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Alabama current connection

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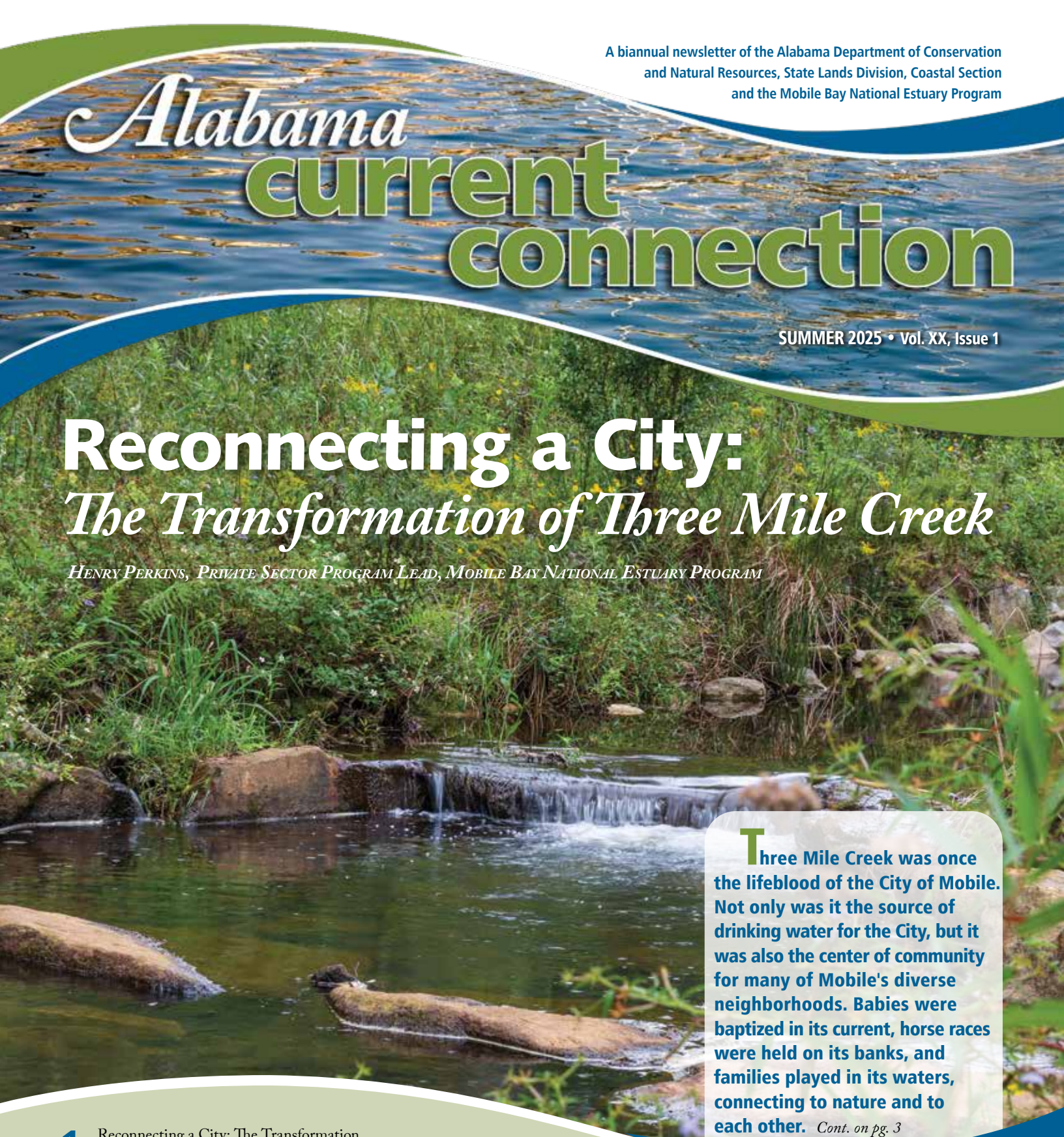
Reconnecting a City:
The Transformation of Three Mile Creek

Henry Perkins, Private Sector Program Lead, Mobile Bay National Estuary Program



Three Mile Creek was once the lifeblood of the City of Mobile. Not only was it the source of drinking water for the City, but it was also the center of community for many of Mobile's diverse neighborhoods. Babies were baptized in its current, horse races were held on its banks, and families played in its waters, connecting to nature and to each other. *Cont. on pg. 3*

Currently Inside

Coastal Corner

By Christopher M. Blankenship, Commissioner, Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

Innovate Alabama: *Expanding Recreational Access*

Alabamians hold tradition in high esteem. We've always been hospitable, always worked hard, and we've always been connected to our land. But at the same time, we're not afraid of building something new. Across the State, partnerships between business, government, and local communities are building a stronger, more resilient Alabama. One of the best examples of that work is the junction between outdoor recreation and economic development.

Innovate Alabama, the State's first public-private partnership focused on entrepreneurship, technology, and innovation, is leading this effort. Their mission is to create an ecosystem where innovators and entrepreneurs can put down roots. One of the smartest ways they're doing that is by leveraging something Alabama has in abundance, our natural beauty.

From the Appalachian foothills to the white sand beaches, Alabama offers an extraordinary range of outdoor experiences. SEEK AL, one of Innovate Alabama's flagship initiatives, was launched to make good use of these opportunities. SEEK AL, through its digital platform and marketing campaign, highlights the outdoor assets making this state not only a great place to visit, but a great place to live and build a business.

Whether native Alabamians or our guests are looking for hiking trails, kayaking routes, or a cave adventure, it's all there, along with accessibility details, curated trip ideas, and a growing library of user-submitted photos and stories. That visibility matters. It helps entrepreneurs by providing them with the information they need to market guide services, outfitters, and gear shops. It helps cities and counties promote tourism. And it helps Alabama families discover what's in their own backyard.

This only works if the infrastructure is in place. Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources has been proud to partner with Innovate Alabama and the Outdoor Recreation Advisory Roundtable to make sure our physical assets match the scale of our natural ones.

Right now, the State is investing $66 million in boating access improvements, adding and upgrading boat ramps, kayak launches, and parking at sites across Alabama. We're also working with local communities on trail expansions, greenway connections, and new outdoor amenities that enhance both quality of life and economic opportunity.

