09 Public Access

Target Statement

By 2050, public river access sites supporting boating, kayaking, swimming, fishing and riverside wildlife viewing enable residents and visitors to have rich and diverse river experiences. These facilities provide educational opportunities, contribute to ecological management goals, improve quality of life, and support economic development and tourism. By 2030, the impacts of sea level rise on the future amount and condition of river access sites have been evaluated, ecologically sound adaptation plans have been developed for sites in need, and existing access site managers continue to improve accessibility, where feasible, for everyone, including people with disabilities, older adults and families with small children.

Summary

The Hudson River estuary is recognized, both regionally and nationally, as an important recreational resource. Because of its significance, Congress has recognized the Hudson as an Estuary of National Significance and established the Hudson River Estuary National Research Reserve. The river and its valley have received many state and federal designations including: A) Hudson River Valley Greenway and Greenway Trail (State, 1991); B) Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area (Federal, 1996); C) American Heritage River (Federal, 1998); D) Hudson River Greenway Water Trail (State, 2001); and E) National Water Trail (Federal, 2012). These designations support connectivity between the river and upland trails along the portions of the waterfront, which then connect into 3,000 miles of regional trails in the Hudson Valley, including the Appalachian Trail, which crosses over the river at the Bear Mountain Bridge. The recently announced Empire State Trail, when completed in 2020, will be a continuous 750-mile route spanning the state from New York City to Canada and Buffalo to Albany, creating the longest multi-use state trail in the nation. The Hudson River estuary is bookended by New York State's two most populous metropolitan areas, the greater New York City Region and the greater Albany Capital Region, and the study area includes 10 New York counties and the waterfronts of 21 villages, 41 towns and 10 cities.

The region's love affair with the Hudson River estuary has dramatically increased over the past several decades due in no small measure to pollution clean-ups spurred by state and federal policies such as the Clean Water Act and the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act ("Superfund Act"). Local and regional waterfront restoration plans and programs that identify opportunities for public access have also been established through programs such as the NYS Hudson River Estuary Program, the Hudson River Valley Greenway and the NYSDOS Local Waterfront Revitalization Program (LWRP). A vibrant community of conservation and environmental advocacy organizations, and a staunch citizen stakeholder community have assured that these programs and policies are well developed and well applied. Implementation of restoration and clean-up efforts under federal, state and local regulations and programs has been largely responsible for communities and citizens re-engaging with the jewel found in their backyard. The renewed relationship with the Hudson has led to the emergence of world-class recreational opportunities including: blue way trails, waterfront pedestrian trails and parks that connect recreational and educational, art and nature opportunities. Historical sites which, in some cases, pre-date the Revolutionary War are attracting new visitors. The region's 256-mile Hudson River Greenway trail connects with the Walkway Over the Hudson, the world's longest and highest pedestrian bridge, and the Hudson River Skywalk connecting the Thomas Cole and Olana historic sites via the Rip Van Winkle bridge. Every riverfront community now has some form of public access to the river.

Although all the public access infrastructure is a critical contributor to the regional economy, and the region's quality of life, it does require regular maintenance, is vulnerable to climate change and requires users to be educated about how to safely use the resource. New public access facilities are desired in some areas but feasibility is limited by available public land and/or safety concerns (e.g. adjacent rail lines to be crossed). However, existing facilities are well used by the public which requires regular maintenance and repair budgets, and, to accommodate more users, upgrades to facilities to meet the Standards for Accessible Design need to be accelerated. These facilities are also, generally, located along the dynamic shoreline of the Hudson River which makes them vulnerable to ice floes, sediment deposition, flooding and sea level rise. As a result, facility managers and state agencies are beginning to think about resilient design and implementation techniques. These facilities also provide proving grounds for improved, ecologically-sound, shoreline and infrastructure measures that meet the needs of users but also provide ecological benefits for fish, birds and plants. Users of these facilities and the open waters of the estuary also need to be informed and educated of the risks and challenges associated with recreational activities on federally managed and maintained shipping channels. They should have a better understanding of the impact of their activities on critical aquatic habitats; such as shallow water habitats inhabited by submerged aquatic vegetation.