

2025 ISSUE

Habitat Hotline

ATLANTIC

EXCLUSIVE

*Habitat Highlights
from Maine to Florida*

COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION IN ACTION

State and regional partners working together to advance the conservation, protection, restoration, and enhancement of fish habitat across the Atlantic coast

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Chair Notes

WELCOME TO HABITAT HOTLINE

This issue is packed with inspiring articles, conservation tools, and project tips to keep coastal states ahead of the habitat restoration curve. Enjoy!



The 2025 issue of *Habitat Hotline Atlantic* highlights the impressive habitat restoration and conservation work happening along the Atlantic coast. From Maine to Florida, state agencies and partners are steadfastly conserving and restoring saltmarsh and oyster reefs, installing living shorelines, removing dams and restoring connectivity, expanding shell recycling efforts, and much more – all to bolster resilience and support thriving fish populations and ecosystems.

I offer my gratitude to the members who serve on the Habitat Committee and contribute throughout the year, all while balancing the many demands of their day-to-day responsibilities within their states and respective agencies. Looking ahead to 2026, I am excited to continue working together to strengthen engagement among the Committee and Commissioners as we kick off a project to identify near-term priorities that will best support the needs of the states and the Commission.

I hope that you enjoy reading about the many ways our state agencies and federal partners are working to steward and protect our Atlantic coast habitats.

Kate Wilke, The Nature Conservancy
Habitat Committee Chair

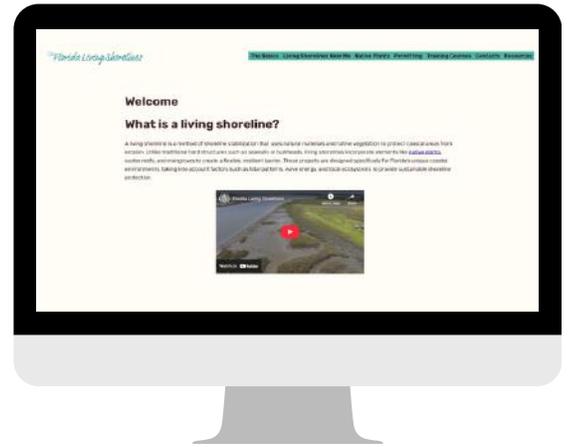
*Healthy fisheries
need healthy habitat*

State Updates

FLORIDA

Kent Smith, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Indian River National Estuary Program (IRLNEP) Implements \$9 Million in Estuarine Habitat Restoration Projects



The IRLNEP is working with various partners to implement 10 estuarine habitat enhancement and restoration projects in the Indian River Lagoon system funded by a \$9.4 million NOAA Transformational Habitat Restoration grant. Project partners, such as the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission (FWC), Brevard County, Brevard Zoo, University of Central Florida, St. Johns River Water Management District to name a few, are working as project managers can contributing additional non-federal match to restore up to 73 acres of seagrass, 7 acres of oyster reefs, over 2,100 acres of wetlands and implement 8,450 linear feet of living shoreline installations. These projects will combine to restore essential fish habitat, enhance ecosystem functions and increase ecological resilience in the IRL system. These enhancements of estuarine habitat will restore ecological services lost to extensive algal blooms occurring in the Lagoon since 2010. A [story map published in 2025 highlights the success of these projects](#) across the IRL on the east coast of Florida.

Florida Living Shoreline Website Updated

A coalition of partners in Florida developed and recently updated a Florida-specific Living Shorelines Website designed to disseminate information about the latest technology, design and permitting details to shoreline property owners and public resource managers over a decade ago. With Florida being on the forefront of adverse effects from sea level rise and increasing frequency and intensity of tropical cyclones, the use of nature-based infrastructure to address creating shoreline resilience is a focal activity on the part of state, federal and non-governmental agencies and organizations working on estuarine resource management projects.

Top left: Volunteers planting a living shoreline in the IRL. Credit: The Riverside Conservancy; Bottom right: A healthy living shoreline along a residential property. Credit: FWC



The website is a “one-stop shop” for all things living shoreline. From example installations in various regions of the state that the public can visit to the types of natural materials and plants applicable to various energy exposure shorelines, anyone can find information they need to help direct living shoreline project development. This, in concert with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection Office of Resilience and Coastal Protection’s [Living Shoreline Outreach Story Map and Project Tracker](#), combine to engage and connect the public, consultants and resource managers to expand the use of this approach to creating coastal resiliency that can adapt to our changing climate conditions and benefit fishery species. Integrating a mosaic of habitats from oyster reefs connected across the landscape to coastal marsh communities into these designs expands the area of habitat and ecological services, such as use by fish species as nursery habitat, of these communities in estuarine waters. Interest in nature-based shoreline resiliency has led to a dramatic increase in the installation of these projects around the state, thereby enhancing fish habitat in affected estuaries.

GEORGIA

Cameron Brinton, Georgia Department of Natural Resources

In the spring of 2025, Georgia Department of Natural Resources (GADNR) staff restored oyster reefs along more than half a mile of shoreline in the Teakettle Creek Recreational Shellfish Harvest Area (McIntosh County, Georgia). This location was selected as it increases the opportunities for the public to collect oysters in Georgia’s most overharvested public picking area and creates essential fish habitat within the Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve. This project restored approximately half an acre with loose shell and modules made from wire mesh and shell. At approximately 270 tons of shell deployed, this was the largest oyster restoration project conducted by GADNR to date and used recycled shell collected by the We Recycle Shell partnership supplemented by shell purchased from other sources.

the project benefited from strong community engagement through module-building workshops attended by volunteers from the Boy Scouts of America, Wallenius Wilhelmsen, The Wesley Center at Chattanooga, and Oglethorpe Charter School. Early monitoring of this site shows excellent recruitment and growth of oysters.



Loose shell being dispersed with a water cannon. Credit: GADNR

NORTH CAROLINA

Michelle Brodeur, North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries | Braxton Davis, R. Wilson Laney, & Todd Miller, North Carolina Coastal Federation

The North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries is deploying a new strategy to restore oyster habitat through the protection of deep-water reefs in the Pamlico and Neuse rivers. These reefs have suffered from excessive historical harvest, disease outbreak, and mass mortality from water quality impacts. Deep-water Oyster Recovery Areas (DORAs) were established at the mouth of the Pamlico and Neuse Rivers to allow deep-water reefs to recover by closing these areas to mechanical harvest.

As the deepwater reefs located in DORAs recover and accumulate living oysters and shell material, they will have the opportunity to increase in habitat complexity from gaining height and more interstitial spaces. This complexity allows the reefs to function better as habitat for oysters and the numerous ASMFC-managed species which rely on them. In addition to restoring habitat value, added height increases resilience to low dissolved oxygen events by providing refuge for benthic organisms when lower portions of the reef are hypoxic.

DORA closures will protect 680 acres or 81% of the known deep-water oyster habitat, preventing further height loss and damage to recovering oyster reefs. Impacts to the commercial fishery because of these closures will be partially offset by implementation of a series of rotationally managed cultch sites, which will provide full-season opportunities for harvesters in dedicated areas to reduce harvest pressure on vulnerable oyster reefs.

