

Survey reveals strengths, weaknesses in public's relationship to Long Island Sound

By Nancy Balcom

If I asked you, “What three adjectives come to mind when you think about Long Island Sound,” what would you say?

Looking out my office window at the Avery Point lighthouse and Long Island Sound beyond, as I've had the treat of doing for more than 30 years, my answers are...intriguing, changeable and crucial.

“Intriguing” because of its many habitats and organisms I never get tired of exploring.

“Changeable” because of its many weather-directed moods that turn quietly lapping waves into stomach-churning waters. “Crucial” because of the many livelihoods and recreational activities it supports.

Residents of Connecticut
and certain parts of
New York were asked

this question as part of the 2024 Long Island Sound Public Perceptions Survey and focus group discussions. Their responses, captured in a word cloud image in the summary report made available in August, were overwhelmingly positive and included “fun,” “beautiful,” “peaceful,” and “relaxing.” “Fishing,” “swimming” and “beach” were called out frequently. Among the fewer negative adjectives offered were

“dirty,” “polluted,” “crowded,” and “murky.”

For many, there's an emotional benefit to being near the Sound. Sixty percent of survey respondents agreed with the statement, "Being near Long Island Sound makes me feel peaceful and happier" while only 13% disagreed.

Focus group participant Heather (East Northport, NY) remarked, “I

have really good memories associated with the Sound. ...Just doing swimming and having outings with my family at the beach. And it's a strong connection, a sense of pride and joy that I live by the Sound. So it's a beautiful thing."

Nancy (Norwalk, CT)
shared, *"I have always
loved the beach, any body of
water, but I really like the
sound of water...It sounds
really beautiful. And when*

I do go, I use it to relax and also to take my grandchildren, because they like to play in the sand and all that."

Positive feelings about the Sound also translate into caring for the Sound. Two-thirds of survey respondents agreed with the statement, “I care



A word cloud comprised of terms survey respondents associate with Long Island Sound.



Swimmers and sunbathers enjoy Waterford Town Beach on an August weekend. Photo: Judy Benson

about Long Island Sound.” About three-quarters said they “care about the river, stream, or coastline...nearest to where I live.”

Respondents offered specific reasons why they appreciate the Sound: 61% said it provides recreational opportunities, 58% said it has a positive economic impact on the region, and 60% would call the Sound “a national treasure.”

Yet, despite all these positive impressions, only 14% of survey respondents said they “yes, definitely” live in the Long Island Sound watershed while 31% said “no, definitely not.” Since everyone surveyed does live within the watershed, a broad-based effort to strengthen peoples’ connections to the Sound seems warranted.

“As we saw from survey responses, many residents aren’t aware that they live in the Sound’s watershed and that their actions impact the Sound,” said Larissa Graham, education coordinator for the Connecticut National

Estuarine Research Reserve and survey team member. “The Sound’s watershed, or drainage basin, covers the north shore of Long Island, parts of New York City and Westchester County, nearly all of Connecticut, and continues to stretch up to the Canadian border. When it rains, pollutants such as litter, excess fertilizer, pesticides and nitrogen from improperly working septic tanks can wash into local streams, rivers, and storm drains or soak into groundwater and be carried to the Sound. Even if you can’t see the Sound, it’s important to know that the choices you make impact it.”

Information contained in the public perceptions report will help those working towards the new Informed and Engaged Public (IEP) goal in the Partnership’s updated Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP). Nancy Seligson, co-chair of the LIS Partnership Citizens Advisory Committee and member of the survey team, shared why it’s important to understand public perceptions.

“The public perceptions survey provides invaluable information about peoples’ interests and needs regarding Long Island Sound,” said Seligson. “It also tells us how much or how little people know about the Sound. The Citizens Advisory Committee needs this information to help connect people to the Sound because we know from experience that when people learn about the Sound, they also appreciate it. That’s why it’s critical to hear from the public. The public perceptions survey is an ideal tool to tailor programs and communication to better reach and engage people in all of the Long Island Sound watershed.”

A team representing numerous Partnership groups and organizations developed the questions with guidance from the contracted firm, OpinionWorks. The questions covered outdoor activities on or near the Sound; access and barriers to visiting the Sound and sense of welcome and belonging; personal priorities related to the natural environment; impressions of LIS; perceptions of water quality and the safety of seafood and swimming; perceptions of the impact of personal actions on the health of local and Sound waters; awareness of and attitudes about contaminants; adoption and likelihood of future adoption of individual practices that help or hurt the Sound; and trusted sources of information.

