

COASTAL FISH & WILDLIFE HABITAT ASSESSMENT FORM

Name of Area: **Cutchogue Harbor and Wetlands**
Designated: **March 15, 1987**
Date Revised: **May 15, 2002**
County: **Suffolk**
Town(s): **Southold**
7½' Quadrangle(s): **Southold, NY; Southampton, NY**

Assessment Criteria

Ecosystem Rarity (ER)--the uniqueness of the plant and animal community in the area and the physical, structural, and chemical features supporting this community.

ER assessment: Bay-wetland complex, unusual in northern Long Island, but degraded in places by marina/residential development. Calculation: $\sqrt{(16 \times 9)} =$ 12

Species Vulnerability (SV)--the degree of vulnerability throughout its range in New York State of a species residing in the ecosystem or utilizing the ecosystem for its survival.

SV assessment: Least tern (T), piping plover (E, T-Fed), and osprey (SC) nesting. Calculation: $36 + (25/2) + (16/4) =$ 52.5

Human Use (HU)-- the conduct of significant, demonstrable commercial, recreational, or educational wildlife-related human uses, either consumptive or non-consumptive, in the area or directly dependent upon the area.

HU assessment: Commercial and recreational scalloping significant to Suffolk County. Clamming significant at the town level. 4

Population Level (PL)--the concentration of a species in the area during its normal, recurring period of occurrence, regardless of the length of that period of occurrence.

PL assessment: Concentration of osprey is significant at the county-level. 4

Replaceability (R)--ability to replace the area, either on or off site, with an equivalent replacement for the same fish and wildlife and uses of those same fish and wildlife, for the same users of those fish and wildlife.

R assessment: Irreplaceable. 1.2

Habitat Index = [ER + SV + HU + PL] = 72.5

Significance = HI x R = 87.0

NEW YORK STATE
SIGNIFICANT COASTAL FISH AND WILDLIFE HABITAT
NARRATIVE

CUTCHOQUE HARBOR AND WETLANDS

LOCATION AND DESCRIPTION OF HABITAT:

Cutchogue Harbor and its adjacent wetlands are located west of Little Hog Neck, opening into Little Peconic Bay in the Town of Southold, Suffolk County (7.5' Quadrangles: Southold, NY and Southampton, NY). This approximate 490 acre habitat includes the shallow open water area of Cutchogue Harbor (205 acres) and three adjacent, distinct tidal wetland/creek areas: Wickham Creek, Haywater Cove, and Meadow Beach (Horseshoe Cove). The Wickham Creek area contains approximately 70 acres of undisturbed tidal creek and Salt Marsh located behind a low beach on Cutchogue Harbor. The Haywater Cove area consists of approximately 190 acres of Salt Marsh islands, mudflats, open water and tidal Creek including East Creek, Mud Creek and Broadwater Cove. All three of these tidal creeks have been disturbed to some extent by adjacent residential and recreational development. The Meadow Beach area is an approximate 25 acre area, including a 15 acre wetland preserve owned by the Nature Conservancy, bordered by undeveloped wooded shoreline. Much of the Cutchogue Harbor and Wetlands area receives moderate summer recreational use, including recreational boating in the coves and creeks.

FISH AND WILDLIFE VALUES:

The Cutchogue Harbor and Wetlands complex represents a valuable ecosystem area in northern Long Island. Although the three wetland sites are relatively small, and subject to human disturbances, they provide suitable habitat for a variety of coastal wildlife species, including osprey (SC), least tern (T), piping plover (E, T-Fed) and diamondback terrapin.

Osprey have nested in the area for many years using man-made nesting platforms placed at Wickham Creek and Meadow Beach. The Meadow Beach nesting site has been especially productive in past years, and has served as a source of young birds for the NYSDEC's "hacking" program in western New York. A nesting platform in Haywater Cove historically has been active and is an important potential nesting site.

Meadow Beach supported a relatively small nesting colony of least terns of 20-60 pairs during 1982-1985. These numbers declined between 1986-1991 (ranging from 13-24 pairs). Least tern have nested sporadically since 1991 (1 pair in 1993; 14 pairs in 1997). Up to 4 pairs of piping plover nested at Meadow Beach and Wickham Creek during the early 1980s, but similarly, numbers of this species have declined to an annual average of 1 nesting pair between 1987 and 1996. The peak number of nesting piping plover pairs in the area during this period was 2, occurring in 1994.

