

## Long Island Sound



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The Nature Conservancy is involved in a number of projects dedicated to improving coastal and ocean management in the Long Island Sound ecosystem, which spans waters in both Connecticut and New York. While the efforts described below are considered separate projects, they are all part of TNC's Long Island Sound Program's priority strategies.

## Long Island Sound Blue Plan (NY & CT)

### Overview

In 2015, Connecticut Governor Dannel Malloy signed the [Public Act 15-66, An Act Concerning a Long Island Sound Blue Plan and Resource and Use Inventory](#) into law. This legislation, known as the "Blue Plan", stems from a consensus that there is a need for MSP in Long Island Sound as the best approach for managing new uses so that traditional human uses and natural resources are

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sustained and conflicts avoided. The need for this spatial approach is called for in the updated [Long Island Sound Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan](#) of the Long Island Sound Study, the national estuary program charged with protecting and managing Long Island Sound staffed by the EPA and supported by multi-lateral governmental agencies and partners.

Under the Blue Plan, a Long Island Sound Inventory and Science subcommittee along with 3 work teams have been tasked with conducting an inventory of Long Island Sound's natural resources and uses, leveraging the best available ecological and human use data about the Sound. These datasets along with new information developed during the planning process will be used to develop a spatial plan which will identify and protect "Ecologically Significant Areas (ESA)" including special, sensitive or unique estuarine and marine life and habitats while preserving and protecting traditional riparian and water-dependent uses and activities. The plan will also foster compatible and sustainable uses of the Sound.

Stated goals of the plan are:

- Healthy ocean and coastal ecosystems
- Effective decision-making
- Compatibility among past, current, and future uses

Guiding principles of the plan are:

- Meaningful public participation
- Sound science
- Transparent process
- Government coordination and collaboration
- Adaptive management

## TNC's Role

- Process facilitation
- Scientific/Technical expertise
- Governor appointed position on the Blue Plan Advisory Committee
- Core member of the Plan Development Team (executive committee of overall process)
- Leading the ecological process to identify "Ecologically Significant Areas"
- Chair of the Stakeholder Engagement Subcommittee

TNC's Connecticut chapter played a significant role in bringing together a diverse group of scientists, planners and other partners from New York and Connecticut, forming the CT-NY Bi-State Marine Spatial Planning Working Group. This effort created the technical foundation and political enabling conditions to advance an official MSP process. TNC and its partners championed

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this approach to CT lawmakers. Through its active role as a member of the Blue Plan Advisory Committee, TNC is helping to guide and generate results within the official process. This includes engagement and leadership in the full range of work involved from data and information collection, identification of important ecological and human use areas, stakeholder engagement and policy development to , securing funding and capacity.

Notable results where TNC has played a leadership role include: 1) completing Blue Plan Vision and Goals, 2) producing a Stakeholder Engagement Program plan, 3) holding several major public outreach events including 2 with ~200 attendees, 4) conducting multiple webinars and meetings with ecological experts and human use sectors to review existing data and geospatial maps, 5) developing draft chapters of the LIS Resource and Use Inventory, 6) integration of TNC's [Long Island Sound Ecological Assessment \(LISEA\)](#) into the Resource and Use Inventory which is expected to help inform identification of the "ESA", 7) securing 4 grants totaling \$340,000 to support the planning process , 8) fostering agreement that the process should identify ecological and human use areas for Blue Plan policy purposes and for those policies to assure protection of these areas (e.g. siting and performance standards).

## Project Partners

**Lead Institution:** [CT Department of Energy & Environmental Protection](#)

**Other Partners:** Blue Plan Advisory Committee (16 members including other state agencies and a cross section of human use and conservation sectors), [CT Sea Grant](#), CT-NY Bi-State Marine Spatial Planning Working Group, NY Sea Grant, NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, NYS Department of State

## Status

The planning process is underway and a draft plan is required by March 2019. After a public review and revision period, the Plan is due to the CT legislature, expected to be the 2020 legislative session. Additional data and information and planning activities are expected to continue through 2020. The Plan must be updated every 5 years or less.

## Fact Sheets and Links

[Long Island Sound Blue Plan Home](#)

## Fishers Island Seagrass Management (NY)

## Overview

Globally, seagrasses are under intense pressure from human activities and environmental stressors. In Long Island Sound, this pressure is particularly acute – 90 percent of the historic eelgrass acreage has disappeared. Despite large-scale deterioration throughout the estuary, eelgrass has persisted where the mouth of the Sound opens to meet the Atlantic Ocean. Here, at the eastern edge of the Sound, TNC is helping state government and community stakeholders collaborate to designate the first marine co-managed area in the Sound to preserve the enduring eelgrass ecosystem at Fishers Island.

Culminating in 2014, a five-year research initiative, funded by NOAA and led by TNC, to identify the causes of seagrass decline across southern New England and New York revealed that nitrogen pollution – from sewage, fertilizers and the atmosphere – and warming waters are the major threats to seagrass in the region. Physical disturbances and damage caused by boating, fishing gear, dredging, and coastal construction, and biological impacts caused by disease, invasive species, grazing, bioturbation, and loss of genetic diversity also threaten the persistence of seagrass in the Sound; although the extent and severity of these stressors are not well known.

