

# Revitalizing New York City's Waterfront: A Selective Overview of Strategies and Programs

Study Prospectus By

## **Dr. Rutherford H. Platt**

Professor of Geography Emeritus, University of Massachusetts Amherst,  
Senior Fellow, CUNY Institute for Sustainable Cities and  
Director, Ecological Cities Project, Northampton, MA  
<http://www.humanemetropolis.org/>  
platt@geo.umass.edu; (413) 575-0865

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The CUNY Institute for Sustainable Cities (ISC) is a new center for research, teaching, and outreach on urban environmental issues based at Hunter College in Manhattan. Its mission is:

“To create awareness and understanding of the connections between the everyday lives of urban citizens and their natural world, leading to the discovery and use of cities like New York as a learning laboratory to create a sustainable future for cities worldwide.” (<http://www.cunysustainablecities.org/>).

ISC has defined three core topic areas around which its program is organized:

- City by the Coast
- Climate Change and Energy
- Consumption Cities

In furtherance of the first core topic—Cities by the Coast—ISC has contracted with Dr. Rutherford H. Platt to review and compare selected initiatives now in progress to revitalize the New York City waterfront. For purposes of this study, the New York City waterfront is viewed geographically as both a boundary (between land and water) and as a set of nested zones defined for different purposes including:

1. Ecological functions (e.g. upland, riparian, and aquatic habitats; above and below water surface, etc.);
2. Social benefits (recreation, health and fitness, contemplation, social interaction in shared spaces, etc.);
3. Economic functions (navigation, transportation, tourism, fishing, residential and commercial development, etc.).

The study will conduct a broad, reconnaissance-level survey of a sample of the myriad efforts now in progress relating to the first two sets of waterfront functions: ecological and social. Its limited scope will not allow much consideration of the very important third set of economic functions. Nor will it discuss the relevant federal and state legal context in detail.

New York is blessed with a cornucopia of programs—public and private sector, large and small, old and new—that address waterfront issues at various scales and with different objectives.

- Regional-level initiatives, e.g., the Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance based at the Municipal Art Society, the Regional Plan Association “Highlands to Ocean (H<sub>2</sub>O)” concept, and Mayor Bloomberg’s PlaNYC;
- Sub-regional projects, e.g., the Bronx River Alliance, Governors Island, the Jamaica Bay Watershed Alliance, the Manhattan Waterfront Greenway, and Flushing Creek Watershed;
- Site-specific projects like Stuyvesant Cove Park and the High Line projects in Manhattan, Brooklyn Bridge Park, and Pugsley Creek Park in The Bronx.

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In particular, the saliency of New York coastal and waterfront issues has been greatly enhanced by Mayor Bloomberg's recently released "Blueprint for 2030" (PlaNYC). According to a Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance press release of April 23, 2007:

"More than half of the Bloomberg Administration's action items for moving New York City towards sustainability will create the dual benefit of an economically productive and environmentally healthy waterfront and waterways." ([www.waterwire.net](http://www.waterwire.net))

Other contextual factors influencing management of the New York City waterfront include expected city population increase of perhaps one million by 2030, increasing highway traffic congestion, and the rising cost of gasoline—all pointing to the need to provide opportunities for recreation, exercise, and contact with nature accessible to urban residents by foot, cycling, or public transit. Overshadowing all other concerns regarding coastal access and land use is the prospect of rising sea level due to global warming.

This study will not attempt to assess the effectiveness of existing programs or approaches, nor will it "preach to the choir." Instead, its objective is to sample the "institutional terrain" of waterfront improvement efforts through examination of selected programs representing diversity of scale, purpose, and geographic focus. Its approach is qualitative, not statistical. Our goal is to better understand a few representative programs and the extent of coordination or interaction between them. This will be accomplished through both web-based research and personal interviews and site visits, where feasible. The final product will be a working paper to be circulated informally and posted on the ISC website, with a possible printed summary for distribution at public meetings and classes.