



Environmental Awareness Is for the Birds... and Everyone Else!

By Dr. JoAnne Castagna

A flock of young shorebirds spread their wings and fly away from their nests on East Inlet Island in the Long Island Intracoastal Waterway in New York for their first major flight south for the winter. A few years ago, this wouldn't have occurred because many of these birds are threatened and endangered. It's a reality now because people from several agencies put their minds together and created a project that not only benefits wildlife but their team players as well.

In 2002, the United States Army Corps of Engineers®, New York District—in cooperation with several environmental,

state, and local agencies—created a wildlife habitat on this island for threatened and endangered bird species, using dredged sand from the waterway. Sand is regularly dredged to ease boat travel.

This sand was placed on the mainland in the past, but Long Island's growing residential and business developments have limited land space. So the team of agencies had to think of another location, and they decided on an environmentally beneficial one.

For the past few years, shorebirds—such as least terns, common terns, piping plovers, and roseate terns—have colonized, nested, and bred on this island, demonstrating an example of how the Corps is collaborating with partnering agencies to produce successful environmental projects.

In the past, the dredging projects have been criticized by the public for affecting endangered shorebird habitats. Once the Corps proposed creating a bird habitat with the dredged sand, it received enthusiastic support. Some of the most vocal critics turned around and actually supported the innovative things the Corps was doing.

Performing environmentally friendly projects is hard at first but—in the end—is beneficial to all involved. The following are benefits that can be expected:

- *Strengthens customer relationships.* When customers, such as environmental agencies, see the positive results of environmentally aware projects, it increases their trust. As a result, these customers—who may have been originally wary—may be more open to providing ideas for improving the project.



Photo by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—Long Island Field Office

East Inlet Island

- *Builds public trust.* When the public realizes that their quality of life has been enhanced in ways above and beyond the ones originally envisioned for the project, their trust and support of the project increases.
- *Saves time and money.* Performing an environmentally aware project is hard at first, but it gets easier. In the beginning, you may find yourself educating and convincing an organization of the benefits of the project. Trust must be built with environmental groups and agencies so they have confidence in what is being done. Once a project becomes a success story, the efficiency increases because it is easier for you to do the project. For example, it is less difficult to secure permits from the local people, and support for the project increases, which saves time and money.
- *Expands engineer skills.* You will experience a wider breadth of professional experience in the environmental field and gain personal satisfaction that you are doing good things, smart things.
- *Produces better projects.* A successful project receives increased customer support, allowing it to be produced more efficiently. Customers who are happy with the project will be open to providing ideas and suggestions for improvement and will work to remove potential project barriers, such as securing permits, saving the project time and money.

To be more environmentally aware, do the following:

- *Talk and listen.* Talk with the local people and resource agencies to get to know them, and listen to find out what they value and what their issues are. Put your head together with individuals who have ideas on how to make the project more environmentally friendly. This not only brings fresh ideas into the mix but also improves relationships with these individuals and groups.
- *Research.* Check out the Web sites of the major agencies or groups that you plan to work with, which will provide you their mission and priorities and might give you ideas.

Being environmentally friendly in projects requires innovation and creative thinking. As with any innovative or creative endeavor, it helps to have input from several different viewpoints. You cannot do this without including people who do not see the world as you do. The management of the group dynamics is the hard part—gaining individual trust and making the diverse group productive.



Dr. Castagna is a technical writer/editor for the United States Army Corps of Engineers, New York District. She can be reached at <joanne.castagna@usace.army.mil>.