



Long Island Sound Blue Plan: a guide for the estuary's future created from many voices

By Judy Benson

Suppose a wind energy company wants to lay an underwater cable to carry power from turbines in the North Atlantic into Long Island Sound to a transmission station somewhere along the Connecticut coast.

This isn't a far-fetched possibility, given that there are several plans in the works for offshore wind farms to produce power for the Northeast. But how would the best east-west route of this hypothetical cable be decided by the developers and regulators? They'd want to avoid shellfish and eelgrass beds, fishing hotspots and main navigation routes for submarines, among other sensitive areas. How would they know the locations?

Until now, they'd have to take a cumbersome and piecemeal approach to finding the answers, and risk missing some critical pieces of information. But thanks to the Long Island Sound Blue Plan, completed this fall and now with the state Legislature for final review and approval, that's no longer the case. The 514-page document, with interactive maps and resource inventories, puts all the characteristics of the estuary — from cold water coral colonies to popular sailboat racing routes — in one place where they are identified, described, displayed and accessible to everyone.

“The Blue Plan is meant to protect what we care about, and reduce conflict in the future,” said Sylvain De Guise, director of Connecticut Sea Grant. “Its guiding principles are that it be science-based, embrace public engagement and transparency, and strike a balance between economic benefits and environmental protection.”

De Guise, along with Brian Thompson, director of the Land and Water Resources Division for the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, and his team, and

Nathan Frohling, director of coastal and marine initiatives for The Nature Conservancy, led the four-year project to produce the Blue Plan. They tapped the expertise of scientists, fishermen, marina owners and dozens of others who live, work and play on what DEEP Commissioner Katie Dykes recently called “the state's most important natural resource.”

Often referred to as a marine spatial plan, the Blue Plan is the first of its kind for the estuary. If that term doesn't resonate, think of the city or town where you live, and how the commercial, residential, mixed-use, industrial and open space areas are kept more-or-less distinct. That's because, somewhere on a shelf in the Town Hall sits the current plan of development for the community. That's the document that guides how a proposal from a would-be developer of a big-box store might be handled — the areas he or she might be directed to that are considered suitable, with proper road access, water and sewer lines and away from public drinking water reservoir protection land, for example.

In the same way, the Long Island Sound Blue Plan is intended to guide new development that impacts the submerged lands and waters of the estuary, while protecting current uses and users. It's a resource the public, regulators and developers alike can use to help make good decisions about the Sound. Everyone with an interest in this natural treasure should take a dive into the plan, get to know its many resources and maybe learn something new about the Sound.

People with many different perspectives contributed to creation of the Blue Plan. Eleven of those who were involved at various levels were asked to answer two questions about the plan:

- **What was your role in the creation of the Blue Plan and why did you want to be involved?**
- **What's the significance of the plan to the way you use and experience Long Island Sound?**

Following are their answers:



Penny Howell, retired marine biologist with the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection:

I was part of the Ecological Experts Working Group, based on my 38-year career at Connecticut DEEP doing fisheries stock assessments and climate modeling. My role was shepherding DEEP's extensive fisheries database to identify ecologically significant areas for the more than 150 marine species using the Sound.

The plan literally brings home through digital maps decades of data I worked on, tying the Sound's ecological features to the health of the system. I grew up on the Sound, playing and working. I witnessed the degradation of its resources but now I can point to its renaissance.



Chris Elphick, professor of ecology and evolutionary biology, University of Connecticut:

I was asked to be involved because of my scientific work on Long Island Sound ecosystems, especially coastal marshes and the birds that live in region. I agreed because it provided an opportunity to ensure that the best scientific knowledge helped inform the plan. As a researcher working in coastal ecosystems, the plan helps me see where there is need for new scientific work. By pulling together data on many types of resources and uses, the plan also helps researchers make connections that might not otherwise have been obvious. From a personal perspective the plan has great potential

to improve cost-effective management of the Sound, which matters to me as someone who cares deeply about protecting natural ecosystems, but also recognizes the need to do that in ways that are consistent with economic and recreational activities.



