

COASTAL FISH & WILDLIFE HABITAT ASSESSMENT FORM

Name of Area: **Downs Creek**
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: Relatively large, undeveloped salt marsh and tidal creek which has never been dredged; unusual in Suffolk County. 9

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: Osprey (SC) nesting. Piping plover (E, T-Fed) have nested, but importance of this area to these species not adequately documented. 16

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: Bank mussel (*Geukensia demissa*) harvesting of local significance. 0

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: No unusual concentrations of any fish or wildlife species occur in the area. 0

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] = 25

Significance = HI x R = 30.0

NEW YORK STATE
SIGNIFICANT COASTAL FISH AND WILDLIFE HABITAT
NARRATIVE

DOWNS CREEK

LOCATION AND DESCRIPTION OF HABITAT:

Downs Creek is located approximately one mile southwest of the hamlet of Cutchogue, in the Town of Southold, Suffolk County (7.5' Quadrangles: Southold, NY; and Southampton, NY). The fish and wildlife habitat is an approximate 70 acre tidal estuary, containing salt marsh, open water, and mudflats. Historic Fort Corchaug lies at the head of the creek. The area surrounding Downs Creek is almost entirely undeveloped, with mature woodlands bordering the marsh. There is a golf course bordering Downs Creek to the east.

FISH AND WILDLIFE VALUES:

Downs Creek is a relatively small coastal wetland area, but is unusual in Suffolk County because it exists in a nearly natural, undisturbed condition and has never been dredged. This area is utilized by variety of fish and wildlife species, including osprey (SC).

Osprey have nested on a man-made platform located near the mouth of Downs Creek since at least 1982. Piping plover (E, T-Fed) in small numbers nested sporadically at the mouth of the creek during the late 1980s through 1992, but have not been documented since then. Sharp-tailed sparrow are also reported to nest at Downs Creek. The estuary serves as a feeding area for osprey, along with herons, egrets, waterfowl, shorebirds, and other wildlife.

Diamondback terrapin have been seen nesting here but the importance of this area to the species has not been documented. Downs Creek is also a highly productive area for marine finfish and shellfish. This area serves as a nursery and feeding area (from April-November, generally) for many estuarine fish species, including scup and winter flounder. Ribbed mussels (*Geukensia demissa*; also called bank mussels) and fiddler crabs are abundant in the tidal creek banks within the marsh. Ribbed mussels (*Geukensia demissa*) are commercially harvested for bait fish in the creek.

IMPACT ASSESSMENT:

Any activity that would substantially degrade the water quality in Downs Creek would adversely affect the biological productivity of this area. To preserve the pristine nature of this creek, no dredging should occur unless necessary to stabilize the inlet. All species of fish and wildlife would 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.

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.

Alteration of tidal patterns in Downs Creek (*e.g.*, by modifying the inlet) would have major impacts on the fish and wildlife species present. Elimination of salt marsh and intertidal areas, through loss of tidal connection, dredging, ditching, excavation, or filling, would result in a direct loss of valuable habitat area. Construction and maintenance of shoreline structures, such as docks, piers, bulkheads, or revetments, or disturbance of adjacent woodland habitats may have a significant impact on the fish and wildlife resources of Downs Creek. 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.

KNOWLEDGEABLE CONTACTS:

Habitat Unit
NYS Department of State
Division of Coastal Resources
41 State Street
Albany, NY 12231
Phone: (518) 474-6000

NYSDEC—Region 1
State University of New York, Building 40
Stony Brook, NY 11790-2356
Phone: (631) 444-0354

Wildlife Manager
NYSDEC—Region 1
State University of New York, Building 40
Stony Brook, NY 11790
Phone: (631) 444-0310

Bureau of Marine Resources
NYSDEC
205 N. Belle Meade Road, Suite 1
East Setauket, NY 11733
Phone: (631) 444-0430

