

Executive Summary

Cities by the Bay: The Urban Challenge for the Upper Narragansett Bay Watershed



The health of Narragansett Bay and its watershed as a whole continues to improve, but major challenges remain in the urban areas; however, local, site-specific efforts to address urban water quality are seeing progress. These projects can and should help drive more, broader and integrated initiatives in upper Narragansett Bay, where the benefits to bi-state residents of RI and MA are not only environmental and social, but have a direct link to enhancing the region's economy.

Cities along Narragansett Bay have bustling economies, first class arts and culture, and a rich history. Added to that, they have stunning views of beautiful Narragansett Bay and its watershed. But, this combination of urban areas abutting the natural environment poses a conundrum: you can dive into the scenic view of the upper bay, but you cannot dive into its waters.

Upper Narragansett Bay water quality is impacted by cities and urbanized areas throughout the watershed. Whether it is Taunton or Fall River, Providence or Pawtucket, all drains lead to the bay. And there are difficult challenges coming down those pipelines in the future. Water quality is impacted by runoff that carries pollutants and harmful bacteria, which prohibits many urban waters from being safely fishable or swimmable. Development patterns have led to increased flooding, beach closures, and limited access to waterways, with escalating climate change serving to exacerbate these impacts, including those affecting the diverse marine life that calls Narragansett Bay its home.

It will take significant, comprehensive, and well-coordinated investments to tackle these challenges to ensure that in the near future our beaches are open to visitors, our fish are safe to eat, and our water-based economies are protected. Unfortunately, the scale of effort that is needed is not currently in development, but partners in the watershed are making small investments that have important local impacts and more elected leaders are starting to make the important link between the environment and the economy.

Examples of recent successful municipal initiatives now point the way for a needed comprehensive approach to solving urban water quality problems. The City of Pawtucket renovated Festival Pier to improve access to the water. The City of Taunton removed several dams to decrease downtown flooding and improve fish habitat. The City of Worcester planted tens of thousands of new trees to improve urban health and water quality. The City of East Providence is on the cusp of having the first licensed urban beach in Rhode Island. These are not only accomplishments to celebrate but also calls to action, much more action.

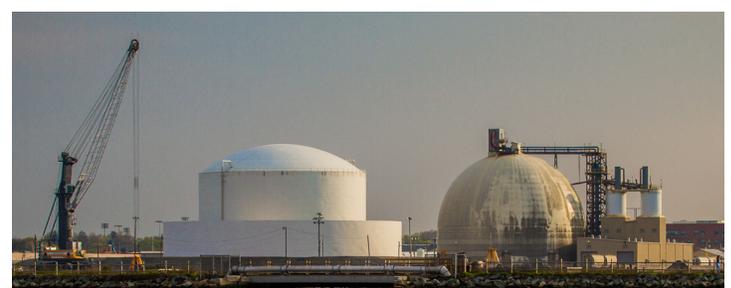
All of these projects have benefited the local communities by improving water quality, increasing access to the urban waters for

fishing and kayaking, or reducing environmental threats to lives and infrastructure. These are great accomplishments and serve as models to other communities. But, local, isolated efforts need help in taking on the big issues – such as degraded water quality and the implications of climate change.

The 2015 Watershed Counts report highlights challenges to and improvements in the urban environments of the Narragansett Bay watershed. Working together with a long-term vision, Rhode Island and Massachusetts can protect the environmental health, economic health, and community health of our urban waters and the people who depend on them to ensure the enjoyment of these benefits for generations to come.



Photos this page: Ayla Fox



Watershed Counts is a coalition of over 60 non-profit entities, government agencies, academic institutions, and other organizations who work together to report regularly on the land and water resources of the Narragansett Bay region. The annual Watershed Counts report highlights the important work that these many partners do every day to protect and restore the Narragansett Bay watershed.

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