The opportunity is huge. Alabama has more miles of navigable waterways than any other state in the country. We're home to 1,300 miles of public trails, 4,200 documented caves, and 132,000 miles of river. Outdoor activities like hiking, mountain biking, caving, and paddling already bring in thousands of tourists and millions of dollars in spending each year, and that's a growing number.

This initiative helps reinforce the value of the resources we're working to protect. By promoting our trails, rivers, forests, and parks, we're building a stronger public appreciation for our natural resources, and in turn support efforts to conserve, restore, and invest in these places for future generations.

Outdoor recreation has always been part of Alabama's identity. It's how many of us grew up, on the water or in the forests, and these are values we want to pass down to our kids and grandkids. But now we're seeing that it's also part of our economic future. When we promote and protect Alabama's natural assets, we're creating jobs, strengthening communities, and making this a place where locals and tourists alike can create new traditions.

By promoting our trails, rivers, forests, and parks, we're building a stronger public appreciation for our natural resources, and in turn support efforts to conserve, restore, and invest in these places for future generations.

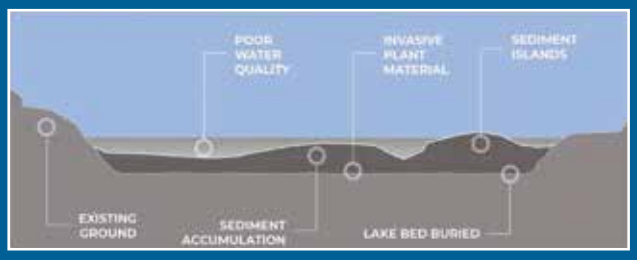
Thanks to the leadership of Governor Ivey, the creativity of partners like Innovate Alabama, and the energy of local communities across the State, we're taking big steps towards a future where everyone knows that conservation is in their interest.

I'm proud to play a role in this work. And I invite all Alabamians to get outside and explore the state we love.

Reconnecting a City: *The Transformation of Three Mile Creek* *Cont. from page 1*

LAKE IMPROVEMENTS

Impact and Benefit to the Dredging of Langan Park Lake



Before Dredging

After Dredging

After World War II and the City's rapid expansion, the dynamic value of Three Mile Creek changed. Since then, Three Mile Creek has sometimes been seen as a problem, an obstacle, or a flooding threat to be controlled. Prone to flooding, degraded by pollution, and largely disconnected from the people living around it, the waterway's potential was diminished and forgotten.

Today, that's changing, thanks to years of community work and a shared vision. Led by the City of Mobile, many partners have embarked on one of the most ambitious greenway efforts in the State.

"These big transformative ecosystem projects cannot be done in a silo," says Jenn Greene, Director of Programs and Project Management at the City of Mobile. "You need strong partnerships - between the City, County, citizens, nonprofits, MBNEP, Osprey Initiative, ADCNR, ADEM, and so many others. People see individual projects, but they don't always see how they're connected."

What connects these efforts is the *Three Mile Creek Watershed Management Plan*, developed with extensive community input and completed in 2014. The plan focuses on water quality and outlines a comprehensive approach to managing flooding, reducing pollutants, and increasing public access to this unique urban waterway – a 14-mile corridor beginning near the University of South Alabama and flowing to the Mobile River.

One of the most visible and anticipated projects underway is the dredging of Langan Park Lake. Years of sediment built-up from upstream erosion have impacted the Lake's health, reducing the depth of the water and increasing turbidity in the heart of one of Mobile's most prominent parks.

That's all changing. The City of Mobile is preparing to dredge the Lake's upper and lower portions this summer, reclaiming its place as a unifying force in community life. *Cont. on page 4*

Reconnecting a City: *The Transformation of Three Mile Creek* *Cont. from page 3*

STORMWATER IMPROVEMENTS

Stormwater Channel Redesign

Proposed. Naturalized Stream Channel

Before Channel Naturalization

After Channel Naturalization

Current. Concrete Stormwater Channel

Future. Naturalized Stream Channel

"This is a great example of the watershed plan in action," Greene says. "The City bid the dredging and the stormwater upgrades together as one project. It's creating synergy by combining ADEM and RESTORE dollars with one contractor doing both. And" she adds, "this work is only possible now because of the other work that's been done in the watershed. The restoration of 12 Mile Creek, upgrades to Zeigler Blvd., and management of invasive species [by MBNEP], this all works together so something like this can get done."

A concrete drainage ditch, which currently delivers large volumes of sediment into the Lake from the Park, will be replaced by a series of step pools and low-impact development (LID) drainage features (similar to what was installed in Joes Branch, Spanish Fort). These naturalized channels slow the water, capture sediment, and filter pollutants before they reach the Lake.

"Looking at LID strategies in places like this is absolutely key," Greene said. "They work better, they look better, and they're more aesthetically pleasing than a concrete ditch in a public park."

As sediment is being removed from the Lake upstream, returning a healthy body of water to the community, downstream the Three Mile Creek Greenway Trail, a long-envisioned linear park, ties the City back to its heritage.

Following the ribbon-cutting of the University Connector Trail, Greene reports that the new segment is "extremely well-used," with people walking, running, and biking from dawn to dusk. The next phase, extending from the Japanese Garden trailhead, is currently under construction and, weather permitting, expected to be completed by mid-summer.

"We've already completed half of the trail in that segment, and the roadbed is fully laid," Greene said. "The new trailhead and parking lot are big upgrades, ADA-accessible, with sidewalks and good lighting. It's really going to improve access for everyone."

The challenge now lies in connecting the two major trail segments. A 400-foot pedestrian bridge is needed to span a flood-prone area near I-65. Greene explains completing the trail to this point will strengthen future grant applications by demonstrating progress and demand, but building these sorts of trails is more complicated than people may think.

"When you're building a new road, that's what a greenway trail is," she said, "you're connecting disconnected parts of the City. It's not just a sidewalk, you have to hook up utilities, drainage, everything you associate with new infrastructure."

Importantly, the Trail runs through areas which experience regular flooding, turning otherwise unusable land into active public spaces which serve residents year-round.

