January 30, 2024

The Honorable Tom Carper
Chairman
Environment and Public Works Committee
United States Senate
513 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Shelley Moore Capito
Ranking Member
Environment and Public Works Committee
United States Senate
405 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Bruce Westerman
Chairman
Natural Resources Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
202 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-0404

The Honorable Raúl Grijalva
Ranking Member
Natural Resources Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
1203 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Subject: 2023 National Fish Habitat Partnership Report to Congress on Future Fish Habitat Partnership and Modifications

Dear Chairman Carper, Ranking Member Capito, Chairman Westerman and Ranking Member Grijalva:

As Chair of the National Fish Habitat Board, I am writing to report on the Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 progress of the National Fish Habitat Partnership (NFHP) in implementing Title II, the National Fish Habitat Conservation Through Partnerships Act, of the America's Conservation Enhancement Act (ACE Act; P.L. 116-188) that was signed into law on October 30, 2020.

NFHP's mission is to protect, restore, and enhance the nation's fish and aquatic communities through partnerships that foster fish habitat conservation and improve the quality of life for the American people. Since its establishment as a federal program in 2006, NFHP and the existing network of twenty Fish Habitat Partnerships (FHPs, *see Attachment 1*) have completed 1,464 projects spanning all 50 states (Figure 1); 102 of which were funded in FY 2023. While NFHP has directly contributed $54.6 million in project funding since 2006, each of those federal dollars has been leveraged over 4:1; showcasing the significant influence and value of the Partnership to maximize the effect of our conservation investments.

NFHP has worked across a broad range of federal, state, university, and non-governmental organization partners to develop two national fish habitat assessments in 2010 and 2015,

respectively that identify intact systems needing conservation or protection and assessed the root causes of aquatic habitat degradation in altered systems to guide future fish habitat conservation efforts. A new national fish habitat assessment product was being scoped and designed in FY2023 as required by the ACE Act for delivery in late 2025.

