

Coastal Wetlands of the Great Lakes - Bringing People Together to Protect These Unmatched Natural Resources

Source: lccnetwork.org

Published: March 30, 2016



Sprinkled throughout the Great Lakes region, coastal wetlands provide much needed places for fish and wildlife to live. If you enjoy fishing or eating fish from the Great Lakes, or clean drinking water, you are connected to the Great Lakes and its surrounding coastal wetlands. Wetlands provide unequivocal services for people including flood control, wildlife habitat as well as intangible benefits like a sense of place or a beautiful place to visit.

What is the current status of Great Lakes coastal wetlands?

Two thirds of original coastal wetlands in the Great Lakes have been converted for another land-use benefiting humans like productive farming, residential development, and industry. Unfortunately, much of this conversion occurred before we understood the multiple values coastal wetlands provide. In recent years, interest in restoring and maintaining this treasured resource has grown, as evidenced by the investment provided by the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative.

What's next for coastal wetland conservation?

Many conservation efforts exist, often for similar or complementary purposes, creating the opportunity for conservation practitioners to work together. The Upper Midwest and Great Lakes Landscape Conservation Cooperative provides this community of practitioners a place to identify shared priorities and envision a system of coastal wetland that will attain multiple goals. There are more miles of coastline along the 5 Great Lakes than along either the Pacific Coast, the Gulf Coast, or the Atlantic Coast - restoring and enhancing these wetlands is no small feat. That's why the LCC has identified a focal area of coastline from Saginaw Bay of Lake Huron to Western Lake Erie to bring people together for coastal wetlands conservation.

During the week of March 7, 2016 the LCC's coastal conservation work group hosted two workshops bringing together the conservation community with participants from the Michigan and Ohio Department of Natural Resources, The Nature Conservancy, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, local communities and many others to initiate a collaborative approach to conserving coastal wetlands. These partners identified what motivates them individually, and collectively, to conserve coastal wetlands. Additionally, they identified opportunities to improve knowledge and where collaboration would result in the most effective, strategic work in coastal wetlands.

Barb Avers, one of the LCC partners at the Saginaw Bay workshop, from the Michigan DNR, said, "There are many good initiatives, projects, and research occurring in the Great Lakes to conserve wetlands. As a Wildlife and Wetlands Specialist in Michigan, I see great value in the LCC's coastal conservation efforts to coordinate, synthesize, and communicate this information so that it can be used by wetland managers, land use planners, and policy and decision makers."

Ecological targets, like providing for fish and wildlife populations, have traditionally guided conservation efforts while benefits to humans have largely been ignored. The LCC recognizes that human well-being benefits should be considered alongside traditional ecological targets.

"It's exciting to see an effort that attempts to pull together both ecological and human well-being values to plan wetland conservation for the future. This LCD brings people together to identify wetlands in the region that are most important to protect and restore. It truly feels like a collaborative effort and is acknowledging the values of wetlands, not only for wildlife, but for people too," Avers said of this comprehensive approach.

Human well-being targets discussed at the workshop included: tribal connections, drinking water, maritime history, road and beach access, flood protection, erosion control, sense of place, environmental education and mental health, among others.

The end goal is to restore and conserve a system of functioning coastal wetlands that benefit people and the ecosystem as a whole, such as providing for viable fish and wildlife populations and reducing floods. By mapping out the wetlands with the highest potential for restoration and enhancement, and using the best available information to inform conservation of coastal wetlands, the participants hope to provide long-lasting benefits to people who live, work and play in the Great Lakes region.

Jim Hudgins, Service Private Lands Coordinator of Michigan, spoke to the value of the Great Lakes wetlands and why we should conserve them, "Nowhere else in the world do we have the amount of freshwater coastline that we have here in the Great Lakes region. Our coastal wetlands provide essential habitat for migrating waterfowl, shorebirds and other migratory birds, as well as many fish species. We can't turn this landscape back to what it was one or two hundred years ago, but we can work together to guide what we want it to look like in the future."

Bringing passionate conservationists together was the easy part, now the real work and the collaboration begins. Next steps include providing a means for consistent communication among participants, synthesizing workshop input to move forward with a set of priority ecological and human well-being targets, establish measureable goals for targets, and envision a coastal wetland system that attains those goals. This will set the stage for collaborative action delivered by multiple participating organizations.

With this snapshot, you can see why protecting and maintaining the integrity of this impressive natural wonder is critically important for us and our nation's wildlife. Preserving the inherent value of the Great Lakes is just one of many LCC focus areas. There are 22 LCCs across the nation - each focusing on unique landscapes and associated conservation challenges with local partners, to protect our natural wonders and create livable, healthy environments for people, wildlife and plants.

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