To learn more, visit the [Amendment 5 to the Eastern Oyster Fishery Management Plan](#) webpage.

In 2025, the **North Carolina Coastal Federation (NCCF)** made significant progress in protecting and restoring coastal habitats that are priorities for the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) Habitat Committee (see [NCCF 2025 Habitat Priorities](#)). The Federation's work advanced water quality improvement, salt marsh protection, oyster restoration, and science-based coastal management, while strengthening the connection between environmental health, economic vitality, and community resilience across coastal North Carolina. For more information, please visit nccoast.org.

Water Quality and Watershed Restoration

Improving coastal water quality through watershed-scale planning and restoration remained a central focus in 2025. The Federation continued to lead collaborative watershed planning efforts across coastal North Carolina, including work in the Lake Mattamuskeet, Newport River, White Oak River, Lockwood Folly, and Lower Cape Fear River watersheds – all of which support habitat for ASMFC-managed species such as American Eel, Alewife, and river herring. A major milestone was achieved in the Newport River watershed with the establishment of a 3,500-acre watershed preserve that protects extensive estuarine shorelines from future development while restoring natural hydrology altered by historic ditching. Additional details on these efforts are available at: nccoast.org/water-quality.

In addition, the Federation launched a new watershed planning initiative in the Chowan River basin, in

partnership with USDA-NRCS through the National Water Quality Initiative, to address water quality and habitat conditions in this historically important system for migratory fishes (see [NCCF 2025 Our Coast, Edition 4](#)).



Night heron resting on a boat in the marsh. Credit: NCCF

Salt Marsh Protection and Restoration

North Carolina's approximately 220,000 acres of salt marsh in the second largest estuarine ecosystem in the US provide critical nursery habitat for numerous ASMFC-managed species. Building on the 2024 adoption of the [North Carolina Salt Marsh Action Plan](#), the Federation advanced implementation efforts in 2025 focused on protecting, restoring, and facilitating marsh migration under future sea-level rise. This included participation in an EPA Climate Pollution Reduction Grant that will deliver nearly \$30 million over five years to conserve high-value, carbon-rich marshes. The Federation also prepared to acquire more than 800 acres in the headwaters of the North River in Carteret County, expanding the [North River Wetlands Preserve](#) to over 7,000 acres and safeguarding space for future marsh migration while improving water quality.

Oyster Restoration

Oyster restoration continued to be a cornerstone of the Federation's habitat work. In partnership with the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries, the Federation moved closer to completing the remaining 500 acres of oyster sanctuary reefs in Pamlico Sound. Efforts to strengthen the shellfish mariculture industry progressed through construction of a new mariculture logistics hub in Carteret County, improving access and capacity for oyster farmers.

The Federation also expanded its shell recycling program, managing 30 public drop-off sites and partnering with 31 restaurants and seafood markets. Over the past five years, nearly 27,000 bushels of recycled shell have been returned to North Carolina waters to support oyster reef restoration projects statewide.

Coastal Management and Wetlands Protection

The Federation remained deeply engaged in advancing sound coastal management grounded in science, with an emphasis on resilience, wetlands protection, and emerging threats such as contaminants and microplastics. Through collaboration with statewide coalitions of scientists, advocates, and policymakers, the Federation worked to strengthen legal and regulatory frameworks that protect wetlands and ensure long-term coastal sustainability.

Through restoration, policy leadership, education, and outreach (including its award-winning [CoastalReview.org](https://www.coastalreview.org) news service) the North Carolina Coastal Federation continued to play a critical role in safeguarding North Carolina's most sensitive wetland habitats and resources essential to fisheries, coastal communities, and future generations.

MARYLAND

Marek Topolski, *Maryland Department of Natural Resources*

In 2025, the [Maryland Department of Natural Resources](https://www.dnr.state.md.us) advanced watershed-scale restoration, submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) recovery, oyster reef restoration, shoreline stabilization, beneficial use of dredged material, and fish passage improvements.

Whole Watershed Act Implementation

Maryland initiated the Whole Watershed Act ([SB 969/HB 1165](https://legis.maryland.gov/factsheets/factsheet.aspx?factoid=969HB1165)) to implement science-based restoration across five pilot watersheds representing urban (Baltimore Harbor), suburban (Severn River), and agricultural systems (Antietam Creek, Newport Bay,

and Upper Choptank River). Projects are led by South Baltimore Gateway Partnership, Resilience Authority of Annapolis and Anne Arundel County, Catoctin Land Trust, Maryland Coastal Bays Program, and ShoreRivers, and will be implemented over five years with state funding provided at a 1:1 match.

Submerged Aquatic Vegetation (SAV) Restoration

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR), in partnership with ShoreRivers, Arundel Rivers Federation, and Anne Arundel Community College, collected nearly seven million SAV seeds for restoration efforts planned for 2026. Species collected included horned pondweed (*Zannichellia palustris*), sago pondweed (*Stuckenia pectinata*), and widgeon grass (*Ruppia maritima*). While early seeding in the Rhode, South, and West Rivers showed limited recruitment, widgeon grass and sago pondweed expanded to nearly 4.5 acres in Glebe Bay on the South River. DNR is testing scuba diver-assisted seeding to improve seed retention and germination.

Oyster Restoration and Sanctuary Development

Maryland completed development of approximately 1,300 acres of oyster sanctuary across five Chesapeake Bay tributaries (Manokin, Little Choptank, St. Mary's, Harris Creek, and Tred Avon Rivers). Monitoring documented multiple age classes, increased biomass, complex reef structure, and natural reproduction. Planning is underway to designate three additional oyster sanctuaries in Herring Bay, the Nanticoke River, and Hoopers Strait.

Living Shorelines, Wetlands, and Beneficial Use of Dredged Materials

Living shoreline and wetland projects were completed at Baynes Cove on Seneca Creek, Wye Island State Park, and Pickering Creek on the Wye River, totaling nearly 1,500 linear feet of stabilized shoreline and 0.41 acre of tidal wetland creation. Maryland DNR and The Nature Conservancy also advanced beneficial use of dredged material through statewide training and two large-scale projects: four acres of marsh enhancement

at the Chesapeake Bay Environmental Center and construction of an 850-linear-foot living shoreline along Stoney Creek.

Fish Passage and Connectivity

The Federation remained deeply engaged in advancing sound coastal management grounded in science, with an emphasis on resilience, wetlands protection, and emerging threats such as contaminants and microplastics. Through collaboration with statewide coalitions of scientists, advocates, and policymakers, the Federation worked to strengthen legal and regulatory frameworks that protect wetlands and ensure long-term coastal sustainability.