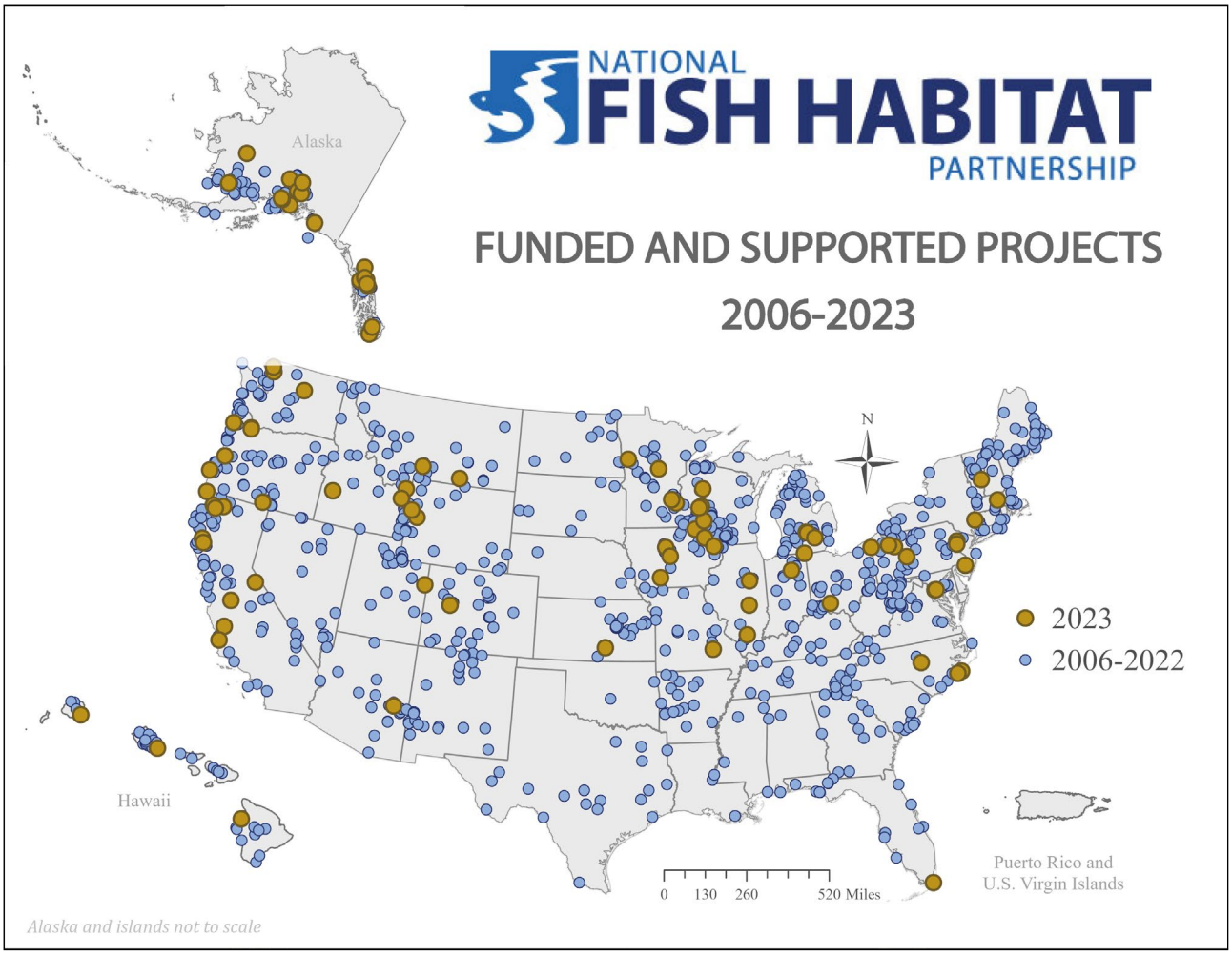


Figure 1 – NFHP funded and supported projects implemented across the United States from 2006 - present.

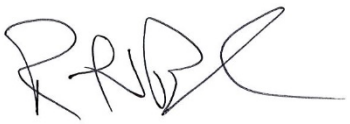
NFHP is implementing the provisions of the ACE Act. This includes the development of a process to submit FHPs for congressional designation, which is anticipated to be completed in 2024. During our four meetings (a combination of in-person and virtual) in Fiscal Year 2023, the Board has furthered building working relationships, discussed needed NFHP changes and key decision points within the ACE Act, engaged Board Committees to work on key issues, and provided guidance to the existing network of twenty FHPs. The Board submitted the FY 2024 project list for the Secretary of Interior's review by July 1, 2023 and it was subsequently approved on September 12, 2023. As required by the ACE Act, the Board set National Conservation Priorities at its virtual September Board meeting by following a recommendation of the Board's Science and Data Committee to renew support of the previous seven National Conservation Priorities. These priorities were developed by the Board's Science and Data Committee with input from the Fish

Habitat Partnerships. As stated in the ACE Act, these conservation priorities guide NFHP's fish habitat conservation work and are integral to each FHP's Congressional designation and fish habitat conservation project selection. The Board Committees established in 2021 have been very active in FY2023 by advancing progress on scientific habitat assessments, policy analysis, communications, and streamlining Fish Habitat Conservation project submission, review, and tracking in alignment with ACE Act provisions. For example, the Board passed several key guidance documents including updated Board bylaws and a communications strategy developed by the Governance and Communications committees, respectively

The FHPs have continued to advance fish habitat conservation on-the-ground in their areas of focus (*see recent projects in Attachment 2)*. FHPs have adjusted their operational schedules to meet the deadlines set in the ACE Act and have submitted proposed projects that met the intent of the ACE Act to the Board on time for the second year in a row, including four tribal-led projects through two FHPs.

