HABITAT HOTLINE ATLANTIC

Summer 2009 Volume 16, Issue 2

THE ATLANTIC COASTAL FISH HABITAT PARTNERSHIP: FLEDGLING NOW FUNCTIONAL

What Is ACFHP?

The Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership (ACFHP) is a candidate partnership under the National Fish Habitat Action Plan (NFHAP). The NFHAP is an unprecedented national effort to build and support strategic partnerships for fish habitat conservation. It establishes a process that brings together partners, challenges them to identify and collaborate to advance strategic conservation priorities, and to measure and report progress. It is this commitment to strategic work, conducted by partners working together, and a commitment to progress measurement that distinguishes the NFHAP and its partnerships from other fish habitat conservation efforts.

In March 2009, the ACFHP formally took effect with the signature of the final party to its Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). There are 30 signatories to the MOU including the ASMFC, the 16 state natural resource agencies managing Atlantic coastal river drainage systems (Maine to Florida, including Pennsylvania and Vermont), federal natural resource agencies (NOAA, USFWS, USGS), the Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Program, the Wells National Estuarine Research Reserve, the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, and several environmental non-governmental organizations (American Littoral Society, American Rivers, Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Environmental Defense Fund, Oyster Recovery Partnership, Partnership for the Delaware Estuary, and The Nature Conservancy). In the future, the Partnership hopes to bring in additional organizations committed to conserving fish habitat along the Atlantic coast.

What Are We Up To?

Presently, ACFHP is working to meet the needs of its partners as well as the requirements for recognition as a fish habitat partnership under the NFHAP. Specific projects include: 1) a web-based assessment of existing coastal fish habitat

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information; 2) development of an innovative coast-wide analysis of species-habitat relationships for coastal fish species; and 3) creation of a variety of communications products to disseminate information and provide overall coordination to ACFHP partners. In the coming year, these projects will support the development of coast-wide priorities for future ACFHP efforts.

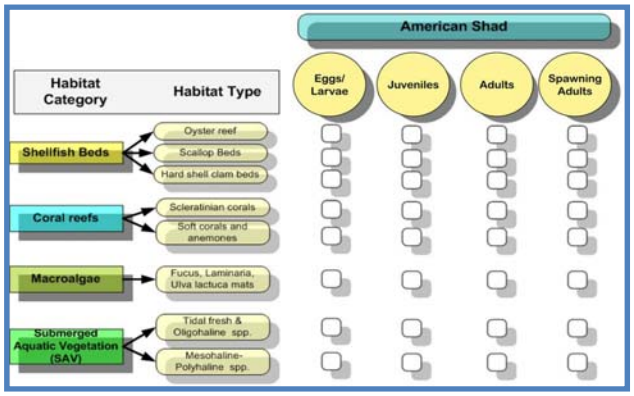
Ultimately, ACFHP will focus its efforts on supporting on-the-ground projects, implemented cooperatively by its partners, through endorsement, funding, coordination, and other opportunities. Through collaborative effort the Partnership will generate conservation outcomes exceeding those that partners could accomplish independently.

Major Project: Strategic Planning

As part of its development, ACFHP will develop a coast-wide Conservation Strategic Plan that sets priorities for habitat management, conservation, and outreach. Using The Nature Conservancy's Conservation Action Planning process as a guide, the Steering Committee began strategic planning in April 2009. To date, the Steering Committee has established tentative goals, and conducted a threats analysis. A series of conference calls and meetings in the upcoming months will be used to determine priority threats, objectives, strategic actions, and focus areas for plan implementation. The Steering Committee has also established a work group for writing the strategic plan.

Science Project 1: Species-Habitat Matrix

Developed and reviewed by a diversity of habitat specialists, the primary purpose of the ACFHP Species-Habitat Matrix is to provide a starting point for prioritizing habitats (on both a coast-wide and regional basis) to focus ACFHP's conservation efforts.