DELAWARE

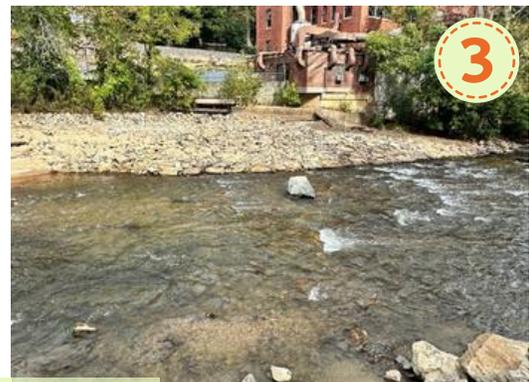
Zina Hense, Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control

In fall of 2025, the months long process of removing Dam 6 on the Brandywine River in northern Delaware was completed, allowing fish passage and restoration of natural river characteristics. The Brandywine River intersects with the Christina River just a couple of miles before the Christina joins the Delaware River. The Delaware River basin once hosted the largest American shad fishery in the nation but damming of its tributaries fragmented habitat and restricted American shad movement to upriver spawning grounds, leading to a decline in the shad population. The Brandywine River, as the steepest river in the

relatively flat state of Delaware, had 11 dams within a 5.1-mile segment. The Brandywine River dams were heavily used to generate power for mills during colonial and industrial periods in America. Dam 1, the first upstream blockage on the Brandywine, was removed in 2019. Following removal of Dam 1, a tagging study conducted on American shad (Roday et al. 2024) found that shad used the habitat upstream within two years of the dam's removal.

To further facilitate connectivity of fish habitat, plans began taking shape to remove other dams on the Brandywine. The Brandywine River Restoration Trust (BRRT) and partner organizations, governments agencies, consultants, and volunteers ([About – Brandywine River Restoration Trust](#)) continued with plans to adapt or remove the other Brandywine River dams. Some dams cannot be removed; Dam 2 supplies water for the city of Wilmington, Delaware, Dams 7-10 are of historic significance, with Dams 8, 9, and 10 designated as National Historic Landmarks, so other means for allowing fish passage will be explored. Focusing on dams that could potentially be removed, Dam 6 and Dam 4 emerged as viable candidates for the BRRT and partner groups.

Dam 6, also known as the DuPont Experimental Station Dam, was a 186-year-old dam that was originally built to power DuPont's mills. The dam was eight feet tall and about 15 feet across. Studies were conducted prior to removal to investigate and ensure safety of sediments that would be released during deconstruction.



Left: Dam 6 before its removal; Middle: Dam 6 during its removal; Right: Dam 6 after its removal. Credits: DE DNREC

The deconstruction was conducted over several months to allow slow release of water, and to place the 2,400 tons of rock removed from the dam into the river and surrounding landscape. Careful planning ensured that an existing sewage pipe crossing the river at the dam remained intact, and some of the removed rock was used to create a ramp to allow fish passage over the pipe. Portions of the dam at the edge of the river were left in situ, with signage provided for visitors, to preserve the history of the dam.

NEW JERSEY

Russ Babb, New Jersey Fish & Wildlife

Eastern Brook Trout Multi-State Partnership

New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJ DEP) Fish & Wildlife is leading a new multi-state Eastern Brook Trout restoration effort across New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania, supported by a \$3.5 million National Fish and Wildlife Foundation [America the Beautiful Challenge](#) grant. The four-year initiative targets forested headwater streams in priority Appalachian watersheds, with projects focused on barrier removal, instream and floodplain restoration, and reducing upstream stressors that contribute to warming waters. Eastern brook trout, New Jersey's only native trout species, serve as a key indicator of cold, clean water conditions.



Left: Juvenile eastern brook trout; Right: Staff scientists measure relative elevation change of sediments in a wetland near Avalon, New Jersey. Credit: NJ DEP

The newly funded program administered by NJ DEP Fish & Wildlife is a collaboration with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission, Trout Unlimited, the Eastern Brook Trout Joint Venture, the Northeast Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, the Wildlife Management Institute, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service. It is focused on safeguarding the biodiversity of the Appalachian Corridor highlands and streams within the three states.

Mapping Tool Developed to Make Coastal Wetlands More Resilient to Sea-Level Rise

NJ DEP launched a new public-facing [mapping tool and informational website](#) to support coastal wetland resilience planning. Using data from the New Jersey Tidal Wetland Monitoring Network (a group of more than 15 research organizations, universities, and non-profits formed in 2018), analyses indicate that approximately 61% of the state's coastal wetlands may be vulnerable to loss due to accelerated sea-level rise – currently occurring at roughly twice the global average. The tool supports science-based decision-making to protect nearly 200,000 acres of tidal wetlands that provide critical fish habitat, storm protection, and ecological diversity. For more information on other DEP wetlands research efforts, visit the [Division of Science and Research's Wetlands Research website](#).



Water Quality Restoration

NJDEP awarded nearly \$8 million in Water Quality Restoration Grants in 2025 to municipalities, nonprofits, and academic institutions statewide. Funded through the Clean Water Act, these grants support stormwater management, riparian buffer restoration, erosion control, watershed planning, harmful algal bloom mitigation, and climate resilience. Since inception, the program has distributed more than \$33 million to improve surface water quality across New Jersey. In New Jersey, this grant program is administered by the [DEP's Watershed and Land Management Program](#).

NJ DEP and Sysco Corporation Announce Partnership to Expand Shell Recycling in NJ

NJ DEP expanded its oyster reef restoration efforts through a new partnership with Sysco Corporation, enabling a major increase in shell recycling statewide. Sysco, the world's largest food distributor, will collect discarded oyster and clam shells from restaurants across the region and provide them to [NJDEP Fish & Wildlife's Shell Recycling Program](#), which significantly increases the availability of shell material for reef enhancement. This also reduces landfill waste, supports climate resilience, and expands oyster habitat, improving recruitment, population recovery, and connectivity of reefs along New Jersey's coast.

Shell recycling is essential because oyster larvae require clean shell substrate to settle and grow, yet shell availability is often limited. NJ DEP Fish & Wildlife launched its shell recycling program in 2019 in Atlantic City, initially partnering with a single restaurant before rapidly expanding to nearly all major casinos and seafood restaurants in the city. The program now includes 32 restaurant partners across Atlantic, Cape May, and Ocean counties. Since 2021, more than 45,000 bushels (over 1,100 tons) of recycled shell, supplemented by shell from local processors, have been planted on oyster reefs, greatly increasing restoration capacity.

NJ DEP launched a new public-facing [mapping tool and informational website](#) to support coastal wetland

resilience planning. Using data from the New Jersey Tidal Wetland Monitoring Network (a group of more than 15 research organizations, universities, and nonprofits formed in 2018), analyses indicate that approximately 61% of the state's coastal wetlands may be vulnerable to loss due to accelerated sea-level rise – currently occurring at roughly twice the global average. The tool supports science-based decision-making to protect nearly 200,000 acres of tidal wetlands that provide critical fish habitat, storm protection, and ecological diversity. For more information on other DEP wetlands research efforts, visit the [Division of Science and Research's Wetlands Research website](#).



