

From 'dismal swamp' to respectable wetland

By Dave Kellam Project coordinator, New Hampshire Estuaries Project

If you had to define the following terms, which one would you attempt: fen, morass, or wetland?

You might choose wetland and guess that it is earth that squishes beneath your feet. You would be right about that; however, the other two are also types of wetlands.

In general, "wetland" is a term that describes many specific types of watery habitats, such as marshes, bogs, and swamps. The legal definition from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is "areas that are inundated or saturated by surface or ground water at a frequency and duration sufficient to support a prevalence of vegetation typically adapted for life in saturated soil conditions." Or, in plain English – wet land.

Surprisingly, the word "wetland" has not been with us for very long - coined in the early part of the 20th century. The first official governmental use of "wetland" appeared in a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service report in 1956. Before the term "wetland," people just used any name for damp real estate, such as marshland, mire, muskeg, quagmire, slough or swampland.

Ironically, when English settlers arrived in North America, they did not have a word for the forested wetlands they encountered, because those types of habitats had long been destroyed in their native England. Since they had no experience with these ecologically important habitats, the settlers simply referred to them as swamps or sometimes "dismal swamps." Proof of this historic name is evidenced by the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, in southeastern Virginia.

Attitudes toward wetlands remained dismal until Henry David Thoreau fell in love with swamps in the mid 1800s.

On June 15, 1840, after spending many hours up to his nose in a Concord, Mass., swamp "soaking up the juices of a marsh," he wrote down his thoughts on wetlands: "When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable, and to the citizen, most dismal swamp. I enter the swamp as a sacred place - a sanctum sanctorum. There, is the strength, the marrow of nature." Respect for wetlands has increased ever since.

Today we know that wetlands have many benefits and offer great recreational opportunities including hiking, kayaking and wildlife viewing. They are an important part of the hydrologic cycle, positively affecting water quality and water supply.

Wetlands provide valuable flood storage, sedimentation control, and natural water filtration. And wetlands are vital wildlife habitats, home to some of the most endangered animals in New Hampshire, including the sedge wren, the marbled salamander and the ringed bog haunter dragonfly.

Across the United States, 53 percent of the wetlands have been lost in the last 200 years. But not all states are the same in terms of wetland loss.

New Hampshire has lost the least amount in the lower 48, just 9 percent or about 20,000 acres. We are much better off than California, which has lost 91 percent of its historic wetlands. However, with its 20,000-acre loss, New Hampshire has experienced decreases in water quality and some wildlife populations, especially in the southeastern portion of the state.

To curb these downward trends, in 1969 New Hampshire enacted law RSA 482:A, which states "no person shall excavate, remove, fill, dredge or construct a structure in surface water, bank or a wetland without a permit from the Department of Environmental Services." Passage of this law was significant because it showed that people understood that a wetland has great public value, even if it exists entirely on private land.

Given that we now better understand the services wetlands provide to wildlife, the environment and humanity; it seems they may be due for another name change. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to rename them "lifelands." Something to consider.

Dave Kellam is the project coordinator for the New Hampshire Estuaries Project. This is an educational column initiated by the New Hampshire Estuaries Project about coastal watershed issues. Go to www.nhep.unh.edu for more information.

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