

# Celebrate Coastal Wetlands...

## Connecting Us All!

### What Are Coastal Wetlands?

Coastal wetlands include all tidal and non-tidal, fresh, saline, and brackish water wetlands in coastal watersheds. They include, but are not limited to, salt marshes, bottomland hardwood swamps, fresh marshes, seagrass beds, mangrove swamps, and shrubby depressions known in the southeast United States as “pocosins.”

About 40 percent of the wetlands in the lower 48 states are coastal wetlands (approximately 40 million acres), and approximately 81 percent of coastal wetlands in the continental United States are in the southeast.

### Why Are Coastal Wetlands Important?

- Coastal wetlands provide spawning grounds, nurseries, shelter, and food for finfish, shellfish, birds, and other wildlife. This includes:
  - More than half of commercially harvested fish in the United States. The abundance and health of these fish is directly related to wetland quality and quantity.
  - 85 percent of waterfowl and other migratory birds.
  - Nearly 45 percent of the nation’s endangered and threatened species.
- Wetlands help improve surface water quality by filtering and retaining residential, agricultural, and urban wastes.
- They also buffer coastal areas against storm and wave damage and help stabilize shorelines.



Many animals, including the blue crab, rely on coastal wetlands for food and shelter. Protection of wetlands is important to crab and other commercial fisheries along the coast.



Tidal marshes and other coastal wetlands buffer coastal areas against storm and wave damage and help stabilize shorelines. These functions have become more important due to climate change.

### Why Are Coastal Wetlands Disappearing?

More than half the U.S. population lives in coastal counties at densities about five times greater than those of non-coastal counties. Coastal populations are expected to continue growing in the coming decades, which will continue to place enormous direct and indirect pressure on existing coastal wetlands.

Coastal wetlands are being directly impacted as a result of dredged or fill activities associated with roads, residential and commercial development, marina construction, and other related infrastructure projects.

In addition to direct losses of coastal wetlands, indirect impacts from stormwater, pollutant runoff from agriculture, residential, commercial and industrial development, erosion, changes in water flows, and invasive species result in the degradation of coastal wetland quality and function.

Climate change and sea level will exacerbate these existing stressors on coastal wetlands. For example, in the U.S., sea level is rising at a rate of between a few inches to a foot or more per century. Coastal wetlands can and do move inland with rising sea level, but in developed areas roads, houses, parking lots, and other infrastructure impede with this natural migration of coastal wetlands. The inability of the wetlands to migrate inland will eventually result in the wetlands becoming submerged and lost with rising sea level.

## How Do Coastal Wetlands Connect Us?

- *If you love seafood* - many kinds of fish from salmon to striped bass, as well as lobster, shrimp, oysters and crabs, depend on coastal wetlands for places to live, feed, or reproduce.
- *If you live near a river hundreds of miles from the coast* - water flowing in that river most likely ends in a coastal wetland. Sometimes rivers contain pollutants, such as excess fertilizer or pesticides, which can be filtered by coastal wetlands before they reach the ocean. Unfortunately, large amounts of pollutants can overwhelm coastal wetlands, which can create problems for fish along the coast.
- *If you drive a car, cook, or heat your home* - you might be using oil or gas that traveled through coastal wetlands. Eighteen percent of U.S. oil production and almost 24 percent of U.S. natural gas production originates in, is transported through, or is processed in Louisiana coastal wetlands.

### 10 Things You Can Do for Coastal Wetlands

1. Participate in programs that help protect and restore wetlands. Contact local, state, or federal agencies, community groups, environmental organizations, and other non-government organizations. To participate in activities for American Wetlands Month in May, visit <http://www.epa.gov/wetlands/awm>.
2. Report illegal actions such as unauthorized fill or dredging activities to government authorities, such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency or the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.
3. Pick up litter and dispose in appropriate trash containers. Keep surface areas that wash into storm drains clean from pet waste, toxic chemicals, fertilizers, and motor oil, which eventually reach and impair our wetlands.
4. Use native species when planting trees, shrubs, and flowers to preserve the ecological balance of local wetlands.
5. Use “living shoreline” techniques that make use of plant roots to stabilize soil if you own waterfront property and your shoreline or river bank needs to be stabilized.
6. Avoid wetlands if you are expanding your house or installing a shed.
7. Use phosphate-free laundry and dishwasher detergents. Phosphates encourage algae growth, which can suffocate aquatic life.
8. Use paper and recycled products made from unbleached paper. Bleached paper contains toxic chemicals that can contaminate water.
9. Use non-toxic products for household cleaning and lawn and garden care. Never spray lawn and garden chemicals outside on a windy day or on a day that it might rain and wash the chemicals into waterways.
10. Reduce, reuse, and recycle household items and waste.



Tupelo swamps provide habitat to countless species of plants and animals, store flood waters, and improve water quality, but are disappearing in Louisiana and other coastal states.

### Coastal Wetland Loss

- By the mid 1970s, more than half of all salt marshes and mangrove forests present in pre-colonial times had been destroyed.
- The Chesapeake Bay has lost 90 percent of its submerged aquatic vegetation and 50 percent of its coastal marshes.
- Losses of coastal marshes have been most extensive in Florida, Texas, California and Louisiana.
  - For example: from 1990-2000 Louisiana lost approximately 24 square miles of coastal wetlands per year. More than 91 percent of California’s coastal wetlands have been lost.
- Between 1998 and 2004 coastal watersheds of the Atlantic Ocean, Great Lakes, and Gulf of Mexico lost 354,000 acres, or about 59,000 acres per year.

**For more information, visit:**

<http://www.epa.gov/owow/wetlands>

<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/habitat/habitatprotection/wetlands/index.htm>