

ATLANTIC COASTAL FISH HABITAT PARTNERSHIP: THE ROLE OF A FISH HABITAT PARTNERSHIP IN COASTAL HABITAT CONSERVATION

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Despite numerous successful efforts to preserve the invaluable function that aquatic habitat and fisheries play in maintaining our nation's collective quality of life, fish habitat in many coastal and upstream systems are deteriorating. In 2001, the development of a coalition of anglers, conservation groups, scientists, state agencies, federal agencies, and industry groups to address this issue, began. The result of this joint effort, the National Fish Habitat Action Plan (NFHAP), outlines a fish habitat management framework that calls for the creation of effective partnerships across sectors, bound by a mutual goal of conserving, restoring, and enhancing fish habitat.

The Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership (ACFHP) is a candidate partnership formed under the auspices of NFHAP. This coast-wide collaborative effort will involve state and federal agencies, tribes, local governments, non-governmental organizations, and other entities to protect and restore fish habitat for native Atlantic coastal, estuarine-dependent, and diadromous fishes.

ACFHP was formed following a recommendation from the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission with the realization that many of the fish habitat issues needing attention fall outside of the jurisdiction of a single agency and that an important area was largely missing amongst the existing NFHAP partnerships—coastal habitats.

As outlined by NFHAP guidance, the responsibilities of a Fish Habitat Partnership include, in part, conducting a resource assessment, developing a strategic plan and leveraging resources for projects that protect and maintain healthy, or restore declining, fish habitat. Currently, ACFHP is developing an assessment of existing information on Atlantic coastal fish habitats and an Atlantic coastal species-habitat matrix, both of which will aid in the development of a conservation strategic plan that will set priorities for ACFHP efforts. Ultimately, it will focus its efforts in supporting on-the-ground projects, implemented by its partners, through endorsement, funding, coordination, and other opportunities.

The current effort of assessing existing information on coastal habitat will produce a comprehensive bibliography of selected documents, data sets, and analyses on Atlantic coastal fish species and habitats, compiled in a database framework. The database will enable ACFHP partners to identify and summarize priorities and threats, gaps in knowledge and information, and habitat conservation, restoration, and policy strategies. It will also incorporate a spatial component, mapping priority habitat areas. The species-habitat matrix is a tool for evaluating the relative importance of a specific habitat type to

a given life history stage for an individual species. It will ultimately aid in identifying those habitat types and categories that provide the greatest amount of benefit for multiple species.

NFHAP has created the framework for an approach to fish habitat management that emphasizes the importance of partnerships in addressing the challenges currently facing our country's fish habitat. ACFHP's efforts to develop the capabilities to fulfill its role as an effective fish habitat partnership illustrate the possibilities for addressing these challenges, through habit conservation and restoration along the Atlantic coast.

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