

EDITORIAL & COMMENTARY



Great Blue Heron

SCOTT LONGFIELD

IT'S YOUR TURN

Commentary

Barnegat Bay: A Jersey Jewel in Peril

By Michele S. Byers

Barnegat Bay, a favorite destination in this state we're in, is famous for crabbing, fishing, swimming, sailing and boating.

But in recent years, Barnegat Bay has been in decline. For decades, scientists have warned that an overload of nutrients – specifically, nitrogen and phosphorus found in fertilizers and also acid rain – is choking the bay.

New Jersey's Senate and Assembly environment committees just held a hearing in Toms River about the state of the bay's health. Overwhelming evidence shows that nutrients entering the bay pose an increasingly dire threat.

Rutgers University scientist Michael Kennish presented an updated report showing that environmental degradation of the bay has worsened over the past two years, and excessive nutrients are still to blame.

The main problem is lawn fertilizers running into the bay during rainstorms. You might think lawns are porous and would absorb these nutrients, but that's not the case. Nearly all lawns exist on soils that have been so compacted by construction, mowing and recreation that they function like pavement. Most of what's applied to lawns in Ocean County – which makes up virtually the entire Barnegat Bay watershed – ultimately winds its way into the bay.

There is also a significant amount of nitrogen in the summer thunderstorms that blow in from the Midwest, where coal-burning power plants are still abundant. Nitrogen falls with the acid rain and quickly flows into the bay through storm sewers.

Coastal scientists describe the bay as "highly eutrophic," a condition caused by high levels of nutrients. This results in low dissolved oxygen levels in the water, harmful algae blooms, a loss of marine habitats and decreased abundance of hardshell clams and many other popular aquatic species.

Here are three things needed to restore Barnegat Bay's health:

The state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) should declare it an "impaired" waterway under the Clean Water Act, which would require the state to restrict the amount of nutrients allowed in the bay and put it on a restricted pollution diet. This was suggested in the past, but Gov. Christie vetoed it. The governor did sign a law limiting the nutrients in fertilizers sold in New Jersey and cutting the amounts that can be used on lawns. That step should reduce nutrients entering the bay, but the law is too new to fully evaluate its impact. And by itself it's not enough.

Keep preserving land in the bay's watershed. Thanks to the Pinelands Protection Act, the state Green Acres Program and the federal Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge, 57 percent of the watershed is preserved. The Ocean County Natural Lands Trust has also preserved significant forested land. But most of the lands immediately adjacent to the northern half of Barnegat Bay are intensely developed. So pristine headwater streams begin in natural lands but pick up massive amounts of pollutants as they enter the bay.

The DEP is now rewriting its rules that govern land use in our coastal communities. This is the perfect chance to promote soil restoration and restrict nutrients. Unfortunately, the proposed new

rules ignore studies showing lawns to be hard, compacted, impervious surfaces. Instead, the rules define them as "porous" surfaces. The rules need to be written to provide real protections for the bay.

"We now have the science to show us how to restore the bay, and we understand how available approaches and strategies can effectively implement the scientific findings," says Tim Dillingham, executive director of the American Littoral Society, a coastal conservation organization based in Highlands. "We need the governor and the DEP to put these tools into place, and adopt clean water designations, land use rules and policies to save the bay."

You can take action to help Barnegat Bay! Please sign a petition asking the DEP to declare it an "impaired" waterway, which will lead to greater protections. Go to www.littoralsociety.org/index.php/21-action-alerts/245-sign-the-petition-to-protect-barnegat-bay.

For a wealth of information on Barnegat Bay's ecosystem and the work being done to protect and restore it, visit the Save Barnegat Bay website at www.savebarnegatbay.org.

And to learn more about preserving land and natural resources in New Jersey, visit the New Jersey Conservation Foundation website at www.njconservation.org or contact me at info@njconservation.org.

Michele S. Byers is the executive director of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation.

Sea Level Rise Calls for Preparedness, Not Politics

By The American Shore & Beach Preservation Association

New climate change studies just released brought new interest in how sea-level rise will impact on our coastal cities and communities. That's good, whatever your thoughts on this hot-button issue.

Why? Because the first step in being prepared is being aware – and any coastal manager or resident who knowingly ignores a potential threat to the community and interests is not being a good steward for those interests.

Saying it could happen is not necessarily saying it will – but to deny even the chance of catastrophe is a fool's game. The good news is that, in cities from Miami to Manhattan, Seattle to Old Saybrook, people are looking at how vulnerable their community could be if seas start to rise more rapidly.

In some areas, this is not an abstract interest. For instance, some areas of Miami Beach and Honolulu flood at slightly higher than normal high tides today, a problem that calls for action – especially when this flooding is a new development in the past decade. Other cities, particularly those with major infrastructure within the tidal or storm surge zone, are looking at the lessons of coastal catastrophes such as Super Storm Sandy to see what steps could be taken today to make this infrastructure withstand whatever tomorrow has in store.

Given the price tags some cities could be facing, starting this process early is wise, since it's always easier to adapt over time than to make up for lost ground all at once when trying to recover from a coastal disaster. What's the key to being prepared? Looking at your vulnerabilities today so they don't become liabilities tomorrow.

Look at coastal areas that are prone to trouble in normal conditions – low spots that flood quickly; hot spots that erode quickly; vital infrastructure such as roads, utilities and public areas that are most likely at risk in any storm or weather event. What can you start doing today that will make them safer tomorrow?

Look at properties that are most vulnerable or have made your repetitive-risk list thanks to multiple damage claims. Can you plan to do something that will lower that risk, or can you work to move those structures away from future risk (or eventually remove them altogether)?

Look at your community. Does it have a realistic view of coastal conditions, a desire to proactively address problems (coastal and otherwise)? Or does it lurch from crisis to crisis, addressing problems only when they become nearly unmanageable or major threats to public safety? Smart communities anticipate disaster (as much as possible, of course), rather than allowing a crisis to set the local agenda. How? By being prepared.

When it comes to sea-level rise, pundits and policy makers may have the luxury of debating or delaying because it is abstract issue for them, but people with something at stake – such as coastal residents and managers – had better be prepared for whatever might be ahead. That doesn't mean coastal interests should embrace the worst-case scenario – whatever this week's iteration of that looks like. Nor does it mean those who care about the coast should let their ideologies override their interests, so their opinion about sea level rise closely follows their voting record.

It means you have to keep an open mind and an adaptable attitude, to be willing to respond to what you see and what can scientifically be proven in a way that keeps you and your community ahead of the game in preparations. And it means looking for weakness and vulnerabilities before they put people at risk, and doing the necessary thing even if it's not politically easy.

Founded in 1926, the American Shore & Beach Preservation Association (ASBPA) advocates for healthy coastlines by promoting the integration of science, policies and actions that maintain, protect and enhance the coasts of America.



COURTESY DORN'S CLASSIC IMAGES

Two River Moment

Hundreds gather at the Red Bank railroad station, some holding flags, others standing on rooftops or in open cars to get a better look at this unknown event, circa 1910s.