The Matrix is a tool that will help evaluate the relative importance of different coastal, estuarine, and freshwater habitats in terms of their value as habitat for selected fish and invertebrate species. The goal is to provide an index of habitat value through one specific lens. While ACFHP designed this matrix specifically to help the partnership prioritize habitats, there are many other potential uses for this work in the future.

ACFHP Mission

To accelerate the conservation, protection, restoration, and enhancement of habitat for native Atlantic coastal, estuarine-dependent, and diadromous fishes through partnerships between federal, tribal, state, local, and other entities

NATIONAL FISH HABITAT ACTION PLAN

ACFHP Vision

Healthy, thriving habitats of sufficient quantity and quality to support all life stages of Atlantic coastal, estuarine-dependent, and diadromous fishes

ACFHP Timeline

May 2006: ASMFC begins partnership development

February 2007: Informational sessions held along the Atlantic coast

May 2007: Coast-wide workshop in Baltimore to engage stakeholders and partners

August 2007: ACFHP granted 'candidate partnership status' by the NFHAP Board

April 2008: Full-time ACFHP Coordinator hired

March 2009: ACFHP MOU enacted

August 2009: ACFHP will apply to be an 'official partnership' under the NFHAP

Science Project 2: Assessment of Existing Coastal Fish Habitat Information

The primary objective of the Assessment of Existing Information (AEI) is to inform and enable ACFHP conservation planning. This project will be completed through a contract with the NOAA National Ocean Service's Biogeography Branch of the Center for Coastal Monitoring and Assessment. The AEI is a comprehensive bibliography of over 500 selected documents, datasets, and information portals on Atlantic coastal fish species and habitats. An assessment of this information has yielded indicator, threat, and action classifications from approximately half of these documents for waterbodies along the entire Atlantic coast. Knowledge and information gaps have also been identified through this process. Additionally, waterbodies and drainage areas addressed in these documents and datasets will be linked to a spatial footprint, developed in a GIS framework. Products from this project will allow ACFHP partners to consider assessment information at a waterbody, regional, or coast-wide scale, and a set of web-based tools will enable users to query information and view spatial formats, making the AEI a tool available to all resource managers.

Communications Project: ACFHP Website

ACFHP's Communications Working Group issued an RFP for an ACFHP website on May 27th, with proposals due on June 26th. The ACFHP website will include: 1) information about ACFHP; 2) information about priority habitats and projects; 3) a clearinghouse of resources for conservation; and 4) a central point of coordination for partners. Please contact Emily Greene for a copy of the RFP, if you or an organization you know is interested in bidding. ACFHP is hoping to have a live website in January 2010.

New Protocol: Letters of Endorsement

ACFHP's Endorsement Subgroup has developed a protocol for considering requests for letters of endorsement on habitat projects occurring along the Atlantic coast. In the absence of funding, an endorsement letter serves as a way to display ACFHP support of a project. If you are interested in seeking ACFHP endorsement for a project please contact Emily Greene for an application.

ACFHP Committee Structure

Steering Committee
Science & Data Working Group
Communications Working Group

Contact Information

For more information, please contact Emily Greene, ACFHP Coordinator, at egreene@asmfc.org or (202) 289-6400.

Spotlight on a Small Bivalve with a Big Impact

Restoration News from the Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership

Mention oysters and the listener probably envisions food, restaurants, or maybe shells. Oysters are a valuable seafood commodity, enjoyed by many while supporting commercial fishers along all of America's coasts. Only a few listeners would picture the oyster's ability to enhance water quality and stabilize shorelines. Thanks to the oyster, a little-noticed change is occurring in many places along the South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico. Oysters are improving, and in the process they are restoring shorelines and increasing fisheries.

