

WRACKLINES

WHERE CONNECTICUT MEETS THE SOUND



SOUND CONNECTIONS

Extending 40 years of estuary stewardship

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From the Editor

A SLITHERY MASCOT FOR LONG ISLAND SOUND?



This summer I had a front-row seat on two seines at opposite ends of Long Island Sound.

Both yielded many natural treasures, from filamentous seaweed to a seahorse to silversides by the dozens. There were even several specimens of *Anguilla rostrata* (the American eel), a creature that could be the perfect symbol of a new thrust in one of the main themes recently set for the conservation of the estuary—connecting the Sound to its inland watershed.

The first seine was in July at Calf Pasture Beach on the western side, when two counselors for The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk's summer camp drew the long net through the water onto shore for elementary and middle high school charges to behold sea life first-hand.

"We found a horseshoe crab," one boy exclaimed.

"There are a lot of little fish," said the pink-booted girl next to him.

"Could you hand me any cool animals you find?" a third camper asked Tiffany Adams, one of the wader-clad counselors who pulled the net.

She kept busy picking up blue crabs and various fish, showing them to the students then throwing them back in the water. Suddenly a two-foot long eel slithered into view. She tried several times to grab it, unsuccessful.

"He's a master of escape," she said. "I guess that's why they say 'slippery as an eel.'"

After several more tries, she captured the eel and returned it to the water.

Several weeks later, a group of researchers whose main mission was to net several kinds of juvenile flounder for a study of their diets, encircled two four-foot eels and several smaller ones in their haul. This particular seine, one of several the researchers had done that summer in Mumford Cove on the eastern end of the Sound, was especially abundant.

"We normally see a lot of fish, but this is insane," said Emma Siegfried, like the others a doctoral student in Professor Hannes Baumann's lab. "This is like Christmas."

Seeing so many marine creatures—almost too many for the researchers to count—was delightful, and exciting. Even the researchers got a little giddy. But the eels especially fascinated me. They are one of the few catadromous species that have a somewhat mysterious life cycle, migrating from fresh water to marine waters to spawn, rather than the other way around like herring and their anadromous cousins. They are also considered endangered due to decades of overfishing and a lucrative trade in juveniles, known as glass eels.

They need both healthy fresh and marine waters to survive and thrive, just like Long Island Sound itself.

The Long Island Sound Partnership, the umbrella organization for the two states and numerous other groups working to protect the estuary, this summer released a new version of its guidebook for that work, called the Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan. One of the new elements is a focus on encouraging stewardship, engagement and pollution reduction not just along the two states' coasts, but into all the upland lakes, streams and rivers that flow into the Sound all the way from the Canadian border.

I think the eels would approve. When it's spawning time, an eel living in Lake Sunapee in New Hampshire will swim hundreds of miles to the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, to an area known as the Sargasso Sea.

All those waters in between are its home. It's all connected.



Judy Benson
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Top: Left, Maritime Aquarium camp counselors pull a seine net at Calf Pasture Beach in Norwalk. Right, a UConn researcher tosses an eel caught in a seine net back into Mumford Cove.

Cover: Three generations of the Bean family—grandfather Douglas, left, his grandson Henry, center, and his son Jacob, of Middletown, get close to Wadsworth Falls on a rock ledge on a July afternoon. Photos: Judy Benson

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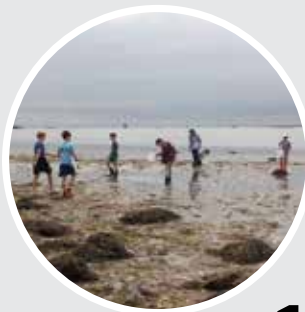
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About Our Contributors

NANCY BALCOM

Nancy Balcom is the associate director and extension program leader for Connecticut Sea Grant and a senior extension educator with UConn Extension. Her extension interests range from safe seafood handling and safety at sea to disaster risk communication and community resilience. She has been part of the Sea Grant family for more than 40 years, starting in 1985 as a graduate student. She earned her undergraduate degree from UConn and her masters in marine fisheries from the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, College of William & Mary.



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Erica Casper is the Long Island Sound outreach support coordinator for Connecticut Sea Grant and the Long Island Sound Partnership. She advances science communication related to the protection and restoration of Long Island Sound and its watershed. With over a decade of experience in writing, content development, and outreach, she has translated complex topics for both scientific and public audiences. Erica holds a master's degree in marine science from Boston University and has supported initiatives at universities and research institutions.



KIRAN JOHNSON

Kiran Johnson is a fourth-year undergraduate student at Northeastern University studying journalism and environmental science. She has written for various science publications at Northeastern, communicated about lobster research as part of Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution's Sea Grant program and has worked at the *Provincetown Independent* newspaper. Johnson has an interest in the natural world—exploring it, explaining it and being immersed in it.



JUDY BENSON

Judy Benson has been communications coordinator at Connecticut Sea Grant and editor of *Wrack Lines* since 2017. Before that, she was a newspaper reporter and editor, concluding her journalism career at *The Day* of New London covering health and the environment. She is the author of two books, the latest titled, *The Book of Todd*, a collaboration with her late husband published in cooperation with New London Librarium (nllibrarium.com). She earned both a bachelor's degree in journalism and a Master of Science in natural resources from UConn.



