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More Public Access to the Harbor and its Waters, But Not For Everyone

Comprehensive Accounting of Waterfront Parks Documents Access to Region's Largest Public Space and the Role of Civic Organizations in its Stewardship

New York, NY – A new report released today by the New York – New Jersey Harbor & Estuary Program/Hudson River Foundation and the USDA Forest Service provides, for the first time, a comprehensive account of where and how the public can access the New York – New Jersey Harbor and its tidal waters. The report, *Connecting with Our Waterways: Public Access and its Stewardship in the New York – New Jersey Harbor Estuary*, identifies over 500 parks and public spaces along the New York – New Jersey Harbor that are accessible to the public. The shorelines of these public spaces – ranging from the small urban street-ends and esplanades to the sandy beaches and marshes – stretch for 595 miles or 37% of the 1595 mile long waterfront.

But, for the more than 500,000 residents in 12 higher need areas, only about nine percent of the waterfront is accessible. These waterfront areas, from the Bronx shoreline to the mouth of the Raritan River, have a limited number of parks, densely developed housing, or an otherwise disadvantaged population. In the Passaic River between Newark and Paterson, for example, over 96% of the waterfront is inaccessible. Along the shores of the Harlem River in the Bronx and Northern Manhattan live some of the lowest income populations among all waterfront areas.

“Access to the New York – New Jersey Harbor Estuary – whether for swimming, boating, fishing, or just enjoying the spectacular views – is an amenity that impacts quality of life and drives spending by residents, visitors, and businesses” said Robert Pirani, Program Director for the New York New Jersey Harbor Estuary Program. “Unfortunately, our study found that not all of our waterfront communities are realizing these benefits.”

The 34 page report notes the extraordinary transformation of the waterfront in recent decades, with over 500 acres of new waterfront parks and public spaces created in the last five years alone. To document this progress, and recognize and address new challenges to public access, the authors compiled and mapped existing parks and other public waterfront access sites in the NY-NJ Harbor Estuary: the tidal waters from the Tappan Zee Bridge south to Sandy Hook, NJ and Far Rockaway, NY, and east to the New York City border at Throgs Neck, including the tidal tributaries such as the Passaic, Hackensack, Raritan, and Bronx rivers.

A particular focus of the study was identifying the critical role of civic organizations in terms of providing public access to the waterfront and supporting waterfront stewardship. An assessment of 146 civic organizations indicates that they offer a broad array of programs that help engage people with the Harbor Estuary through community organizing, public outreach, and volunteering or employment. Almost all conduct educational programs about the local environment; about twenty percent conduct boating, fishing, or swimming programs.

“Civic stewards actively help waterfront communities improve access to the estuary along with site quality. This study highlights waterfront areas where civic activity is already high - as well as

areas where civic organizations can be better supported,” said Michelle Johnson, Interdisciplinary Scientist with the USDA Forest Service and co-author of the study. “Even organizations with fewer fiscal resources – 45% of the assessed organizations have an annual budget under \$50,000 – can make great contributions through leveraging their volunteer and member participation.” she added.

The assessment establishes an important baseline from which regional and local organizations such as the New York – New Jersey Harbor & Estuary Program (HEP) may better identify priorities, allocate resources for fostering stewardship capacity and addressing gaps in access, and refine and track progress toward public access and stewardship goals established by the upcoming HEP Action Agenda and the Hudson-Raritan Estuary Comprehensive Restoration Plan.

“The wealth of detailed waterfront access information contained in the Harbor Estuary Program’s ‘Connecting with Our Waterways’ is a welcome and invaluable new resource to all who work to connect New Yorkers and New Jerseyans to the magnificent harbor and waterways that surrounds us said Roland Lewis, President and CEO of the Waterfront Alliance; “Thank you and Bravo to the Harbor & Estuary Program!”

Communities may use the maps and figures to analyze how their own resources stack up relative to the harbor as a whole, and to make a plan for addressing resource gaps.

"City Parks Foundation is pleased to see the commitment to waterfront stewardship by the New York-New Jersey Harbor & Estuary Program," said Heather Lubov, Executive Director of City Parks Foundation. "Through our Catalyst program we work to revitalize underutilized parkland in historically underserved, waterfront communities by building local stewardship, engaging community members, and working with the community to create a vision for their open spaces. Catalyst revitalizes neighborhoods and helps waterfront parks fulfill their potential as centers of vibrant community life."

The New York – New Jersey Harbor & Estuary Program also announced a request for proposals on April 6th, specifically targeted to address stewardship and public access in the region, particularly in underserved areas. Proposals are due May 11th.

The New York-New Jersey Harbor & Estuary Program was established by the Congress and the States of New York and New Jersey in 1987 to protect and restore the estuary resources we depend on and share. The Program is managed by the Hudson River Foundation, established in 1981 to make science integral to decision-making with regard to the Hudson River and its watershed and to support competent stewardship of this extraordinary resource.

The New York City Urban Field Station was established in 2006 as a unique federal-municipal partnership between the USDA Forest Service Northern Research Station and New York City Parks. Its mission is to improve the quality of life in urban areas by conducting and supporting research about social-ecological systems and natural resource management.