

HAMPTONS

What You Can do to Save the Hamptons' Natural Beauty

By Emily J. Weitz | May 22, 2015 | [Lifestyle](#)

A recent report about the dire future of New York State's wildlife has been a greater call to action for nature-nurturing Hamptonsites.



There are certain aspects of our environment that are so intimately woven into the fabric of the Hamptons that it's difficult to contemplate life without them. The calls of meadowlarks in the trees; the whirl of bumblebees in the garden; cottontail bunnies hopping across the yard; piping plovers dancing along the shoreline. But these species are just a few of the 186 animals that are likely to drop to critical levels unless urgent action is taken. By 2025 the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) predicts that twice that number of species will see significant declines in numbers. What does this mean for the East End, and what can we do about it?

The report, which was released by the NYSDEC in conjunction with the Cornell Cooperative Extension and relied on studying populations over time, surveys, flyovers, and other sources, sounds dire. Of 594 species, 372 were designated as "species of greatest conservation need" (SGCN), which means they are rare or their populations are declining; 186 of these were designated as high priority. Even though it was a statewide

survey, about half of these species on the list spend at least part of their lives on Long Island, many in the waters, wetlands, and woods of the East End. And many of the highest-priority species came as quite a shock. “There are species that most people know,” said Robert DeLuca, president of the Group for the East End. “Hard clams, horseshoe crabs, bay scallops, oysters, winter flounder. These are [species] people fish for and eat. They’re in the background of our lives, and we don’t think of them being on the brink [of extinction].”

But they are on the brink, and without action, these species could move from the SGCN list to the endangered species list. If that were to happen, it could affect our food sources, our economy, and our culture. It’s painful to imagine a Montauk without fishermen or an East Hampton without baymen. That’s what environmentalists insist must be avoided. “You’re better off taking care of a species before it gets onto the endangered species list,” says DeLuca. “If you don’t, it’s more [about] crisis management.”

Others in the environmental community believe that getting these species onto the endangered species list is exactly what we need to spark the urgency that the situation demands. “We have a 10-year window to create a management plan,” said Frank Quevedo, executive director of the South Fork Natural History Museum. “Putting them on the endangered species list now may involve a lot of red tape, but it’s a strong plan that would be efficient in sustaining populations. We are in crisis mode now and we need to move quickly.”

One of the main ways to help these species make a comeback is through habitat restoration. Construction and pollution have destroyed and degraded many of the habitats these species require to survive. “Whether it’s a marsh that gets filled in, a wetland that gets turned into a shopping center, or the poor water quality in bays and harbors, if you can restore the habitats, the species have a better chance of [survival],” argues DeLuca.



There are programs that have succeeded in restoring habitats. For example, eelgrass bed restoration projects by the Cornell Cooperative Extension have been underway for more than 20 years. (Eelgrass is one of two

species of sea grass that occurs naturally in this area, and it is essential as a nursery for the young of many species, including shellfish and finfish. The stalks can grow as high as six feet and act as underwater forests that provide shelter and food.) The success of these programs varies, but some have done very well. Says Christopher Pickerell, marine program director at Cornell, “Two large restored meadows in Long Island Sound have persisted for 10 years and are expanding every year through natural vegetative spread.”

The hope is that the NYSDEC list will be a wake-up call to organizations and individuals to promote projects like Cornell’s, and to make some drastic changes in the way we live. The Concerned Citizens of Montauk focuses on fisheries, water quality, and coastal resiliency as ways to keep intact the identity and natural balance of Montauk, which is New York State’s largest commercial fishing port. “Clams, scallops, mussels, striped bass, tuna—unfortunately, you name it,” says Jeremy Samuelson, executive director of CCOM, which hosts beach clean-up days and guided trail hikes. “The scary reality is that each of these species is intricately interwoven into complex systems so that when you pull one thread, the entire system can come unraveled. We’re not only a part of the system, but dependent on it.”

Samuelson believes that real change will take all of the local organizations working together. “We have to stop pretending if we do all the right things, we can put the world back together the way it was. We have to admit how broken the systems are,” he says of the area’s large-scale systems like waste management, water treatment, and electricity. Thinking about the ways these are not serving us efficiently can be daunting to the individual, but Samuelson urges people to use the local government to effect change. “Good old-fashioned outreach to elected officials,” he says, “is the only thing that will get us moving down the right road. For the people to lead and make perfectly clear that we have to change course.”

So far, it is Hamptonites who are changing the area’s course. The Group for the East End acknowledged the need for clean drinking water and partnered with the Riverhead-based environmental group Long Island Pine Barrens Society to enact legislation. “It was approved two to one for the county to start putting money back into water quality protection,” says DeLuca. “A lot of good can happen that way.”

The septic systems in the Hamptons, many of which are old and insufficient, have allowed nitrogen to leak into our waters. “We’ve worked at the state level to bring funding to change out septic systems that are failing and too close to the water,” says DeLuca.

Assemblyman Fred Thiele Jr., who works at the state level, points to the success of the Community Preservation Fund (CPF), which gets its money through real estate transfer taxes. “The Community Preservation Fund has generated \$1 billion for land preservation and has preserved 10,000 acres,” says Thiele, who has proposed that the CPF be expanded to focus not only on habitat, but on water quality as well. “A lot of the species on the list are aquatic species. Water quality continues to decline on the East End.”



Thiele believes that the list of the species affected points to the larger issues affecting our world. “Loss of habitat, continuing problems with pollution, and climate change—all of these issues are related, and every level of government has a role to play,” he says, insisting that federal agencies need to help state and local governments to exact change. “We’re talking about billions and billions of dollars. It requires commitment from every level of government.”

Today, the Hamptons still offers sweeping expanses of untouched beaches, the taste of fresh-caught tuna in Montauk in August, and the serenity of baymen coming home in the evening, but it is essential that every member of the community play their part to ensure these are available for generations to come by joining area activist groups like the Group for the East End, Concerned Citizens of Montauk, or Peconic Baykeeper, to name just a few; volunteering during clean-up days; or donating to organizations that protect the local environment. “We have forests and fields and open marshes that still look like they did 100 years ago,” says DeLuca. “It’s why the Hamptons is a destination. These species are the canaries in the coal mine. They are giving us insight into the ecosystems, and I consider this list a warning about the trends affecting our natural resources and, therefore, affecting all of us.”

On the East End, our relationship with the environment is manifold. It’s more than nice to live in a beautiful place. The beauty itself is what makes life possible. “We want to protect the environment,” says Thiele, “but for us, that’s protecting the cornerstone of our economy. And more than that, it’s protecting our traditions, our history, and our culture.”