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>



From busy beach to uninhabited island, expansive marsh to urban river

By Erica Casper

Exploring four Long Island Sound Stewardship Areas, longing to see more

In 2003, the Long Island Sound Partnership launched a stewardship initiative to identify the most ecologically and recreationally significant places on coastal Long Island Sound. Experts and community members worked together to highlight 33 areas across Connecticut and New York that deserved special recognition and investment.

These places protect rare habitats, support threatened species, offer public access to the water and provide opportunities for research and education. Since then, the Long Island Sound Partnership has invested millions of dollars in protecting, restoring, and improving these areas.

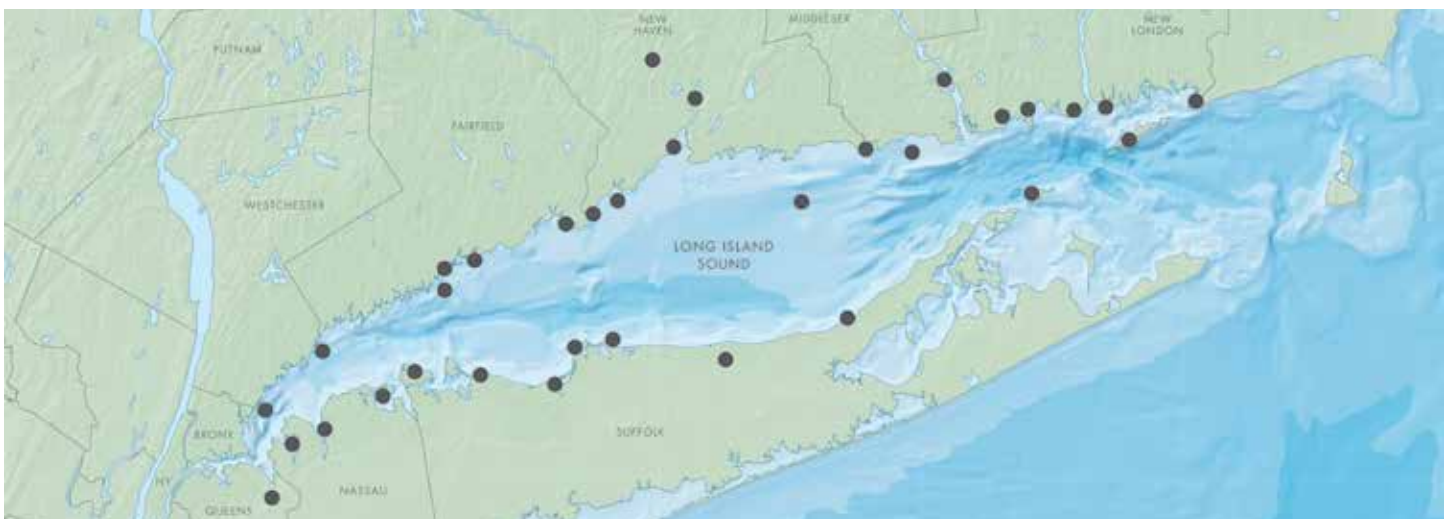
I've been learning about the stewardship initiative since I started working for the Long Island Sound Partnership and Connecticut Sea Grant earlier this

year. Each of the Stewardship Areas tells part of the story of Long Island Sound: how it supports both people and wildlife, how it has been shaped by history, and how it continues to change. Some areas I already knew well, such as Bluff Point, Harkness, and Rocky Neck state parks, longtime favorites of mine for spending time outdoors. I was unfamiliar with many others, however, and learning about them on paper sparked my curiosity to experience them firsthand.

With that in mind, I recently visited four new-to-me Stewardship Areas in Connecticut: Norwalk Harbor, Charles Island, Barn Island and the Quinnipiac River. They all offered something different—some bustling, some remote, some surprising in their setting. Together, these areas showed me how diverse the Sound's landscapes are and why they matter, while



Tiffany Adams, counselor for The Maritime Aquarium summer camp, shows campers the sea life captured in a seine net at Calf Pasture Beach. Photo: Judy Benson



Thirty-three sites in Connecticut and New York have been designated as Long Island Sound Stewardship Areas. Illustration by Lucy Reading-Ikkanda for LIS Partnership

highlighting unique ways to explore and appreciate what makes Long Island Sound special.

Norwalk Harbor: Where the City Meets the Sea



Maritime Aquarium campers explore the area at Calf Pasture Beach exposed at low tide. Photos: Judy Benson

Norwalk Harbor is a hub of activity, where recreation, industry, and conservation come together. Veterans Memorial Park and nearby Calf Pasture Beach provide easy access to the water and lots of options for spending time outside. Whether you're launching a kayak, watching the boats, fishing from the pier, or just walking along the shore, the harbor invites people in.