Standing out across all these efforts is community buy-in. From neighborhood meetings to ribbon cuttings, public sentiment has shifted toward excitement and pride in the progress.

"At this point, we're only hearing positive things," Greene said. "The running and biking communities are incredibly excited. People want to get back into nature, and we heard the same thing at the [Brookley by the Bay] meetings. This is giving people a safe, beautiful place to do just that."

Trailheads with adequate parking and visibility are proving especially important for encouraging use.

"These are becoming destinations," Greene adds, "people drive to the trailheads to walk and ride with their families. The more access points we have, the more people can take advantage of what's being built."

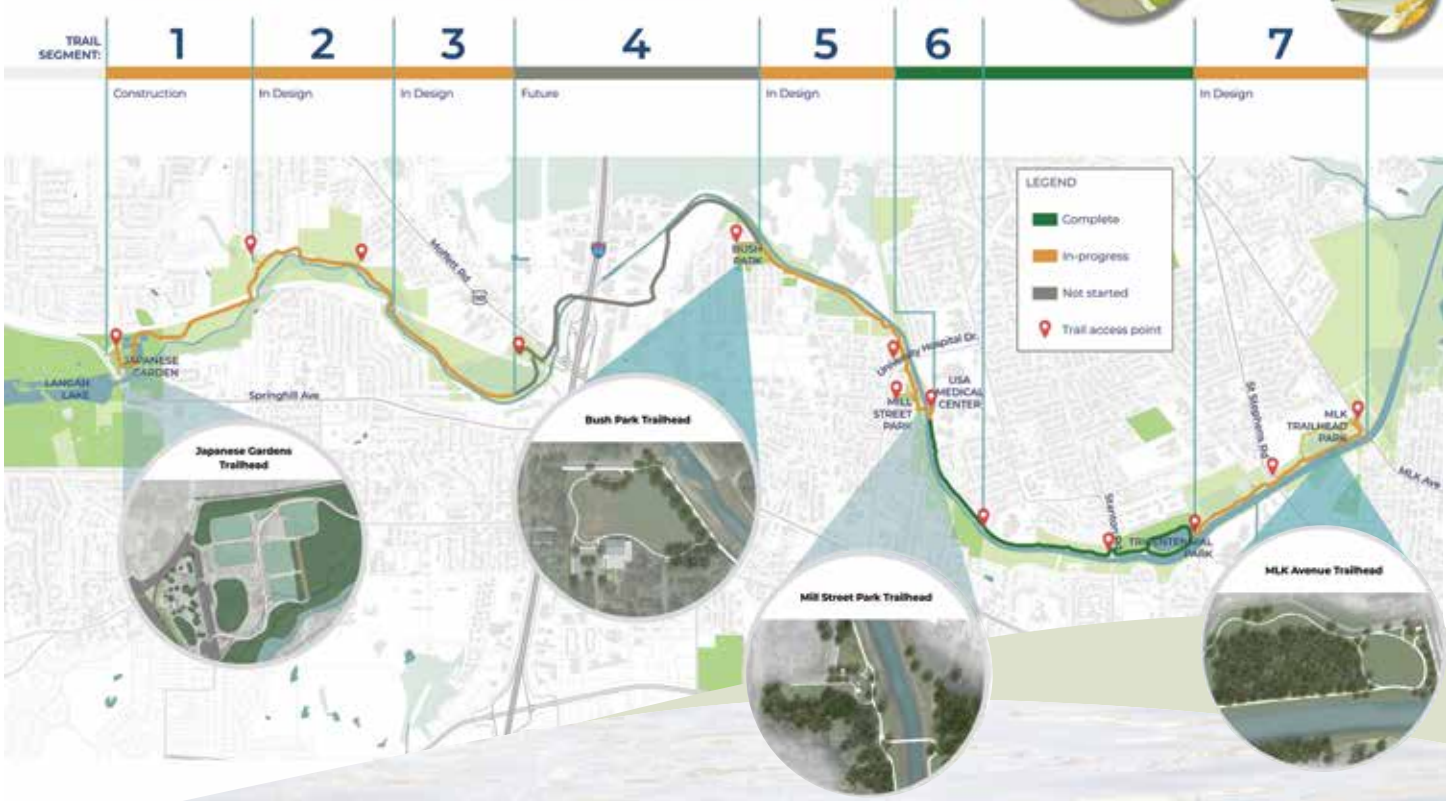
What's happening along Three Mile Creek is not just about restoring a waterway; it's about restoring connectivity between neighborhoods, public health and the environment, and between Mobilians.

These new trails will connect with other projects, like the Broad Street redevelopment and MLK Complete Streets, and eventually the Greenway is expected to extend to the Crepe Myrtle Trail and Brookley by the Bay.

"When you connect all the pieces," Greene said, "you don't just restore a creek, you reconnect a city."

THREE MILE CREEK GREENWAY TRAIL

The Three Mile Creek Greenway Trail is 6.5-miles long and provides access to one of Mobile's most beautiful natural assets, and will connect existing parks and infrastructure that leads to downtown Mobile and other parts of the Mobile Greenway Initiative. It has been advocated for by the community for 35 years, and the City has organized an implementation plan, secured funding from multiple source. It is undertaking design and construction of the greenway in phases.



Estuary Reflections

By Roberta Swann, Director, Mobile Bay National Estuary Program

The Next Decade

Dauphin Island Bridge

Over the next decade, ensuring the resilience of Alabama's estuaries and coastlines will require a continued and intensifying collective effort. Since its inception in 1995, (hard to believe we have been in existence for 30 years!), MBNEP has provided an effective model for collaborative environmental stewardship, and as we look ahead, our role in shaping the future of coastal conservation in Alabama will be more important than ever.

MBNEP's longevity and ongoing evolution reflect a growing understanding about why safeguarding these ecosystems requires more than just short-term interventions. The program has been a catalyst for not only addressing immediate environmental concerns but also laying the foundation for long-term sustainability. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the D'Olive Watershed, where the voices of a property owner's association evolved into a multi-million-dollar restoration program across two cities and a county. Over ten years of work have resulted in a network of streams able to convey the greater volumes of stormwater runoff created by more impervious surfaces; local governments who have a greater understanding of how development impacts city infrastructure, and a growing acceptance of preserving nature as part of the infrastructure needed to manage community growth.

