

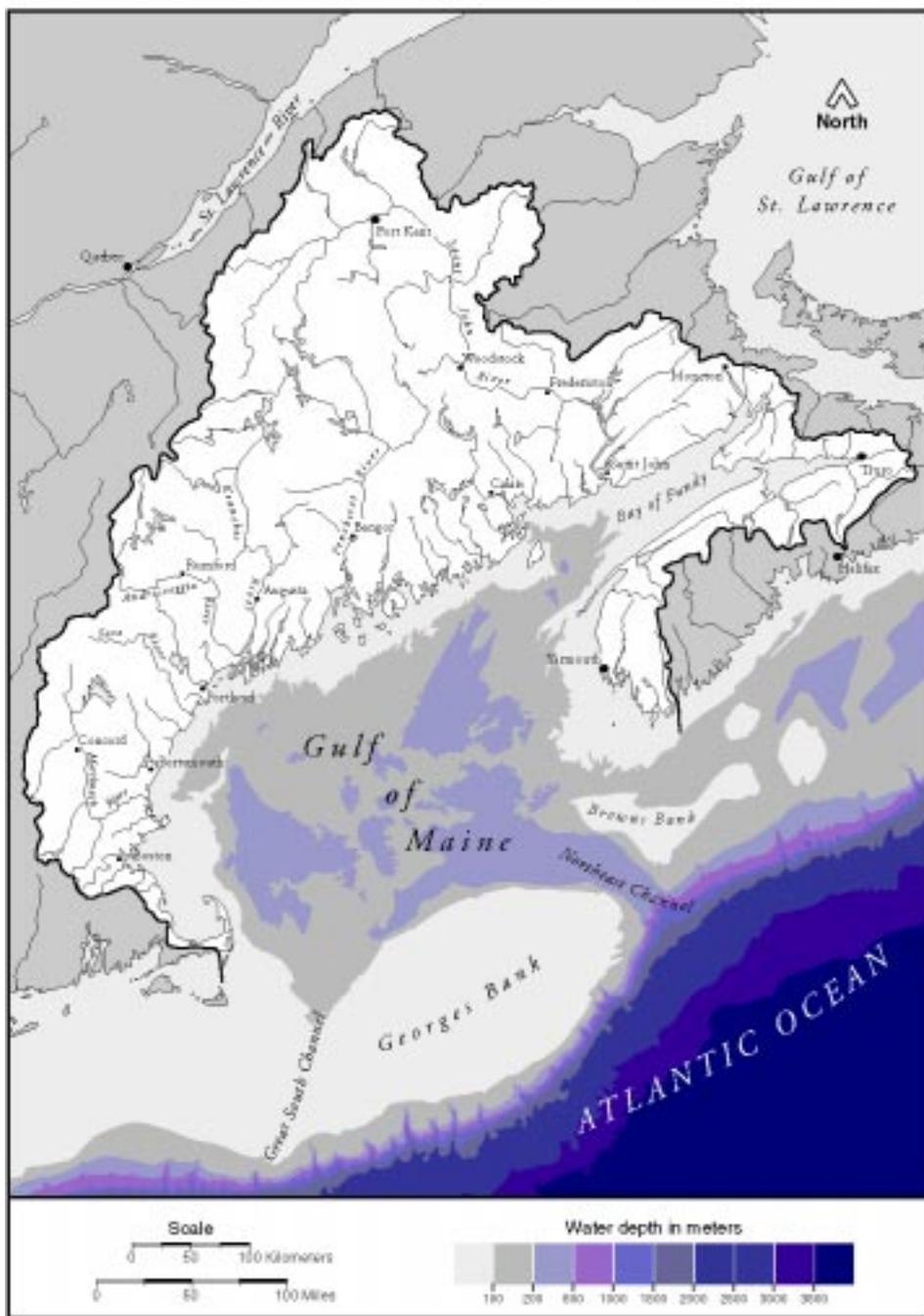
The Gulf of Maine watershed includes a variety of interconnected coastal habitats -- salt marshes, mudflats, sandy beaches, intertidal and nearshore subtidal zones and islands. They all play a vital role in sustaining the natural environment and form the basis of human activity in the Gulf region. Estuaries, where fresh river water and salty ocean water mingle, provide productive nurseries for many marine species and important feeding grounds for migrating waterfowl. For example, estuaries provide home for 70% of all commercially harvested fish in the Gulf. Salt marshes also produce abundant nutrients through decomposition, provide food and cover for marine and terrestrial animals, and serve as a natural water purification system. Mudflats, which may look barren on first glance, abound with animal life just below the surface. Huge concentrations of worms, clams, molluscs, crustaceans and migrating shorebirds depend on healthy mudflats to survive.

Sandy beaches, rocky intertidal and nearshore subtidal zones, and islands also play an important role in sustaining the natural environment. Sand beaches provide habitat for two rare bird species -- the least tern and the piping plover. Intertidal and nearshore subtidal habitats support marine algae which provide home for a broad array of organisms, including scallops, flounder, urchins, lobster and waterfowl. Islands provide critical habitat for seals, nesting seabirds and unique plant communities.

Cold oxygen-laden waters subject to constant movement, mixing and upwelling create a nutrient-laden Gulf of Maine marine environment -- one of the world's most productive continental shelf communities. Many who live on the shores of the Gulf of Maine appreciate its biological wealth and have nourished themselves from its bounty. However, habitat loss, fragmentation and degradation, wetland and associated upland loss, overharvesting, oil spills, pollution and other cumulative effects of development threaten the integrity of the Gulf ecosystem.



Gulf of Maine Watershed



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) protects and restores fish and wildlife resources and their habitats -- for the natural environment and for us. Nationwide, the Service manages over 500 National Wildlife Refuges, an outstanding network of lands dedicated to protecting wildlife. The Service also operates National Fish Hatcheries, raising and stocking about 200 million native fish annually. Through its Ecological Services program, the Service also safeguards endangered species, resolves fish and wildlife issues related to hydropower projects, curbs toxic contamination and restores and protects valuable fish and wildlife habitat on public and private lands through partnerships. The Service also investigates cases and enforces federal wildlife laws. Through its Federal Aid program, the Service directs millions of dollars annually to state fish and wildlife agencies for their use in protecting, managing and restoring habitat and providing conservation education.