

# Arlington Marsh

## Harbor Estuary Program Restoration Site:

**Site:** Arlington Marsh

**Watershed:** Arthur Kill, NY

**Protection Status:** Restorations ongoing and completed at Saw Mill Creek, Old Place Marsh, Gulfport Marsh, Mariner's Marsh, Chelsea Road Bridge, and Wilpon Pond

**Acreage:** No data

**Project Summary:** Salt Marsh Restoration/Non-Point Source Reduction

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Source: [NY/NJ Harbor Estuary Program](#), 2003

## Arlington Marsh

(Adapted from “An islanded Nature: Natural Area Conservation and Restoration in Western Staten Island, including the Harbor Herons Region” by Peter P. Blanchard III and Paul Kerlinger, published by The Trust for Public Land and the NYC Audubon Society.)

Size, ecological importance, restoration potential, contiguity with existing parkland, and a high degree of development threat are all characteristics that place Arlington Marsh at the highest level of priority for conservation. Arlington Marsh is the largest remaining, intact salt marsh on the Kill van Kull in Staten Island. Despite development at its southern boundary, a DOT facility on the landward end of its eastern peninsula, and a marina on its eastern flank, Arlington Marsh provides more habitat, and in greater variety, for flora and fauna than it might initially appear.

Arlington Marsh’s importance within the fabric of remaining open space in northwestern and western Staten Island continues to be recognized. In Significant Habitats and Habitat Complexes of the New York Bright Watershed (1998), the U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service identified Arlington Marsh as “one of the main foraging areas for birds of the Harbor Herons complex.” In September 1999, the site was recommended as a high priority of acquisition by the NY/NJ HEP Acquisition and Restoration Sub workgroup. The Regional Advisory Committee for the New York Open Space Plan (2000) has listed Arlington Marsh as a “government property with potential for transfer to public recreational use.”

According to the Sweetbay Magnolia Biosphere Reserve Conservancy, the most important feature of this site is that it serves as “a green corridor for wildlife moving from the Goethals Bridge Pond to Mariners Marsh and the north coast of Staten Island.” The Mariners Marsh Conservancy, a local non-profit environmental organization that manages Mariners Marsh for NYCDPR, recognizes that Arlington Marsh, in addition to its significant natural habitat, serves as “the last natural area on the North Shore



through which the public can gain access to waterfront” (letter to Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, January 17, 1999). From a bird’s-eye view and from an overview of the entire region covered by An Islanded Nature, Arlington Marsh may, in fact, be seen as the northern anchor of a system of interdependent natural and regenerating landscapes.

Arlington Marsh contains a variety of habitat types including high marsh, salt marsh, intertidal marsh, Phragmites marsh, mudflats, and uplands along Richmond Terrace. The site’s shoreline consists of two peninsulas and a central cove. From an ecological perspective, Arlington Marsh is essentially the northern extension of Mariners Marsh to the Arthur Kill. Ancient hydrological and habitat connections between the two sites also persist, despite the presence of Richmond Terrace, which was constructed only recently (in the time frame of marsh establishment of Staten Island), defining the

southern boundary of Arlington Marsh. A hydrological link between Arlington Marsh and Mariners Marsh is provided by tidally influenced Newton's Creek (formerly Bowman's Brook), which originates in Mariners Marsh and, having passed under Richmond Terrace, enters the southeast corner of Arlington Marsh on its way to the Arthur Kill. Since the Harbor Herons Report (1990), which treated the two sites as one unity, Mariners Marsh has achieved full recognition and protection through its designation in 1997 as a New York City Park. Arlington Marsh, however, continues to languish, its habitat qualities praised but its status as a natural area very much at risk.