From MBNEP's early focus on educating citizens about environmental issues to its broader engagement with habitat restoration, coastal resilience, and water quality improvement, MBNEP's trajectory mirrors the shifting priorities in environmental conservation. The challenges Alabama's estuaries face – ranging from urbanization to rising seas and frequent severe weather events – demand a flexible approach to adjust to emerging threats. In this sense, MBNEP's commitment to keeping community leaders engaged and involved in collaborative solutions has kept environmental protection on the front burner and enabled local governments, through their greater understanding of new science and changing regulations, to continuously improve how our coast's natural resources are managed to adapt to evolving community needs.

For example, over the years, MBNEP's work has expanded beyond traditional water quality management to include shoreline and wetland restoration, education about coastal dune protection, and other natural infrastructure projects. As sea levels rise and coastal erosion accelerates, these kinds of nature-based solutions will become even more important. The Program's focus on building ecosystem resilience through restoring natural habitats will help protect coastal communities from flooding and storm surge, enhancing both environmental and economic stability.

Looking forward, MBNEP will continue leveraging partnerships between federal, state, and local governments, private interests, and the community. A key part of its success has always been the collaborative nature of its efforts – bringing together a diverse array of organizations and individuals who have a shared stake in the health of Alabama's coastlines. Moving into the next decade, this inclusive model will be critical in addressing the compounding challenges of frequent severe weather events, habitat degradation, and population growth along the Gulf Coast.

An emphasis on continuous improvement will be essential. By constantly assessing and refining the strategies which have been successful, and learning from challenges or setbacks, MBNEP can continue to evolve with the changing environmental landscape. This approach ensures conservation initiatives are not only reactive but proactive, allowing the Program to anticipate future threats and opportunities for improvement.

As MBNEP moves into its fourth decade, the Program's future will be shaped by the ability to integrate the latest science and technology, prioritize equity and community engagement, and build resilience into every facet of coastal management. Given the Program's track record and the growing urgency of environmental threats, there's reason to be hopeful the next ten years will be marked by significant strides in protecting and restoring Alabama's invaluable estuaries and coastlines for future generations.

Reaching Alabama

Jason Kudulis, Deputy Director, Mobile Bay National Estuary Program

Members of the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program's Management Conference remain focused on what people value about living on the Alabama Coast, specifically – Access: to the water and open spaces for recreation and vistas. Everyone deserves access to the outdoors. If we are to collectively restore, protect, and conserve our coastal way of life, it is important that we foster opportunities for everyone to connect with the resources that bind our coastal quality of life.

From Mobile County's Escatawpa Hollow Park on the Alabama/Mississippi line to ADCNR's Perdido River Canoe Trail on the Alabama/Florida line, and points all over and in between, over the last decade coastal Alabama has been blessed with an "access renaissance." The State of Alabama and local elected leaders have strategically made investments to set aside,build, and upgrade public places to connect with nature in Mobile and Baldwin counties. Blueways, greenways, boat ramps, piers, beaches, nature trails, and undisturbed habitats to observe native plants and animals to name a few.

With the good fortune of so many public access sites to choose from, one might ask, how can I find them, what does each offer, and more broadly from a management perspective, what can we learn from end-users and current site environmental conditions to continue to make good choices with future investments? This last question is important because we know access remains a priority and decision makers need data and tools to more effectively characterize and manage site challenges and environmental stressors to ensure long-term sustainability and management of sites and continued delivery of ecosystem services. Ecosystem services are the benefits humans derive from natural places and ecosystems.

To answer these questions researchers from the Stokes School of Marine and Environmental Sciences at the University of South Alabama are undertaking in-depth field studies to catalog environmental conditions (e.g., coastal habitats, infrastructure) and social outcomes (e.g., recreational use, satisfaction) for at least 60 public access sites in surrounding coastal waters. This work will characterize coastal habitats and their role in supporting healthy ecosystems, as well as producing tools and products for public engagement with the information including an interactive map with site details and a 360° viewer. Stay tuned.

"By looking closely at both the health of our coastal habitats and how people use and value these sites, we can make better-informed decisions. That means not only protecting ecosystems and the services they provide, but also ensuring these special places remain open and accessible for everyone." says Dr. Steven Scyphers, Director at the Center for Socio-Environmental Resiliency at the Stokes School of Marine and Environmental Sciences.

Mobile County Blueway Project Update

By Henry Perkins, Mobile Bay National Estuary Program and Tina Sanchez, Mobile County Commission Environmental Services

Mobile County is investing in one of its most valuable natural assets – its waterways. The County is creating a network of paddling trails and public access points that will improve recreational opportunities, support environmental stewardship, and enhance quality of life for residents and visitors alike.

The comprehensive water trail system is called the Mobile County Blueway. This effort is supported by the Mobile County Commission and is intended to increase public access to the region's extensive network of rivers, bayous, creeks, and estuarine waterways.

The connected paddling routes in this system will be accessible, safe, and clearly marked. They are being planned to showcase the region's natural beauty, environmental diversity, and cultural heritage, and will be available to paddlers of all experience levels.

The Mobile County Blueway Project is funded through multiple sources. Primary funding comes from the RESTORE Act, the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill dollars managed by the State (ADCNR). This funding mechanism provides money to Gulf Coast states for environmental restoration and economic development. Additional funding for the Blueway is provided by the State of Alabama GOMESA grant program administered by ADCNR. These combined resources are what allow Mobile County to invest in this ambitious public access infrastructure project.

The project team began with a feasibility study to assess current conditions and opportunities, a study which included an inventory of existing water access points, an evaluation of their conditions, and a review of gaps in the trail system. The team also developed a visual identity and signage system to create a consistent look for all Blueway locations, helping users identify official entry points and navigate the trails.

Three Mile Creek Historic Channel

Weirs installed in urbanized Three Mile Creek

The Master Plan for the Blueway includes a phased approach for implementation. The Plan lays out proposed routes, recommended access points, infrastructure improvements, and guidelines for trail development, the idea being the network can be incrementally built out.