Diamondback terrapin nest in the Haywater Cove area, and up to 20 nests were reported from the

marsh areas at the mouth of Wickham Creek in 1996. This area may provide important breeding habitat for horseshoe crab, but additional documentation is required. The Cutchogue Harbor Wetlands serve as valuable feeding areas for the species noted above, as well as for herons, egrets, waterfowl, shorebirds, and a variety of other wildlife species. Bird species that are probable or confirmed inhabitants of the area include green heron, yellow-crowned night heron, Canada goose, mallard, American black duck, clapper rail, killdeer, belted kingfisher, red-winged blackbird, and sharp-tailed sparrow. Double-crested cormorant reportedly use surrounding creeks.

Cutchogue Harbor and Wetlands are very productive areas for marine finfish and shellfish. The marshes, mudflats and tidal creeks contribute significantly to the biological productivity of Cutchogue Harbor and adjoining portions of the Peconic Bays. Historically, eelgrass beds were present in the southwestern portion on the harbor, supporting a large number of commercial scallop houses in New Suffolk to the west.

The Cutchogue Harbor area is one of the top areas in Southold for the harvesting of scallops and clams. The level of scalloping is significant at the county level. Clamming is significant to the Town of Southold. There is also a conch fishery of local importance. An administrative closure is in effect between May 15 and October 31 for Broadwater Cove and Wickham Creek. East Creek is closed to shellfishing year round. Blue crab are harvested locally for recreational purposes. The wetlands and tidal creeks serve as nursery and feeding areas (April-November, generally) for many estuarine fish species, including scup and winter flounder.

IMPACT ASSESSMENT:

Any activity that would substantially degrade the water quality in Cutchogue Harbor or the adjacent wetlands and creeks, would adversely affect the biological productivity of this area. All species of fish and wildlife may be affected by water pollution, such as chemical contamination (including food chain effects resulting from bioaccumulation), oil spills, excessive turbidity, stormwater runoff, and waste disposal, including boat wastes. It is essential that high water quality be maintained in the area, through control of sewage discharges from recreational boats and upland sources.

Alteration of tidal patterns in the Cutchogue Harbor Wetlands (*e.g.*, by modifying the inlets) could have major impacts on the fish and wildlife species present. Dredging in Cutchogue Harbor should be scheduled from September 15 through December 15 to minimize potential impacts on aquatic organisms and to allow for dredged material disposal when wildlife populations are least sensitive to disturbance. Dredged material disposal that alters creek inlets or tidal flow would negatively impact the habitat value of this site. Such impacts are reported to exist already at a dredged material disposal site in the Meadow Beach area, where tidal flow has been altered causing erosion of the marsh and shoaling to the north. Barriers to fish migration, whether physical or chemical, into Wickham Creek or Haywater Cove would have a major impact on the fisheries. Restoration of fisheries habitat through removal of such barriers, or other means, should be considered for the Cutchogue Harbor and Wetlands area.

Unrestricted use of motorized vessels including personal watercraft in the protected, shallow waters of bays, harbors, and tidal creeks can have adverse effects on aquatic vegetation and fish and wildlife populations. Use of motorized vessels should be controlled (*e.g.*, no wake zones, speed zones, zones of exclusion) in and adjacent to shallow waters and vegetated wetlands.

Elimination of salt marsh and intertidal areas, through loss of tidal connection, dredging, excavation, or filling, would result in a direct loss of valuable habitat area. Dredged material disposal in this area would be detrimental, but such activities may be designed to maintain or improve the habitat for certain species of wildlife, especially nesting shorebirds. Construction of shoreline structures, such as docks, piers, bulkheads, or revetments, in areas not previously disturbed by development, may result in the loss of productive areas which support the fish and wildlife resources of the Cutchogue Harbor area. Alternative strategies for the protection of shoreline property should be examined, including innovative, vegetation-based approaches. Control of invasive nuisance plant species, through a variety of means, may improve fish and wildlife species use of the area and enhance overall wetland values.

Restoration opportunities may exist for eelgrass habitat in the western nearshore area of the harbor mouth. Eelgrass beds require high water quality for survival, and the existence of appropriate environmental conditions for eelgrass restoration should be carefully examined.