Heron, egrets, and ibis, arriving from Shooters Island, Prall's Island, Isle of Meadows, and other New York/New Jersey Harbor islands, feed in Arlington Marsh's shallows and mud flats in the warmer months. It should be noted that, in contrast to Shooters Island, Prall's Island, Isle of Meadows, and other New York/New Jersey Harbor islands, which afford to nesting wading birds a high degree of security from predators and disturbance, Staten Island's mainland marshes (including Arlington Marsh) cannot provide this level of protection. Therefore, herons, egrets, and ibis feed but do not nest in Arlington Marsh's shallows and mud flats. The



Red-winged Blackbird and the diminutive Marsh Wren do make their nests at safe elevations in the Arlington Marsh vegetation and, according to Dr. Katherine Parsons based on ongoing ornithological observations in the New York Harbor initiated in 1992 under the Wetlands Watchers Program (the Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences), "Thousands of waterbirds of 48 species utilize this site. Species observed at the site include state-designated- Endangered and Threatened species Least Tern, Common Tern, Northern Harrier, and Osprey. In addition, state designated special concern species Snowy Egret, Great Egret, Little Blue Heron, Glossy Ibis, Yellow-crowned Night Heron, Tricolored Heron, Laughing Gull, Black Skimmer, Ruddy Duck, and Boat-tailed Grackle have been observed at Arlington Marsh. The site is especially critical to nearby populations of breeding herons, egrets, and ibises" (Dr. Katherine Parsons, letter dated March 1, 2000).

The value of Arlington Marsh and of other coastal marshes to marine life cannot be overestimated. The waters here are contiguous with Newark Bay and share elements of marine fauna with the bay. Furthermore, faunas of the bay and of the Arthur Kill are linked through food chains and nutrient exchange. For numerous marine invertebrate and vertebrate animals, the offshore waters, shallows, mud flats, intertidal marshes, and tidal creeks offer a wealth of habitat for feeding, reproduction, and escape from predators. Fiddler crabs, blue crabs, ribbed mussels, killifish, and silversides all inhabit the Arlington marsh which provides them with a naturally protected ecosystem, allowing them to both flourish and in turn be eaten by their natural predators.

The role of salt marshes in nurturing marine life in various stages of development is well known. The marine life harbored in salt marshes and adjacent waters, in turn, sustains additional marine life, birds, and commercial and recreational fisheries, and contributes to the overall

health and productivity of the new York/New Jersey Harbor Estuary. As alternative plans are drawn up for this site, it must be remembered that the largest remaining salt marsh of Staten Island's North Shore is an important and functioning part of a broader natural system.

The future of Arlington Marsh is now being considered by the Wetlands Transfer Task Force established by Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and the New York City Council. The Task Force has been working for the past two years to evaluate the feasibility of transferring available City-owned wetlands—like Arlington Marsh—to the jurisdiction of New York City Department of Parks & Recreation (DPR). The Task Force has identified over 1000 such city owned “surplus” properties totaling about 700 acres that might be eligible for transfer to DPR.



## **MAYOR BLOOMBERG ANNOUNCES HISTORIC PRESERVATION OF STATEN ISLAND'S ARLINGTON MARSH WETLANDS AREA**

### ***70-acre Natural Salt Marsh to be Designated Public Parkland as Part of Effort to Protect City's Ecosystem***

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg announced the preservation of Arlington Marsh, a major wetlands area on the northwest corner of Staten Island. The 70-acre natural salt marsh will be transferred to the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation and dedicated as public parkland for preservation. The announcement comes as the New York City Wetlands Transfer Task Force, created in 2005 to formulate strategies to ensure the survival of the City's urban wetlands, submits its citywide recommendations to Mayor Bloomberg and City Council Speaker Christine C. Quinn.

"Staten Island's Arlington Marsh is one of the last remaining natural wetlands in New York City, and its preservation is a major step forward in our effort to protect our natural ecological resources as outlined in PlaNYC," said Mayor Bloomberg. "Over time, the more than 100 square miles of natural wetlands that once existed within New York City have been reduced to just 14, and we have a responsibility to see to it that that trend is halted. I want to thank the Wetland Transfer Task Force for its work over the past two years, and I look forward to reviewing all of its recommendations."



"Arlington Marsh is exactly the kind of resource we were looking to protect when the Council passed legislation creating the Wetlands Transfer Task Force," said Speaker Quinn. "By designating it as public parkland, we are preserving native wildlife and open space for future generations of New Yorkers, as well as protecting a crucial component of our City's environment. I want to thank Council Members Gennaro and McMahon for their hard work advocating for this preservation, as well as Mayor Bloomberg and Commissioner Benepe for making these projects a continued priority."