Staff biologists pick up shells from area restaurants. Credit: NJ DEP

The program has received statewide and national recognition, including an Honorable Mention from the Environmental Council of the States in 2024 and recognition during New Jersey's 2025 State Employee Recognition Day. In 2024, [NOAA Coastal Zone Management](#) funding supported program expansion beyond Atlantic City and the launch of Project S.H.E.L.L. (Strengthening Habitats through Environmental Learning and Leadership), an environmental education initiative providing hands-on marine science experiences for students in Atlantic City and surrounding communities. To learn more about the Shell Recycling Program, NJ DEP's partnership with Sysco Corporation and other shell recycling program partners, visit <https://dep.nj.gov/njfw/fishing/marine/shell-recycling-program/>.



An endangered shortnose sturgeon being examined aboard the survey vessel. Credit: NYS DEC

NEW YORK

Alexa Fournier, New York Department of Environmental Conservation

Back from the Brink: New Collaborative Study Estimates Population of Hudson River Endangered Shortnose Sturgeon

In June, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) announced new research estimating that nearly 70,000 endangered shortnose sturgeon inhabit the Hudson River, likely making it the largest population of sturgeon anywhere in the world. This marks a dramatic recovery from the early 1970s, when overfishing and habitat degradation had reduced the population to roughly 6,000 adults and led to the species' listing under the federal Endangered Species Act. Protective measures and improved river health have played a crucial role in the species' rebound.

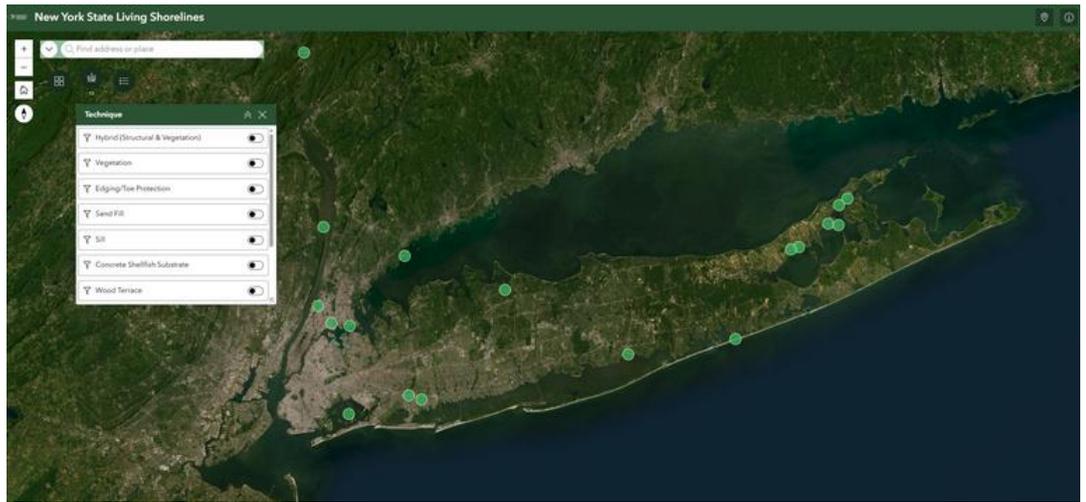
The new estimate comes from a major population study by researchers from DEC, US Geological Survey, and several universities that began in 2021. Researchers combined acoustic telemetry with side-scan sonar imagery processed by artificial intelligence to locate and count sturgeon across more than 150 miles of tidal river. This effort, funded by the Hudson River Foundation, resulted in the first comprehensive assessment of the population in 30 years and included the development of a new statistical tool to integrate the different data types.

Despite the encouraging population estimate, the study also raises concerns about the sturgeons' vulnerability to localized disturbances. More than 40 percent of the population congregates in a small overwintering habitat which coincides with an area of high human activity, including commercial shipping and underwater construction. This finding underscores the vulnerability of the sturgeon population despite its numerical abundance and the importance of habitat protection for its continued success.

Promoting Living Shorelines in New York State

In 2023, Governor Hochul signed into law an [amendment](#) of New York's Tidal Wetlands Act which directed the DEC to "authorize and encourage the use of nature-based solutions as the preferred alternative, where appropriate, for stabilizing tidal shorelines in the state". Staff within DEC's Marine Habitat Bureau have worked with New York SeaGrant, local estuary programs and many other environmental groups to promote living shorelines and other nature-based features as an alternative to harder options such as seawalls and bulkheads along eroding coastlines.

Recently the DEC released a [public mapper](#) with information about living shorelines constructed throughout New York's marine district. This mapper was created to highlight the variety of techniques that can be used under different conditions and will be useful to anyone considering one for their own property.



New Seagrass Maps Released

In the summer of 2024, an aerial imaging survey of Long Island Sound and the Peconic Bay estuary was taken for the purpose of updating New York's seagrass maps. These images have been processed and analyzed and are now available to be viewed on the NYS [Statewide Seagrass Map](#). Collecting these aerial images is important for ongoing management of seagrass. Comparing recent images to those taken in prior years shows where seagrass meadows are expanding and where they are disappearing, which allows the state to make more informed management decisions.

To learn more, visit the [New York's Seagrass Management Plan](#) webpage.



Top right: DEC's Living Shorelines mapper. See the [New York's Living Shorelines](#) webpage for more info; Bottom left: Seagrass meadow in the Great South Bay, New York. Summer 2025. Credit: NYS DEC

RHODE ISLAND

Eric Schneider, Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management

Seaweed Ecology and Research Collaborative (SEAC-RI)

In 2025, the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (DEM) [Division of Marine Fisheries \(DMF\)](#), in partnership with the [Narragansett Bay Estuary Program \(NBEP\)](#), made significant progress establishing the Seaweed Ecology and Research Collaborative (SEAC-RI). SEAC-RI supports cross-state coordination, informs state and federal management, and advances research on macroalgae in the Narragansett Bay region, including Narragansett Bay, the Salt Ponds, and Little Narragansett Bay. The collaborative provides curated data to inform the siting and maintenance of habitat restoration and enhancement projects such as shellfish outplanting, eelgrass seeding, and artificial reefs.

Field monitoring was enhanced through an NBEP-funded intern who integrated macroalgae surveys into existing research and monitoring programs, increasing efficiency and enabling data collection that would not otherwise have occurred. SEAC-RI vetted and tested standardized long-term monitoring protocols in both laboratory and field settings. Sampling included fixed and drift algae across multiple habitats and depths using fishery-independent surveys (bottom otter trawls and beach seines), aquaculture lease inspections, and rocky intertidal monitoring.



Launched in April 2024, SEAC-RI has rapidly grown to include academics, students, non-profits, and state and federal partners who meet quarterly. In 2026, the collaborative plans to expand partnerships and apply machine learning and community science to increase data collection and reduce processing time.

To learn more, visit the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program resources on the Macroalgae Working Group.

Rhode Island State and Federal Agencies Continue a Decade of Oyster Restoration

In 2025, the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Rhode Island Oyster Restoration Initiative continued restoration activities and added new practice components. Led by the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in partnership with DEM DMF, aquaculturists, and the Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council, the initiative has restored native eastern oysters (*Crassostrea virginica*) in Rhode Island waters since 2015. Over the past decade, more than 48 aquaculturists have participated across eight marine systems.

