**What is an Estuary?**

Estuaries are bodies of water along our coasts that are formed when freshwater from rivers flows into and mixes with saltwater from the ocean. In estuaries, the fresh river water is blocked from streaming into the open ocean by either surrounding mainland, peninsulas, barrier islands, or fringing salt marshes. This mixing of fresh and saltwater creates a unique environment that brims with life of all kinds -- a transition zone between the land and sea known as an estuary. The estuary contains an abundance of life - gathering nutrients from the land and from the ocean, forming an ecosystem that contains more life per square inch than the richest Midwest farmland.

Why are healthy estuaries important to us? Estuaries are a critical source for much of our ocean life. Their bounty forms a natural wonder that offers the more than 50% of Americans who live near estuaries, and the millions who visit, a wealth of recreational opportunities. Estuaries provide essential habitat for over 75 percent of our nation's commercial fish catch. Commercial and recreational fishing, boating and tourism also provide more than 28 million jobs. Fishing alone generates $111 billion yearly in economic activity.

Estuaries are important to our quality of life and our health for reasons other than jobs, healthy economies, and recreational opportunities. They also protect water quality, are a center for research and education, and help stem the erosion of our shoreline communities. Estuaries, in short, are national treasures -- vital ecological and community resources whose health affects our health and the liveliness of our communities and economy.

**Why Restore Estuaries?**

Our nation's estuaries are in grave danger. The vital habitats they provide for an extraordinary diversity of food and wildlife are shrinking fast and jeopardizing jobs in the fishing and tourism industries.

**What is estuary habitat and why is it important?**

The essence of our estuaries is found in their habitats: salt marshes, eel grass beds, fish runs, mudflats, and mangroves. These estuary habitats are the places where plants and wildlife live and create the web of life, which makes estuaries extraordinary. In estuaries, soil, nutrients, and water combine in a special way to nurture marsh grasses, sea grasses, and other types of vegetation. At first glimpse, these estuary habitats might appear to be very simple and insignificant, but they provide creatures with shelter and food. By nurturing this bounty of life, habitats make estuaries the ecological, cultural, and economic powerhouses that we treasure.

Unfortunately, much of our estuary habitat has been damaged and destroyed over the past 100 years with little regard for its many benefits. When estuary habitats are paved over, polluted by runoff, or lost to coastal land subsidence, it cripples an estuary's ability to support life. When a salt marsh is filled, it can no longer filter sediments and pollution from run off. When pollution destroys eelgrass beds, young fish and shellfish will no longer be able to hide and feed in its shelter. In these little ways, habitat loss has accumulated to threaten the health of our nation's estuaries.

But this story need not have a bad ending- because estuary habitat can be restored to its former glory. A variety of efforts -- ranging from parents and children going out on a Saturday morning and replanting natural vegetation to reconstruction of physical and hydrologic conditions through heavy engineering -- have successfully brought estuaries back to life. However, we must act now, before the bounty of our estuaries are lost.

**Restoring our nation's estuary habitat will:**

* Maintain vital food supplies. Healthy estuaries produce more food per acre than the richest Midwestern farmland because of the fertile mix of nutrients from land and sea.
* Protect Nature's Bounty. Beyond providing food for our consumption, estuaries are the home of thousands of species of fish, birds, plants, and animals that depend on healthy habitat for their survival.
* Create jobs. There are 28 million jobs in the fishing, tourism and recreational boating industries -- all of which depend on healthy estuaries for their products and customers. Indeed, estuaries and coastal waters provide essential habitat for 75% of America's commercial fish catch and 80 to 90% of the recreational fish catch.
* Expand our enjoyment. 180 million Americans -- approximately 70% of the entire population -- visited estuaries in 1993 for vacations, recreation, sport, or sightseeing. They enjoyed swimming, fishing, boating, diving, wildlife viewing, hunting, hiking, and learning. The more we do to restore estuaries, the more Americans will be able to experience their amazing bounty.