SARP's Mission

With partners, protect, conserve, and restore aquatic resources, including habitats throughout the Southeast, for the continuing benefit, use, and enjoyment of the American people

In Florida, about 3,000 feet of oyster reefs are being created by oyster domes that have been installed by the U.S. Air Force along the shoreline at MacDill Air Force Base. These domes provide habitat upon which oyster larvae settle and grow, eventually producing large colonies that filter water and attract a plethora of sea life. The domes also reduce wave energy along the shoreline. As a result, volunteers from the base have been planting native marsh grasses and mangroves as sediment has aggregated.


U.S. Air Force

In North Carolina, volunteers from the North Carolina Coastal Federation are stabilizing an estuarine shoreline adjacent to the largest sand dune system on the East Coast. They built an oyster sill to dissipate wave energy, and are now planting marsh grass seedlings to build up the marsh.


SARP

In the estuarine areas of the Altamaha River in Georgia, oyster shell sacks are being used to prevent erosion of a vegetative shoreline while artificial cultch has been installed to restore oyster reefs to the area. The area is good habitat for increasing the oyster fishery, but shell cultch was in short supply. This method will increase the fishery.

These three projects are among many undertaken throughout the region to accomplish the objectives of the Southeast Aquatic Habitat Plan, the strategic guide of the Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership, with funding assistance through the National Fish Habitat Action Plan. The partnership integrates programs, such as the NOAA Community-Based Restoration Program, with NFHAP in order to strengthen the outcomes of aquatic conservation and restoration efforts for the benefit of the entire region.

The Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership (SARP) was initiated in 2001 to address the myriad issues related to the management of aquatic resources in the southeastern United States. SARP is a regional collaboration of natural resource and science agencies (including ASMFC and many of its member agencies), conservation organizations, and private interests developed to strengthen the management and conservation of aquatic resources in the southeastern United States.

For more information about any of these projects, or about SARP, contact Scott Robinson, SARP Coordinator, scott.robinson@dnr.state.ga.us, or visit www.sarpaquatic.org.

NATIONAL FISH HABITAT ACTION PLAN

Energy Update

Framework for Renewable Energy Development on the U.S. Outer Continental Shelf Announced

WASHINGTON, D.C., April 22, 2009 – Today, in an Earth Day speech at a wind turbine tower manufacturing plant, President Barack Obama announced that the Department of the Interior has finalized a long-awaited framework for renewable energy production on the U.S. Outer Continental Shelf (OCS). The framework establishes a program to grant leases, easements, and rights-of-way for orderly, safe, and environmentally responsible renewable energy development activities, such as the siting and construction of off-shore wind farms, on the OCS.


MMS

"It is fitting that on Earth Day President Obama is taking this bold step toward opening America's oceans and new energy frontier, so that we can wisely build a clean energy economy that will create millions of new jobs across the country," Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar said.

In addition to establishing a process for granting leases, easements, and rights-of-way for offshore renewable energy development, the new program also establishes methods for sharing revenues generated from OCS renewable energy projects with adjacent coastal States. Additionally the framework will enhance partnerships with federal, state, and local agencies and tribal governments to assist in maximizing the economic and ecological benefits of OCS renewable energy development. The Final Framework has been submitted to the Federal Register, and is available online.

The Energy Policy Act of 2005 granted the Interior Department's Minerals Management Service (MMS) the authority to regulate renewable energy development on the OCS, but no action had been taken under that authority until today. Since taking office, Secretary Salazar has made it a priority to finalize the rules that will govern offshore renewable energy development, given the enormity of this clean, renewable energy source and its proximity to major population centers. A number of other countries already are tapping significant energy from offshore winds.

The Interior Department and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) cleared the way for the publication of these final rules by signing an agreement on April 9, 2009 that clarifies their agencies' jurisdictional responsibilities for leasing and licensing renewable energy projects on the OCS.

Under the agreement, the MMS has exclusive jurisdiction with regard to the production, transportation, or transmission of energy from non-hydrokinetic renewable energy projects, including wind and solar. FERC will have exclusive jurisdiction to issue licenses for the construction and operation of hydrokinetic projects, including wave and current, but companies will be required to first obtain a lease through MMS.