Top left: SEAC-RI intern works with RI DMF staff to separate macroalgae from fish and invertebrates during the Narragansett Bay Seine Survey, Fall 2025. Credit: Abigail St. Jean; Top right: Spat-on-shell eastern oysters grown through the RI NRCS EQIP Oyster Restoration Initiative, shown ~7 months post-hatchery before deployment on a restoration reef. Credit: JA Macfarlan

Rhode Island also implemented the NRCS Bivalve Aquaculture Gear and Biofouling Control Practice in 2025, which reduces ecosystem impacts from biofouled organisms released during on-farm gear cleaning by cycling equipment and shifting cleaning onshore. In its first year, 15 aquaculturists cycled tens of thousands of fouled cages and bags, replacing them with clean gear. Additional information is available through [NRCS](#) and DEM DMF program pages or by contacting Blake Busch (blake.busch@usda.gov), Melissa Hayden (melissa.hayden@usda.gov), or JA Macfarlan (reuben.macfarlan@dem.ri.gov).



MASSACHUSETTS

Mark Rousseau, Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries

Biodiversity Initiative

In 2025, the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) advanced a broad suite of habitat conservation and restoration efforts aligned with the Commonwealth’s newly released [Biodiversity Conservation Goals](#), developed pursuant to Executive Order No. 618. The goals emphasize protecting, restoring, and reconnecting habitats through a whole-of-government approach, with coastal priorities including fish passage restoration in every coastal watershed and expanded support for community-led habitat projects. To help implement these goals, the Department of Fish and Game launched the [Community Biodiversity Grants Program](#) in fall 2025, offering \$20,000–\$200,000 awards for habitat-focused projects statewide. Projects are expected to be completed by June 2026.

To learn more, visit the Massachusetts Department of Fish and Wildlife’s [Biodiversity Goals](#) website.

Capital Funding for Marine Habitat Restoration

DMF also received \$1.5 million in capital funding from the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs to expand marine habitat restoration capacity at its [Cat Cove Field Station](#) in Salem. Planned upgrades include expanded hatchery space and a new circulating saltwater system, which will support seed-based eelgrass (*Zostera marina*) restoration, expand oyster restoration capacity, and enhance public outreach and education opportunities.

Oyster Restoration

Oyster restoration efforts continued to scale up through a new five-year partnership with [The Nature Conservancy](#), the Cape Cod Conservation District, and USDA's NRCS. This initiative will develop a statewide coastal habitat restoration plan, identify priority sites for oysters and other habitats, and streamline planning, permitting, implementation, and monitoring to accelerate restoration and strengthen climate resilience. For more information contact Sean Terrill at Sean.V.Terrill@mass.gov.



Eelgrass Restoration & Seeding

Eelgrass restoration remained a major focus as acreage continues to decline statewide. Through partnerships supported by [EPA's Southern New England Program](#) and [Woods Hole Sea Grant](#), DMF and collaborators assessed eelgrass seed timing and density from Cape Cod to Cape Ann. In 2025, this work culminated in a [large-scale seed harvest](#) in Salem Sound, where divers collected over 10,000 reproductive shoots and processed nearly 500,000 seeds for restoration.

Planning is underway to expand harvesting and processing capacity in 2026 and beyond. For more information contact Dr. Forest Schenck at Forest.Schenck@mass.gov.



Ram Island, Mattapoisett

DMF also supported coastal resilience planning at Ram Island in Mattapoisett, a critical nesting site for Roseate and Common terns that was heavily impacted by the 2003 Bouchard Barge oil spill. DMF mapped eelgrass distribution and provided technical guidance to ensure proposed salt marsh restoration and erosion control measures protect adjacent eelgrass habitat while preserving vital seabird nesting areas.

Bottom left: Deploying shell to an oyster restoration site in Mashpee. Credit: MA DMF; Top right: Divers and surface support receiving instructions for harvesting reproductive eelgrass shoots around. Credit MA DMF; Bottom right: Ram Island provides critical Roseate and Common tern nesting habitat. Credit: MassWildlife



Black Sea Bass on an artificial reef. Credit: MA DMF

Artificial Reefs

Finally, DMF advanced artificial reef development in partnership with the Towns of Brewster and Dennis, proposing two new 15-acre reef sites in Cape Cod Bay to support structure-oriented fish species and recreational fishing. Given the Bay's designation as Critical Habitat for the endangered North Atlantic right whale, DMF is proposing seasonal construction restrictions to avoid impacts during peak whale presence. For more information contact Mark Rousseau at mark.rousseau@mass.gov.

Together, these efforts reflect Massachusetts' integrated approach to restoring coastal habitats, enhancing biodiversity, and building long-term climate resilience across marine and estuarine systems.

NEW HAMPSHIRE

Robert Atwood, New Hampshire Fish and Game

After nearly a decade of minimal oyster recruitment on the largest reef in the Great Bay Estuary, the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department (NHFG) closed 15 of its roughly 45 acres to recreational oyster harvesting beginning in 2021. The closure will remain in effect until late 2026. Since then, several partners — the University of New Hampshire (UNH), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the Natural Resources

Conservation Service (NRCS), and the Municipal, Alliance for Adaptive Management (MAAM) through the City of Rochester, NH — have carried out restoration work inside the closed area. Grants from multiple agencies funded reef restoration activities, including deploying clam shell to create hard substrate and purchasing farmed

oysters from New Hampshire aquaculture farms to seed the sites. UNH also partnered with the Coastal Conservation Association of New Hampshire (CCA) to deploy oyster shells collected through local restaurant recycling programs.

Deployment of farmed oysters began with TNC's Supporting Oyster Aquaculture and Restoration (SOAR) program in 2020–2021 as a COVID-era effort to support oyster farmers and test whether adult farmed oysters could help restore wild populations. From 2021 to 2024, NRCS and MAAM funded additional farmed-oyster deployments. Approximately 1.7 million farmed oysters were deployed between 2021 and 2024, and about 1,500 yd³ of shell were added to the restoration area during that period.

NHFG has conducted surveys of the Nannie Island reef since 1991. The reef showed limited to no recruitment from 2012 through 2020. UNH's sampling, begun in 2018, recovered only one live oyster between 2018 and 2020. Recruitment began to increase in 2021, with the highest densities and most live oysters observed in 2024. Size-frequency data from 2024 indicate successful recruitment over roughly the past three years. Together, these monitoring results strongly suggest that farmed-oyster deployments and addition of shell substrate are contributing oyster recruits to the degraded reefs. The next step is to use genomic methods to determine whether recent recruits originate from farmed or wild oysters.

Beyond Nannie Island, multiple other reefs in Great Bay Estuary have been targeted for restoration. TNC, in partnership with The Pew Charitable Trusts, the oyster aquaculture industry, local restoration groups, tribes, and state agencies, launched a second round of the SOAR program with funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, NOAA and the Builders Initiative to restore critical oyster habitat across eight coastal states. In New Hampshire, TNC has led restoration near the mouth of the Squamscott River, where cultch was placed to create a reef foundation. Local oyster farmers contributed by adding both farm-reared spat on shell and larger single oysters to the reef base.