As envisioned by the ACE Act, NFHP continues to improve our nation's fisheries resources and aquatic habitats by leveraging funds and collaborating with a diverse network of partners to achieve shared goals. We are transitioning into the model envisioned by the ACE Act while continuing to build relationships and achieve on-the-ground results. In FY 2024, we look forward to enhancing the operations of the FHPs and Board, and beginning the process for Congress to approve the FHPs. We appreciate the support shown to this program by the Committees of jurisdiction through your leadership and other members of Congress and look forward to discussing our work further with you and your staff.

Sincerely,



Robert Boyles, Jr.

National Fish Habitat Board Chairman

Attachments:

1. Existing 20 Fish Habitat Partnerships
2. Selection of 2023 NFHP Project Photos & Descriptions

NATIONAL FISH HABITAT PARTNERSHIP

JULIE CARTER
(WAFWA Representative), Arizona Game and Fish, Aquatic Habitat Branch Chief - Term exp. 12/26

ROBERT BOYLES
(AFWA Representative), South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, Director (Board Chairman) - Term exp. 2/26

STEVE GUERTIN
(Serves by virtue of office), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Deputy Director

ANNE KINSINGER
(Serves by virtue of office), U.S. Geological Survey, Associate Director, Ecosystems

TIM SCHAEFFER
(NEAFWA Representative), PA Fish and Boat Commission, Executive Director - Term exp. 11/26

PAT RIVERS
(MAFWA Representative), Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Deputy Director - Term exp. 2/25

SAM RAUCH
(Serves by virtue of office), NOAA (National Marine Fisheries Service), Deputy Assistant Administrator for Regulatory Programs

ROB HARPER
(Serves by virtue of office), U.S. Forest Service, Assistant Director

AUSTIN BOOTH
(SEAFWA Representative), Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, Director - Term exp. 2/26

JAKE SLAGER
(Corportate Industry Representative), Coca-Cola, Sr. Manager, Colleges & Universities - Term exp. 5/26

ADAM RINGIA
(Tribal Representative), Southwest Tribal Fisheries Commission, Executive Director - Term exp. 2/25

KAREN LINNELL
(Tribal Representative), Ahtna Intertribal Resource Commission - Executive Director - Term exp. 2/25

STEVE PERRY
(Landowner Representative of an active Fish Habitat Partnership) Term exp. 2/27

JOHN LECOQ
(Corporate Industry Representative), Fishpond USA, CEO - Term exp. 2/24

TED EISCHEID
(Local Gov. Rep. in Fish Habitat Restoration), Matanuska-Susitna Borough, AK, Planner - Term exp. 2/24

JESSE TRUSHENSKI
(Agricultural Production), Riverence, Chief Science Officer - Term exp. 2/27

CARTER KRUSE
(National Private Landowner Representative), Turner Enterprises, Director of Conservation - Term exp. 2/27

GENE GILLILAND
(Freshwater Recreational Angling Representative), Bass Anglers Sportsman Society, Conservation Director - Term exp. 2/26

STAN ALLEN
(Councils/Commissions), Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission, Sr. Program Manager - Term exp. 2/27

DOUG AUSTEN
(Science Based Fisheries Organization Representative), American Fisheries Society, Executive Director - Term exp. 2/27

CHRISTY PLUMER
(Marine Rec. Fishing Representative), Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, Chief Conservation Officer - Term exp. 2/24

MIKE LEONARD
(Recreational Sportfishing Industry Representative), American Sportfishing Association, VP of Gov. Affairs- Term exp. 2/25

CHRIS MOORE
(Commercial Fishing Representative), Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, Executive Director - Term exp. 2/24

BRYAN MOORE
(Habitat Conservation Organization), Trout Unlimited, Chief Intergovernmental Officer - Term exp. 2/25