Veterans Memorial Park spans 35 acres, with sports fields, paths and a boat launch. It's open year-round from dawn to dusk. Calf Pasture Beach, one of the area's most popular spots, offers sandy beach access, lifeguard-supervised swimming, and views of the Norwalk Islands. There's also a skate park, concessions, and a small boat ramp for kayaks and canoes.

One of the harbor's most notable features is its oyster industry. Norwalk has been a major source of oysters for generations. If you've eaten oysters in New England, there's a good chance they came from here. That history is still alive in the working waterfront and the educational programs nearby. Oyster boats can often be seen from the beach, and there's even a recreational shellfishing area there where people can harvest their own.

When I visited, the beach was buzzing with energy. Walkers and joggers were enjoying the paved paths. Sailboats glided past in the water. Two summer camp groups from The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk were exploring the shore and combing

through treasures captured by seine net pulls in the shallows. The excitement was contagious as the kids discovered pipefish, pufferfish, crabs, shrimp, and even a horseshoe crab. It was a great reminder that Norwalk Harbor isn't just a place for recreation, it's also a living classroom where people of all ages can learn about the Sound.

Charles Island: A Natural Gem with a Tidal Secret



Visitors venture out on the sand bar towards Charles Island.

Charles Island sits just offshore from Silver Sands State Park in Milford. This 14-acre island is home to one of Connecticut's largest breeding colonies of herons and egrets and has been designated a Natural Area Preserve and a National Audubon Society Important Bird Area. Its dense woods and rocky shoreline offer vital nesting habitat for great egrets, snowy egrets, and other coastal birds.

Geologically, Charles Island is a tied island. It is connected to the mainland by a natural gravel bar that's only exposed at low tide. It's a striking feature that draws visitors out along the sandbar, creating a temporary bridge between land and island. But timing is everything. When I visited, I missed my window. The tide had already come in, and the sandbar was submerged. I hadn't checked the tide chart ahead of time, so I couldn't cross.

That said, the shoreline and boardwalk at Silver Sands State Park were still worth the trip. The beach is wide, with shallow water and lifeguards on duty during the summer. It's an accessible place to walk, relax and watch birds overhead. If you're planning to visit the island itself, though, planning ahead is important. The tides make all the difference, and visiting during nesting season (typically May through August) is discouraged to protect the birds.

With a history that includes a tobacco farm, a failed hotel, and a 20th-century retreat center, Charles

Island has seen its share of stories. Today, it's a reminder that some of the Sound's most interesting places are those that let nature take the lead.

Barn Island: A Living Laboratory for Coastal Change

Barn Island, located in Stonington, is the largest coastal Wildlife Management Area in Connecticut and one of the most ecologically diverse. Spanning over 1,000 acres, it includes salt and brackish marshes, intertidal flats, upland forests, a sandy beach, and even a rare sea-level fen. It's a place where you can experience the full range of coastal habitats, all in one visit.

But Barn Island isn't just a beautiful landscape. It's also a vital research site. For more than 60 years, scientists have been studying its wetlands to better understand how marshes respond to sea-level rise and human activity. After misguided efforts in the 1930s to control mosquitoes by digging ditches to drain the marsh, restoration work began and continues to the present. That history has made Barn Island a rich case study for long-term ecological change.

When I walked the trails, I passed from shaded forest into open marsh, with the landscape shifting dramatically from one moment to the next. Dragonflies buzzed around, bees moved from flower to flower, and birds called in the distance. If I could use one word to describe it, I would say "peaceful." Outside the trailhead is a parking lot and boat launch, offering access for paddling and fishing.

Barn Island offers something for everyone: scientists, birders, hikers, and anyone looking to spend quiet time in nature. It's also a reminder that conservation takes time, and that places like this can teach us a lot about both change and resilience.



The marshes at Barn Island Wildlife Management Area are surrounded by a coastal forest. Photo: Judy Benson

Quinnipiac River: A Green Corridor in the City



The main trail at the Quinnipiac River takes visitors into the upland forest and along the river. Photo: Erica Casper

The Quinnipiac River Marsh Wildlife Management Area and State Park in New Haven anchor the Quinnipiac River Stewardship Area, offering nearly 900 acres of tidal marsh, floodplain forest, and upland habitat within an urban setting. Designated an Important Bird Area by the National Audubon Society, the marshes attract migratory waterfowl and provide habitat for threatened species such as the northern harrier and least bittern. The four-mile Banton Quinnipiac Trail winds through the floodplain, giving visitors a chance to hike, birdwatch, or simply experience one of the rare stretches of green space along the lower river.

When I visited, I followed part of the trail that began in New Haven. At times it hugged the river's bends; at others it meandered upland. The sounds of birds and insects mixed with the constant hum of the nearby Merritt Parkway, nature and city pressed close together, separated in places only by a strip of forest and guardrails. Along the trail, I passed a woman with a fishing pole, hinting at quiet fishing spots tucked farther along the river.

This section of the Quinnipiac may not feel as remote as some other Stewardship Areas, but it highlights why urban access to nature matters. For local residents, the river provides habitat for wildlife and a daily reminder that green corridors and healthy waterways can exist even in the middle of a city.