The NHFG is preparing a new five-year closure to recreational oyster harvest beginning in late 2026. The proposed closed areas would protect 15 acres of the Nannie Island reef and 5 acres of the Woodman Point reef (total 20 acres). The closure will provide a temporary reprieve from recreational harvesting and the ability for restoration efforts and research to continue.

MAINE

Lars Hammer, Maine Department of Marine Resources

Maine continues to advance several significant habitat restoration projects that directly benefit ASMFC-managed species. Supported by key federal funding programs and an extensive network of partners, ongoing work spans saltmarsh and eelgrass restoration as well as major efforts to improve fish passage at watershed scales. Below are brief updates on two of the state's largest fish passage initiatives.

Restoring Connectivity on the Kennebec River

The Kennebec River has been the focus of long-term diadromous fish restoration, beginning with the landmark removal of Edwards Dam in Augusta, ME in 1999. That action, combined with subsequent dam removals and fish passage improvements, has substantially increased populations of American shad, river herring, and Atlantic and shortnose sturgeon.

Notably, more than nine million river herring were counted at the Benton Falls fish lift on a Kennebec tributary in 2025.

Despite this progress, four dams on the mainstem Kennebec continue to block access to more than 60% of historical riverine habitat for American shad and blueback herring. Earlier this year, The Nature Conservancy announced an agreement with Brookfield Renewable to purchase and remove these dams. If completed, the project would reconnect over 800 miles of habitat for diadromous fish while supporting the region's economic resilience.

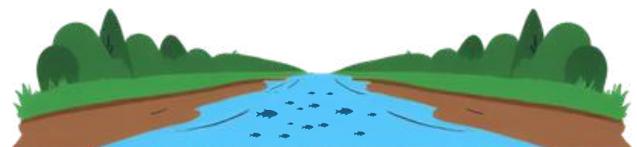
To learn more, visit [The Nature Conservancy's webpage on Restoring Balance to the Kennebec River](#).

Advancing Fish Passage on the St. Croix River

Approximately 100 miles east, on the Maine–Canada border, partners are pursuing a similar large-scale connectivity initiative on the St. Croix River. The removal of Milltown Dam in 2024 restored access to 10 miles of mainstem habitat for diadromous species. Additional work is underway to replace outdated and ineffective fishways at the Woodland and Grand Falls dams upstream.

Together, these efforts would reopen more than 600 miles of river habitat and over 60,000 acres of lake habitat for alewife, with the potential to support an annual run of 27 million adult river herring, the largest in North America. The Maine Department of Marine Resources recently completed bidding for a new fish lift at the Woodland Project, with construction anticipated to begin in January 2026. Project partners, including the Passamaquoddy Tribe and The Nature Conservancy, are also seeking funding for fishway construction at Grand Falls and related components.

To learn more, visit [NOAA Fisheries feature story of Collaboration on St. Croix Fish Passage Projects May Create Largest Alewife Run in North America](#).



Updates from the Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership

ON THE GROUND CONSERVATION

Simen Kaalstad, ACFHP Director

The Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership (ACFHP) partnered with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for the 16th consecutive year to fund three new restoration projects in 2025 through the National Fish Habitat Partnership (NFHP).

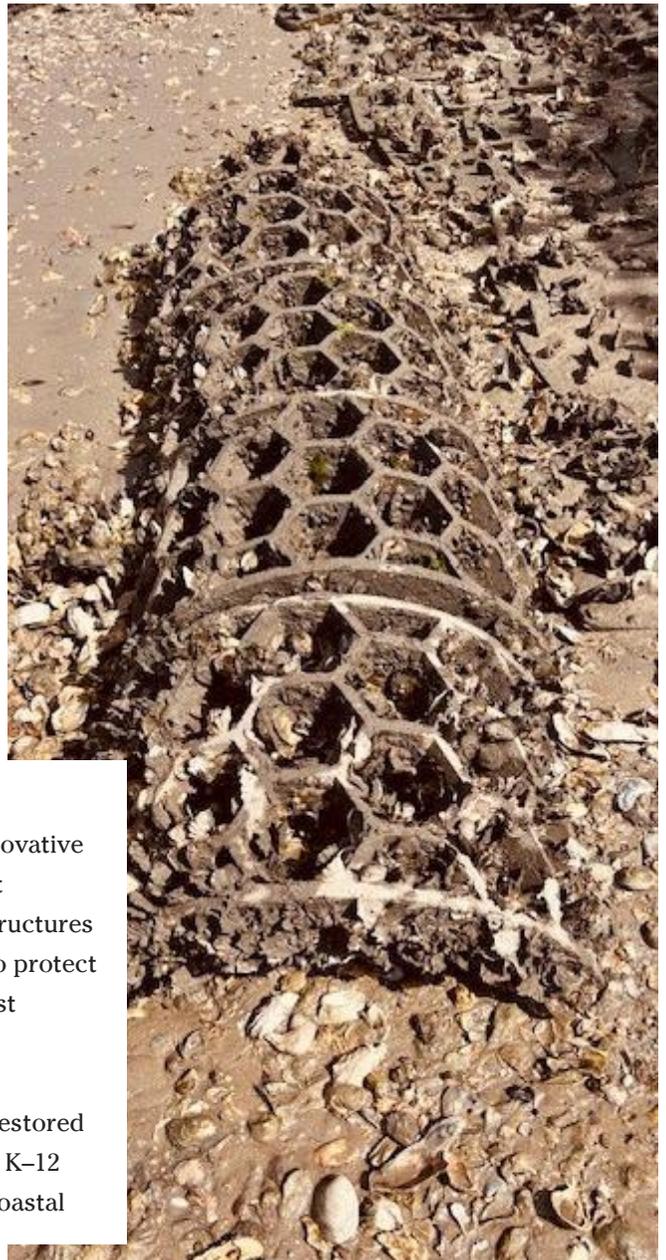
For more information about previously funded and endorsed restoration projects, please visit: [On the Ground Projects – Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership](#).

Oyster Reef Restoration for Increased Habitat and Ecosystem Services in the Matanzas River, St. Augustine, FL

This project addresses severe shoreline erosion in the Town of Marineland, Florida – home to the University of Florida’s Whitney Laboratory – where boat wake and storm surge have damaged coastal vegetation and degraded oyster and fish habitat.

To restore natural shoreline function, the Whitney Lab team is constructing approximately 500 feet of living shoreline using innovative “oyster arches”, lightweight engineered concrete structures that dissipate wave energy while supporting oyster growth. These structures will replace existing rubble armoring and be installed offshore to protect newly planted mangroves and marsh grasses, helping rebuild lost ecosystem services.

The project also provides significant educational benefits. The restored site will assist with marine science programming for 5,000–7,000 K–12 students annually and will be incorporated into graduate-level coastal restoration coursework at the Whitney Laboratory.