Figure 2 – National Fish Habitat Board Membership

NATIONAL FISH HABITAT PARTNERSHIP

Attachment 1 – Existing 20 Fish Habitat Partnerships

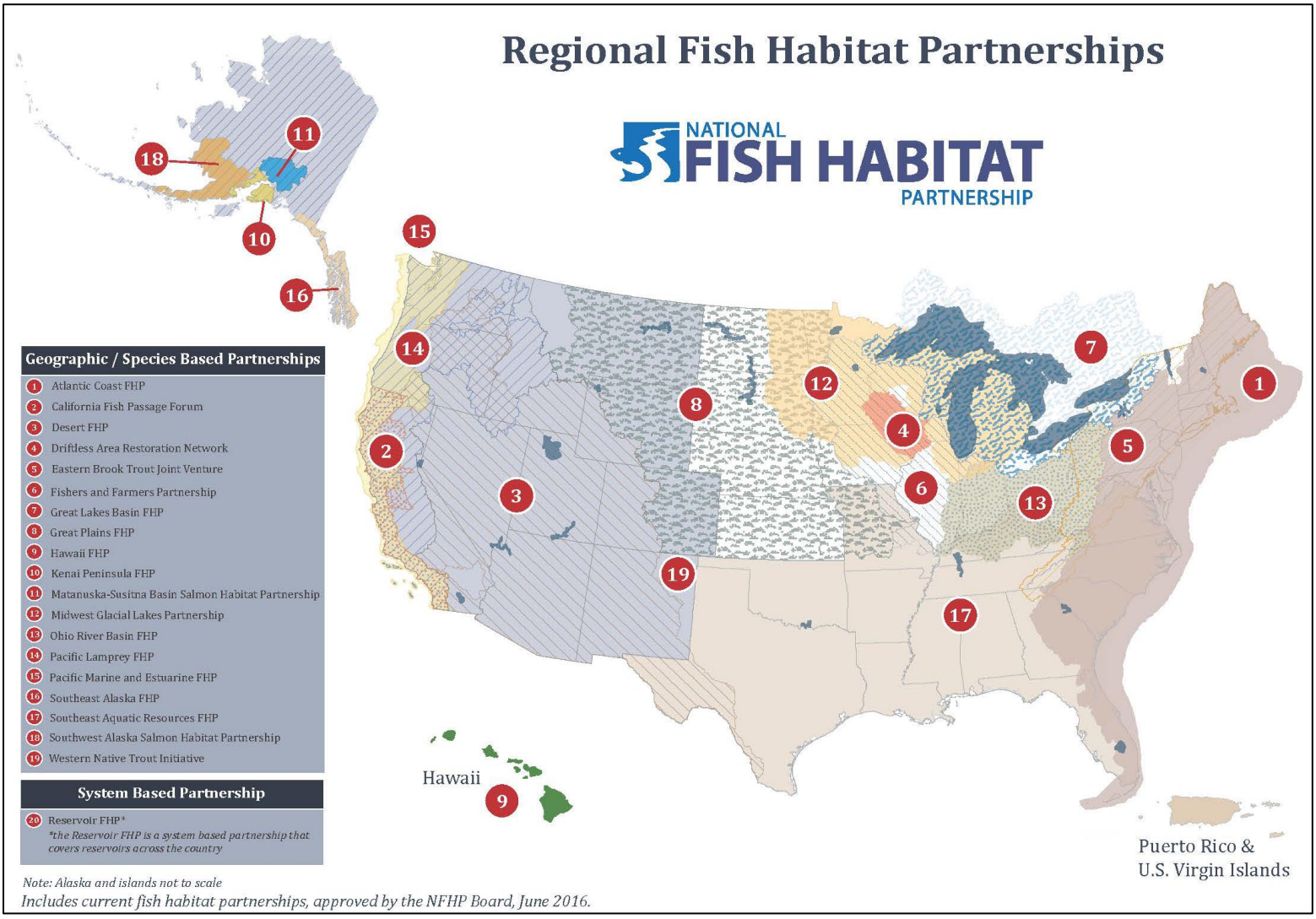


Figure 3 – United States map depicting the regional focus of each of the 20 Fish Habitat Partnerships.

Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership (*Board recognized March, 2009)*

California Fish Passage Forum (*Board recognized March, 2010)*

Desert Fish Habitat Partnership (*Board recognized March, 2009)*

Driftless Area Restoration Effort (*Board recognized October, 2007)*

Eastern Brook Trout Joint Venture (*Board recognized October, 2007)*

Fishers & Farmers Partnership (*Board recognized March, 2010)*

Great Lakes Basin Fish Habitat Partnership (*Board recognized October, 2009)*

Great Plains Fish Habitat Partnership (*Board recognized October, 2009)*

Hawaii Fish Habitat Partnership (*Board recognized March, 2009)*

Kenai Peninsula Fish Habitat Partnership (*Board recognized January, 2010)*

Matanuska Susitna Basin Salmon Habitat Partnership (*Board recognized October, 2007)*

Midwest Glacial Lakes Partnership (*Board recognized March, 2009)*

Ohio River Basin Fish Habitat Partnership (*Board recognized October, 2009)*

Pacific Lamprey Conservation Initiative (*Board recognized June, 2016)*

Pacific Marine and Estuarine Fish Habitat Partnership (*Board recognized January, 2012)*

Reservoir Fisheries Habitat Partnership (*Board recognized October, 2009)*

Southeast Alaska Fish Habitat Partnership (*Board recognized March, 2014)*

Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership (*Board recognized October, 2007)*

Southwest Alaska Salmon Habitat Partnership (*Board recognized May, 2008)*

Western Native Trout Initiative (*Board recognized February, 2008)*

Attachment 2 – Selection of 2023 NFHP Project Photos & Descriptions

Science-Focused Assessment with Management Implications

Evaluating the Distribution and Drivers of Sculpin and Brook Trout Populations in NE Iowa; Advancing DARE in the Volga River Watershed

In 2023, the Volga River Catchment Project was funded in part by the Trout Unlimited Driftless Area Restoration Effort Partnership (DARE). This project is a collaborative effort between Upper Iowa University (Dr. Richard Walker) and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) that is focused on assessing the distribution of cold-water stream fishes, water quality, and habitat availability in the Volga River watershed. The Volga River is a tributary of the Turkey River in Iowa's Driftless Region, which was identified as an Iowa priority watershed with high recovery potential by the United States Environmental Protection Agency's Recovery Potential Screening program in 2016. The lack of fish population data in the watershed limits IDNR's ability to detect and assess fish community responses to watershed conservation efforts planned to support fish population recovery. These surveys will document current fish populations, water quality, and habitat suitability which will directly inform future fish management activities and guide surface water reclassification efforts in the Driftless Region. During summer 2022 and 2023 the project team assessed fish assemblages, habitat, and water quality across 30 sites. Cold-water fish species were detected at nine sites; continuous water quality monitoring also helped to provide an indication of suitable cold-water habitat distribution in the watershed. Data collection will continue in summer 2024. This project will ultimately help to define the current factors influencing fish assemblages in the drainage and support the IDNR in their cold-water stream reclassification efforts throughout the Driftless region. This assessment also advances the DARE partnership's mission in protecting and enhancing cold, cool, and warm-water stream fishes and their habitats in the Driftless region of Iowa.

Figure 4: Electrofishing surveys in the Volga River watershed (left) help to document current fish assemblages, including cold-water species such as Brown Trout (right)

Engaging Partners & Tribal Members

Engaging Tribal and Community Partners for Salmon Habitat Hand Tool Restoration in the Margaret and Ward Creek Watersheds, Tongass National Forest

In Southeast Alaska, the largest, tallest, and oldest trees commonly grow next to salmon streams. When these old-growth trees fall into streams, they create and maintain critically important habitat for salmon populations that have sustained the region's indigenous peoples for millennia. Between the 1950s and 1990s, salmon-producing watersheds were extensively logged. Large, old-growth trees growing on stream banks were cut down, eliminating a source of habitat-forming large woody debris for centuries and threatening the viability of salmon populations.