"Preserving wetlands is essential to our environment because they provide habitats for a variety of species of plants, birds, reptiles, fish, and microbes," said Parks & Recreation Commissioner Adrian Benepe. "They also provide natural water quality improvement, shoreline erosion control, and flood protection. We are grateful to the Wetlands Transfer Task Force for its hard work and look forward to playing an expanded role in preserving irreplaceable public wetlands."

In August 2005, Mayor Bloomberg and the City Council created a task force to inventory City-owned wetlands in the metropolitan area and to determine the technical, legal, environmental and economical feasibility of transferring these wetlands to the jurisdiction of the Department of Parks & Recreation. The Wetlands Transfer Task Force is comprised of seven individuals, four appointed by the Mayor and three by the City Council. The report recommends the transfer of 80 parcels totaling just over 220 acres to Parks.

"The Task Force's identification of more than 220 acres of city-owned wetlands that should be permanently protected will help ensure that these ecosystems continue to protect the coastal property and the environmental health of New Yorkers," said Council Member James Gennaro, who chairs the Council's Committee on Environmental Protection and helped create the Task Force. "I am particularly appreciative that the Task Force members recommended protection of Arlington Marsh Cove on Staten Island. It is terrific that this irreplaceable wetland will continue to inspire successive generations of New Yorkers."

"This is very good news for the people of Staten Island and I am gratified that the Administration through Deputy Mayor Doctoroff's office heard the unanimous voice of the people," said Council Member Michael E. McMahon. "This 70 acres of property - instead of becoming another industrial

site - will become an environmental gem on the North Shore of Staten Island and an important addition to the North Shore greenbelt."



"I commend Mayor Bloomberg for once again not only understanding the importance of adding beautiful parkland for our residents, but taking action on it," said State Senator Andrew J. Lanza. "The mayor's action will forever protect this sensitive and beautiful land, and further establish Staten Island as the borough of parks. I thank Mayor Bloomberg on behalf of the people of Staten Island."

"I congratulate the Mayor and the City Council for their

decision to protect one of the last remnants of our city's original wetlands," said State Senator Diane J. Savino. "Preserving Arlington Marsh means preserving habitat for the numerous species of migrating birds and marine life; it also means generations to come will have the opportunity to experience firsthand this precious corner of our ecosystem."

"Today's announcement is great news for Staten Island and our environment," said Assembly Member Michael Cusick. "Preserving Arlington Marsh will benefit our borough for generations to come."

Wetlands are among the most productive ecosystems in the world. Not only do they provide habitats for a variety of species of plants, reptiles, birds and fish; they also provide natural water quality improvement, shoreline erosion control and flood protection for the City of New York. As a result of urbanization, the more than 100 square miles of wetlands that historically existed within the New York City limits have now been depleted to approximately 14 square miles.

"Arlington Marsh is one of the last, best, unprotected coastal wetlands in New York Harbor, and a priority for the environmental community for more than 20 years," said Robert Pirani, Director of Environmental Programs at Regional Plan Association and Co-Chair of the Wetlands Transfer Task Force. "The Mayor's actions today ensures that it will remain a sanctuary for wildlife and people

forever. The leadership of Councilmen McMahon and Gennaro has been instrumental in protecting this vital open space.”

“This is tremendous news, not only for Staten Island but for the larger ecological health of the New York Harbor,” said Marcia Bystryn, Executive Director of the New York League of Conservation Voters. “With salt marshes rapidly dwindling all over the East Coast, Arlington Marsh is vitally important as one of the last major tidal wetlands in New York City. By extending Parks Department protection to Arlington Marsh, Mayor Bloomberg and Commissioner Benepe are ensuring that it will continue to flourish as a habitat for birds and fish, and we salute the City’s leadership.”

“Arlington Marsh is one of the last, great undeveloped wetlands on the New York City waterfront,” said Andy Darrell, director of Living Cities at Environmental Defense. “Surrounded by development, it is a refuge for migrating shorebirds, a natural water purifier and a pocket of wilderness. Protecting it now is a far-sighted investment in the city’s ecology. With the right care, Arlington Marsh will become a place of natural wonder on the city’s industrialized shoreline.”

