

A scenic view of a rocky coastline. The foreground is dominated by large, dark grey and brown rocks with visible cracks and textures. The water is a deep blue, with patches of green seaweed and kelp visible near the shore. The sky is a pale, clear blue.

# Connecticut Seeks to Join National Estuarine Research Reserve System

by Kevin O'Brien

A healthy and productive Long Island Sound is our greatest natural resource and also contributes an estimated 7 billion dollars annually to the regional economy...

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Photo credit: CT Audubon/Paul Fusco

Plovers are among the wildlife that benefit from healthy coastal ecosystems.

The Sound, like other estuaries around the country, is constantly threatened by development, pollution, invasive species, and the effects of climate change—to name just a few. These and other threats make it more important than ever to have the information needed to make critical management decisions affecting our coastal resources. One such source of information is the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR) System.

The NERR System is a network of 28 coastal areas designated to protect and study estuarine systems. Created by the Coastal Zone Management Act, the reserves are a partnership between the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and coastal states. NOAA provides funding, guidance, and technical assistance. Each reserve is managed by a lead state agency or university, with input from local partners. The reserves cover 1.3 million acres of estuaries and focus on:

- **Stewardship:** Each site undertakes the initiatives needed to keep the estuary healthy.
- **Research:** Reserve-based research and monitoring data are used to aid conservation and management efforts on local and national levels.
- **Training:** Local and state officials are better equipped to introduce local data into the decision-making process as a result of reserve training efforts.
- **Education:** Thousands of children and adults are served through hands-on laboratory and field-based experiences. School curriculums are provided online.

The national Reserve system is a vital, important program from which no coastal state should be omitted. Connecticut, however, is one of only two salt-water coastal states without a reserve. A Connecticut-based NERR would complement and extend existing activities of programs like the EPA National Estuary Program, the Connecticut Coastal Management Program, the Connecticut Sea Grant office, Project Oceanology, and various academic institutions through the addition of funding, resources, and expertise. Additionally, it would enable new directions and initiatives by leveraging national system programs. The health of the Sound’s ecosystem and the state economy can only benefit from establishing a NERR.

While earlier attempts to designate a reserve in Connecticut stalled, recent efforts have enabled a formal designation process to proceed through the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection’s Office of Long Island Sound Programs (OLISP). Accordingly, OLISP has been working closely with NOAA to develop a process to identify and nominate a NERR

using nationally proven standards with added criteria unique to Connecticut.

Here are some frequently asked questions (and answers!) about the NERR system and how it applies to Connecticut:

**Q: What programs and benefits do research reserves offer?**

A: They apply science and education to improve the management of estuaries. Reserve staff work with local communities to address natural resource management issues, such as non-point source pollution, habitat restoration and invasive species.

- Reserves provide adult audiences with locally relevant training on estuarine issues of concern to better inform coastal management decisions.
- Reserves offer field classes for K-12 students and support teachers through professional development programs in marine education.
- Reserves are considered “living laboratories” providing for long-term water quality and habitat monitoring as well as opportunities for both scientists and graduate students to conduct research on our nation’s estuaries.
- Reserves are eligible for federal funding programs that are only available to a NERR site.

**Q: Will the state have to purchase land for a Connecticut research reserve?**

A: No. Connecticut will select a site from existing publicly owned lands consisting of state owned property and adjacent public trust waters. Municipal and non-profit property may be considered as well and could be part of a reserve through a cooperative agreement with the State.

**Q: Does a reserve restrict existing commercial, recreational, or cultural activities?**

A: The designation of a NERR site does not preclude existing uses/activities, and does not result in the total preservation of the area. As part of the NERR designation process, the Code

of Federal Regulations (15 CFR 921) that set the requirements for NERR sites requires development of a management plan. The management plan must articulate how the public will interact with the site and its resources and describe uses that will require a permit. States are allowed to develop management plans in a manner that respects human as well as natural resource needs. For example, the San Francisco Bay NERR Management Plan acknowledges: "Recreational and commercial fishing, hiking, horseback riding, bicycling, camping, and boating are all traditional uses within the boundaries of the Reserve sites. Some of these activities are subject to state regulation and require licenses and/or permits. Traditional use access will continue according to local and state laws." Development of a management plan for a Connecticut NERR site will require the State to work with stakeholders to determine an approach that best serves Connecticut's resources and people.

**Q: Does the designation of a reserve bring more rules?**

A: No. Reserve designation does not add any new regulations. As part of the site designation process, NOAA will examine whether a proposed site is adequately protected for long-term research and education by existing state authorities. There are no federal regulations imposed as a result of reserve designation.

**Q: Are there certain criteria that a site must meet to be eligible to become a research reserve site?**

A: Yes. Reserves reflect regional ecosystem types called "biogeographic regions," and unique estuarine habitat features within them. NOAA gives priority consideration to designation proposals that establish a reserve in a biogeographic region or sub-region that is not currently represented by the system or that incorporates unique habitat

types that are not represented by the system. Connecticut lies within a biogeographic region encompassing the coastal areas from Cape Cod, Massachusetts to Chesapeake Bay, Virginia, and specifically within the Southern New England sub-region ranging from Cape Cod to Sandy Hook, New Jersey. Since the Southern New England sub-region already contains three reserves (Waquoit Bay, MA, Narragansett Bay, RI, and Hudson River, NY) it will be imperative for Connecticut to evaluate and identify a site with unique habitat elements that are currently not represented in order to potentially designate a research reserve.

**Q: What is the process to establish a potential site as a research reserve?**

A: The Office of Long Island Sound Programs of the Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection is coordinating the reserve designation process. Having sent a formal letter of intent and received a notice to proceed, the State and NOAA worked together to develop a site selection process to inventory and evaluate potential sites. The site selection process will require the involvement of a variety of stakeholders including academic institutions, state and federal agencies, private industries, environmental groups, municipal officials and staff, local land owners, as well as other parties that have interests in the coastal area. Several public information meetings will be held to present information and solicit input from the public. The process itself will apply an expansive suite of environmental and organizational criteria to evaluate and score various options that will culminate in a formal report documenting the process and nominating a site. Following an approval from NOAA, the State, with assistance from NOAA, will then work to develop and submit a management plan for NOAA review. At the same time NOAA,

with the State's assistance, will develop Draft and Final Environmental Impact Statements for the designation. When the reserve is approved by NOAA, the State and NOAA will sign a Memorandum of Understanding addressing operation of the new reserve and a ceremony will be held to present the certificate of designation to state officials and reserve partners.

**Q: If we have a potential reserve site in mind, is it necessary to use the formal selection process?**

A: Yes. The state is responsible for developing a site selection process that examines potential sites and then strategically narrows down the options to the best location. The site-selection process has been proven valuable in clarifying issues and priorities and in engaging interested parties.

For more information on the CT NERR effort, please contact:

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For more information on the NERR system, please visit <http://www.nerrs.noaa.gov/>