Several initial projects have already been completed or are underway. These include improvements to individual sites that serve as anchor points for specific segments of the Blueway system:

• A new ADA-compliant kayak launch has been installed at Memories Fish Camp. This feature improves accessibility for individuals with limited mobility and enhances the overall usability of the site. Memories Fish Camp, recently renovated by the County, is a key access point on Fowl River and will serve as a primary hub for this Blueway segment.

• Escatawpa Hollow Park & Campground has undergone facility improvements to better support paddling activity. This location already serves as a destination for outdoor recreation and now offers improved accommodation for paddlers.

• The County recently held a groundbreaking ceremony for Lewis Landing, which will serve as the first designated access point for the Africatown Blueway. This project represents a long-term investment in the cultural heritage of Africatown and the Plateau neighborhoods.

The County is working with a Steering Committee composed of representatives from various community organizations. This group is helping to guide the next phase of the project, which includes identifying additional trailhead locations, installing directional signage and water trail markers, and prioritizing areas for future development.

The County is moving forward with beach and boat ramp improvements at recently renovated Chickasabogue Park, and further design and planning work is being carried out for additional improvements at Escatawpa Hollow.

Once the infrastructure elements are developed, the County will begin a coordinated marketing and outreach campaign to inform the public about the Blueway to draw paddlers to these new resources. This campaign will aim to attract both local users and tourists, with a focus on promoting safe, sustainable, and enjoyable use of the water trail system.

The Blueway is being developed through strong partnerships. In addition to the Mobile County Commission, key collaborators include local municipalities, the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program. These entities bring technical expertise, regulatory support, and regional coordination to the project.

The long-term goal of the Mobile County Blueway is to connect as many public access points as possible across the County's waterways. By doing so, the County aims to support recreation, tourism, environmental awareness, and quality of life. Water access is a major feature of the region, and improving infrastructure to support it is viewed as a long-term investment in community health and resilience.

Mobile County is home to a wide range of waterways, including small creeks, large rivers, estuaries, and coastal bays. Many of these locations are already being used informally for activities like kayaking, canoeing, fishing, and swimming. The Blueway formalizes this use, ensures safer and more consistent access, and provides an organizing framework for future investment and stewardship.

For more information about the project, including planning documents, maps, and updates, visit the project website at www.mobilecountyblueway.com.

MA2 Cody Aloi with his dog, Bosco, a German Sheppard Military Working Dog, are pictured in 2012 while serving in north Afghanistan in 2012.

A Veteran's Connection to the Water

By Cody Aloi, Program Manager, Mobile Bay National Estuary Program

Mobile Bay's coast is renowned for its diverse aquatic life and stunning waterways. Sportsmen and connoisseurs of outdoor life travel from all over to take in the lustrous beauty that God bestowed on this little slice of coastal water paradise, and the inherent benefit of making these incredible waters physically accessible for everyone runs deeper than increasing recreation and ecotourism. Let's turn back the clock for a moment.

It's 2012 in southern Afghanistan, and I was sitting at a fire pit in a dilapidated "mud hut" in war-torn, mountainous terrain.

It's a quiet, tranquil morning, which is a welcome relief. As we know, all good things must come to an end, and the silence is interrupted by the deep, soul-piercing rumble of an explosion that rocks the insufficiently fortified walls of the compound. A Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED) was detonated at our makeshift entry control point.

After the rush of excitement from the initial blast, the quiet returns only to be broken again by the radio on my hip: "One casualty, call for a medevac." The person injured was a 19-year-old man I knew. The most significant of his injuries was to his right leg. Despite the best medical treatment available to him, his leg was eventually amputated.

He was given a wheelchair and prosthetic leg, now one of around 1,500 service members with similar injuries who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, sent home to recover from their wounds, both physical and mental. Some of these individuals would attempt to escape from the torments of the inevitable PTSD, which usually accompanied these physical wounds, by retreating to Mother Nature, retreating to the water.

Like many veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, he faced not only physical wounds but also the hidden scars of trauma. For many of my comrades, nature, water especially, became a refuge. On the water, they found peace, freedom, and a measure of independence that helped them move forward.

Today, my mission has shifted. Instead of defending our nation on the battlefield, I have the privilege of protecting the waters of coastal Alabama. Through this work, I've come to see how access to the Bay is not just about recreation, but it's about giving people, including those with disabilities, a way to connect with the restorative power of nature.

The State of Alabama, through ADCNR's administration of the State GOMESA grant program and other funding sources, and with partners like the Mobile Bay NEP, has been working to expand accessible water access across Mobile and Baldwin counties. Out of more than 240 public access sites, dozens already feature accommodations such as ramps, mats, or ADA-compliant kayak launches. Each new improvement strengthens a network of access points that make it easier for everyone, regardless of mobility, to find their way to the water.

The vision is simple: when more people can reach the Bay, more people can heal. That's why MBNEP supports improvements such as durable access mats, engineered kayak and canoe launch structures, and ADA ramps. These investments are not just about meeting standards but are about opening doors to experiences that nurture both body and spirit.

Durable, weather-resistant access mats create firm, non-slip paths across sand, gravel, or other uneven terrain. They make it possible for wheelchairs, walkers, and strollers to roll all the way to the shoreline. Kayak and canoe launch platforms allow users to safely board or disembark, offering stability, handrails, and slip-resistant surfaces so people can paddle independently. And ADA ramps, designed with the right slope and protective handrails, provide long-term, resilient access to piers, beaches, and boat launches.

The vision is simple: when more people can reach the Bay more people can heal.

These improvements represent more than infrastructure. They are the opportunity for a veteran with a prosthetic to cast a line from a pier, for a child using a wheelchair to play on the shore, or for families to paddle together without barriers. In each case, the outcome is what it has always been, a source of healing.

Durable, weather-resistant access mats provide stable, non-slip surfaces for access to the water.

MBNEP's commitment to water is codified in the Clean Water Act Section 320, but it is also deeply personal. Protecting and restoring our estuary means creating pathways for everyone to experience its benefits. Every mat laid, every ramp installed, every launch built is a step toward a community that embraces and honors those who have sacrificed for others.

From my own journey, I know that healing does not happen all at once. It comes from moments, from quiet mornings on the Bay, from the rhythm of paddles on the water, from reuniting with my family in my coastal community. By expanding access, we make those moments possible for more people, including veterans who, like my friend in Afghanistan, carry both visible and invisible wounds.

