

COASTAL SERVICES

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LINKING PEOPLE, INFORMATION, AND TECHNOLOGY

LIVING SHORELINES:

**Following Nature's
Lead to Help Prevent
Erosion in Virginia**

**Adapting to Climate
Change Is the Focus of
Washington Workshop**

**Bringing New York's
Dive Industry to the
Economic Surface**



Bringing New York's Dive Industry to the Economic Surface

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Mark Peckham, New York Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau

As zebra mussels have clarified Great Lake waters around New York and new technologies have made locating shipwrecks easier, scuba divers have flocked to the state's shoreline, bringing in millions in tourism dollars. Recognizing the opportunity to develop the niche market, New York Sea Grant has worked to help foster and support the state's growing diving industry, while at the same time helping to interpret and protect the underwater cultural and natural resources.

"Recreational tourism is a major component of the economy for communities along New York's Great Lakes," says David White, recreation and tourism specialist for New York Sea Grant. "Fishing, boating, sailing—all of these recreational opportunities help maintain the economic development in these communities. Diving is an excellent next step in enhancing the recreational tourism base."



Divers can explore ships like the Great Lakes schooner Emma C. Neilson off New York's coast.

Working with a multitude of partners, Sea Grant's efforts have ranged from preparing communities to better meet the needs of visiting divers, to using research to help promote the industry, to supporting site interpretation through dive trails and signage, to hosting conferences that educate divers and historians on how to protect the fragile resources.

"One thing we're finding now is that wrecks are being discovered at an exponential rate," says Mark Peckham, National Register Program coordinator for New York's Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau. "Twenty years ago it might have been possible to shield the location of wrecks, but now people are going to find them."

He adds, "It's incumbent on us to try to find creative ways of managing the situation."

Clear Opportunity

Dramatically improved water clarity was a surprise benefit of the economically destructive zebra mussels that invaded the Great Lakes region beginning in 1988. Improved visibility and a diverse selection of submerged cultural and natural resources began to draw divers to New York's coastline.

Even 10 years ago, divers were packing an economic wallop in the state. A New York Sea Grant survey conducted in 1999 showed that divers living within the Great Lakes region spent \$61 million a year on

such items as boat and auto fuel, lodging, and food, and \$47 million on diving-related expenditures.

The cold fresh water of the Great Lakes has helped preserve centuries-old ships and artifacts, says Peckham, who is also a diver. More than 10,000 wrecks are estimated to be off New York's coast.

"That 1999 report documented the interest and spending of those interested in our underwater treasures," says White. "That was our prompt to develop a submerged cultural resources program. Diving and shipwrecks became a real opportunity for us."

Getting in Front

As with any niche market, White says, it is important that communities "get in front of it," meaning that before undertaking efforts to draw divers to the region, communities needed to understand and be prepared to meet divers' needs.

"You won't get repeat business if you're not prepared to meet their needs," White explains. "If you're taking the opportunity to prepare to invite them, you better make sure they have a good experience."

Sea Grant participated in educational workshops for communities who needed to address everything from providing local venues where divers could refill air tanks, to ensuring hotels had places to store bulky, wet diving equipment, to arranging for hospitals to respond to dive-related emergencies.

"If you are not a diver, you don't know what a diver needs," White says. "You have to translate that concept for communities."

Seeking Designations

Another key effort, says White, was working with many partners to get New York's first Submerged Cultural Preserve and Dive Site designated on Lake Ontario in 2000.

This designation spurred Sea Grant and partner efforts to establish the "Dive the Seaway Trail" initiative, which promotes five model scuba diving sites that can be found along the Great Lakes Seaway Trail, a 518-mile National Scenic Byway.

Introduced in 2007, the dive sites are marked, buoyed, and maintained by community-based stewards along the St. Lawrence River, Lake Ontario, Niagara River, and Lake Erie. The sites offer dives for all skill levels, and a series of Great Lakes Seaway Trail outdoor "storyteller" panels help interpret the sites from shore.

"This is a great way to educate the public and help preserve the sites," Peckham says. "If you make recreational opportunities available to the sport diving community, then you take some of the pressure off more sensitive sites."

Seaway Trail President and CEO Teresa Mitchell says working with Sea Grant to help develop "Dive the Seaway Trail" and accompanying signage has provided them with additional marketing angles to promote the region. The Seaway Trail also showcases the area's lighthouses, birding opportunities, as well as many other natural, historic, and cultural features.

Sea Grant is also helping to support a New York state initiative to create a Blue Water Cultural Trail, which would create a series of heritage preserves in state waters.

Bringing People Together

Another significant outreach effort for Sea Grant is organizing an annual Great Lakes Underwater Conference, which is a daylong seminar open to divers, historians, and other members of the public interested in underwater issues and opportunities in the Great Lakes.

White notes that the conference, co-sponsored by the Oswego Maritime Foundation and a Great Lakes Seaway Trail byway organization, has set attendance records in 2008 and 2009.

"Education is really the key," notes Peckham. "We're not able to put fences around sensitive sites or police them. The diving public serves as the stewards of these sites, and the only way that can effectively happen is if you educate them to care for these resources."

White says Sea Grant will continue its efforts to promote New York's submerged cultural resources through research, partnership building, and program and outreach development.

He adds, "We are constantly surprised at how many local, state, regional, and international connections can be made to our Great Lakes resources." ❖

More information on the "Dive the Seaway Trail" initiative can be found at www.seawaytrail.com. For more information on New York Sea Grant's efforts to promote and preserve submerged resources, contact Dave White at (315) 312-3042, or dgw9@cornell.edu.