



In places like Washington's Port Susan Bay, The Nature Conservancy is exploring how new approaches—such as purchasing submerged land and creating supportive coastal policies—will expand opportunities for protecting our important near shore marine resources. © Keith Lazelle

Leasing and Ownership of Ocean and Coastal Resources

Expanding the tools for marine conservation by acquiring submerged lands and resources

Hidden within our bays, estuaries, and off-shore waters lay forests of kelp, meadows of seagrass, and gardens of coral. Home to an abundance and diversity of plants and animals, these productive ecosystems nourish marine communities and provide valuable economic benefits by hosting commercial fisheries, buffering shorelines, cleaning water, supporting tourism and offering recreational opportunities. Yet centuries of human activity have made these submerged lands some of the world's most threatened and degraded ecosystems.

With increasing pressures on our oceans and coasts, new and innovative approaches are needed to sustain their immense biological wealth. To address these threats, The Nature Conservancy is taking successful strategies used on land—the acquisition and management of natural resources through ownership, easements, and leases—and applying them in the sea. Conserving ocean and coastal ecosystems will improve water quality, protect wildlife habitat and benefit economies and livelihoods of local communities for generations.

Conditions for successful leasing and ownership of submerged lands

Critical habitat identification

Knowledge about what makes some sites and habitats more productive than others is essential for implementing a conservation leasing and ownership program. The Conservancy is gathering this essential data through research on fish and shellfish nurseries—areas abundant in food and refuge for juveniles.

Community involvement

Stakeholder involvement in identifying critical areas, threats and management options is essential to any conservation strategy. Management plans for leased or owned lands that improve habitat while also allowing public use help meet the needs of both conservation interests and local communities.

Supportive public policies

Policies and comprehensive use plans that support conservation of submerged lands and resources help strike a balance between extraction and protection of the valuable

resources contained in coastal and ocean waters. Working with state resource managers, the Conservancy helps to achieve this important balance between the needs of people and healthy ecosystems.

Affordable cost

Submerged lands and resources are often less expensive than terrestrial lands, stretching limited funds for marine conservation further. Lower costs enable those looking to protect such lands—often government and non-profit organizations—to compete with businesses and other interests.

Shared knowledge

The Conservancy is providing best practices from current holdings, such as those in New York and Washington state, with partners and stakeholders. Sharing lessons learned will enable other organizations to implement this approach, expanding the impact of this exciting new conservation tool.



Leasing of California's kelp beds allows Conservancy scientists to study the ecology of the kelp forest canopies, examine the role they play as fish nurseries and learn how natural factors, harvesting and land use affect their health and function. © Richard Herrmann



Submerged lands of Woodard Bay, Washington are the site of a precedent-setting conservation lease that is helping the Conservancy explore leasing and ownership nationwide as a strategy for conservation, restoration and research in coastal areas. © Natalie Forbes

Buying the bottom

For centuries, submerged lands and resources have been bought, sold and leased. Every year billions of dollars are spent to develop these lands for oil, marinas, docks, aquaculture and other economic activities. Submerged lands and resources are available for lease and ownership in every coastal state in the United States and in many nations, costing as little as \$2 per acre. The Nature Conservancy is working with landowners, governments and partners to ensure that both environmental and economic interests have equal access to these marine land opportunities. Once purchased or leased, these lands and associated resources can be restored, used for research, managed sustainably or protected.

Demonstrating success

The Conservancy has acquired over 25,000 acres of submerged marine lands for preservation, restoration and research in Virginia, Florida, California and Washington state. In 2002, we secured more than 13,000 acres of Bluepoints oyster bottomlands property in Great South Bay, New York. The Conservancy formally organized local partners into the Bluepoints Bottomlands Council, which is developing a plan to oversee the management and sustainable use of this underwater property valued at \$2.4 million and representing more than 25 percent of the bay.

Influencing public policy

The Conservancy is working with state officials to develop policies that support the leasing and ownership of submerged lands and resources for conservation. With input from the Conservancy, the Washington State Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) crafted the nation's first state program to designate leases explicitly for the conservation of submerged lands, allowing groups like the Conservancy to use leasing to protect important ocean and coastal areas from degradation. The Conservancy and WDNR developed a pilot lease agreement and training program to help implement the new program. The Conservancy continues to work with other states and is exploring leasing and ownership policies in federal waters.

Examining international opportunities

The Conservancy is also researching opportunities to own or lease ocean and coastal lands and resources internationally. In many Pacific Islands, submerged lands and resources are owned by local communities and leased for commercial fishing and pearl harvesting. In Chile, the government is granting marine concessions to support a growing salmon aquaculture industry. Examples like these show promise for applying leasing and ownership approaches to places outside of the United States.

Building lasting results

The leasing or ownership of ocean and coastal lands and resources is an innovative strategy that can be combined with other practices and widely shared with partners to significantly improve marine conservation around the world. By holding an interest in land, private organizations gain a seat at the table when local and regional decisions affecting critical habitat are made.

To help our partners and other organizations gain similar interests and positions, the Conservancy is developing a practitioner's toolkit for the leasing and ownership of ocean and coastal lands and resources. By sharing tools and information within the marine community, we can work together to realize the full potential of leasing and ownership to improve and protect the health of our oceans and coasts.

For additional information:

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The Global Marine Initiative works across the Conservancy and with partners to protect and restore the most resilient examples of ocean and coastal ecosystems in ways that benefit marine life, local communities and economies.