

FISH AND SHIPS

Photographs and Narrative by Andrew J. Willner



Fish and Ships

New York Harbor is one of the most documented and least well known of our beautiful and productive estuaries. I had the honor and privilege of serving as the Baykeeper for the Bays and tributaries of the Hudson-Raritan (New York/New Jersey Harbor) Estuary from 1989 to 2008. Part of my job was to document what I observed as I patrolled the bays and rivers in a locally built work boat. My other job was to tell the story of the Harbor as an ecological system, to record insults to it, and develop strategies for its restoration. I hope that this presentation will help to tell the story of the working waterfront, the wetlands, waterways, and the people that are the threads in the tapestry that is the Harbor.

This urban wilderness is astonishing, not just for its beauty and bounty but for its diversity and tenacity. It is a place that can make nature worshippers out of non-believers. This extraordinary collection of rivers, harbors, bays, beaches, uplands, and primal mud is a celebration of water people, fish, commerce, and nature. It is the reason people settled here, and it is still the glue that holds the bio-region together.



The Hudson-Raritan Estuary marks the watery end of New York and New Jersey's largest rivers – the Hackensack, Hudson, Passaic, Rahway, Shrewsbury, Navesink, and Raritan.

It is a living web of upland, fresh and salt water marshes, beaches, straits, and broad bays. It is home to more than 150 species of fish 300 bird species, and 20 million people. It feeds vast schools of migrating shad, flocks of songbirds and raptors. It nourishes people who eat from its bounty and seek recreation and rejuvenation in nature. It is also the world's most urban harbor – a metropolitan mosaic of shimmering glass towers, looping highways, and gritty refineries, it is a region teeming with life and in need of ecological repair.





From any accessible shoreline – from small boats or fishing with a guide, recreational fishermen do well here. The Hudson River is the last estuary on the east coast with most of the fish species that at existed at the time of European colonization. The Bays are full of striped bass, weakfish, fluke, winter flounder, bluefish, and blue crabs. “Head boats” leave from ports in New York City and the Bayshore of Raritan Bay, and for a special day on the water, fishing guides can take a small party for an hour fly fishing trip during lunch hour.












**There is a time in the life of the
Estuary for life and rebirth.**

**An osprey pair raises its young
nesting on the remains of an old
steamship boiler stack .**

**A prehistoric remnant, a horse
shoe crab sheds its shell among
the detritus of an urban beach,**

Combined Sewer Overflows are a polite way of saying that human waste and everything else in the street and the sewer dumps directly into the waterways of the Harbor whenever it rains.





We live in a time of transition – movement into the Ecozoic Era, as Thomas Berry has called it. Signs are increasingly apparent: Peak oil, climate unpredictability, and ecological and economic instability. How are we to live into such a moment with intention and hope? How can we act on our commitment to life and the common good?



Photograph by Rick Dove

The photographs and narrative chronicle a Twenty Year love affair with the natural resources, people, and places on the Hudson-Raritan (New York-New Jersey Harbor) Estuary. I have had a unique opportunity as Baykeeper to see And record a special and personal collage of the urban wilderness.

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