

Jamaica Bay Task Force Proves Area Isn't 'Strictly for Birds'

By John T. Tanacredi

The Jamaica Bay Task Force – a joint venture of the National Park Service, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and the New York City Department of Environmental Protection – is concrete evidence that more than a Proceedings can spring from a Conference. The Task Force, now a going concern, is the offspring of the June 1984 Jamaica Bay Environmental Conference, held at Queens College, City of New York – a conference prompted by concern for Jamaica Bay as a prime example of the Hudson-Raritan ecosystem and the human interactions and efforts that have gone into its revitalization.

A cooperative activity of the National Park Service, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, and the New York City Department of Environmental Protection, and several private and non-profit organizations, the Task Force is focusing on immediate studies and decisions, and on the development of a long range comprehensive strategy for the Bay. It was established at the suggestion of Congressman Joseph P. Addabbo.

Jamaica Bay had been a recurring example in the writings of the late Dr. Rene Dubos, and so it was fitting that Dr. William Eblen – the present director of the Dubos Center in New York City – provided the conference's keynote address. His opening remarks led directly into an all-day set of sessions that featured speakers from both the private and public sectors, explored problems and implications of urban ecosystem revitalization, and sought means of fostering dialogue among various levels of government, the scientific community, and local citizen groups affected by activities in and around Jamaica Bay.

It has been 32 years since then Commissioner of the NYC Parks Department Robert Moses declared, "Jamaica Bay is strictly for the birds," and with these words requested and received the first significant budget of \$55,000 for the establishment and operation of the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. From the end of 1953 through 1954, some 1½ million culms of beachgrass were planted, along with a variety of small trees, shrubs, and bushes for land birds. By the end of 1954, more than 100 species of birds and their nesting areas were observed by Refuge visitors.

In the three decades since its establishment, the Refuge has seen:

- the number of bird species expand to 327;
- the inclusion of a majority of Jamaica Bay within the NPS System;
- the creation of salt marsh areas along the periphery of the Bay;
- the improvement of water quality;
- the upgrading of major wastewater treatment systems;
- an increased interest in research and use of the Bay as an environmental laboratory; and
- recreational fishing at one of its highest levels in years.

On the negative side, must be noted the contribution of hazardous materials and debris, the expansion of a major airport runway into the Bay, the creation of two landfills, and chemical pollution that has neces-

sitated restrictions on the consumption of certain fish species.

One's sense, then, of how things are developing has to be a mixed bag of emotions . . . surprise at the productivity, tenacity, and survival of a wide range of species, and frustration over the inability to remove or discontinue the chronic disposal of synthetic and biological pollutants. These two conflicting impressions were the genesis of the major theme for the Jamaica Bay Environmental Conference: "The problems and implications of urban ecosystem revitalization."

National Parks have been described recently in terms of their interrelationship with those areas that immediately surround them. The principles of island biogeography have been used in describing parks, inasmuch as a park's isolation will cause effects in

the trends of organism recruitment across the park's boundaries. If Jamaica Bay really were "strictly for the birds," few problems would exist. The Bay is directly under the administrative pathway for bird migration (the Atlantic Flyway) and so long as we continue to provide a wide diversity of habitat we have no problem attracting bird life.

Jamaica Bay, however, is "for the people" as well . . . not just in mere provision of "recreational space," but – as the Second World Conference on National Parks suggested in 1972 – as places "where visitors are allowed to enter, under special conditions, for inspirational, educative, and recreative purposes." The NPS, further, must accomplish this within the mandate of the Organic Act of 1916 – "by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

Thus, we are entrusted to turn over natural/cultural resources to the next generation in a healthy state. But what is a healthy state? What will it take to reach this goal? Can the NPS do it alone? What role will each of the associated agencies (participants in the Jamaica Bay Conference panels) play in this effort? The objectives considered in the day-long presentations were aimed at answering these questions in the light of past history and present conditions.