“Like many other areas around the Sound—though sometimes more so—residents in Queens and the Bronx often don’t realize they live within the Long Island Sound watershed,” said Lillet Genovesi, Partnership outreach coordinator for New York City and Westchester County. “As part of New York City—the largest city in the country—their everyday actions, both positive and negative, have a significant impact on the shoreline and water quality of this beautiful and cherished estuary.”

Those local waters are important for many reasons. They support the numerous diverse



Volunteers collect trash along the seawall on Long Wharf Drive in New Haven during an August 16 cleanup sponsored by Connecticut Sea Grant and Save the Sound.
Photo: Judy Benson

organisms living in or near beaches, tidal flats, marshes and open waters. They support commercial fishing and shellfishing businesses and recreational pastimes such as swimming and boating.

The health of the Sound’s waters has long been a priority concern of the Partnership and the focus of extensive efforts to make improvements. Current public perception is split, with 45% saying water quality is “excellent” or “good” and 41% saying it’s “fair” or “poor.”

When asked if they think the Sound’s overall water quality is better, worse or the same compared to five years ago, 29% perceive improvement; 22% think the water is getting worse and 33% see no change. Perhaps five years is too short a timeframe to discern significant changes. During one focus group, longtime residents of the western Sound region decidedly expressed more positive views of changes they have witnessed over time.

Rob (City Island, The Bronx, NY) said, “*The Sound is much, much, much, much, much cleaner than even as little as 20 years ago. Completely different animal. I mean, we have mussels growing. The mussels disappeared 30 years ago... The western part of the Sound is loaded with mussels now all over the place. That tells you we have a healthy (ecosystem)... They wouldn’t be here otherwise.*”

Zenida (Bridgeport, CT) remarked, *“When I was younger in Bridgeport...they kept having to close (the beaches) for toxins in the water. But now we don’t get those alerts. We don’t get our beaches closed down. They do a lot more water treatment work around the beaches to make sure it’s safe for us to swim. So, I got to say, Bridgeport is stepping up in that area, and it is a lot better compared to what it used to be.”*

While 26% of survey respondents believe swimming in the Sound is unhealthy, this is a significant decrease from the 38% who believed this in 2006. Similarly, while 25% believe eating fish or shellfish from the Sound’s waters is unsafe, this is much lower than the 41% who believed this in 2006. Experts consider swimming and eating fish from most areas of the Sound to be safe. Water tests determine if swimming closures are necessary, especially after heavy rains. State fish consumption advisories provide guidelines for fish species that can accumulate higher levels of chemical contaminants, such as larger bluefish and striped bass.

Distance and lack of time topped the list of reasons why people don’t visit the Sound, but the cost of parking or permit fees was the third most common reason. Although admission to Connecticut state beaches is free to residents, that is not the case for municipal and privately-owned sites; several focus group participants spoke with frustration about the high cost of visiting Sound beaches.

About three-quarters of respondents agreed that “The actions of people on land have an impact on the health of Long Island Sound.” Yet, an overwhelming majority do not recognize the impact their own actions have on the Sound’s water quality. Renewed efforts by the Partnership will be needed so more people understand these connections.

While a majority are not sure what they can do to help protect the health of Long Island Sound, younger residents, those newer to the area and those with lower household incomes more

readily thought there are changes they could individually make that would help.

Encouragement from friends can help shift inaction to action, as shared by focus group member Paola (Stamford, CT,) who said, *“I feel if people see other people do things, they want to get in on the trend or get in on everything so they could say they’re a part of it... I have a friend who actually volunteers at the beach to clean up, and because she started doing it, my other friends started doing it. So I feel people love doing things once they see that other people start doing it.”*

Let’s hope we can continue to build that chain of positive action person by person.

The full report can be downloaded from the Partnership website:

<https://lispartnership.org/2025/08/2024-public-perception-survey/>

Note: *The survey sample of 3,709 residents produced a margin of sampling error of no more than $\pm 1.6\%$ at the 95% confidence level, meaning that if every adult resident of the region had been interviewed, the actual results could be expected to fall within that margin at least 95% of the time.* 🐟



UConn students launch a rowboat from the beach at the Avery Point campus as part of the “Messing About in Boats” event in September 2024. Photo: Judy Benson