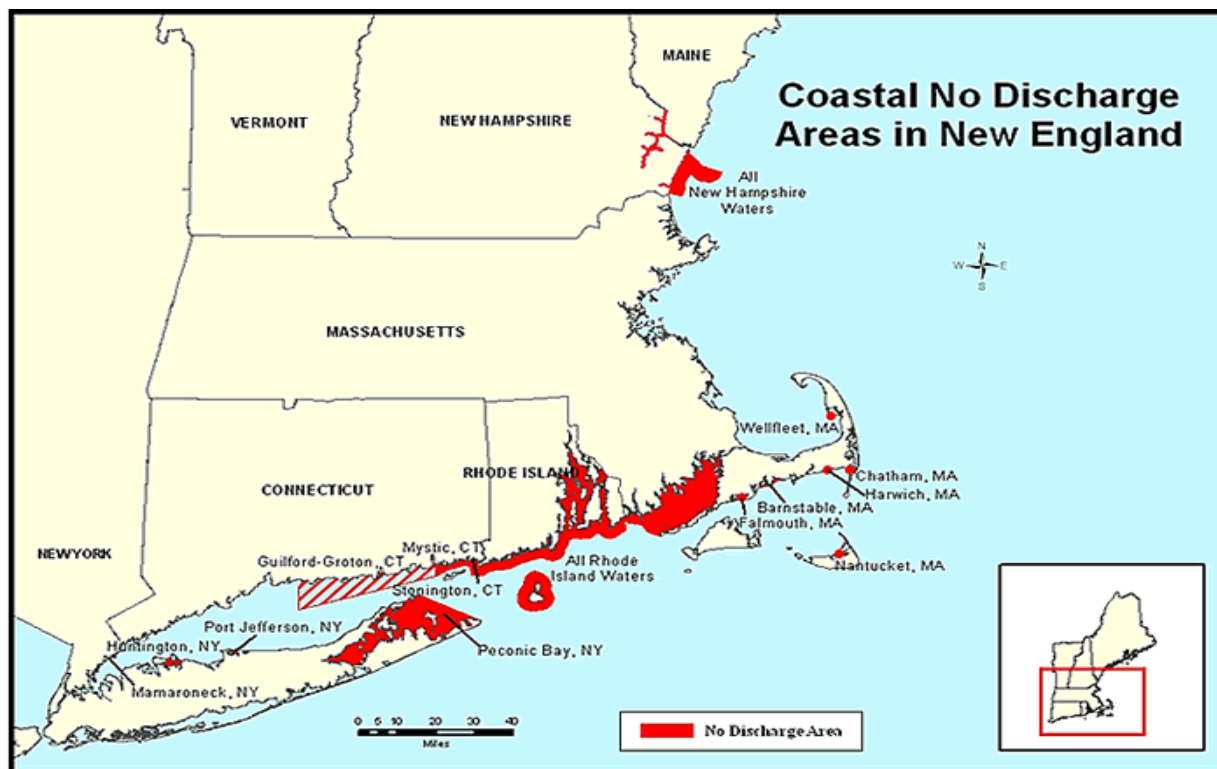
"Thirty years ago, NH became the first state in the nation to designate all inland lakes as No Discharge Zones. No discharge in inland lakes included both black and grey water which was essen-

tial for reducing phosphorus and bacteria loading to one of states most valued assets. We are long overdue for providing similar protection to our coastal waters through a No Discharge designation for the entire NH coastline. The NH coastline provides important economic and recreational resources and the No Discharge designation will help protect these vital waters for future generations to enjoy," noted NH Department of Environmental Services (DES) Commissioner Michael Nolin.

In 1975 all New Hampshire inland waters were approved as No Discharge Area waters. The state hopes to emulate the lake boating inspection program on their coastline. DES initiated the No Discharge Area designation for the New Hampshire coastline in the spring of 2004 to safeguard local marine resources.

Other areas in New England with No Discharge areas include: all of Rhode Island's marine waters and Block Island's Great Salt Pond; Nantucket Harbor and Harwich, Waquoit, Wellfleet, and Buzzards bays in Massachusetts; Stonington Harbor and the Groton/Mystic area in Connecticut; and Lake Champlain, Lake George, and Lake Menphremagog in Vermont and New York.

Information on No Discharge Areas may be found at the EPA's website at: <http://www.epa.gov/ne/eco/nodiscrg/index.html>.



In the News

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recently published **Community-Based Watershed Management: Lessons from the National Estuary Program** (NEP), a handbook designed for all individuals and organizations involved in watershed management, including states, tribes, local governments, and nongovernmental organizations. The handbook describes innovative approaches to watershed management implemented by the 28 National Estuary Programs, which are community-based watershed management organizations that restore and protect coastal watersheds. Drawing on nearly 20 years of experience, readers will learn how the NEPs organize and maintain effective citizen involvement efforts, collect and analyze data, assess and prioritize problems, develop and implement management plans, and communicate results of program activities. For more information and to download this handbook (in PDF format), visit: <http://www.epa.gov/owow/estuaries/neprimer>. Also, you can receive a free copy of this handbook by contacting the National Service Center for Environmental Publications via phone at 1-800-490-9198 or via the web at www.epa.gov/ncepihom and requesting Publication # EPA 842-B-05-003.

On October 31, 2005 the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) announced the availability of up to \$6 million in financial assistance for the **Open Rivers Initiative**. The program will provide grants ranging from \$50,000 to \$250,000

for communities to remove obsolete and derelict stream barriers. The initiative will only target structures that no longer serve a useful purpose, where both the community and owner support dam removal, and where removal will provide significant benefit to anadromous fish such as salmon, striped bass, and shad, which migrate upriver to breed. Removing dams and other blockages opens habitat for migratory fish and can help boost local economies by increasing property values and recreational opportunities. More information can be found under "funding opportunities" at www.nmfs.noaa.gov/habitat/restoration/. Source: Portsmouth Herald.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the Coastal States Organization (CSO) launched the **Coastal Indicators Information Exchange website** at <http://coastalindicators.noaa.gov/>. The new website provides a central location for information about coastal indicator efforts and resources. The website provides links to such efforts and resources and a directory of indicators is planned for the future to allow searching by indicator type. The indicator efforts and resources on the current website are only the ones that have been identified by subcommittee members. Additional links or ideas for improvement are welcomed and can be sent to Zac Hart (zac.hart@noaa.gov) or Elizabeth Mills (elizabeth.mills@noaa.gov).

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