Change is the theme for this issue, and Connecticut Sea Grant has had its share of changes over the years since it began. The well-kept secret is that the ability to rapidly change and evolve as coastal and marine issues emerge is one of the program’s greatest strengths.
Celebrating Connecticut Sea Grant’s 25th anniversary

The Early Years

October 2013 marked the 25th anniversary of Connecticut Sea Grant’s College Program Designation. This designation is the highest rank that a Sea Grant program can achieve, and Connecticut Sea Grant had to work to achieve that level of excellence. While all of the accomplishments of those years would only fit in a large book, it seemed appropriate to walk down Memory Lane and hit some highlights.

The program started on a very small scale, way back in 1974, when Richard Nixon was still president. George Geer led the program then, as the Marine Advisory Program. It wasn’t until 1980 when the first formal Sea Grant director position was established, along with a commitment to begin a competitive marine research program. Since then, Connecticut Sea Grant has had three visionary leaders.

All three had experience in academic research as well as administration. Each brought unique expertise and ideas to enhance the program.

The late Vic Scottron, the first formal Sea Grant director, from 1980 to 1985, was an emeritus civil engineering professor. He was director of both the UConn Institute of Water Resources and Sea Grant. Scottron had a vision to establish a full-fledged Sea Grant Program, and convinced a skeptical university in “the Land of Steady Habits” that we needed one. Under Scottron’s leadership, the program grew and the first research competition was held in 1982.

Those first early research efforts included projects on managing hard clams and oysters, the life cycle of soft shell clams, and managing dredge spoils. In addition, an education project with Project Oceanology introduced high school students to marine research.

The next round of funding in 1984 added crustacean endocrinology and seaweed physiology.

After Scottron’s departure in 1985, Extension Leader Norman Bender served as acting director until Edward C. Monahan became director in 1986, serving until 2005. Ed was a physical oceanographer noted for his research in breaking waves and air-sea exchange. He expressed a strong commitment to scientific research.

In 1987, a communicator became a priority addition to the program, to get the Sea Grant message out and oversee publications. I joined the crew in 1987. At the time, “Connecticut Currents” newsletter, begun by Sea Grant’s Marine Advisory Program in the early days,
was put together with a typewriter, black and white print photos, and a wax roller. In the ‘90s, *Nor’aster* magazine, coordinated by Rhode Island Sea Grant for seven regional programs, was a popular publication for the public, for that decade.

**College Designation 1988**

Under Monahan’s leadership, a full research portfolio was accomplished and full Sea Grant College status was achieved. A ceremony was held with fanfare in October 1988. UConn President John Casteen co-chaired over the speechmaking, and a plaque was permanently installed on the seaside wall of the Branford House at Avery Point.

To celebrate, and take advantage of Ed’s international connections, research symposia were held in Germany, Ireland, and Northern Ireland. A formal collaboration with Ireland and Northern Ireland to share research ideas began in 1991. Subsequent agreements included aquaculture efforts with Chile, and Mexico. Further research collaborations were formed with China, Germany and Israel. The first formal strategic plan was developed.

In the mid-‘90s, a formal Sea Grant Intern Program was established with the Yale Center for Coastal and Watershed Systems. Before the program ended, more than 50 interns carried on undergraduate research to benefit coastal ecosystems.

The Marine Advisory Program, led late in the ‘80s by Lance Stewart, continued under Extension Leader Norm Bender in the ‘80s and early ‘90s. That evolved into the present day CTSG Extension Program led by Nancy Balcom since 1994. The program, established by Congress, was based on marine extension as “field agents in hip boots” in waterways. Early agents like Tim Visel and Jim Wallace specialized in fisheries, shellfish and seafood. Later on water quality became a priority and Chet Arnold, followed by Heather Crawford, joined Extension. There were branch extension offices in Haddam and on the Yale University Campus.

Aquaculture and shellfish were always both a research and an extension priority. In 2000, Tessa Getchis was the first agent dedicated to aquaculture, and Anoushka Concepcion followed in 2011. Invasive species, identified as a huge concern by Jim Carlton’s research in the late ‘90s, are still a topic for both research and Extension today.

**EPA Long Island Sound Study outreach (LISS)**

Around 1988, the EPA LISS found that hypoxia (low DO) was a huge problem. LISS outreach became a formal collaboration between the EPA LISS and Connecticut and New York Sea Grant programs. The Connecticut LISS outreach coordinator position was first manned by Chet Arnold—later Kathy Rhodes followed by Nancy Balcom and Joe Blumberg—continues today with Judy Preston.

Making connections between land use and water quality also became imperative. Chet established the NEMO (Nonpoint Education for Municipal Officials) program. He left Sea Grant to lead NEMO when it expanded to a national effort.

Close collaboration between NEMO, its spinoff CLEAR (Center for Land Use, Education, and Research), and CTSG continues today. Current staff Juliana Barrett and Mike Dietz are also NEMO and CLEAR team members. This partnership has brought geospatial technology relating to land use and water quality to many communities.