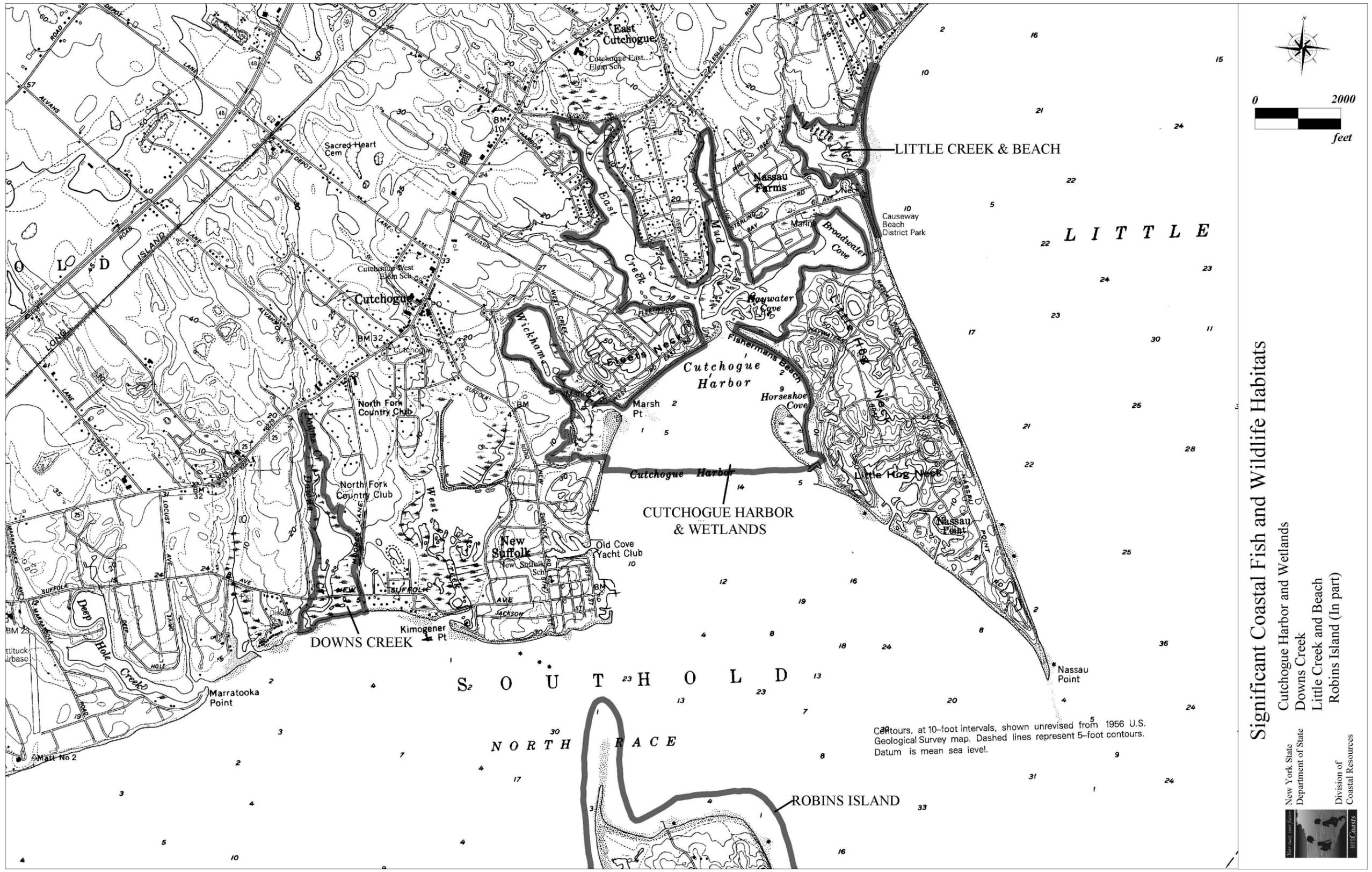
Finfish and Crustaceans
NYSDEC
205 N. Belle Meade Road, Suite 1
East Setauket, NY 11733
Phone: (631) 444-0436

New York Natural Heritage Program
Wildlife Resources Center
700 Troy-Schenectady Road
Latham, NY 12110
Phone: (518) 783-3932

Town of Southold
Town Hall
53095 Main Road; P.O. Box 1179
Southold, NY 11971
Phone: (631) 765-1801

Office of Ecology
Suffolk County Dept. of Health Services
Bureau of Environmental Management
County Center
Riverhead, NY 11901
Phone: (631) 852-2077

Paul Stoutenburgh
4015 Skunk Lane
Cutchogue, NY 11935
Phone: (631) 734-6605



Significant Coastal Fish and Wildlife Habitats

- Cutchogue Harbor and Wetlands
- Downs Creek
- Little Creek and Beach
- Robins Island (In part)

New York State
Department of State
Division of
Coastal Resources

Contours, at 10-foot intervals, shown unrevised from 1956 U.S. Geological Survey map. Dashed lines represent 5-foot contours. Datum is mean sea level.