

LONG ISLAND SOUND'S BIGGEST PROBLEM: EDUCATION

Connecticut Opinion

By Whitney Tilt

As fall settles in and we reflect on the summer past, many of us will remember heading for the water to escape the heat and humidity. For many residents of Connecticut and New York, this watery haven in which to cool off as well as to sail, fish, swim, or watch the sunset is Long Island Sound. But last summer also saw beach closings, congested harbors, and dirty-looking water.

Now as we leave the recreational waters of Long Island Sound for another year, we should ask, "Who will be minding the store while I'm gone" and "What condition will the Sound be in when I return next summer?"

In 1971, former Gov. Abraham Ribicoff spoke to a conference on Long Island Sound water pollution. He offered two major reasons for the sorry state of the Sound at that time: 1) as a result of multiple-state jurisdiction, there was little unified concern for the future of the Sound; and 2) intergovernmental rivalry stymied any serious attempt to cope with the deteriorating situation.

Looking back on the 13 years since, vast improvements have been achieved in many areas of the estuary. The Clean Water Act, state wetland protection acts and coastal zone management are a few efforts to more effectively manage the Sound. Unfortunately multiple-state jurisdictions, further clouded by numerous federal, interstate, county and municipal interests, still stymie serious attempts to manage the Sound as a single estuary. Efforts undertaken are more often motivated by parochial and political interests rather than effective science.

The statement of the Chief of Operations of the Environmental Protection Agency rings as true today as it did in 1971: "These [deteriorated] conditions which are now occurring in the Sound are occurring by default rather than by design, and to follow that path is to invite ecological disaster and the loss of a valuable natural resource."

We have yet to lose that "valuable natural resource." In fact, statistics for the Sound are impressive by any standard. Aside from the thousands of people who swim and fish in Long Island Sound each summer weekend, several major industries rely directly on the Sound. It is one of the largest boating centers in the world, with the Connecticut recreational boating industry alone estimated to be the cause of a minimum of \$281 million worth of business activities. Both the oyster and lobster industry have undergone tremendous growth over the last decade and now account for over \$10 million, with the Long Island Sound oyster fetching 25 percent more per bushel at market than its Chesapeake rival.

This illustrates several of the problems currently facing the development of an effective management strategy. Most people would be surprised, if not amazed, that the Sound is a productive estuary, illustrating that the No. 1 problem is education and appreciation.

A second problem arises from multiple use of the Sound coupled with a lack of appreciation: in other words, Long Island Sound has many users but lacks a constituency.

A final problem might be coined "the calm before the storm." While the current figures look good, how is Long Island Sound going to avoid the problems facing many other coastal areas? For example, Chesapeake Bay is suffering reduced fisheries production due to a host of known and unknown causes while the Maine lobster industry shows all the classic signs of an over-exploited fishery. Will Long Island Sound learn from these other experiences or choose to await its own crisis?

Many scholars identify crisis as paramount in bringing an issue to the attention of the public and affecting a policy response. For Long Island Sound, we have seen that the threat of a Cross-Sound bridge or a dredging project can ignite public sentiment, but once the crisis is past, the coalition of Sound supporters return to their individual pursuits: the sailors to their yachts, the fishermen to their baits, and the tug captains to their barges.

Potential crises are not absent from the Sound. Concern for anoxic (absence of oxygen) conditions in parts of the estuary during the summer; the uncertain status of striped bass stocks; and unknown effects of high nutrient and heavy metal inputs are but three examples. The question remains, "Who is looking out for the Sound?"

The answer is, unfortunately, no one. While numerous government, academic and private organizations have focused on portions of Long Island Sound, no single entity sees Stonington Connecticut as part of the same system as Oyster Bay New York; nor is there truly a recognition that Huntington, Long Island shares the same water as Westchester County.

Water quality is a good example of environmental management on Long Island Sound. The counties of Suffolk, Nassau and Westchester conduct some form of surface water-quality testing while Connecticut has no comprehensive program for the open waters of the Sound. Coordination between the existing sampling programs is minimal while the extrapolation of Sound-wide water quality trends remains impossible.

The one interstate agency once responsible for water-quality testing in the western Sound, the Interstate Sanitation Commission, has seen its budget consistently reduced so that it has only a token presence on Long Island Sound. In excess of 1.1 billion gallons of sewage effluent flows into Long Island Sound and the East River each day, yet no coordinated attempt has been conducted to evaluate its effect on the estuary. Sewage effluent may be one of the least offensive inputs currently discharged into the Sound.

In 1975, the now defunct New England River Basin Commission issued a study concluding that "there is no one voice to speak for Long Island Sound." The study recommend the establishment of an interim action program that called for Connecticut and New York to work together with other academic, scientific and citizen interests to develop a program and long-term mechanism to manage the Sound.

The study concluded that "unless the Sound has a visible and local spokesman, the work of the study and concern of the thousands who participated in it may have been for nothing."

Nine years later, the majority of the study's recommendations lie collecting dust on forgotten book shelves.

Another opportunity for Long Island Sound lies before Congress. Thanks to the efforts of United States Representative Stewart B. McKinney and other regional representatives, the proposed Water Quality Renewal Act includes a provision to allow selected estuaries to convene a "management conference." The purpose of this conference would be the development and implementation of a comprehensive master plan for the estuary.

The Water Quality Renewal Act recently passed the House of Representatives and awaits action by the Senate. However, with or without the sanction of Congress, it is time that Long Island Sound received its single voice. With millions of people living within a few miles of this estuary, Long Island Sound is truly an "urban sea" and offers this region a unique and bountiful resource. Without a coordinated management effort, the Sound will continue to be parochially fragmented while its natural resources are degraded in an incremental and piecemeal manner.

This fall, make sure that someone is taking responsibility for Long Island Sound. Contact your state and Congressional representatives and tell them to support their local estuary so that next year, when you return to the shore, it will be an even better experience.

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