Oyster growth on one of the “arches” used to dissipate wave energy. Credit: Sean Westley



Learn more about it in this YouTube video:
[Whitney Lab Oyster Restoration Initiative](#)

Burke’s Pond Dam Removal, Restoration, and Habitat Enhancement on Sucker Brook, Pepperell, MA

The Burke’s Pond Dam Removal Project will eliminate the last permanent barrier to fish and aquatic organism passage on Sucker Brook in Pepperell, Massachusetts, restoring full connectivity from the stream’s headwaters to its confluence with the Nissitissit River. Removal of the dam will reopen 1.1 miles of upstream habitat, reconnecting approximately 4 miles of coldwater stream and restoring natural flow conditions to an impounded reach of Sucker Brook. The project will also improve public safety by removing a dam classified by the Massachusetts Office of Dam Safety as having a “significant” hazard potential and “poor” structural condition.

Led by the Squan-a-Tissit Chapter of Trout Unlimited, the project builds on recent dam removals and culvert replacements downstream that have already improved connectivity in the watershed. Sucker Brook is a certified Coldwater Fishery Resource, and restoring passage at Burke’s Pond will provide important habitat benefits for Eastern brook trout and other coldwater species.

Removal of the dam is expected to reduce thermal stress caused by the impoundment, improving water temperatures and stream function in a system already near the upper thermal limits for brook trout.

Beyond the dam removal itself, project partners plan to enhance stream and riparian habitat by adding large instream wood, restoring 2–3 acres of riparian area, relocating brook trout from the nearby Gulf Brook, and monitoring fish populations and stream temperatures. Collectively, these actions will strengthen long-term habitat resilience and support the recovery of coldwater fisheries in the Nissitissit River watershed.

Fish Presence and Abundance on Restored Oyster Reefs, Anne Arundel County, MD

In Chesapeake Bay, ACFHP provided continued funding to the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, in partnership with the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center, to expand a three-year study evaluating how restored oyster reefs support fish and forage species compared to non-restored areas. The project integrates scientific monitoring with angler-led citizen science and outreach events, including the annual Rod and Reef Slam Fishing Tournament, to increase public awareness of oyster reef benefits.



Control (left) vs restored (right) oyster reef sites. Credit: Chesapeake Bay Foundation

ACFHP LAUNCHES NEW INTERACTIVE STORYMAP HIGHLIGHTING COASTWIDE HABITAT CONSERVATION EFFORTS

The [Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership \(ACFHP\)](#) recently announced the release of a new interactive ArcGIS StoryMap that showcases its coastwide efforts to conserve, protect, restore, and enhance fish habitats along the US Atlantic coast – from Maine to the Florida Keys.

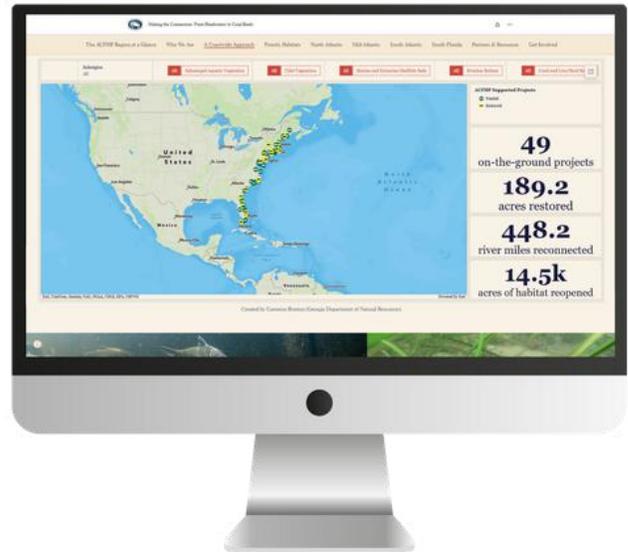
The StoryMap, titled “Making the Connection: From Headwaters to Coral Reefs,” highlights how the Atlantic coast is a living network of habitats where healthy rivers, estuaries, wetlands, and nearshore marine habitats are deeply connected – and how collaborative conservation efforts support fish, communities, and coastal economies. Through maps, photos, project examples, and conservation tools, the StoryMap illustrates ACFHP’s work across four ecologically distinct subregions: the North Atlantic, Mid-Atlantic, South Atlantic, and South Florida.

“Fish habitat doesn’t stop at state lines, and neither does our work,” said Simen Kaalstad, ACFHP Director. “This StoryMap shows how partnerships, science, and on-the-ground restoration come together to reconnect habitats and communities across the entire Atlantic coast.”

ACFHP is one of 20 regional partnerships within the [National Fish Habitat Partnership \(NFHP\)](#) and brings together state, federal, tribal, academic, and nonprofit partners to address shared conservation challenges. Since 2010, ACFHP has supported more than 50 on-the-ground habitat restoration projects, reconnecting hundreds of miles of rivers, restoring access to thousands of acres of fish habitat, and leveraging millions of dollars in partner funding.

In addition to highlighting restoration success stories, the StoryMap features ACFHP’s science and data tools, including habitat prioritization resources that help partners target conservation efforts where they can have the greatest impact. It also emphasizes the role of local communities and collaborative partnerships in sustaining healthy fisheries and resilient coastal ecosystems.

Explore the StoryMap here: [Making the Connection: From Headwaters to Coral Reefs](#)



The StoryMap launch comes as ACFHP and its partners prepare to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the National Fish Habitat Partnership in 2026, marking two decades of nationwide collaboration to protect and restore fish habitats across the US.

The ACFHP StoryMap is publicly available and designed for a wide audience, including resource managers, conservation partners, educators, policymakers, and community members interested in learning more about fish habitat conservation along the Atlantic coast.

About the Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership

About the Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership ACFHP works from Maine to the Florida Keys to conserve, protect, restore, and enhance habitat for Atlantic coastal, estuarine-dependent, and diadromous fishes. ACFHP is part of the National Fish Habitat Partnership and collaborates with diverse partners to support healthy ecosystems, sustainable fisheries, and vibrant coastal communities.

THE MELISSA LASER HABITAT CONSERVATION AWARD

Annie Roddenberry – 2025

Annie Roddenberry, Aquatic Habitat Conservation and Restoration Biologist with the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), was presented with the ACFHP Melissa Laser Fish Habitat Conservation Award on October 27, 2025, at the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission’s 83rd Annual Meeting in Dewey Beach, Delaware.

Annie was recognized for her outstanding leadership, innovation, and dedication to improving habitat for native fish and wildlife along Florida’s Atlantic coast. Throughout her career, from her early work at the Marine Discovery Center in New Smyrna Beach to her current role with FWC, she has led transformative habitat restoration projects that benefit coastal ecosystems and the communities that rely on them.