Bill Gardella, owner of Rex Marine, Norwalk:

As a "lifer" in the Connecticut recreational boating industry, I was honored to be selected by state

Sen. Bob Duff to be an Advisory Committee member representing recreational boating interests. My role was to offer recreational boating industry perspective to increase understanding among Advisory Committee members and others who were part of Blue Plan creation. This was important to prevent unintended consequences to our industry, our employees and our customers from the adoption of the Blue Plan.

Long Island Sound is a national resource and treasure, among the many jewels Americans are blessed to use, and take good care of in perpetuity. The Blue Plan was envisioned as one more tool to better ensure the Sound remains more or less as she is now, with limits to high intensity uses and/or over-commercialization, such as the intended, rejected floating Broadwater liquefied natural gas terminal project. Responsible usage will continue, while the trade-offs for proposals that could adversely impact current users can be better evaluated.



Alicia Mozian, conservation director, Westport:

I was appointed to be on the Blue Plan committee as a municipal representative. The reason I was pleased to be appointed is because I think the plan can serve as a way to avoid potential problems when trying to locate competing uses within the

Sound. As a person who serves in a local regulatory authority capacity, I have experienced first-hand the conflict that arises when applications for "development" have occurred in areas that were plagued with problems that could've been avoided if only a better location were chosen. I am hoping that the Blue Plan will reduce these types of conflicts.

The significance of the plan as to the way I use and experience Long Island Sound is somewhat answered above. I would add that there can be competing uses that can co-exist without necessarily sacrificing one for the other. This is what the Blue Plan hopes to achieve. Personally, I use the Sound for recreational purposes but I also enjoy eating shellfish and one day, I hope to have cheaper electric rates from the use of wind power. If there is a way that all of these benefits can co-exist without harm to the environment, I would be happy. Again, this is what I hope the Blue Plan can help achieve.



Jerry Morgan, owner, Capt. Morgan's Bait & Tackle, Madison:

My role in the creation of the Blue Plan was simple. Being involved in active roles with

fisheries at federal and state levels, including identifying resource inventory species, it was apparent that protecting Long Island Sound's fisheries and its related habitat was paramount. One of those ways was being instrumental in crafting language such as, "significant displacement of recreational fishing and related activity by other activity, or permanent structures shall be avoided to the maximum extent practicable."

From my input, the Blue Plan now opens the door to artificial reefs as potential habitat generators. As a steward, stakeholder and user, that would be a step toward enhancing our Sound for recreational use and enjoyment for generations to come.



Ben Goetsch,
sales and nursery
manager, Briarpatch
Industries, Milford:

I got involved with the Blue Plan in order to ensure that the commercial shellfish industry's interests would be well served by the plan as I felt our industry was not well represented at the Advisory Board level. The plan is only as good as the information that it captures so I wanted to help contribute what I knew about the present and future needs of the industry. The Blue Plan protects the historical use of Long Island Sound by shellfishermen but the plan could have a significant impact on the future expansion of shellfish aquaculture in Connecticut. For example, the plan must be taken into consideration for any new leases in town or state waters and for any new permit applications that utilize grow-out gear in open water deeper than 10 feet.



**Bill Lucey, Long
Island Soundkeeper,
Connecticut Fund
for the Environment/
Save the Sound:**

I joined the group as one of Save the Sound's representatives. As a past coastal planner I had to rely on fragmented data sources when evaluating project proposals and

permits so the utility of a marine spatial plan was readily apparent to me.

The Blue Plan sets the framework as a "one-stop-shopping" information hub for people interested in what happens on the Sound. The plan can highlight areas that are appropriate for development and the type that makes sense. It can tell us where information is lacking or which areas merit protection. I hope the Blue Plan becomes a go-to resource for people in the region.



**Christine Nelson, town
planner, Old Saybrook:**

I had a small role on the Blue Plan Advisory Committee, which was to represent coastal municipalities' interests and to share my experience as a town planner. I've worked mostly with conservation or development of land that affects near-shore activity, and I had an interest in aiding municipal shellfish operations and preserving historic and archaeological features of the Sound. So, I participated in the broader aspects of engaging stakeholders in these significant human use areas. But, it was observing the deeper dive into gathering spatial data for the Long Island Sound Inventory that I found most fascinating — the enthusiasm of the various users of the Sound was captured through

