

# Who's Keeping Track of Long Island Sound...?

## The Long Island Sound Resource Center

[Note: This is an expanded version of an article that appears in the *Bulletin of the Connecticut Academy of Science and Engineering*, Vol. 21,1, Spring 2006.]



*View from Rocky Neck State Park in East Lyme, Connecticut south to North Brother Island. Photo courtesy Ralph Lewis)*

According to the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), more than eight million people live in the Long Island Sound watershed and it provides “feeding, breeding, nesting and nursery areas for a diversity of plant and animal life, and contributes an estimated \$5.5 billion per year to the regional economy from boating, commercial and sport fishing, swimming and sight-seeing.” In recent years, several development projects have been proposed for the Sound, including controversial plans to site electrical cables beneath the sea bed and a recent proposal by TransCanada and Shell to build a 10-story liquefied natural gas storage facility in the middle of Long Island Sound. To fairly evaluate these and other pending proposals, it is critical that decisionmakers have

easy access to all existing information about the Sound.

So, who's keeping track of what we know about this natural resource and what's going on below the surface?

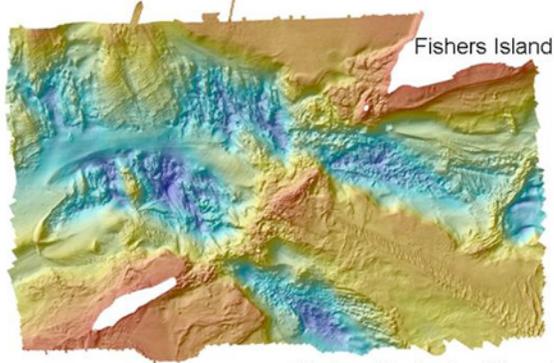
For more than 15 years, the Long Island Sound Resource Center (LISRC) has been developing a comprehensive collection of existing data. Located on the shores of Long Island Sound at the Avery Point campus of the University of Connecticut (UConn) in Groton, the LISRC is a partnership between UConn and the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). The LISRC has been collecting not only readily available relevant journal articles, but also “gray materials” (for example, scholarly studies and scientific reports that have limited distribution and are in danger of disappearing).

DEP Commissioner Gina McCarthy said, “The DEP is proud to be a partner in this important project, which provides valuable information about Long Island Sound for everyone who cares about this important natural resource.”

In an effort to provide easy access to this information, LISRC staffers have spent the past three years creating a searchable website: [www.lisrc.uconn.edu](http://www.lisrc.uconn.edu). The Center's two staffers are Beth Doran, environmental analyst at the DEP and webmaster of the LISRC website, and volunteer Ralph Lewis, professor in residence of Marine Sciences at UConn and retired founder of the LISRC. The website development has been funded by the DEP Office of Long Island Sound Programs with money from the US Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

“This is a dynamic website created by devoted volunteers and a dedicated staff,” Commissioner McCarthy said. “They are committed to providing information that helps educate the public about Long Island Sound and encourage thoughtful decisions when it comes to questions that affect the future of the Sound.”

### Eastern Long Island Sound



An acoustically-derived multi-beam image of the seabed in the vicinity of the Race in eastern Long Island Sound. Blue represents the deepest water depths, red tones indicate shallow waters. (Image courtesy LISRC)

Doran said the organization's goal is for the website to be a clearinghouse of information about Long Island Sound. "The funding allowed us to start to develop the site, buy equipment and scan some existing materials," she said. "We expect to continue to add information and content to the website as well as to connect users of our site with the many other sites with information about the Sound."

According to Lewis, the key is to keep the website updated. "There have been many attempts to gather information about Long Island Sound in one place," he said. "The key is to keep the information source current; otherwise, it becomes outdated and

just another point of reference rather than a living, accurate reflection of the most current information available.

"We have been working on our collection since the 1980s, when the Connecticut DEP and UConn joined forces to put together a collection of gray literature about Long Island Sound," Lewis said. "We developed a fairly good collection and made it available to people via the UConn library at Avery Point. That was in the days before the Internet, so people would either call us or come to Avery Point to access the information. That was the beginning of the organization now known as the LISRC."

The organization continues to develop and now is one of the leading sources of information about Long Island Sound. "The Internet gave us a fairly inexpensive way to make our collection available to people," Lewis said. "The website is a work in progress, but, in time, it could be the

A screenshot from the LISRC website showing some of the bathymetry data that are available for download.

premier source of information about Long Island Sound, offering one-stop shopping and providing not only brief overviews, but also technical studies in original format. It will be a Web-based data- and information-server for Long Island Sound.”

Future plans for the website include adding photos of marine life living in the Sound. “The Sound is a tremendous resource for our state and it is important to make people aware of what is in there and why we should value it,” Doran said. “Adding these photos to our site will be an exciting and eye-opening way to help people learn more about this resource. I’m sure that I’m not the only person who has lived in Connecticut for most of my life and didn’t know that sea horses live in the Sound.”

In 2004, the Connecticut Academy of Science and Engineering (CASE) conducted a study of benthic habitats in Long Island Sound. The study, initiated at the request of the Connecticut Energy Advisory Board, found that there was a critical need for a central repository of information about the Sound. “The LISRC really proved its worth during this time,” said Edward C. Monahan, a member of the CASE study committee. Monahan is the recently retired director of the Connecticut Sea Grant College Program and professor emeritus of Marine Sciences at UConn. “It is a great resource for all involved in research in Long Island Sound. It offers reports as well as a panoply of charts and other objective information that takes a while to accumulate.

“The LISRC does a Herculean job with the resources it has to work with,” he said. “They do a tremendous job of hanging onto reports and other information that would disappear into the ether. When there is a critical need for quick information, like with cable sitings, for example, there isn’t time to bring someone on board to begin to collect the appropriate information. It is particularly in times like these that the LISRC is more than worth the investment.”

Commissioner McCarthy agrees. “The LISRC continues to grow as new data is collected and will benefit all of us who want to learn more about Long Island Sound and the aquatic and



*This screenshot from the LISRC website shows one of several interactive maps (in this case, sonar surveys of the Sound), that are available to users.*

wildlife that are part of what makes the Sound so special,” she said.

On a shoestring budget, the resource center continues the big job of developing its website. “We are constructing modules and we have a variety of search options to make the site easy to use,” Lewis said. “The Geology module is fairly complete and we have another module in place that lists all of the Long Island Sound studies funded by the DEP.”

Each module has a top-level overview, but also provides different levels of information all the way down to the original technical data from studies. “This same website can be used by journalists, nonprofit agencies, lawyers, legislators, teachers, students, boaters and anyone else interested in the Sound,” Lewis said.

Lewis notes that the website is a long-term project. It will take many years to input the existing materials and, ideally, will be continuously monitored and updated forever. “We are trying to leverage our resources by finding other people and organizations to help develop additional modules. There are many grants out there that require outreach and we are hoping to work with researchers to make modules for the website to fulfill their outreach obligation. It’s a win for the researcher and for LISRC. And, the researcher actually gets the additional benefit that their results will be available to people in an easy-to-use format, making it more likely that their work will be referenced.”

Commissioner McCarthy supports this idea. “Through continued partnerships, the LISRC will continue to grow and serve as a link to other valuable resources for current information about Long Island Sound,” she said.

Future modules could focus on invasive species and benthic habitats (organisms living on and in the sea bottom). “Really the possibilities are as deep as the ocean,” Lewis said.—***Karen Cohen (Karen Cohen is a freelance writer and owns The Write Stuff, LLC.)***