These four visits, along with others I've explored, are just the beginning. There are still plenty of Stewardship Areas to discover, and each season brings new sights, wildlife and perspectives. Spending time at them is an easy way to connect with the Sound. Grab a trail map, pick a site, and see for yourself why these places matter. 

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

Live from Long Island Sound

By Kiran Johnson



Peter Auster is seen in an eelgrass meadow wearing the Presenter Helmet in this image from a pilot video. Photo courtesy of the CT National Estuarine Research Reserve.

You might know Long Island Sound by its sometimes green, opaque waters or enjoy its beaches. Fishermen might know it by the species they catch—black sea bass, bluefish and scup. Peter Auster and Jason Krumholz know it from a sub-aquatic perspective.

Waist-high but similar to a forest—that’s how Auster describes standing in an eelgrass meadow. In the way that wind blows through a forest, waves ripple through the seagrass. Fish weave between blades while crustaceans scuttle around stalks.

Auster has been diving for 50 years. He is a research professor emeritus of marine sciences and a marine ecologist and conservation biologist at the UConn.

A primary location of his research is now the Connecticut National Estuarine Research Reserve

(CTNERR), established in 2022. It is one of 30 coastal sites with the NERR designation and is located on the eastern end of the Sound. Here, shipwrecks being reclaimed by nature, intertidal marshes and shellfish beds share the waters with 78 different fish species. But there is nothing more quintessentially Long Island Sound than eelgrass meadows.

“A lot of people see eelgrass as a nuisance. It washes up on beaches, decomposes, smells bad, gets tangled in boat propellers,” says Krumholz. “But it has a tremendous amount of ecological value.”

A scientific diver since 2006, he is the stewardship coordinator at the CTNERR and is based at UConn’s Avery Point Campus.

Krumholz and Auster want to bring their perspectives of the Sound out of the water and into classrooms, aquariums and, eventually, into interactive live streams conducted from the sea floor. For three days last May, they trialed a new diving helmet that enabled them to record video and audio from an eelgrass meadow 12 feet deep, near Avery Point.

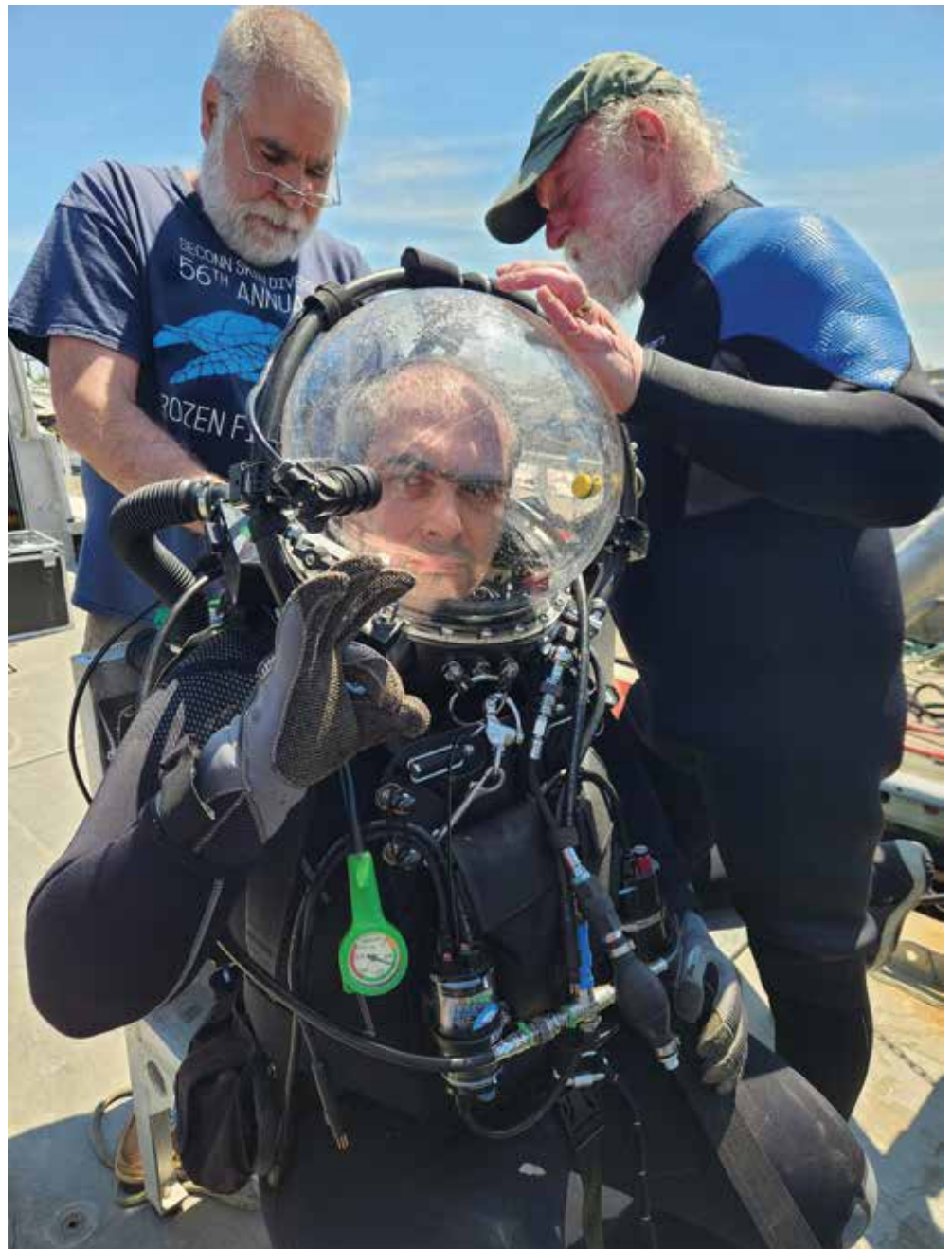
“It’s an underwater storytelling tool,” said Mike Lombardi. He is the creator of what he calls the “Presenter Helmet” and the company that owns it, Lombardi Undersea LLC. Lombardi spent much of the three-day period behind the camera, underwater, filming Auster and Krumholz speaking.