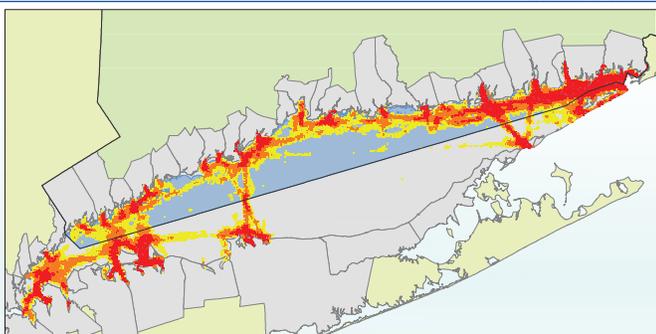
their interactions with The Nature Conservancy, DEEP and Connecticut Sea Grant as they pulled together the interactive map of the Sound. It's an invaluable tool for working towards the goal of compatibility among ocean uses in the Blue Plan policy area. And, for townspeople living and working in the upland, the Blue Plan is a significant counterpart to depict how uses of the offshore environment connect with uses in the coastal zone.



**Joe Gilbert, owner,
Empire Fisheries:**

Brian Thompson of the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, Nathan Frohling of the Connecticut Fund for the Environment/Save the Sound, Sylvain De Guise of Connecticut Sea Grant and the whole team all did an excellent job in crafting the Blue Plan. I was afforded every opportunity to offer my input, through a collaborative process that considered current and historic data as well as fishermen's direct observations and opinions. I, and the fishermen of Connecticut, wanted to be involved in order to give an accurate first-hand account of the resources we rely on, the nature and scope of our activities, and our concerns for the future.

**Significant Human Use Area Map:
High Density Recreational Boating Areas**



— CT State Boundary
Policy Area
Area of Interest

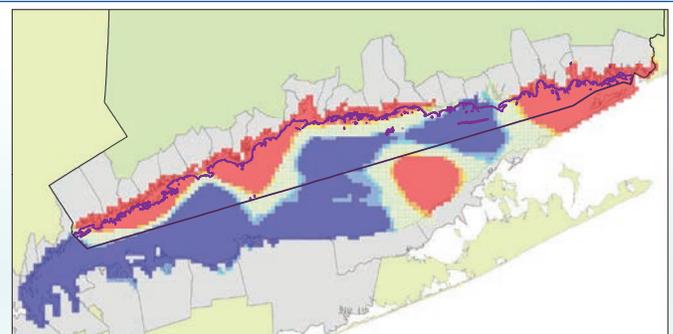
**High Density Recreational Boating Areas
Density**

1.3 - 1.61
1.61 - 1.97
1.97 - 3.4



Map created by Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection, September, 2019 (FINAL)

**Significant Human Use Area Map:
Concentrations of Fishing & Shellfishing Uses**



— CT State Boundary
Policy Area
Area of Interest

Concentrations of Fishing & Shellfishing Uses

Not Significant
Hot Spot - 90% Confidence
Hot Spot - 95% Confidence
Hot Spot - 99% Confidence

Cold Spot - 99% Confidence
Cold Spot - 95% Confidence
Cold Spot - 90% Confidence



Map created by Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection, September, 2019 (FINAL)

These are two of the many maps included in the Blue Plan.

It is a very diverse and dynamic marine resource. The Blue Plan will help ensure that I and many others can continue to enjoy our recreational and commercial activities in balance with increasing demands on marine resources.



Catherine Finneran, director of environmental affairs, Eversource:

At Eversource we understand the tremendous natural resource Long Island Sound is for our customers and employees. As New England's largest energy provider, we also know the Sound is home to critical energy infrastructure. By lending our perspective and sharing information with others, we hope to create a beneficial tool that can be consulted to determine the compatibility of potential future uses with the overall health of the Sound.

We have electric transmission cables in Long Island Sound that connect Connecticut to New York. These cables also connect to the larger power grid to help ensure clean, reliable power for our region. It's our hope the Blue Plan will support better, well-informed planning and decision-making for potential critical energy infrastructure and other uses.



Peter Auster, senior research scientist, Mystic Aquarium; professor emeritus, UConn Marine Sciences:

My principal role was serving on the Ecological Experts Working Group, although I also participated as a member of the public at multiple commission meetings. I am a marine ecologist by training and practice and have been conducting studies in the Sound for nearly 40 years. Perhaps equally important to my interests is that I look at the underwater landscape and wildlife here like



Blue Plan Essentials

The Blue Plan goals are simple.