Her accomplishments include advancing seagrass restoration and water quality improvements in the Indian River Lagoon, implementing living shoreline and wetland restoration projects, and supporting spring bank stabilization in central Florida. Annie recently chaired the Northeast Estuarine Restoration Team Steering Committee, and has served as project manager on multi-year, multi-agency restoration initiatives such as the North Peninsula State Park Wetland Restoration Project. She is known not only for her technical expertise, but also for her collaborative spirit and ability to inspire partners, volunteers, and community members.

“Annie is a dedicated and highly effective leader whose passion for habitat conservation shines through every project she takes on,” said members of the ACFHP Steering Committee. “Her work has delivered lasting benefits for coastal habitats and fisheries, and we are thrilled to recognize her achievements.”



From left: Jessica Coakley, Simen Kaalstad, Jeff Beal, Annie Roddenberry, Kent Smith. Photo credit: ASMFC

More information about the Melissa Laser Award can be found at: [Melissa Laser Fish Habitat Conservation Award – Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership](#)



ACFHP SEEKS NOMINATIONS FOR 2026 MELISSA LASER FISH HABITAT CONSERVATION AWARD

The Melissa Laser Fish Habitat Conservation Award is bestowed by the Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership upon individuals deemed to further the conservation, protection, restoration, and enhancement of habitat for native Atlantic coastal, estuarine-dependent, and diadromous fishes in a unique or extraordinary manner.

The award was established in memory of Dr. Melissa Laser who passed away unexpectedly on April 27, 2010. Melissa was a biologist with the Maine Department of Marine Resources where she worked tirelessly to protect, improve, and restore aquatic ecosystems in Maine and along the entire Atlantic coast.

As an astute strategic thinker and leader, Melissa edited and coordinated the Strategic and Operational Plan for the Restoration of Diadromous and Resident Fishes to the Penobscot River. She coordinated fish passage projects, managed and oversaw the biological field staff for the Maine Western Region, and was the Bureau of Sea Run Fisheries and Habitat Program lead for habitat restoration studies and projects. She was also an effective champion for Atlantic salmon, directing and coordinating Endangered Species Act-related actions pertaining to the species. Melissa brought her smiling dedication and enthusiasm to the ASMFC's Habitat Committee and Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership's Steering Committee, catalyzed by the Commission in 2006. Her contributions to these committees and to her home state were tremendous. She is deeply missed.

View the instructions on how to submit a 2026 nomination, or to see a list of past award recipients, visit: [Melissa Laser Fish Habitat Conservation Award – Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership](#). Please send nominations to Simen Kaalstad, ACFHP Director (SKaalstad@asmfc.org), by August 7, 2026. We plan to present the 2026 award at the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission Annual Meeting this fall.

NATIONAL FISH HABITAT PARTNERSHIP: 2025 UPDATES

In 2025, the National Fish Habitat Partnership (NFHP) continued its mission to protect, restore, and enhance fish habitat across the United States through collaborative, locally led conservation efforts.

A key milestone this year was the submission of the [Five-Year Status Report \(2021–2025\) to Congress](#), fulfilling a requirement under the America's Conservation Enhancement Reauthorization Act of 2024. The report outlines NFHP's progress on habitat projects, investment, results, priorities, and the power of partnerships in advancing fish habitat conservation nationwide.

On the ground, more than \$23.4 million in funding supported 53 priority conservation projects in 29 states. These initiatives, backed by the US Fish and Wildlife Service and a broad coalition of partners, leveraged federal, state, Tribal, and private contributions at a 6.7:1 match ratio – a strong indicator of NFHP's ability to stretch limited resources for maximum habitat benefit. The 2025 projects addressed a diverse suite of habitat needs, including removing barriers to fish passage, reducing erosion on agricultural lands, restoring stream banks, combating drought impacts, and conducting critical habitat monitoring and assessment work. Efforts spanned from urban and suburban stream restoration to tidal wetland reconnection, supporting healthier waterways and stronger fish populations from Alaska to Vermont. These accomplishments reflect NFHP's continued emphasis on strategic, partnership-driven conservation, advancing national priorities while improving local fishing opportunities and aquatic ecosystem health.

Comings & Goings

FAREWELL TO BOB GROSKIN

By Kent Smith, ACFHP co-founder and member of the ASMFC Habitat Committee



As with any organization, valued committee members move on to other phases of their careers and lives, and it is with fondness and deep appreciation that we bid farewell to Bob Groskin, who for more than a decade

represented the International Federation of Fly Fishers (now Fly Fishers International) on the ACFHP Steering Committee.

Like many, Bob's love of piscatorial pursuits with his favored fly-rod setup brought him to the fish habitat table. He recognized early on that conserved fish habitat equals healthy fisheries and quality fishing opportunities. Bob's background was unique within ACFHP. He spent his professional career as a small-animal DVM, maintaining a successful Mid-Atlantic practice, and entered the nonprofit world toward the end of his tenure in that role. As a business-oriented professional, he provided a valuable perspective alongside the many scientific professionals on the Committee—one that helped ACFHP successfully develop a business plan that is now yielding direct benefits, from fundraising to outreach.

Bob's enthusiasm for ACFHP's work was always evident at our meetings. He was known for those post-meeting ideas that surface in the middle of the night, which he would promptly share with the Committee Chair for off-line consideration – often on a 24/7/365 basis. We will miss Bob's thoughtful input and considerate nature as ACFHP continues to grow and advance its mission as a leading entity in fish habitat restoration along the Atlantic East Coast.

Tight lines and happiness to you wherever your aquatic pursuits take you in retirement, Bob!



WELCOME TIM ELLIS (APNEP) TO THE ACFHP STEERING COMMITTEE

The ACFHP is pleased to welcome Tim Ellis of the Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Partnership (APNEP) to the ACFHP Steering Committee.



Top left: Credit ASMFC; Top right: APNEP

Tim joined APNEP in 2017 as the program's Quantitative Ecologist, where he works closely with regional partners to develop and implement monitoring and assessment initiatives, with a particular focus on understanding the connections between submerged aquatic vegetation and estuarine water quality. He also facilitates the development of North Carolina's Aquatic Invasive Species Management Plan, helping to guide coordinated statewide efforts to address emerging threats to aquatic habitats.

Prior to joining APNEP, Tim spent a decade researching the population dynamics and connectivity of spotted seatrout in North Carolina and the Chesapeake Bay. He holds a B.S. in Biology from the University of North Carolina, and an M.S. in Zoology and a Ph.D. in Fisheries, Wildlife, and Conservation Biology from North Carolina State University.

Tim's strong background in quantitative ecology, habitat monitoring, and fisheries science will be a valuable asset to the Partnership, and ACFHP looks forward to his contributions to advancing coastwide habitat conservation and restoration efforts.

Acknowledgements

HABITAT PROGRAM MISSION

To work through the Commission, in cooperation with appropriate agencies and organizations, to enhance and cooperatively manage vital fish habitat for conservation, restoration, and protection, and to support the cooperative management of Commission managed species.

Partner Contributors

Braxton Davis, Todd Miller, Ryan Roberts, Sean Westley, Tim Ellis



ACFHP Steering Committee, John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge, Philadelphia, PA. Credit: ASMFC

Habitat Committee Member Contributors

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