Nesting shorebirds inhabiting Cutchogue Harbor and Wetlands are highly vulnerable to disturbance by humans, especially during the nesting and fledging period (March 15 through August 15). Significant pedestrian traffic or recreational vehicle use of the beach could easily eliminate the use of this site as a breeding area and should be minimized during this period. Recreational activities (*e.g.*, boat and personal watercraft landing, off-road vehicle use, picnicking) in the vicinity of bird nesting areas should be minimized during this period. Predation of chicks and destruction of eggs or nests by unleashed pets (*e.g.*, dogs, cats) and natural predators may also occur, and predator control should be implemented where feasible. Fencing and/or continued annual posting of shorebird nesting areas should be provided to help protect these species. Control of vegetative succession, through beneficial use of dredged material or other means may improve the availability of nesting habitat in this area.

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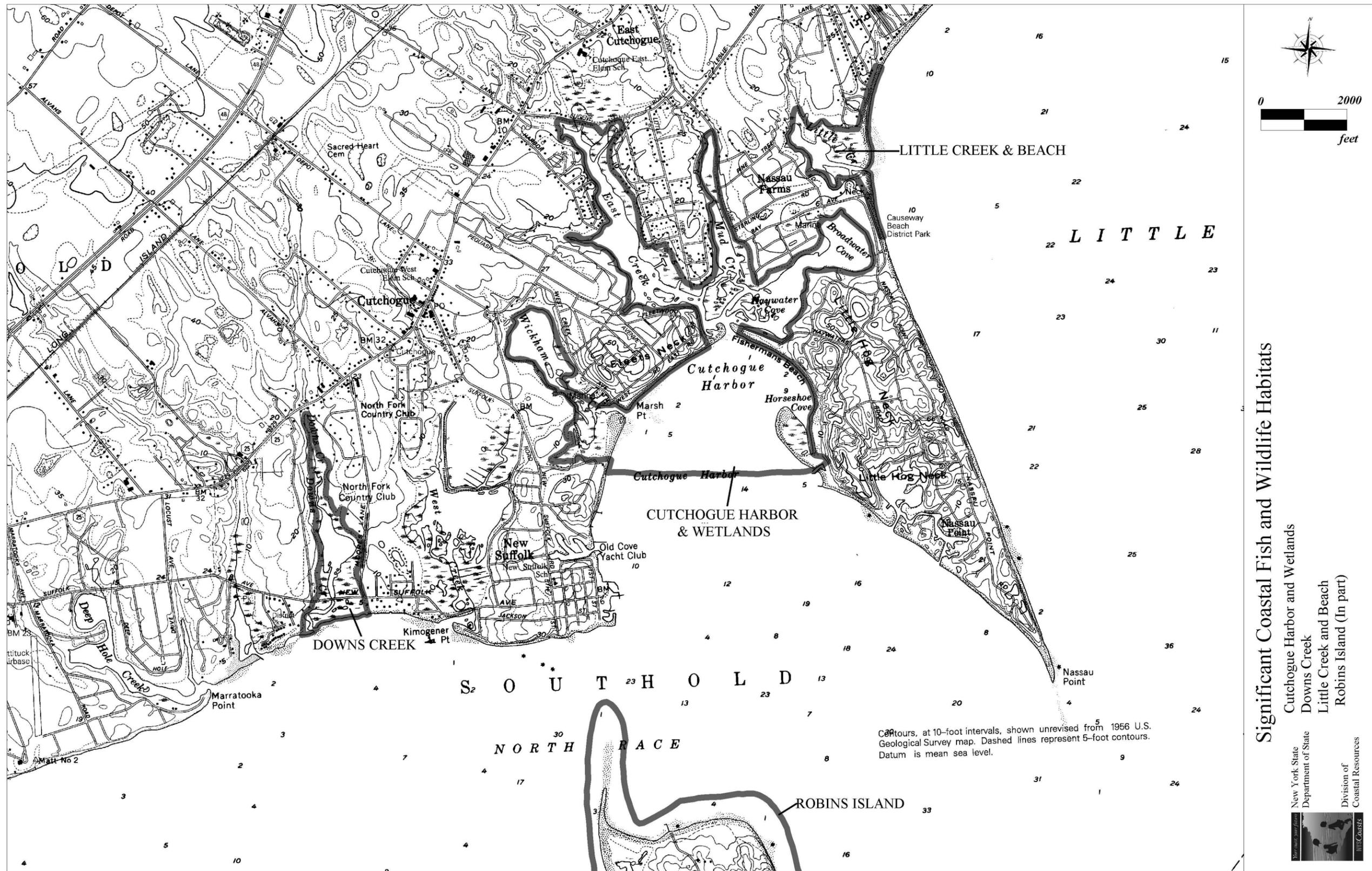
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