

COASTAL FISH & WILDLIFE HABITAT ASSESSMENT FORM

Name of Area: **Accabonac Harbor**
Designated: **March 15, 1987**
Date revised: **May 15, 2002**
County: **Suffolk**
Town(s): **East Hampton**
7½' Quadrangle(s): **Gardiners Island West, NY**

Assessment Criteria

Ecosystem Rarity (ER)--the uniqueness of the plant and animal community in the area and the physical, structural, and chemical features supporting this community.

ER assessment: Large, undeveloped, coastal wetland ecosystem; rare on Long Island. 25

Species Vulnerability (SV)--the degree of vulnerability throughout its range in New York State of a species residing in the ecosystem or utilizing the ecosystem for its survival.

SV assessment: Piping plover (E, T-Fed), least tern (T), osprey (SC), short-eared owl (E) and spotted turtle (SC) breeding. Northern harrier (T) and common loon (SC) feeding.
Calculation: $36 + (36/2) + (25/4) + (25/8) + (16/16) =$ 64.38

Human Use (HU)-- the conduct of significant, demonstrable commercial, recreational, or educational wildlife-related human uses, either consumptive or non-consumptive, in the area or directly dependent upon the area.

HU assessment: Commercial and recreational shellfishery of county-level significance. 4

Population Level (PL)--the concentration of a species in the area during its normal, recurring period of occurrence, regardless of the length of that period of occurrence.

PL assessment: Piping plover nesting populations significant in Suffolk County. Populations of breeding osprey and diamondback terrapin significant at the local level. 4

Replaceability (R)--ability to replace the area, either on or off site, with an equivalent replacement for the same fish and wildlife and uses of those same fish and wildlife, for the same users of those fish and wildlife.

R assessment: Irreplaceable. 1.2

Habitat Index = [ER + SV + HU + PL] = 97.38

Significance = HI x R = 116.9

NEW YORK STATE
SIGNIFICANT COASTAL FISH AND WILDLIFE HABITAT
NARRATIVE

ACCABONAC HARBOR

LOCATION AND DESCRIPTION OF HABITAT:

Accabonac Harbor is located approximately two miles east of Three Mile Harbor, on Gardiners Bay, in the Town of East Hampton, Suffolk County (7.5' Quadrangle: Gardiners Island West, NY). This approximate 660 acre area consists of shallow open water (less than 6 feet deep at mean low water), extensive salt marshes, sand spits, dredged material disposal areas, and small wooded islands. The fish and wildlife habitat is surrounded by largely developed woodlands. The sand spit north of the harbor inlet along Gerard Drive has considerable residential development on it. The Nature Conservancy owns a number of parcels in the area, totaling approximately 90 acres. The spit of land south of the inlet (forming East Harbor), Louse Point, is used as a recreational beach and a mooring area for commercial and recreational small craft. Residential development borders much of eastern, southern and southwestern portions of the harbor. Most of the Accabonac Harbor area receives relatively little human disturbance, but there is extensive recreational use of the beaches.

FISH AND WILDLIFE VALUES:

Accabonac Harbor comprises one of the major undeveloped coastal wetland ecosystems on Long Island. Portions of the habitat have been designated as part of the national Coastal Barrier Resources System, one of only 67 such areas on Long Island. This diverse area is important to a variety of fish and wildlife, including several endangered, threatened, and special concern species.

Nine pairs of osprey (SC) nested in Accabonac Harbor in 1996; there are a number of man-made platforms placed at various locations in the harbor to encourage nesting.

Least tern (T) frequently nest on the sand spits along the eastern edge of Accabonac Harbor. The annual average number of nesting pairs of least tern for the 1987-1996 period was 16; a peak number of 48 pairs was observed in 1993. Colonies of least tern have been established at the Louse Point location (*e.g.*, 25 individuals in 1998), but have been abandoned during the nesting season. In the 1990s, few least tern offspring fledged at this and other East Hampton nesting locations.

For piping plover (E, T-Fed), the annual average number of nesting pairs for the 1987-1996 period was three; a peak number of seven pairs was attained in 1997. The numbers of nesting piping plover increased from one pair annually in the late 1980's to four or five pairs annually during the early 1990's.

Other probable or confirmed nesting bird species in Accabonac Harbor include green-backed heron, American black duck, mallard, sharp-tailed sparrow, willet, and Virginia rail. During the winter

months, northern harrier (T) and short-eared owl (SC) are regularly seen foraging among the marshes in this area. Christmas counts have documented several hundred white-winged scoter, oldsquaw, common eider, and red-breasted merganser in Accabonac Harbor, as well as Canada goose, horned grebe, common loon (SC), green-winged teal, bufflehead, and other bird species.

In addition to having significant bird concentrations, Accabonac Harbor is a productive area for marine finfish, shellfish, and other wildlife. The Accabonac Harbor wetlands contribute significantly to the biological productivity of Gardiners Bay. There are fringing eelgrass beds to the north of the harbor, which are likely to contribute to the overall value of the area as nursery for fish and habitat for shellfish species. The harbor serves as a nursery and feeding area (from April through November, generally) for many estuarine fish species, including scup, summer flounder, bluefish, and winter flounder. Bay scallops were formerly abundant in the harbor but populations have declined. Soft clams and hard clams are found most years in abundance, supporting a commercial and recreational shellfishery of county-level significance. Most of East Harbor is closed to shellfishing year round. All waters of Accabonac Harbor south of Sage Island, and the northernmost waters of the Harbor, are closed to shellfishing between May 1 and November 30. Horseshoe crabs breed on Accabonac Harbor beaches in large numbers during the spring. Diamondback terrapin breed in the harbor wetlands. Spotted turtles (SC) occur in the south end of the harbor, inhabiting the ditches and marshes of that area.