Progress towards restoring the Sound's water quality holds promise for the future of seagrass habitat in the Sound. After two decades of implementation, in 2017, the Long Island Sound TMDL achieved its target for reducing nitrogen from sewage treatment plant discharges by 58.5 percent. Now, the U.S. EPA, and the states of Connecticut and New York have set forth new plans to sustain this achievement and further reduce nitrogen from non-point sources in the Sound's watershed with a goal of improving water quality and clarity sufficient to restore and maintain 2,000 additional acres of eelgrass by 2035 (from a 2012 baseline of 2,016 acres). As efforts continue to restore the conditions seagrass needs to survive where it has been lost, research recommendations, evidence from the field, and New York state decision makers have made it clear that conservation of extant eelgrass meadows to support natural habitat recovery is an essential priority.

In 2012, the New York Legislature passed the Seagrass Protection Act requiring the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYS DEC) to protect seagrass habitat and regulate coastal and marine activities that threaten seagrass habitat or restoration efforts by: 1) designating seagrass management areas (SMA), 2) developing and adopting a management plan for each SMA, and 3) consulting with local governments, recreational boaters, marine industries, fishermen, affected property owners and other stakeholders to effectively manage, protect and restore seagrass. Subsequently, research initiated by TNC in 2015 revealed that a well-designed, participatory process and collaborative capacity building by state and local actors are critical factors for successful protection and restoration of seagrass habitat through implementation of the Seagrass Protection Act.

TNC is providing capacity building, technical, planning and management support to the Fishers

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Island community and the NYS DEC to strengthen and advance seagrass conservation and community engagement at Fishers Island by: 1) building interest and support for a collaborative approach to marine resource management, 2) establishing and operationalize a community-based coalition that works with the state to ensure decision-makers have the science, local social-ecological knowledge and capacity to effectively and equitably designate and manage SMAs, 3) developing community-based capacity to improve community access to science, understanding of local human activities relevant to seagrass areas, engagement in local issues, influence on management, and resource managers' awareness and appreciation of local knowledge and expertise, and 4) filling data and information gaps identified by the community.

## TNC's Role

- Scientific/technical expertise
- Facilitation
- Financial

TNC's work is focused on providing technical, planning, facilitation, fundraising and capacity building support to community-based partners on Fishers Island and NY State to explore options for seagrass conservation and management at Fishers, including the evaluation of potential sites for the designation of seagrass management areas and management plan development. While the conservation target is the eelgrass ecosystem, the process involves gathering and, in some cases, generating, data for multiple management issues from water quality and climate change to impacts associated with boating, fishing and other human uses. For example, TNC worked with the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and Lighthawk Conservation on an [aerial survey](#) project to characterize boating activity around the island in order to help with the siting of seagrass management areas.

## Project Partners

**Lead Institution:** New York State Department of Environmental Conservation

**Other Partners:** Fishers Island Conservancy; Henry L. Ferguson Museum; Yale University School of Forestry and Environmental Studies; Lighthawk Conservation

## Status

The community-based Fishers Island Seagrass Management (FISM) coalition formed and began meeting in August 2017. The coalition convened its first meeting with NYS DEC in November 2017. Data collection and analyses to address stakeholder needs and fundraising efforts to build local capacity are underway.

## Fact Sheets and Links

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New York State Seagrass [Management](#)

[Protecting Seagrass in Long Island Sound](#)

# Long Island Sound National Estuarine Research Reserve (CT)

## Overview

The state of Connecticut, along with NOAA, has initiated a process to select and designate a [National Estuarine Research Reserve \(NERR\)](#). NERRs are part of a national system of coastal sites designed to protect and study estuarine systems. One of the goals of the NERR system is to provide data to aid conservation and management efforts on local and national levels. The addition of a NERR in Long Island Sound will complement the marine spatial planning process already underway in the Sound [See the Blue Plan] by providing additional information for management decisions in these waters.

A leadership team, composed of the CT Department of Energy and Environmental Protection's Land and Water Resources Division, the UConn Marine Sciences Department and CT SeaGrant is evaluating existing protected land, engaging coastal experts and stakeholders, and holding public meetings to present information and gather input. Using information gathered through these efforts, the state will nominate a site for designation.

## TNC's Role

- Science/technical expertise
- Advisory

TNC's Long Island Sound Program Director is part of a stakeholder team exploring potential sites for the reserve, lending specific scientific expertise on the importance of protecting, managing and restoring marine resources in Long Island Sound.

## Project Partners

**Lead Institution:** Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection

**Other Partners:** NOAA, University of Connecticut

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The effort began in 2016 and is currently underway

## Fact Sheets and Links

[A National Estuarine Research Reserve \(NERR\) for Long Island Sound](#)

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