The helmet looks like an upside-down fishbowl on the diver’s head. The dome is made of a custom polyacrylic plastic that is flexible and shatterproof. The diver has a 360° view of their environment, and the audience can see the diver’s entire face as they interact with their underwater surroundings.

“The complaint was always, well, we go through all this effort and expense to try to capture diver audio, but we can’t see the diver’s reaction to things,” said Lombardi. He has worked on various underwater film shoots, such as the Discovery Channel’s “Shark Week,” the PBS Nova show “Creatures of Light,” and has had his own work featured in *National Geographic*.

“In the end, the audio usually wasn’t very good,” Lombardi said about past film shoots. The diver’s voice would be dubbed in during post-production. “We’re aiming to condense this entire operation,” he added.

The Presenter Helmet doesn’t require a breathing mouthpiece, and the diver speaks into a microphone located inside the helmet. A rebreather, secured to the diver’s back, recirculates oxygen into the helmet while filtering



Jason Krumholz gets ready for a dive in the Presenter Helmet. Photo courtesy of the CT National Estuarine Research Reserve

out carbon dioxide that the diver exhales. Additional oxygen is circulated into the helmet, but the rebreather is a closed system and enables the diver to move freely without being tethered to the surface.

A \$5,000 grant from Connecticut Sea Grant for the pilot project enabled the team to test the feasibility of this novel method of underwater content creation. The grant covered the cost of subcontracting to Lombardi Undersea for a dive technician's time to prepare the specialized equipment, supervise three days of field use and demobilize the gear.

"This was a proof-of-concept project," said Auster. The goal was to demonstrate that the Presenter Helmet approach, with an underwater host, could be an effective tool to create education and outreach content.

During the three-day trial period, the team worked to develop a protocol for training, including learning how to use the rebreather, and procedures for field use and helmet safety. Then, there was the actual content creation piece.

"Most people can picture a coral reef because they've seen it in magazines and they've seen it on television," said Auster. "People have an interest in Long Island Sound but they don't have a mental picture."

The camera is located outside of the helmet, connected to the microphone by a 15-foot wire. It has two screens: one facing the presenter and the second facing the person filming. This enables the presenter and cameraman to work together.

"The shot we're working to engineer with the helmet helps to bring a viewer into the environment, benefitting from a stillness and interaction with a person who is already there," Lombardi said.

"You feel connected to the diver, you feel connected to the place, and you feel like you're part of it," Krumholz said.

He views his job as connecting people to nature. He hopes the helmet will make a difference for viewers vacillating between indecision and taking action for the marine environment.

Amid the forces of nature underwater

Filming underwater is similar to doing it on land, except that physics play a larger role.

"It's like you're trying to hold a 60-pound balloon over your head the whole time. It's pulling you up," Krumholz said about the helmet.

To counter the buoyancy, 32 pounds of weights were fixed to plates on the front and back of the helmet.

A key part of developing protocol and showing proof of concept was to work out how to make the dive presenter feel secure, physically and mentally. If the diver was worried about safety or not comfortable with their equipment, the conversation wouldn't feel natural and engaging to the audience.

"Day one," said Larissa Graham, "they just focused on making sure that everybody felt comfortable in the gear." Graham is the CTNERR's education coordinator, and she accompanied the divers on the three-day pilot test.

Alterations to the helmet had to be made to fit both Krumholz and Auster's facial structures. This was done with foam pads and adjustments to how the helmet straps to the chest piece.

"The underwater team is three people. It's the presenter, the videographer, and then the safety diver, who's one person who's just focusing on safety," Krumholz said.

Auster and Krumholz took turns in the presenter role. Jeff Godfrey, the diving safety officer in the UConn Department of Marine Sciences, served as the safety diver.

On day two, the divers began presenting underwater from a script.

“Weather conditions created some challenges with site selection and visibility, so the footage isn’t as clear as we hoped, though they were comfortable in the helmet itself,” Graham said. “On day three, we switched things up to ask more open-ended questions and that’s where we got the best footage.”