The New York Natural Heritage Program documents several listed and rare plant species at the Accabonac Harbor site. These include: bushy rockrose (*Helianthemum dumosum*, T), New England blazing star (*Liatris scariosa* var *nova-angliae*), silverweed (*Potentilla anseina* ssp *egedii*), and the best example of creeping spikerush (*Eleocharis fallax*) in New York.

IMPACT ASSESSMENT:

Any activity that would substantially degrade the water quality in Accabonac Harbor would adversely affect the biological productivity of this area. All species of fish and wildlife would be affected by water pollution, such as chemical contamination (including food chain effects resulting from bioaccumulation), oil spills, excessive turbidity, and waste disposal. It is essential that high water quality be maintained in the area to protect the bay scallop and hard clam fishery. A particular threat in this regard stems from continued development of parcels surrounding the Harbor. Alterations in water circulation patterns for habitat and water quality management and improvement, including Open Marsh Water Management, may be beneficial to fish and wildlife species using the habitat.

Unrestricted use of motorized vessels including personal watercraft in the protected, shallow waters of bays, harbors, and tidal creeks can have adverse effects on aquatic vegetation and fish and wildlife populations. Use of motorized vessels should be controlled (*e.g.*, no wake zones, speed zones, zones of exclusion) in and adjacent to shallow waters and vegetated wetlands.

Alteration of tidal patterns in Accabonac Harbor could have major impacts on the fish and wildlife communities present. Accabonac Harbor has the most frequently dredged inlet and channels in the

Town of East Hampton. No new navigation channels should be excavated in the area. Dredging to maintain existing boat channels in the harbor should be scheduled between September 15 and December 15 to minimize potential impacts on aquatic organisms, and to allow for disposal when wildlife populations are least sensitive to disturbance. Dredged material disposal in this area would be detrimental, but such activities may be designed to maintain or improve the habitat for certain species of wildlife.

Elimination of salt marsh and intertidal areas, through loss of tidal connection, ditching, excavation, or filling, would result in a direct loss of valuable habitat area. Construction of shoreline structures, such as docks, piers, bulkheads, or revetments, in areas not previously disturbed by development, may result in the loss of productive areas which support the fish and wildlife resources of Accabonac Harbor. Alternative strategies for the protection of shoreline property should be examined, including innovative, vegetation-based approaches. There is considerable potential for preservation of vegetated buffer areas and restoration of tidal wetlands in the Accabonac Harbor area. Control of invasive nuisance plant species, through a variety of means, may improve fish and wildlife species use of the area and enhance overall wetland values.

Nesting shorebirds inhabiting Accabonac Harbor are highly vulnerable to disturbance by humans, especially during the nesting and fledgling period (March 15 through August 15). Significant pedestrian traffic or recreational vehicle use of the beach could easily eliminate the use of this site as a breeding area and should be minimized during this period. Recreational activities (*e.g.*, boat and personal watercraft landing, off-road vehicle use, picnicking) in the vicinity of bird nesting areas should be minimized during this period. Predation of chicks and destruction of eggs or nests by unleashed pets (*e.g.*, dogs, cats) and natural predators may also occur, and predator control should be implemented where feasible. Fencing and/or continued annual posting of shorebird nesting areas should be provided to help protect these species. Control of vegetative succession, through beneficial use of dredged material or other means may improve the availability of nesting habitat in this area.

CONTACTS

Habitat Unit
NYS Department of State
Division of Coastal Resources
41 State Street
Albany, NY 12231
Phone: (518) 474-6000

NYSDEC—Region 1
State University of New York, Building 40
Stony Brook, NY 11790-2356
Phone: (631) 444-0354

Wildlife Manager
NYSDEC—Region 1
State University of New York, Building 40
Stony Brook, NY 11790
Phone: (631) 444-0310

Bureau of Marine Resources
NYSDEC
205 N. Belle Meade Road, Suite 1
East Setauket, NY 11733
Phone: (631) 444-0430

Finfish and Crustaceans
NYSDEC
205 N. Belle Meade Road, Suite 1
East Setauket, NY 11733
Phone: (631) 444-0436

The Nature Conservancy
Long Island Chapter
250 Lawrence Hill Road
Cold Spring Harbor, NY 11724
Phone: (631) 367-3384

New York Natural Heritage Program
Wildlife Resources Center
700 Troy-Schenectady Road
Latham, NY 12110
Phone: (518) 783-3932

Department of Natural Resources
Town of East Hampton
300 Pantigo Place, Suite 105
East Hampton, NY 11937-2684
Phone: (631) 324-0496

Office of Ecology
Suffolk County Dept. of Health Services
Bureau of Environmental Management
County Center
Riverhead, NY 11901
Phone: (631) 852-2077