The proposed wind farm off Nantucket Sound, known as Cape Wind, has been undergoing review independently of the rule making process, and no decision is being made on the project at this time. If approved, it will be subject to the terms of the final framework announced today.

> *This new framework will enhance our energy security and create the foundation for a new offshore energy sector that will employ Americans developing clean and renewable energy.*
>
> -Ken Salazar, Secretary of the Interior

The Interior Department's Minerals Management Service is responsible for the management of the more than 1.7 billion acres of submerged lands on the OCS, to include mineral resource and renewable energy development.

For a copy of the full framework report, see: http://www.mms.gov/offshore/AlternativeEnergy/PDFs/AD30RenewableEnergy04-22-09.pdf.

For more information, contact: Frank Quimby (202) 208-6416 or Nicholas Pardi (202) 208-7746.

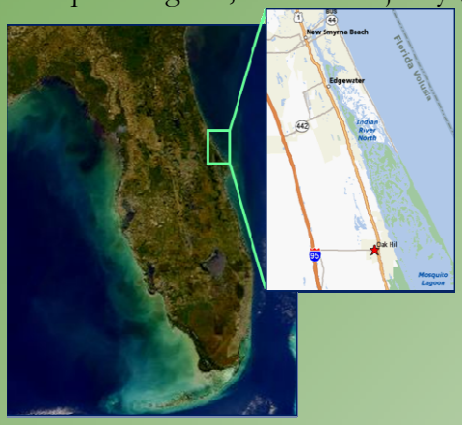
Source: U.S. Department of the Interior, Minerals Management Service

Around the Coast

Ditching Ditches in Indian River Lagoon

Coastal marsh habitats provide a vast array of ecosystem functions and serve as links and buffers between terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems where sediment and nutrients from uplands are trapped and transformed into plant biomass. They provide habitat for numerous animals (especially fish and birds), thus helping to maintain biodiversity. Wetlands also moderate storm/flood damage to upland areas, and provide buffers to anticipated sea level rise anticipated from predicted climate change. Conservation of these habitats is of paramount importance to fish and wildlife management in Florida and throughout the Atlantic seaboard.

In the Indian River Lagoon (IRL), which includes the Mosquito Lagoon, the vast majority (over 75%) of the historic wetlands have been impounded for mosquito control and isolated from the estuary since the late 1950s and 1960s. Past work by the St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD) has reconnected more than 19,000 acres of impoundments with the installation of culverts and pumps. Much of the Volusia County coastal wetlands in the Mosquito Lagoon that were spared from impounding were crisscrossed with hundreds of miles of mosquito control ditches. The most damaging of these ditching efforts used large excavation equipment (draglines) to ditch through 1,200 acres of wetlands in this system.



The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), SJRWMD, and Volusia County are working together on a $780,000 project with significant contributions from a USFWS National Coastal Wetland Conservation Grant to restore more than 300 project acres of the dragline ditch-impacted wetlands remaining on public lands in Volusia County's portion of the Mosquito Lagoon. This landscape-level strategy will concentrate on large contiguous areas of severely impacted wetlands, which will ultimately amount to about 21% of the dragline-disturbed wetlands in the County, with more than 32% of the publicly-held dragline disturbed wetlands remaining.

Restoring wetlands damaged by dragline ditching constructed for mosquito control provides increased acreage of tidal wetland. Although no planting of wetland vegetation is done, extensive post-restoration monitoring has demonstrated recruitment from seed and vegetative expansion of remaining or adjacent wetland plants back to historic community structure within 5 to 7 years.