Salmon habitat damaged by outdated logging practices can be repaired. With funding provided through the Southeast Alaska Fish Habitat Partnership, the Ketchikan Indian Community (KIC, the local Tribal government), the Southeast Alaska Watershed Coalition (SAWC), and U.S Forest Service (USFS), partnered to restore salmon habitat in Margaret Creek and Ward Creek watersheds near Ketchikan in 2022 and 2023. With training provided by SAWC and USFS, local indigenous watershed stewards are assessing watershed conditions, identifying habitat problems, and designing and constructing habitat improvement projects on historically indigenous lands managed by the USFS and the local Native Corporation. Tony Gallegos, Natural and Cultural Resources Director at KIC recently testified: "A small local tribal crew that is properly resourced and supported can make a difference. We are especially excited about the personal growth we have seen in our crew who have gained confidence, knowledge, and self-esteem. While growing in appreciation of the forest ecosystem and the impacts they can make to be the stewards of the environment in their traditional territory."

These Projects in Ward and Margaret Creek are part of a larger regional initiative to improve fish habitat on tribal lands in southeast Alaska. Building upon this successful collaboration, partners envision a future where local, highly trained Tribal workforces steward and restore habitat across multiple land ownerships throughout the region.

Figure 5: Crews in the Tongass National Forest used large woody debris to slow stream bank erosion (left) and stabilize the stream bed (right) in the Margaret and Ward creek watersheds to improve fish habitat.

Education & Outreach About Native Species

Habitat Restoration & Landowner Education & Outreach on the Vermillion River, MN

In FY23, the Fishers & Farmers Partnership funded a demonstration project in the Vermillion Watershed in Minnesota. The project aimed to improve both soil health and water quality for the benefit of fish and wildlife through engagement with a diverse group of stakeholders including farmers, landowners, anglers, natural resource managers. The project was centered on the Vermillion River Aquatic Management Area (VRAMA), which is a 62-acre parcel near the Minneapolis metropolitan area that is managed by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MDNR). The VRAMA presents both a trophy Brown Trout fishery and a diverse rural agricultural community. This project brings together partners including the Dakota County Soil and Water Conservation District, Friends of the Mississippi River, Hmong American Farmers Association, MDNR, Minnesota Trout Unlimited, Vermillion River Watershed Joint Powers Organization, as well as local farmers and members of the outdoor recreation community. Together, they are restoring prairie and riparian habitats, conducting outreach to many farms along the river, hosting field days and tours, and developing meetings and workshops for these varied stakeholders. In 2023, several project partners and members met with the National Fish Habitat Partnership Coordinator, Jason Olive at the project site to showcase recent success and future planned work.

Figure 6: Minnesota Department of Natural Resources biologists perform an electrofishing demonstration in the Vermillion River watershed.

Fish Habitat Improvement Project On-The-Ground

Restoring Oyster and Salt Marsh Fish Habitat with Living Shorelines at the N.C. Aquarium

The North Carolina Coastal Federation is planning to improve tidal habitats with support from the Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership. The project will include construction of 130 feet of living shoreline at the North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores to protect an area of the marsh that is used for hands-on educational programs. The structural elements will be constructed parallel to shore using materials and at water depths to maximize oyster growth. Salt marsh grass will be planted landward of the structure to stabilize areas that have eroded due to high water levels and storm-induced waves. In addition to protecting the Aquarium's educational area, the living shoreline will also help reduce wave energy, hold sediment in place, improve water quality and protect existing salt marsh, oyster, fish and maritime forest habitat.

Figure 7 – This living shoreline project will address existing shoreline degradation through the construction of additional structures intended to attenuate waves and attract oyster growth while accompanying marsh plantings will help to stabilize bare areas of marsh platform.