

What if everyone fell in love with Long Island Sound and its watershed?

A strategy is afoot to foster more connection and affection for the estuary

Story and photos by Judy Benson

There's a new plan for taking better care of Long Island Sound.

You're part of it, if you live most anywhere in Connecticut or the New York City/Westchester-Long Island region bordering the Sound, so you might want to learn what that means.

The name—Long Island Sound Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan 2025—may not excite you. Maybe it sounds like another tome of bureaucratic mumbo jumbo that collects dust on a shelf somewhere.

But that's not what the authors, who came together under the umbrella of the Long Island Sound Partnership, have in mind. The many contributors, from the Environmental Protection Agency, Connecticut and New York Sea Grant programs, government agencies, municipal officials and conservation groups, intend for the plan to guide concrete actions through 2035. The plan specifies them and spells out tracking measures to hold everyone involved accountable.

While much of the 140-page plan is an update of previous iterations of the CCMP, there is one entirely new goal, called Informed and Engaged Public, or IEP for short. That's the one that most involves you and your fellow residents of the Connecticut and New York portions of the Sound watershed—the land area that drains into the estuary. The nuts and bolts of this goal are summarized on the opening page: "Inspire and empower the public to appreciate, value and

protect Long Island Sound and the waters that flow into the Sound."

How would that be accomplished?

Maggie Cozens, Partnership outreach coordinator at Connecticut Sea Grant and a lead author of the IEP section, decided the best way to explain it would be to show rather than tell. The idea was to convey how this goal could be accomplished in real places. She visited three public sites in the watershed, and noted how they fall short, set a good example, or could be better used to advance the IEP aims.



Maggie Cozens looks out over the beach at Seaside State Park from a "No Swimming" sign devoid of explanation.

"It doesn't mean you should be building a theme park at every site," she said. "It's about preserving the character of the place and encouraging people to feel welcome there."

The premise of the IEP plan is to prioritize improving public access as the first step. From that foundation, other projects would help build a sense of belonging and foster stewardship



Historic but dilapidated buildings at Seaside State Park are slated to be torn down in 2026 as a plan for improvements gets underway.

and involvement in protection of the Sound's land and water-based resources. At the first site Cozens visited, Seaside State Park in Waterford, improving access with physical structures and more inviting messages is an obvious need.

"When you first go into the parking lot, it looks like you're trespassing," she said, noting the cracked pavement, "no swimming" signs at the sandy beach devoid of explanation, and broken-down buildings. "It needs physical improvements like bathrooms, some interpretive signage about the history and ecology, some trash cans. But I like the fact that it's so quiet here. I wouldn't mess with it too much. It's a great site for passive recreation."

Seaside became a state park in 2014, the first new park on the Connecticut shoreline in 50 years. Historic but now dilapidated buildings on the site that once served as a tuberculosis hospital for children, then a mental health facility, are slated for demolition.

The state's plan for the park, which include

several of the improvements Cozens suggested, call for work to begin in 2026. As Seaside's transformation gets underway, she and others in the Partnership would be available to support projects there that would advance the IEP goals, such as with funding, providing educational programming and getting the word out about the park.

Encouraging visitors to Seaside, she noted, could help take some of the pressure off other shoreline parks such as Hammonasset in Madison and Rocky Neck in East Lyme that routinely reach capacity on summer days.

"You don't want to hammer any of these sites with overuse," she said.

The next stop was Wadsworth Falls State Park, which straddles Middletown and Middlefield. A popular inland site with a signature water feature, this park offers an ideal opportunity to educate people about how it's connected to the Sound.



Teens enjoy cooling off in Wadsworth Falls on a July day.

“It’s so important to highlight the connection to the Sound at these upper watershed locations,” Cozens said, as the cascading Coginchaug River splashed over a cliff onto boulders behind her. “Pretty much any body of water you interact with in Connecticut is connected to the Sound. We could really do a lot more to orient people to their watershed address.”

She envisioned some attractive but understated interpretive signs explaining what a watershed is, and how the falls are connected to the Sound. There’s an opportunity for a participatory science project, such as water quality monitoring by volunteers.