Emergent salt marsh and mangrove ecosystems of coastal Florida are critical to the long-term viability of regional fisheries. Although typically harboring only a modest fraction of the species present in other nearby habitats, primary production from this habitat is locally high, and resultant nutrient availability exported from the marsh promotes elevated biomass in adjacent waters. From an economic perspective, the most important function of these habitats is as a nursery for commercially and recreationally coveted fishes and crustaceans, such as spotted sea trout and blue crab. Estuarine marsh restoration in this region of Florida improves habitat for threatened animals and Florida species of special concern. The value of these areas has led to the entire IRL being designated as Essential Fish Habitat by the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration.

Salt marshes and mangrove forests also support a number of small-bodied resident fish species that have evolved to withstand the often-strenuous environmental conditions encountered here. They can complete their life cycle without extensive migration and thus benefit year-round from locally high primary productivity. As a consequence, they often develop large standing stocks and serve as an important food resource for higher trophic levels and as an energy link between upland and estuarine ecosystems. The restoration of coastal wetland included in this project will provide substantial benefit to local and regional fisheries.

Source: Kent Smith, Florida FWC

'Vandenberg' Artificial Reef Successfully Deployed

May 27, 2009

The highly anticipated placement of the world's second-largest ex-military ship as an artificial diving and fishing reef, near Key West, is finally a reality. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) worked closely with its many project partners to successfully deploy the decommissioned military ship "Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg" at 10:24 a.m.

Thousands of delighted onlookers watched as 44 carefully placed explosive charges were detonated to blast holes in the hull of the 523-foot vessel.

According to the FWC, the 'Vandenberg' will provide recreational diving, ecotourism and fishing enhancements to the Florida Keys and provide a needed lift to the economy of Key West and its neighboring communities. The ship was placed in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary near Key West to help divert fishing and diving pressure away from natural reefs near the ship.

The FWC managed nearly $2.5 million in funding for the 'Vandenberg' preparation, cleanup, and monitoring out of total project costs of about $8.5 million.

For more information, contact: Lee Schlesinger, 850-487-0554.

MD, VA, and ACOE Agree to Preferred Alternative for Chesapeake Bay Oyster Restoration

On April 6, 2009, the Chesapeake Bay Oyster Restoration Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) Executive Committee announced their agreement to identify a native-only restoration strategy as the preferred alternative in the final PEIS due to be published in late June. A 30-day public comment period will follow publication of the final PEIS, with a formal Record of Decision expected to be published in late July.

The Executive Committee agreed that, "Based on the current state of the science and extensive public discourse, the use of non-native oysters in Chesapeake Bay, its tidal tributaries, and the coastal bays and waters of Maryland and Virginia poses unacceptable ecological risks." Further, "In selecting the native oyster alternative, the [responsible agencies] will remain fully committed to using only the native oyster to work towards revitalizing oyster restoration and aquaculture in meeting commercial and ecological goals."

An additional commitment was made to, "work towards implementing biologically and economically sustainable harvesting measures for the public oyster fishery… [and] pursue the establishment of realistic metrics, accountability measures, and a performance based adaptive management methodology for all efforts in revitalizing the native oyster for purposes of achieving commercial and ecological goals."

New Guides for Dealing with Climate Change on a Local Level

LOCAL STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE

Local Strategies for Addressing Climate Change

By: NOAA Coastal Services Center

Published: February 2009

Available: http://www.csc.noaa.gov/magazine/climatechangestrategies.pdf

ICLEI Local Governments for Sustainability USA

ICLEI Resource Guide: Outreach and Communications

By: ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability

Published: January 2009

Available: http://www.icleiusa.org/action-center/engaging-your-community/outreach-and-communications-guide/Outreach%20and%20Communications%20Guide.pdf

WORLDWATCH INSTITUTE Vision for a Sustainable World

Climate Change Reference Guide

By: Alice McKeown and Gary Gardner
(The Worldwatch Institute)

Published: 2009

Available: http://www.worldwatch.org/files/pdf/CCRG.pdf

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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.

Habitat Program Vision

Protected, revitalized habitat for all Atlantic coastal fish species or successful habitat restoration well in progress by 2015.

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