“NYC Audubon applauds Mayor Bloomberg for preserving one of the finest and most productive salt-water marshes remaining in the City,” said Glenn Phillips, Executive Director of New York City Audubon. “This property has been a top priority for acquisition as parkland because of its importance for waterbirds and fish, and its role as a connector between Mariner’s Marsh and the Kill Van Kull. Moving properties such as this into the stewardship of the Department of Parks & Recreation will ensure that future generations of New Yorkers may enjoy clean water and the experience of nature within the city.”

“Arlington Marsh is the largest remaining intact salt marsh on Staten Island’s north shore. It is a hidden gem in New York City,” said Rose Harvey, Senior Vice President and Regional Director for The Trust for Public Land. “We applaud Mayor Bloomberg for taking such bold steps to protect our precious remaining natural heritage.”

“The transfer of Arlington Marsh to the Parks Department is very good news,” said Andrew Willner, Executive Director of NY/NJ Baykeeper. “The Marsh comprises about 90 acres, 30 upland acres and 60 acres of marshland and is one of the last major tidal wetland complexes still in existence in New York City and is both a wildlife sanctuary and a community amenity.”

“The Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance applauds the Mayor for balancing the growth of our dynamic port with the ecological need to protect and preserve our wetlands,” said Roland Lewis, President and CEO of the Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance. “This approach to waterfront development is the essence of PlaNYC to both grow the economic engine of the city and improve the quality of life and health in all of our neighborhoods.”

“Marshlands are our most productive ecosystems,” said Don Riepe, Director of the Northeast Chapter of the American Littoral Society. “Having Arlington Marsh turned over to the Parks is a great addition to our City’s natural areas.”



# Arlington Marsh: One-of-a-kind filter on the North Shore

Published: Thursday, April 28, 2011 by Virginia N. Sherry

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. - MARINERS HARBOR - The last time Port Richmond resident Beryl Thurman, president and executive director of the nonprofit North Shore Waterfront Conservancy (NSWC), walked through city-owned Arlington Marsh was five years ago. So, she figured it was long overdue to take another look at the largest remaining intact salt marsh near where the Kill van Kull and Arthur Kill meet, its 70 acres – northwest of the New York Container Terminal – off limits to the public, enclosed by chain-link fences along Richmond Terrace.

Ms. Thurman reached out to the Parks Department and city Economic Development Corporation, and a morning walk-through, at low tide, was arranged for April 15, with the number of participants purposefully kept small.



"I have a great deal of respect for Arlington Marsh and for what it does. I also recognize that it is a very fragile space, and am very conscious of not wanting to disturb the balance that is taking place there, and – as some would say – leave a footprint," said Ms. Thurman.

The marsh plays a critical ecological role in protecting inland areas from storm-surge flooding.

## 'AMAZING'

"Arlington Marsh is amazing," said Dr. Susan Elbin, director of conservation for New York City Audubon. "It's a vital place for long-legged wading birds and other salt-marsh-dependent species such as marsh wrens. There is so much going on; you can't get it from a casual glance," she said after the two-hour walk-through.

"It was too early in the season for the long-legged wading birds," noted Dr. Elbin, "but double-crested cormorants were already nesting on the channel-markers in the Kill van Kull. They benefit from the self-cleansing activities of the marsh's (different ecological) zones."



It was the first time that the Conservancy's Ms. Thurman visited during low tide. "I able to walk on the winter Spartina grass, and I noticed how quiet and peaceful it was, with the exception of us talking. We also noticed that deer had used some of the birch trees to scratch their antlers," she said.

## THE COVE: 'A NURSERY'

One section of the site – Arlington Marsh Cove – "contains one of the largest remaining remnants of the ancient salt marshes that once encircled Staten Island and much of the city's shoreline," according to the Wetlands Transfer Task Force's "Recommendations for the Transfer of City-Owned Properties Containing Wetlands," published in 2007.