**You’ve Got Mail!**

Today we take instant communication for granted. But between 1991 and 1993, that was new to most people. The Internet emerged, offering a new kind of rapid communication to the public and academia. Earlier, communication was done by telephone and hard copy letters. UConn’s main campus at Storrs was quickly wired for Web, but regional campuses had no infrastructure for it. When Extension Leader Norm Bender complained that the rest of academia had the newfangled email and access to the World Wide Web, but UConn’s Avery Point campus and Sea Grant did not, dial-up AOL accounts were set up for staff. Around 1992, the campus was wired and Connecticut Sea Grant’s first web site was launched, even though HTML was a very foreign new language to staff. Fast forward to the program’s grant for a mobile smartphone app for creating rain gardens, developed by UConn CLEAR and NEMO in 2013!

The ‘90s also witnessed the establishment of a Sea Grant extension office at Yale University in New Haven.

A formal component with a staff position was added in 1992. The education office was located in The Maritime Aquarium in Norwalk. Val Cournoyer, Kim Racchio, Amy Haddow, and Diana Payne were education coordinators at various times. Today education is a formal program focus. Diana, originally

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based at The Maritime Aquarium, is full time in-house education coordinator at Avery Point now and is a national leader in marine literacy.

Another advance, in 1993, was the adoption nationwide of a new, consistent logo for all of the nation’s Sea Grant programs, creating a branding identity compatible with NOAA. Prior to that, each program had a distinct state logo; ours was a sperm whale inside an outline of the state. After a period of struggle remembered as “Logo Wars,” the final design developed by Alaska Sea Grant brought a uniform message and greater national identity to Sea Grant.

At the Special Olympics world summer events held in New Haven, Conn. in 1995, Director Monahan presented former Senator Lowell Weicker with a National Sea Grant Award. Weicker had championed Sea Grant for Connecticut.

Connecticut Sea Grant’s tenth anniversary was celebrated in 1998, coinciding with the International Year of the Ocean. A gala dinner was held, along with many public educational events.

In October 1999, henceforth known by some staff as “The Year the Lobsters Died,” Connecticut Sea Grant began to get continuous urgent phone calls about dead lobsters and pesticides. The program was not funding any lobster research. Within 24 hours of a written request, CTSG was able to fund preliminary research to help find the cause of the die-off. In the following year, in collaboration with NY Sea Grant and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, the program funded $7 million in lobster research in seven states. Research that went on for four years did not then show a direct connection between pesticide application for West Nile virus/mosquitoes and the lobster disease, but rather a number of complex environment changes happening, associated with warming waters.

A fabulous new home for the Sea Grant Office came about as a result of UConn 2000, a program to revitalize aging buildings and infrastructure. The old asbestos-laden brick bomb shelter building was demolished, and the modern three-story Marine Sciences Building that the program currently calls home was erected. The new lodging made collaborations much more appealing.

Wrack Lines magazine was launched in 2001 as CTSG’s face to the public. The magazine’s mission was, and is, to provide a potpourri of information to interest and educate in matters coastal and marine with emphasis on the Long Island Sound region. A digital edition was added beginning with the next issue.

Sylvain De Guise, the current Connecticut Sea Grant director, came on board in 2006 after an intense national search. Like his predecessors, he was no stranger to research. Sylvain, who hails from Canada, is also associate professor in pathobiology and veterinary science at the University of Connecticut with interest in health of aquatic organisms, including sharks and marine mammals.

Under Sylvain’s leadership, the program became more geographically targeted to Long Island Sound, but also fostered new regional collaborative initiatives. Partnerships and leveraging resources became priority strategies. While retaining the traditional Sea Grant model of research, outreach and education the program developed a new mission statement: “To generate and provide science-based information to achieve healthy coastal and marine ecosystems, and consequent public benefits.”

Regional collaborations were codified with the formal MOU between Northeast Sea Grant programs and representation on the NOAA North Atlantic Regional Team. Sylvain has served as chair of the Northeast Sea Grant Consortium, consisting of the Sea Grant programs from Maine to New York, and led a greater New York Bight regional ocean science planning initiative. He is chair-elect of the National Sea Grant Association.

The Sea Grant Arts Award, begun in 2010, was the brainchild of Syma Ebbin,
the program’s research coordinator. The annual funding award is open to artists of all genres including the visual arts, writing, theatre, dance, music, film and emerging genres.

Highlights of the past decade have also included international work on coral reef conservation and fisheries management by fisheries extension specialist Bob Pomeroy.

Today, Connecticut Sea Grant’s four primary focus areas are:
- Healthy Coastal Ecosystems and Economy
- Seafood Production and Consumption
- Hazard Resilient Coastal Communities
- Ocean and Coastal Literacy and Workforce Development

As Connecticut Sea Grant moves forward into an uncertain future, we see that some work begun in the early days is still bearing fruit now—for example the first seaweed farms in Long Island Sound; other work addresses new emerging problems such as adapting to extreme storms and climate change and the future of developed urban coast. One thing is certain: Sea Grant will continue to adapt to current needs as its list of partners and stakeholders continues to grow!