Mobile and Baldwin counties have already taken important steps toward greater access. With continued investment and partnership, we can build a coastline that welcomes all, where the water is not just seen but felt, not just admired but lived in. In doing so, we honor our responsibility to protect natural resources while also providing the gift of healing for residents, for visitors, and for those who once served on distant battlefields.

Beauty of Mobile-Tensaw Delta Draws Visitors

Henry Perkins, Private Sector Program Lead, Mobile Bay National Estuary Program

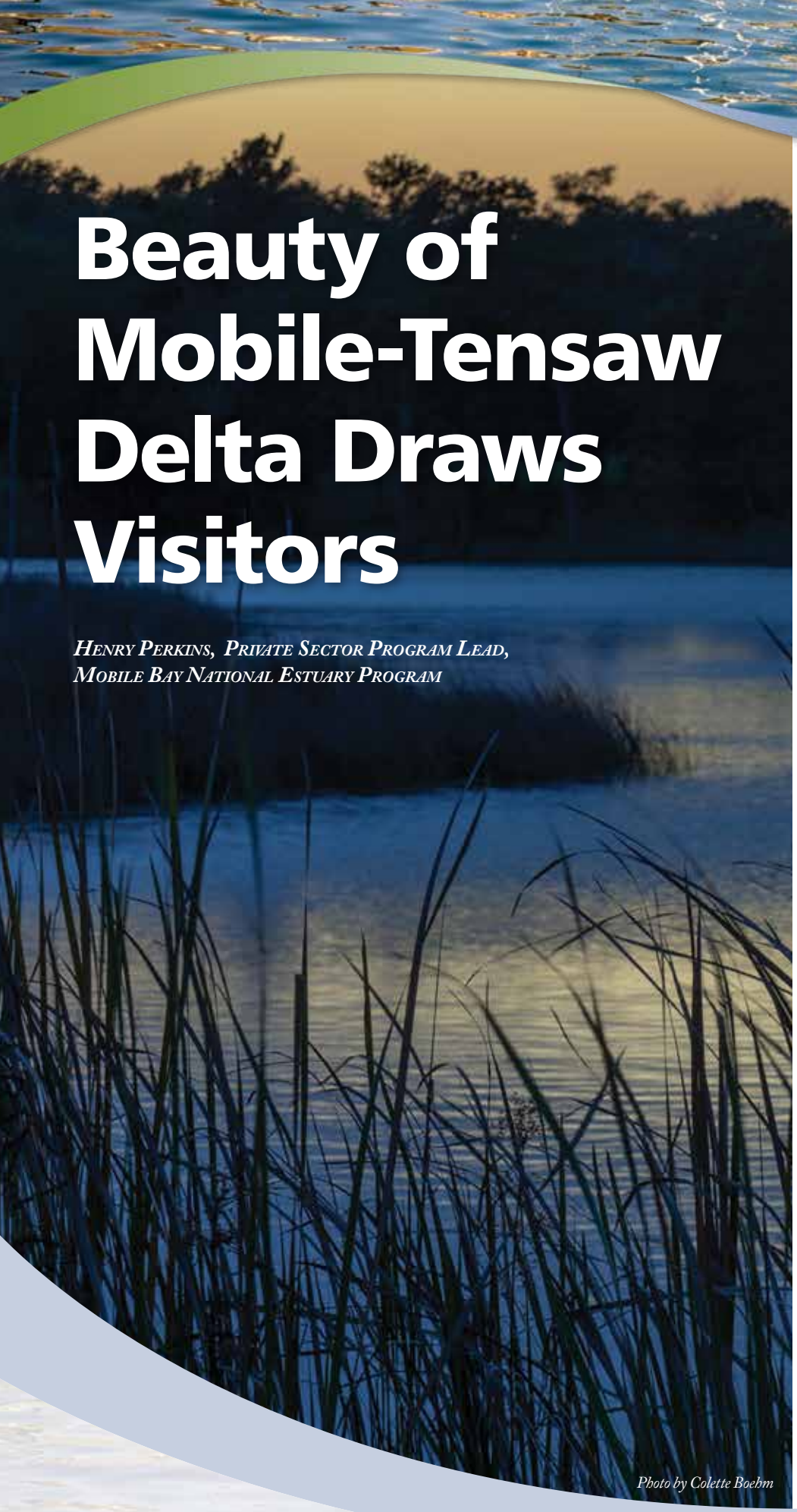


Photo by Colette Boehm

Alabama's Gulf Coast brings millions of visitors every year for its sun and surf. Condos are booked, shells are collected, and sunscreen and aloe vera lotion are applied in unequal measure.

Beyond the beaches, there is a different Alabama to experience. Winding rivers, quiet bayous, and shady pine forests all wait for visitors just off the beaten path. Through a combination of investment and vision, Alabama is unlocking the potential of its ecotourism industry to power a sustainable coastal economy.

Defined as "responsible travel to natural areas while promoting the protection of nature and sustaining the well-being of local people," ecotourism is more than adventurism, it's a way to support environmental restoration, cultural preservation, and community revitalization at the same time. And across Mobile and Baldwin counties, this strategy is taking shape.

Historic Blakeley State Park is one vital gateway to the Delta. Daily boat tours into the Mobile-Tensaw Delta take visitors into a subtropical jungle where osprey nest above old battlegrounds and alligators bask on sites once walked by indigenous tribes and Civil War soldiers. Ecotourism is most powerful when it connects people to both place and story, not just showcasing assets, but helping people understand the ecological and historical significance of the place and its history. In this case, the Delta as a whole.

Blakeley does this well, with guided tours providing context for visitors and narrating the heritage of the space, making it a stand-out access point for both tourists and locals seeking those immersive, educational outdoor experiences.

Similar work is taking shape in Gulf Shores. The Gulf Shores Ecotourism Center will serve as both a welcome center and a launchpad for sustainable coastal recreation.