The NPS has a unique opportunity in Jamaica Bay



New York City skyline looms in background over Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge (above). Abundant waterbird populations seem to find the city no threat as they make use of the Refuge's West Pond (below). Photo by B. Vaughn.

to reverse – in many instances to revitalize – those natural systems that have been degraded or stressed by the urban environment. This can often be accomplished purely by regulatory restrictions. However, the Park Service must do more than merely bring the park ideals out of the “countryside” and into the urban milieu; it must actively pursue opportunities to work cooperatively toward the regeneration of abused natural resources and toward building in people a receptivity for the natural environment. We must do what Dr. Dubos called “help urban people move progressively and with increasing understanding from the completely humanized world into the wilderness.”

This is a tall order. Legislative requirements, public expectations, and managerial concepts of recreational uses cover a wide range of perceptions. Recreation (both “passive” and “active”) is one of the largest and fastest growing economic forces in the United States. Such activities as fishing and wildlife observation are, of course, totally dependent on their being a resource – the flora and fauna of the park’s ecosystem. Other recreational activities will then compete for such uses in areas like Jamaica Bay.

Because of the impacts associated with its proximity to the New York metropolitan area, Jamaica Bay may require some manipulation of the altered natural systems before allowing nature to take its course. The basic premise to such activities is to mimic natural conditions by providing an atmosphere conducive to increasing habitat diversity. The goal is to increase the level of species diversity until it approaches, and in some respects surpasses, historical levels.

The kindling necessary for the successful igniting of dialogue is information. Trial and error does not work when it comes to the Park Service’s primary responsibility – protection of the resource for future generations. The “reasonable freedom” of which the 1963 Leopold Report spoke with relation to allowing natural processes such as fire, insect outbreaks and so forth to operate within national parks, generally means so long as no species or biotic community is exposed to the possibility of extinction; no unacceptable losses to other resources are anticipated, and there is no threat to human safety.

The Interior Department’s Management Policies have recognized the need to determine the attributes and constraints of all land within the park system and to classify the resources accordingly. Management objectives for natural resource management are applied to all units of the National Park System regardless of their administrative designation (i.e., National Parks, National Seashores, National Recreation Areas, etc.). Due to urgently needed open spaces in the United States, particularly near metropolitan areas, recreation areas such as Gateway NRA, while created for use by the general public, also were envisioned to be “free from exploitative practices for the protection of wildlife and their habitat.” The continued attention to reduction of pollution loads to Jamaica Bay, will allow natural processes to return the natural system to historically higher levels of “quality.” Dr. Dubos in an interview by the USEPA in 1978 noted that “an ecosystem that has been changed can be brought back to a good condition if you help nature to function with the natural repair systems that exist.”

It has been NPS policy to restore to its natural condition ecosystems that have undergone major European settler induced changes. How closely the natural condition is approximated depends upon existing knowledge or information of that condition and to what degree the biological and physical processes molding that system presently can simulate or regenerate pre-

settlement conditions. For example, an approximately acre sized site at the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, threatened by erosion, was replanted and stabilized by placing marsh grass along the intertidal zone. The bottom line however, should be the maintenance of naturally functioning ecosystems with commensurate reductions in pollution loads so as to allow the recruitment and increase of natural biological productivity and diversity levels.

Jamaica Bay provides the largest and in some cases the last open space for many species of wild plant and animal life remaining in metropolitan New York. We should be striving to reverse the trends of hundreds of "little decisions" that have added up over the years to a loss of habitat in and around the Bay. Practically one-third of the area associated with the coastal outwash plain of Queens and Brooklyn has been filled since the mid 1700s. The tyranny of small decisions, or "nickel-dime ecology" as I call it, provides for expedient decision-making based on paltry ecological information, but does not allow for long-range planning and conscious conservation.

The pressures on the Bay are many – housing development, dredging, wetlands filling, sewage effluents, oil pollution, noise pollution, and recreation, to name only a few. Because the bulk of the Bay now is included within the boundaries of the NPS Refuge, future impacts may be controlled. However, considerable areas around the Bay are not within the managerial boundaries, and their preservation as natural buffers against continuous urban pressures is essential.

Proceedings of the Jamaica Bay Conference are slated for August 1985 publication. They can be had by writing to Natural Resource Management Specialist, Gateway National Recreation Area, Brooklyn NY 11234. For more information on the Task Force and its activities, contact Tanacredi at FTS 665-3796.

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