"With a diversity of flora and fauna, the site includes mudflats, disturbed marsh, intertidal salt marsh, high salt marsh, as well as grassland, shrub scrub, and forested upland communities.

"As with the adjacent Peninsula site, despite abuse, the tidal flats and uplands of this property combine to serve as a nursery for fish and other marine life, a foraging ground for the Harbor herons, a nesting ground for other bird species like marsh wrens, and a shelter for wintering waterfowl," the report said.

"Archaeological evidence suggests that the Cove area was part of an important pre-colonial Native American site," it added.

## MARITIME EXPANSION

The proposed expansion of New York Container Terminal – including a new 50-foot-deep berth and pile-supported wharf to accommodate huge Panamax container ships – will take away about 16.38 acres of Arlington Marsh wetlands that will be filled or dredged to construct the berth.

In September 2007, Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced the preservation of Arlington Marsh, with its transfer to the city Parks Department. Calling the marsh "one of the last remaining natural wetlands in New York City," the mayor said at the time that its preservation "is a major step forward in our effort to protect our natural ecological resources.

"Over time, the more than 100 square miles of natural wetlands that once existed within New York



City have been reduced to just 14, and we have a responsibility to see to it that this trend is halted."

Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe added: "Preserving wetlands is essential to our environment because they provide habitats for a variety of species of plants, birds, reptiles, fish, and microbes. They also provide natural water quality improvement, shoreline erosion control and flood protection."

# SAVING ARLINGTON MARSH

In keeping with his goal of making New York City sustainable into the future, Mayor Michael Bloomberg has approved the preservation of the city's last major unprotected wetland complex, Arlington Marsh on the northwest shore of Staten Island. This is a major step forward in protecting a vital harbor ecosystem, but the marsh still faces threats.

In agreeing to make the 70-acre salt marsh a park instead of holding it in reserve for possible future expansion of the nearby container port at Howland Hook, the mayor is following the recommendation of the city Wetlands Transfer Task Force, which was established in 2005 to determine which city-owned wetland properties should be transferred to the parks department. The fate of Arlington Marsh was the major point of contention on the task force.

Arlington Marsh is one of the few pieces left of the once-vast wetlands of northwest Staten Island, one of the three great marshes of New York Harbor, along with Jamaica Bay and the New Jersey Meadowlands. "For the longest time Arlington

Marsh has been at the top of most peoples' acquisition and protection lists, including New York Open Space Plan and the Harbor Estuary Plan," said Bill Tai, director of the Natural Resources Group at the parks department and co-chairman of the task force.



## The Task Force Recommendations

The decision on Arlington Marsh is part of a broader effort to preserve New York's diminishing wetlands. The Wetlands Transfer Task Force identified 82 properties, including the marsh, to be transferred to the parks department, for a total of 225 acres. Its report was released in late September.

The task force also determined that an additional 76 small parcels on Staten Island should go to the Department of Environmental Protection for its Bluebelt natural stormwater control program. More than 100 properties throughout the five boroughs were identified as potentially appropriate parkland, but needing further review.

The parks department made it clear that it could take only a limited number of properties - those that it could successfully manage, given its budget constraints. Properties chosen for transfer were typically adjacent to existing parkland or had a potential local stewardship group. The task force called on the city to provide an adequate budget for ongoing maintenance of natural areas and wetlands and for the restoration of degraded wetland sites.

The task force also made a number of recommendations for a comprehensive policy for protecting and managing smaller city-owned and private wetlands that currently are not covered by federal or state regulations. Legislation has been introduced in City Council to require the city to develop such a policy; 2030 PlaNYC also sets forth the goal of developing a more systematic approach to wetlands protection.

## **Nature's Last Stronghold**

The northwest corner of Staten Island, where the Arthur Kill merges into the Kill van Kull, is a site with both heavy industry, past and present, and significant biodiversity. It was once a thriving maritime and manufacturing center, but as industry left in the middle of the 20th century, wetland grasses, shellfish and birds returned and reclaimed the land.