As she spoke, the Bean family—father Jacob and son Henry from Middletown, and grandparents Douglas and Sue from Maine—climbed gingerly onto a rock platform beneath the falls. They posed for pictures.

A short time later, three teenage boys in swimming trunks swam into the river below the falls, disregarding the “no swimming” signs, and began climbing, barefooted, up the cliff face. Still another sign nearby read, “no picnicking.”

“Why no picnicking?” Cozens asked. “The only signs here are about what not to do. We can use signage to give some context and increase environmental literacy.”

Since the falls are already a big draw, she said, there is a lot of potential to work with local educators, community groups and state park managers to make a visit there more enriching and perhaps turn some waterfall gawkers into environmental stewards.

“It would be great to work with the state parks on some common messaging,” Cozens said.

The third site took Cozens to the Sandy Point Bird Sanctuary in West Haven, a preserve of beach and marshes owned by the city and managed with help from Audubon Connecticut. It has attractive educational signs about the Sound watershed, an inviting parking area with raised bed pollinator gardens and an accessible location for nearby urban communities. In many ways, she said, it looked like a model for other public spaces in the watershed.

“What’s cool about this spot is that the city is right here,” she said, looking from the beach across to New Haven, while a couple fished nearby. “There’s a ton of development here, but this is an unspoiled shoreline and marsh. There’s a ton of shoreline that’s gated off, and here you have a nice example of urban shoreline access.”

She also saw potential as an outdoor classroom, for lessons about marshes and the beach environment. Signs in the flower beds for “Friends of Sandy Point” signified that the community is well connected to the site, another key asset.

“The community has obviously done a good job stewarding this site, so you’d definitely want to get them involved in anything you do here,” she said. “But there’s not much I would do to the site, other than raise awareness about it, maybe upgrade the rest room (now a port-a-john).”

Jimena Perez-Viscasillas, Partnership outreach coordinator at New York Sea Grant, and Robert Burg, the Partnership’s communications coordinator, were lead authors with Cozens on the IEP section, organized in three parts: public access, environmental literacy and stewardship.



Egrets wade in the marsh at the Sandy Point Bird Sanctuary in West Haven.

“The order of those three buckets in the IEP section was purposeful,” Perez-Viscasillas said. “Public access and connection come first, then environmental literacy and knowledge, then stewardship and the behaviors people are engaged in.”

Burg said the emphasis on public access comes from the realization that “in many areas, there’s a shortage of places for people to go to enjoy Long Island Sound, and we also recognize that many existing sites are not adequate. They’re not easy to get to, or there are inadequate bathrooms, or the signs aren’t welcoming.”

The CCMP, he noted, sets a goal of adding 40 new public sites on the Sound by 2035, and to improve 60 existing ones, half of those in communities with limited access to the Sound and its connecting waterbodies.

The next step, he said, is bringing work groups together to collaborate on plans for executing these goals. Group members would come from a variety of state, local and non-profit groups with an interest in the Sound and its watershed.

Funding for projects that would help meet the IEP goals would be available from grants the Partnership helps support and administer, Burg said.

“We’ll develop a set of criteria in our grants” specifically focused on the IEP goals, he said.

Building a greater sense of belonging to the Sound and its watershed, Perez-Viscasillas acknowledged, will require helping people feel safe and welcome at the shoreline, and figuring out how to address the hostility of some shoreline homeowners towards visitors.

“One of the main reasons we added improving public access to the new CCMP is because when we spoke with local communities about their relationship to the Sound, a lot of what we heard was related to limited public access” she said. “People really value having access to natural spaces, but in this region getting to the water, or even knowing how to or feeling like you are allowed to, is not always easy.”

She also thinks about the best way to reach out to the many subsistence fishermen she often sees at some of her favorite beaches on Long Island, to build on their existing relationship with the Sound.

Burg sees one overarching goal for all the components of the IEP section of the larger plan—to elevate public awareness about the Sound’s assets and uniqueness.

“Long Island Sound is a network of special places,” he said.

The 2025 Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan can be found at:
<https://lispartnership.org/2025/06/2025-comprehensive-conservation-and-management-plan-ccmp/>.

More articles on the 40th anniversary of the partnership and the 2025 CCMP can be found at:
<https://seagrant.uconn.edu/?p=13649>