The team would film underwater for 30 minutes to one hour, structured around the length of their narrative, before surfacing. During that time, Graham stayed on the boat, cuing the divers relevant facts to highlight about the Sound between shots.

Prior to the three-day period, Graham posted a Google Form to the CTNERR’s Facebook and Instagram pages asking for teachers to send questions from students to ask the divers.

“After reading the book, *A House for Hermit Crab* by Eric Carle, my kindergarten students would like to know if the Sound has any sea urchins,” commented a teacher from Monroe Elementary School.
(Answer: Yes we do, but not as many as we used to.)

Eleventh and 12th grade oceanography classes from Newtown High School asked, “Does visibility increase below the photic zone due to a decrease in plankton (phyto) or does the current kick up detritus and sediment (due to increased turbidity currents) making water clarity/visibility still an issue?”
(Answer: It depends, but sometimes it can be very clear below the photic zone, even though it is often pitch black.”

Krumholz responded to these questions during the pilot filming, and once the footage is edited it will be shared in classrooms.

By the third day, the team finished filming their scripted material and ended trial shooting.

Filming in the future

The imminent next step for testing the Presenter Helmet’s outreach abilities is to try livestreaming.

“The hardest part underwater is microphones,” Lombardi said. He is working to find or create a different microphone that’s compatible with the technology used for livestreaming.

Are there others who could be presenters? Even those who aren’t expert divers?

“As we keep practicing those systems and training those safety divers, and the safety divers get better and better, the skill of the diver in the helmet can get less and less,” Krumholz said.

From scientists in different locations to senators, social media influencers or an NFL player—Krumholz let his imagination run wild with possible underwater speakers. Non-scientists could help bring in different audiences, widening the outreach about ocean conservation.

From other habitats in the CTNERR, such as oyster reefs, to Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary off the Maine coast, Gray’s Reef National Marine Sanctuary off the Georgia coast, the Florida Keys, the Caribbean and places in the Pacific Ocean—there are many marine ecosystems that Auster wants to bring to the public.

“The water belongs to all of us,” he said. “The idea isn’t to tell people what to say, but it’s to give them a different perspective on what it is that’s in the public commons and that is part of their own natural heritage.”

Watch video clips of the presenter helmet at:
<https://seagrant.uconn.edu/?p=13653>



Edward Monahan remembered as scientist, avid rower and leader of CT Sea Grant

Edward Monahan, the second director of Connecticut Sea Grant, was an avid rower. Photo: CT Sea Grant



Edward Monahan, professor of physical oceanography emeritus in the UConn Department of Marine Sciences and director of Connecticut Sea Grant from 1986 to 2005, passed away on June 29 at age 89.

As the second director of Connecticut Sea Grant, he led the successful effort to have UConn designated in 1988 as a Sea Grant College, the top tier of Sea Grant programs nationally.

“During Ed’s tenure, he oversaw the awarding of 85 research awards totaling nearly \$20 million; managed 19 Knauss Marine Policy Fellowships; and started a Sea Grant Coastal Fellows Program in partnership with Yale that supported 50 interns,” said Nancy Balcom, CT Sea Grant associate director. “Working for him for most of his tenure as Sea Grant director, I appreciated how he not only worked to grow our state program but also established programs like Ir-Am-Aqua, which facilitated an exchange among aquaculture researchers at the University of Galway, Queen’s University, Belfast, and the Northeast Sea Grant Programs.”

Longtime friend and colleague W. Frank Bohlen, UConn professor emeritus of marine sciences, shared the following information with the university community after Monahan’s passing:

“In addition to his administrative responsibilities, Monahan was an active, well respected research scientist and mentor who was very well known for

his work dealing with a variety of air-sea interactions and in particular the role of bubbles.

He was a thorough experimentalist, participating in more than 30 research cruises on U.S. and European vessels studying the onset of breaking waves and white capping and the associated sea-air exchange of heat and materials from the Arctic to the Caribbean. This work and subsequent laboratory experiments resulted in an extensive number of publications.

When not in the office or lab, he could often be found rowing on Long Pond in Ledyard, just offshore from the home he built. He also competed in a wide variety of rowing competitions at many locations.

He took up the sport seriously in 1990 and in 2004 published a compilation of his efforts. In May 2017 he reported that he had completed 14,872 miles towards a goal of 16,000 miles.

He was particularly proud of his founding of the Coast Week Row, an annual event on the Mystic River hosted by Mystic Seaport Museum. He loved the competition, the young and old participants and the comradery.”

“He was willing to share a story or opinion and always willing to help,” said Bohlen. “He was a valued member of the University community. He will be missed.” 



10 questions: reflections and aspirations from Nancy Balcom, Jess Brandt

Editor's note: This fall, Associate Director Nancy Balcom retires after 35 years with Connecticut Sea Grant. Jess Brandt, who is on the faculty in the UConn Department of Natural Resources and the Environment & the Center for Environmental Sciences and Engineering, assumes Balcom's position, moving into the role after several months of transitioning. In these 10 questions, Balcom looks back on her career, while Brandt introduces herself and describes what drew her to CT Sea Grant.



