



Save the Sound®

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 18, 2019

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NYS takes step to protect whales, seals, and sea turtles around Plum Island

Southold, New York – In the span of just a few hours last Friday, the New York State Assembly and Senate unanimously passed [legislation](#) to improve protections for marine mammals and sea turtles in New York waters of eastern Long Island Sound. It also allows for the creation of a New York State bird conservation area.

The Marine Mammal and Sea Turtle Protection Area legislation establishes a protection area in New York State-owned waters around Plum, Great Gull, and Little Gull Islands that recognizes the zone as important for sea turtles, whales, porpoises, and seals; it is designed to not negatively impact fishing. The bill directs the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation to bring together the expertise of a broad range of organizations and individuals, including marine researchers, museums and academics, state agencies, and local governments. This advisory committee will be asked to consider how the archipelago and the waters surrounding it are interconnected, and then develop recommendations for protection measures. The bill, originally written and sponsored by Assemblyman Steve Englebright, has been proposed for several years.

“This legislation will make the most of experts in marine life and birds, agency personnel and local officials, nonprofits, and others in considering the ecologically integrated relationship among Plum, Great Gull, and Little Gull Islands and the waters around them—and how to protect that area’s diverse and valuable marine resources, as well as traditional fishing activities,” **said Louise Harrison, New York natural areas coordinator for Save the Sound.** “We are grateful for the leadership of Assemblyman Englebright and Senator Martinez for their commitment toward protecting the special resources surrounding Plum Island. We know Governor Cuomo cares about Long Island Sound and Plum Island and we urge him to sign this legislation.”

“The bills point out the enormous significance of the habitats around these islands. Gray seals are known to breed there. Greater numbers of seals haul out to rest themselves there than anywhere in New York. And shallow, nearshore habitat in clear waters exists around these islands, fostering vitally important submerged aquatic vegetation that in turn supports sea turtles, fish, and many other marine species,” **said John Turner, spokesperson for the Preserve Plum Island Coalition.** “Thanks to Assemblyman Englebright and Senator Martinez for their commitment toward protecting the special resources surrounding Plum Island.”

“Plum Island is a key breeding and stopover site for thousands of birds, including at-risk and priority species, and a Long Island Sound ecological treasure worth preserving. We are thrilled to see this bill pass the Senate, and look forward to seeing Governor Cuomo sign it into law,” **said Ana Paula Tavares,**

executive director for Audubon New York and Audubon Connecticut. “Audubon New York and Audubon Connecticut together applaud New York State for taking this important step to ensure Plum Island the protection it deserves.”

“The Whaling Museum & Education Center of Cold Spring Harbor strongly supports the creation of a marine mammal and sea turtle protection area, and urges the Governor to support this bill. This initiative will help increase the resilience of the ocean ecosystem around the waters of Plum Island, Great Gull Island, and Little Gull Island, an estuary of National Significance and highly worthy of additional protection,” **said Nomi Dayan, executive director at the Whaling Museum & Education Center of Cold Spring Harbor.**

“The Connecticut Audubon Society is thrilled to hear of the passage of the Marine Mammal and Sea Turtle Protection Area legislation in New York State,” **said Patrick Comins, executive director of the Connecticut Audubon Society.** “This area of the Sound is important for Connecticut as well as for New York. The thriving waters around Plum, Great Gull, and Little Gull Islands support the hemisphere’s largest tern colony at Great Gull Island and we all benefit from the abundance of birds this section of the Sound supports.”

“The Coastal Research and Education Society of Long Island, a member of the Preserve Plum Island Coalition with special emphasis on NY’s marine mammals and sea turtles, completely supports the recently passed amendments to the environmental conservation law, in relation to establishing the marine mammal and sea turtle protection area in the critically important State-owned waters immediately around Plum, Great Gull, and Little Gull Islands,” **said Arthur H. Kopelman, Ph.D. President, Coastal Research and Education Society of Long Island.** “We also fully support the establishment of a marine mammal and sea turtle protection area advisory committee and hope to be represented therein. This is a major step in the ongoing efforts to protect and preserve the ecosystems and ecosystem services on and around Plum, Great Gull, and Little Gull Islands. We strongly urge Governor Cuomo to sign this act into law.”

Plum Island, located off Orient Point, Long Island, is currently slated to be sold at auction after the Plum Island Animal Disease Center moves to Kansas. Legislation to permanently protect the island has been introduced in Congress several times. Save the Sound and The Nature Conservancy are in the midst of a multi-month stakeholder process to develop a viable and broadly supported vision for the future of the island.

Bill A6520 passed the Assembly unanimously on Friday afternoon. The Senate then promptly voted on its identical version, S5871, again with unanimous approval.

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