They aim to protect important ecological resources and existing human uses, and serve as a tool to reduce conflicts in the future.

The Blue Plan is place-based.

Through the concept of marine spatial planning, the Blue Plan is meant to gather science-based and stakeholder/expert-vetted information to map the most important locations for special ecological features and human uses of Long Island Sound, so they can be recognized and taken into account in order to make better decisions now and in the future.

The Blue Plan is not a new regulatory program.

If an activity does not require a permit now, it will not require a permit under the Blue Plan. The Blue Plan will only apply to new permits under the existing regulatory programs listed in CGS § 25-157t(h). Permit review under these programs will undergo the same general processes, but will now use the information and standards contained in the Blue Plan. There will not be an additional Blue Plan permit.

The Blue Plan was shaped by meaningful public input.

The Blue Plan Development Team hosted 3 public hearings, several regional meetings in CT and NY, and almost 100 meetings and webinars; responded to countless individual inquiries by email, phone, and in person; and addressed 37 written comments received during the 90-day public comment period.

The Blue Plan is not retroactive.

The Blue Plan is meant to apply to future decisions, and will not affect existing activities.



The Blue Plan provides greater access to information.

Through the Blue Plan process, a large amount of information has been gathered on where important ecological features and human uses occur in Long Island Sound. This information is collated, synthesized, and made broadly available through the Blue Plan documents, including the Long Island Sound Resource and Use Inventory and online map viewer. Using these tools, stakeholders, project proponents and permitting authorities all have the same information to evaluate and substantiate more objective and well-informed decisions.

The Blue Plan is meant to support water-dependent activities.

The Plan specifically recognizes existing human uses in Long Island Sound and maps the most important places they occur and depend on. In addition to increased recognition, the Blue Plan is meant to afford protection of such important human uses, so that future activities can be sited in a manner that will minimize conflicts.

The Blue Plan applies to deeper waters.

Under the legislation mandating the creation of the Blue Plan (CGS § 25-157t), its policies are meant to apply to activities taking place in waters seaward of a 10' depth line. While more technical information is contained in the Blue Plan documents, efforts have been made to define this line and display it on a map (easily available via the Blue Plan viewer). As a result, the Blue Plan does not apply, and was never intended to apply, to a large number of regulated coastal activities such as private docks or protection of salt marshes already managed under the existing Coastal Management Program. However, the Blue Plan gathered some upland information, beyond the policy boundary, so that decisions in deeper water can consider important coastal and upland features.

The Blue Plan is meant to be a living document.

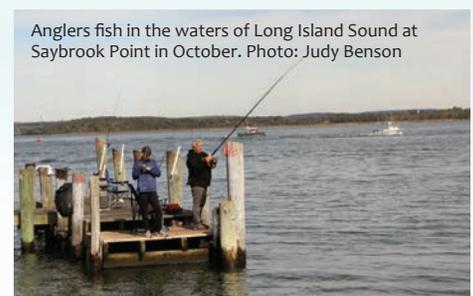
Recognizing that things change, the statute mandating the creation of the Blue Plan requires the plan to be revised at least every 5 years, with a public hearing to be held every year. The Blue Plan Advisory Committee is also required to advise the Commissioner of DEEP on the operation, implementation, and updating of the Inventory and Plan. In short, if information changes or the process does not work as planned, there are opportunities to fix it. Stakeholder input and feedback are encouraged to recognize and address issues.

many others view such public spaces on land, as I have been diving in the Sound since I was 16 years old. This is a special place and management needs to account for both conservation and sustainable use. The Blue Plan will provide a level playing field, in terms of available information, for both managers and stakeholders to address the risks and benefits involved of using this part of the public commons.

The plan represents a hopeful pathway for addressing the expanding uses of our piece of coastal ocean while conserving our natural heritage.

Learn more about the Long Island Sound Blue Plan at:

<https://www.ct.gov/deep/cwp/view.asp?q=574290>



Anglers fish in the waters of Long Island Sound at Saybrook Point in October. Photo: Judy Benson