Top, Jess Brandt, left, will become the CTSG associate director upon Nancy Balcom's retirement this fall. Photo: Judy Benson Lower left, Jess Brandt collects samples with a net as part of field work for research projects. Photo: Milton Levin. Lower right, Nancy Balcom demonstrates how to don an immersion suit and prepare to abandon ship during a safety training workshop for fishermen. Photo: CT Sea Grant

Nancy Balcom

1. What are a few of the most significant projects you've been involved in during your career at CT Sea Grant?

Early in my career, the invasive freshwater zebra mussel was found in U.S. waters, with the potential to thrive in some Connecticut waters. Collaborating with CT DEP (now DEEP) and other groups, we developed a statewide aquatic nuisance species management plan. From there, my work expanded to marine invasive species in Long Island Sound, including the Asian shore crab, the red seaweed *Grateloupia* and the strange world of sea squirts. I led the development of a LIS marine invasive species plan, focused on transport vectors such as boat hulls and bait and partnered on outreach programs. I also got involved in regional and national invasive species work.

In 1999, the American lobster population in the Sound suffered a die-off, devastating the bi-state commercial lobster fishery. With NY Sea Grant's Antoinette Clemetson, I provided support for the federal/state/industry/Sea Grant steering committee led by the late Dr. Tony Calabrese of the NOAA Milford Lab. The committee managed research to investigate the cause(s) of the die-off and the states instituted measures to reduce fishing pressure on lobsters. Antoinette and I did a lot of outreach and organized meetings with researchers and fishermen. I co-edited the special journal issue outlining the factors causing the die-off with Dr. Calabrese.

2. Tell us about some of your work related to safety issues.

As a graduate student, I investigated handling practices for tuna caught by charter boats off the Virginia coast. Tuna and humans have similar body temperatures. If not cooled quickly,

tuna can develop a significant chemical hazard, scombrototoxin, which causes a nasty reaction in consumers. In time, new practices were adopted to keep the tuna onboard as cold as the beer! From there, I trained as an instructor for the national standardized course on safe seafood handling practices for wholesalers. Over 27 years, I co-taught thousands of seafood processors, dealers and regulatory personnel.

To address the risks of commercial fishing, I partnered with the Coast Guard's Kyra Dwyer, acquired instructor training and offered safety courses so commercial fishermen could practice emergency response skills. We sponsored a survival suit race at the Blessing of the Fleet in Stonington one year during which a Coast Guard helicopter pilot demonstrating a rescue at sea unexpectedly decided to land at the Town Dock, causing "a bit" of excitement. After a few years instructors with real-life experience were brought in to do the training at Avery Point.

The Superstorm Sandy death toll resulted in the CT, NY and NJ Sea Grant programs supporting research to investigate how people process storm risk communications and how messaging could be improved. The National Weather Service fully adopted one set of our research recommendations.

3. What drew you into a career in marine science?

My mother was an avid beachcomber. We spent many happy vacations swimming and shelling. In 8th and 10th grades, I spent a week at what is now the Bermuda Institute of Ocean Sciences, snorkeling and exploring the island's flora and fauna. I took marine biology field courses at Avery Point as an undergraduate and worked for three years at the former Children's Museum of Hartford as

an aquarist and marine educator, before pursuing a graduate degree in marine fisheries.

4. Looking back, what would you have done differently during your time at CTSG?

I wish I had recognized the damage the lobster die-off caused to the social fabric of commercial lobster fishing families. The focus was on finding the cause of the die-off and measures to help the resource recover. Unfortunately, the lobster population in the Sound never rebounded. Meanwhile, fishermen were forced to divert from lobstering to other species or leave the water altogether to support their families. Their identity and community were badly affected and the collective "we" should have brought in partners to address the social safety net and mental health needs.

5. What brought you the most professional satisfaction and kept you motivated?

I discovered Sea Grant as a graduate student in 1985 and never looked back. I can't imagine a better career for myself. I have had the tremendous privilege of working with innumerable wonderful and dedicated people who have kept me motivated. My professional satisfaction was grounded in the freedom granted me to pursue issues identified through expressed need, including seafood safety, invasive species, marine debris and storm risk communication. An early collaborative research project with a Stonington commercial fishing family led to the seasonal royal red shrimp fishery that is still viable. I'm proud of that. Benefitting from the mentorship of many, I had opportunities to develop leadership skills and use them locally, regionally and nationally. I have been truly blessed to have spent my career working in the Sea Grant network.

Jess Brandt

1. Tell us about your research and teaching in the Department of Natural Resources and the Environment.

My lab focuses on contaminant dynamics in freshwater and coastal ecosystems. We are especially interested in how contaminant movement through food webs influences contaminant distribution and potential to affect both animal and public health. Most of our research is based either in areas of western North American affected by mining activities or in coastal Long Island Sound and its watershed.

I teach environmental science and ecotoxicology courses at UConn and find a lot of synergy with my research because students are interested in human effects on the environment and contaminant events offer strong examples of those. I teach a lot of case studies and enjoy sharing my lab's projects as an opportunity to elaborate on the research process. I've been lucky to have students from my classes later join my lab as undergraduate researchers for hands-on experience.