Even amid rotted docks and abandoned industrial sites, Arlington Marsh has a range of healthy wetland habitats, from mudflats to salt marsh to shrubs to the freshwater wetlands of the adjacent 107-acre Mariner's Marsh Park. More than 100 species of birds feed or nest here. The mudflats and salt marshes are nurseries for fish, shellfish and other marine organisms. Plants and animals at the northern end of their range, including a number of rare and endangered species, flourish in the wetlands and uplands.

The marsh provides prime foraging ground for colonies of herons, ibises and egrets that returned to nest in the harbor's wetlands and islands in the 1970s. The Trust for Public Land, the New York City Audubon Society and other environmental groups have been working for decades to protect the habitat for this significant wading bird population, known as the Harbor Herons.

West of the marsh is the 187-acre New York Container Terminal, operated under lease from the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

There are also residential areas, including a subsidized low-income apartment complex, on the eastern side of the marsh. These largely low-income, minority communities seem more like villages than gritty urban neighborhoods like Hunts Point, but they have many of the same environmental justice issues, including toxic contamination and lack of access to parks, recreation and the waterfront. "You can go all the way back east to Snug Harbor before you come to anything that's public. Everything is gated," said Tai. "You can barely see the shoreline."

## **The Future of the Marsh**

Arlington Marsh presents a wonderful opportunity for environmental education and research, according to Beryl A. Thurman, executive director of the North Shore Waterfront Conservancy, which has been working to get waterfront access along the north shore. But she and other local activists are not celebrating yet. Although the city plans to dedicate most of the properties that make up the marsh as parkland, it still intends to put a sanitation garage on an eight-acre Department of Transportation site right in the middle of Arlington Marsh Peninsula, across the road from Mariner's Marsh Park.

It is generally agreed that the garage needs to be moved from its current location in a residential area, but local environmentalists say that the city needs to find a better alternative than the new park. "It breaks the natural connection between the freshwater and upland side and the salt marsh and coastal waters," said Richard Lynch, a botanist and president of the Sweetbay Magnolia Conservancy, whose mission is to study and conserve wild areas in the Arthur Kill area.



Robert Pirani, co-chair of the Wetlands Transfer Task Force and director of environmental programs at the Regional Plan Association, said, "Locating a sanitation facility in the middle of a park is a choice of convenience, not a choice of rational land-use planning."

The sanitation garage would be three blocks from the apartment buildings and across the street from a site slated for community ballfields. "Would you put something like that across from Silver Lake or Clove Lakes Park?" Thurman asked, mentioning two parks in more affluent areas of the island. "Why don't we build an education center and comfort station for visitors who live nearby or groups that come to Staten Island who want to do research?"



Local environmental groups are also concerned about the proposed expansion of the container terminal onto the Port Ivory peninsula next to Arlington Marsh Cove. The port expansion onto the former site of a huge Proctor and Gamble Ivory Soap factory would destroy 14 acres of regulated wetlands, four of which form the western edge of Arlington Marsh Cove. It would also require extending the bulkhead and channeling the creek that flows through the area, which could affect the tidal flow to other important wetlands.

Jim Devine, the president and CEO of the container terminal, has said that he does not foresee that the terminal would need to expand further into Arlington Marsh Cove, which influenced the city's decision to make the marsh a park, according to the Staten Island Advance.

In the future, protecting wetlands in the area may become more difficult. According to Staten Island 2020, a recent study by the Center for an Urban Future, the maritime sector offers one of Staten Island's best opportunities for economic growth and the creation of well-paying jobs over the next few decades.

" There is a reindustrialization effort going on at the same time that we're trying preserve as much

of these large natural features as possible," said Lynch. Future expansion of the port and related industries calls for careful planning so that the economy can grow without losing the irreplaceable wildlife value and ecological services wetlands provide.

Even making Arlington Marsh a city park does not provide it with permanent protection. In recent years, the Bloomberg administration has persuaded the state legislature to alienate parkland for other uses, including a water filtration plant in Van Cortlandt Park and a new stadium for the New York Yankees in Macombs Dam Park. Without further protection in place, who can predict what will happen at Arlington Marsh in 20 or 30 years?

Source: Gotham Gazette

URL: <http://www.gothamgazette.com/article/parks/20071030/14/2333>