

Nature in the Neighborhood – June 2023

Celebrating National Ocean Month

There's a reason Massachusetts is nicknamed the "Bay State." While bordered on the North by Vermont and New Hampshire, the West by New York, and the South by Connecticut, to the East our State is bounded by five bays, including our own Massachusetts Bay.

With 1,519 miles of coastline, Massachusetts' history has been tied to the ocean. Its inhabitants have relied upon maritime resources from pre-colonial times right up to the present. And so, from Gloucester to Cape Cod, generations of families fished New England waters for Atlantic Cod.

It's not a surprise, then, that Massachusetts' official state fish is *Gadus morrhua* (the Atlantic Cod) -- a staple of both the New England fishing industry and our dinner plates. As a memorial of the importance of the Cod-Fishery to the Commonwealth, a sculpture of a cod hangs in the Massachusetts House of Representatives and, as you've probably noticed, also above some New England doorways.

At one time, Atlantic Cod were so abundant that fishermen said you could walk across their backs to shore.

Today the Atlantic Cod is listed as threatened, on a path to extinction.

June is National Oceans Month, a time to celebrate and also reflect on how we can protect and conserve our precious ocean and the diverse life it supports. "The climate crisis is drastically impacting marine life, coastal communities, and the ocean economy," observed President Biden in his "Proclamation on National Ocean Month, 2023."

This concern is real. Just this month, the Boston Globe reported that sea surface temperatures hit record highs in the spring with the temperature increasing at an even faster pace in June. In addition to fueling hurricanes and contributing to melting sea ice and rising sea levels, the surge in ocean surface temperature contributes to die-offs of marine life.

Adding to the global warming problem, the pollution we're putting into the

ocean as well as overfishing are all threatening the extinction of many species -- including our Official State Fish.

As President Biden's Proclamation reminds us, "The ocean makes life on Earth possible — feeding us, sustaining livelihoods, and connecting economies across the globe. It bonds us as a source of recreation and rejuvenation for our spirits and links us to our heritage through Indigenous communities who have stewarded our marine habitats since time immemorial."

In this, National Oceans Month, what actions can we begin to take to protect, conserve, and restore our ocean and coasts?

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency (NOAA) provides ten ideas (oceanservice.noaa.gov/ocean/help-our-ocean.html):

1. Conserve Water -- Use less water so excess runoff and wastewater will not flow into the ocean.
2. Reduce Pollutants -- Choose nontoxic chemicals and dispose of herbicides, pesticides, and cleaning products properly.
3. Reduce Waste -- Cut down on what you throw away.
4. Shop Wisely -- Choose sustainable seafood. Buy less plastic and bring a reusable bag.
5. Reduce Vehicle Pollution -- Use fuel efficient vehicles, carpool, or ride a bike.
6. Use Less Energy - Choose energy efficient light bulbs and don't overset your thermostat.
7. Fish Responsibly - Follow "catch and release" practices to keep more fish alive.
8. Practice Safe Boating - Anchor in sandy areas far from coral and sea grasses. Adhere to "no wake" zones.
9. Respect Habitat - Healthy habitat and survival go hand in hand. Treat

with care.

10. Anytime, Anywhere Volunteer - Volunteer for cleanups at the beach and in your community. You can get involved in protecting your watershed too!

To this list, I would add what I believe is another very important idea:

11. Help raise the next generation of ocean stewards by providing kids with outdoor experiences that strengthen their connection with nature and their understanding of the importance of persevering our oceans. Taking kids fishing, kayaking, or just beachcombing lets them appreciate the ocean and families to have some relaxing and fun time together.

To echo President Biden, "This National Ocean Month, let us honor [the ocean's] beauty and bounty with action and commit to protecting and conserving it for generations to come."

See you at the beach this summer.