2. How did you become interested in this area of specialty, and what are some future research questions you hope to study?

I started in research as an undergraduate and master's student in environmental public health and working in a lab at the Johns Hopkins where I helped study the long-term effects of exposures to viruses. Along the way I became increasingly curious about what happens to contaminants in the environment and how those processes can influence the potential for contaminants to cause harm. I pursued that topic as a doctoral student in Duke's Integrated Toxicology and Environmental

Health Program, where I trained in both ecotoxicology and ecosystem ecology. Those programs and my postdoc with the U.S. Geological Survey set me up for the research I pursue now, emphasizing the biological processes that influence contaminant movement and toxicity. We are pursuing projects that 1) ask how contaminants and co-occurring stressors (such as temperature changes and/or pathogens) together influence animal health; and 2) consider the patterns and effects of nutrient and contaminant transfer through food webs.

3. Are there projects you have been involved in that have direct relevance to Long Island Sound and its watershed?

We have had several projects focused on mercury and PFAS in coastal Long Island Sound and its watershed. Mercury is commonly considered a "legacy" contaminant because it persists in the environment even though emissions have slowed. Mercury concentrations build up in organisms over time and can reach toxic levels, and most human exposure comes from eating seafood. We are interested in the environmental factors that influence mercury accumulation by phytoplankton and the transfer of mercury from phytoplankton to oysters. On the other hand, PFAS (the per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances nicknamed "forever chemicals") are contaminants of emerging concern. There has been a huge increase in scientific and public attention on PFAS in the environment, including our water and food. My lab focuses on how PFAS concentrations and mixtures shift as they move through food webs and how PFAS interact with temperature stress to affect fish. We recently completed several projects characterizing PFAS in streams and Sea Grant supported research on PFAS in LIS bivalves and

fish. I look forward to maintaining a research program relevant to the needs of the LIS ecosystem alongside my role at Sea Grant.

4. How will you connect your research experience and expand your areas of focus in your new role?

The best part of my job is collaborating on research that addresses the scientific and management priorities of impaired ecosystems and their stakeholders. It has been especially rewarding to learn how our results lead to improved approaches for contaminant monitoring and species conservation. Addressing issues of contaminant influence on organism health and seafood safety is one focus of the program's work towards achieving healthy coastal and marine ecosystems. My new position offers the chance to expand the range of issues I work on, the group of people I will get to work with, and the audiences I will get to serve. I anticipate many opportunities to build on existing programs and potentially develop new focus areas with the team at Connecticut Sea Grant, the diverse membership of the Long Island Sound Partnership, and the Sea Grant network both regionally and nationally.

5. What brings you the most professional satisfaction and keeps you motivated?

I have two answers—the first is supporting students and postdocs as they develop their scientific identities and find success in their research. The second is partnering with great people on environmental issues that are both compelling and important. I love that I've found a job where I can be creative and curious while working to better understand and protect ecosystems and public health. I already sense that this will be my favorite part of Connecticut Sea Grant too. 

What's in our names?

What are wrack lines? The word wrack is a term for various kinds of seaweed, and wrack lines are the collections of organic matter (sea grass, shells, feathers, seaweed and other debris) that are deposited on shore by high tides. More generally, wrack lines are where the sea meets the land.

With our magazine *Wrack Lines*, we tell stories about the intersection of the land, sea and Connecticut Sea Grant. So what is Connecticut Sea Grant? One of 34 Sea Grant programs across the country, it helps residents make the most of our coastal resources and inland waterways. It addresses the challenges that come with living by the water or within the Long Island Sound watershed, in a state with 332 miles of shoreline and three major tidal rivers.

This NOAA-state partnership based at UConn's Avery Point campus works with aquaculture farmers, fishermen and seafood purveyors to help their businesses prosper.



A family explores the wrack line at Waterford Town Beach. Photo: Judy Benson

Connected to experts and residents who live, work and recreate in the Sound and its watershed, it brings varied interests together around a common purpose of working for mutually beneficial solutions to problems. Small in staff but big in impact, Connecticut Sea Grant is like a pilot boat that navigates the way for large vessels toward safe harbors. Since 1988, Connecticut Sea Grant has supported “Science Serving the Connecticut Coast.”



Congratulations to CT Sea Grant Associate Director Nancy Balcom for receiving the William Q. Wick Visionary Career Leadership Award! It was presented by the Sea Grant Extension Assembly on Sept. 22, 2025, “in recognition of outstanding career achievement, leadership, vision and contribution to Sea Grant Extension through administration.”



DON'T MISS AN ISSUE!

Wrack Lines is available online at: <https://seagrant.uconn.edu/publications/wrack-lines/>

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Tree swallows flock towards Goose Island in the lower Connecticut River on Sept. 4 as part of their annual migration murmuration. Photo: Judy Benson Inset: A male tree swallow, left, and a female tree swallow perch on a fence post. Photo: Thomas Morris



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