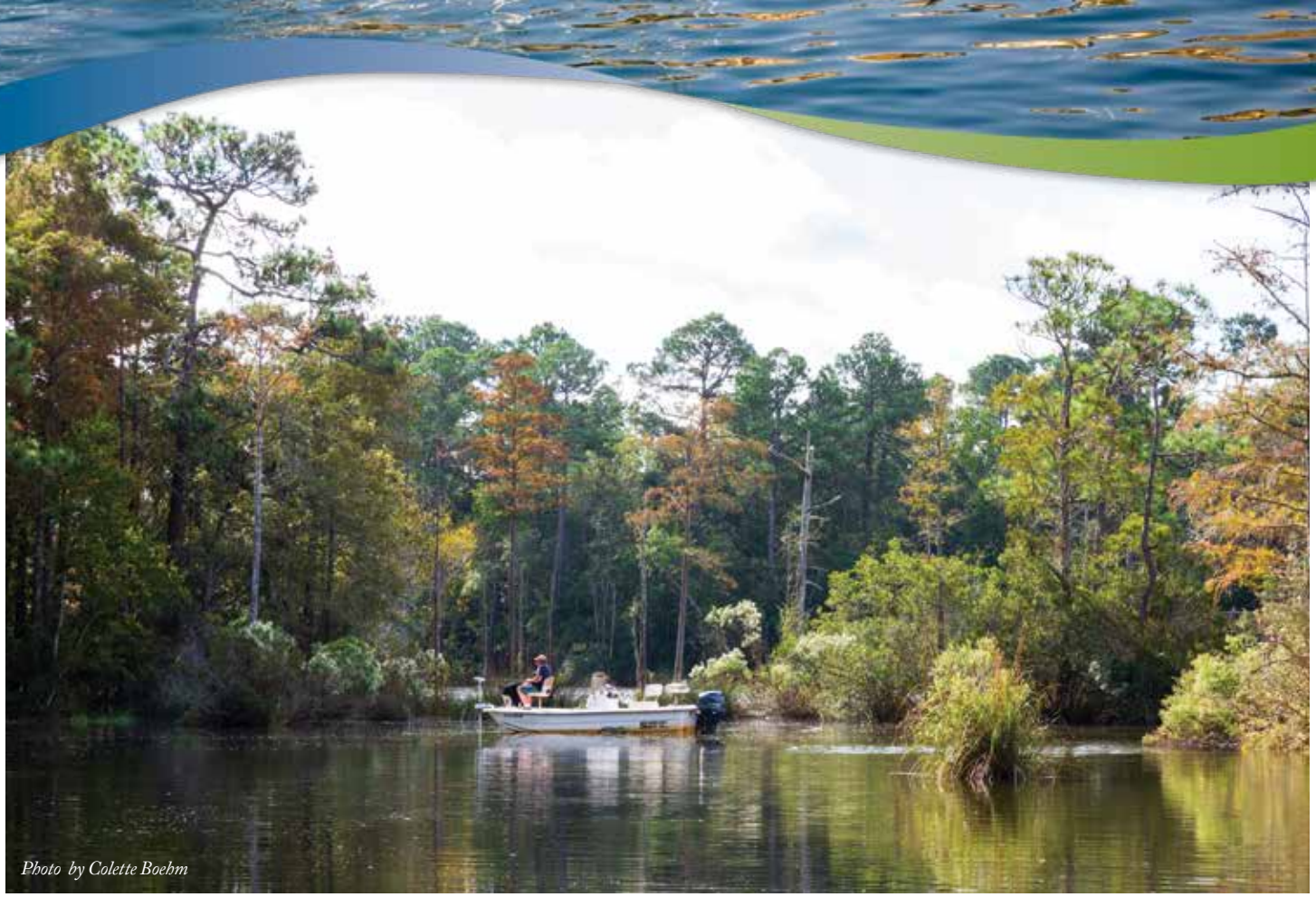


Photo by Colette Boehm

The Center will offer hands-on tools to explore the region's diverse ecosystems, from freshwater marshes to pine forests to dynamic dunes. Its design is rooted in low-impact construction practices and reflects ADCNR's Gulf State Park's broader commitment to align tourism growth with conservation outcomes. The Center is designed with ADA accessibility, bilingual signage, and parking seamlessly connected to the Park's existing 28-mile trail network.

Further up the watershed a high-tech approach is being adopted at the City of Foley's Graham Creek Nature Preserve. Visitors can use a mobile app to rent kayaks and paddleboards on demand with no staff or booking window required.

This app-based system is a convenient and cost-effective way to open access to nature, especially for first-time paddlers, families seeking budget friendly options, or anyone else who might face logistical challenges. Reduced staffing needs makes this type of ecotourism infrastructure more affordable, flexible, and scalable.

These projects don't exist in isolation. The broader context is a strategy laid out in the *Coastal Alabama Regional Ecotourism Plan*, developed through more than 70 community meetings and funded through the RESTORE Act. This plan, developed by the Coastal Alabama Partnership and an esteemed ecotourism advocate, Costas Christ, calls for a transformational shift from promoting traditional mass tourism to cultivating a nature, culture, and community-centered economy.

Among the key recommendations:

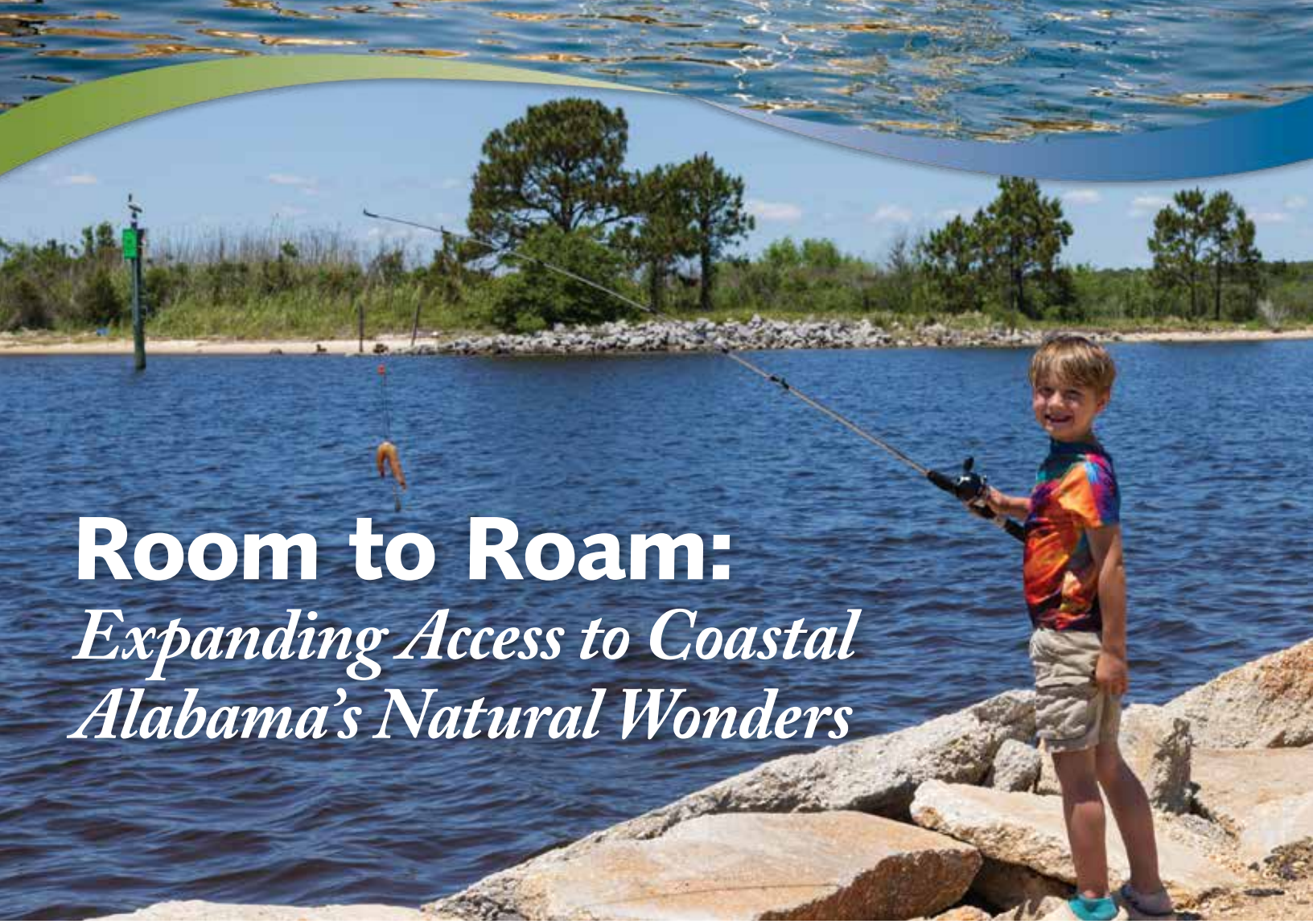
- **Develop a world-class ecolodge in the Mobile-Tensaw Delta to anchor the region's profile nationally and internationally.**
- **Launch a microenterprise training program-based in Africatown to support woman and community-owned ecotourism businesses.**
- **Expand wayfinding and itinerary development so visitors can connect the dots between under appreciated sites like Live Oak Landing, Cooper Riverside Park, and Bon Secour Wildlife Refuge.**

The Plan urges stakeholders to rethink how we define tourism success. Instead of measuring progress by the number of arrivals, it proposes metrics to better reflect local benefits, such as clean water, restored ecosystems, thriving small businesses, and positive economic outcomes in the community.

Unlocking the Gulf Coast's ecotourism potential means moving beyond the marquee destinations and into the overlooked corners of the region. It means driving a little further to paddle some out of the way waters in the Mobile County Blueway or hiking a floodplain trail in Elberta. It means investing in locally owned outfitters, guides, and other businesses whose livelihoods depend on healthy lands and waters.

In the end, it means seeing the region not as a collection of isolated attractions, but as an ecosystem unto itself, interconnected ecologically, economically, and culturally.

As the Regional Ecotourism Plan puts it, coastal Alabama has the key ingredients to become a national and international world class ecotourism destination. The question is not whether this goal can be accomplished; rather, it will be a question of putting recommendations into action and building on community input to take tourism in coastal Alabama to the next level of success by establishing a resilient ecotourism economy bringing prosperity and protection of the region's unique cultural and natural heritage to future generations.



Room to Roam:
Expanding Access to Coastal Alabama's Natural Wonders

By Christian Miller, Public Sector Program Lead, Mobile Bay National Estuary Program

Access to natural areas in Mobile and Baldwin counties is more than a luxury, it is a vital part of our coastal communities' well-being and quality of life. From the sandy beaches of Dauphin Island to the tranquil waters of the Mobile-Tensaw Delta, these diverse landscapes offer residents and visitors opportunities to connect with nature, enjoy outdoor activities, and experience the rich biodiversity of coastal Alabama.

The Mobile Bay National Estuary Program's *Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan* emphasizes the importance of preserving and expanding public access to these areas, recognizing that such connections foster environmental stewardship and help support the health of our estuarine systems. Similarly, the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources has made substantial investments to improve access through funding from sources such as the State of Alabama GOMESA grant program, which utilizes a portion of federal offshore oil and gas revenues. Also, many public access improvements have been funded by ADCNR's Alabama Coastal Area Management Program (ACAMP). As part of watershed planning efforts, the existing level of access within each watershed was evaluated, followed by the development of recommendations based on input from local communities. These included expanding Graham Creek Nature Preserve in the Wolf Bay Watershed, creating a new access point in the lower Three Mile Creek Watershed, developing an ecological preserve and recreational park in the Western Delta Watershed, and advancing Honor Park in the Eastern Delta Watershed.

Graham Creek Nature Preserve, which spans more than 600 acres and is managed by the City of Foley, includes a variety of habitats such as longleaf pine forests, pitcher plant bogs, wetlands, and coastal marsh. The Preserve offers a wide range of recreational opportunities including hiking, bird watching, kayaking, and disc golf. Several past additions were funded by ACAMP. "Foley is excited about potentially placing additional tracts of land into conservation to preserve rare habitats, plants, and animals in coastal Alabama," said Foley's Natural Resources Director Leslie Gahagan. "Wolf Bay has very few public access points to coastal waters. This acquisition would expand passive recreation opportunities for residents and visitors."

In the Western Delta Watershed, the City of Creola has applied for GOMESA funding to support conserving roughly 180 acres along Gunnison Creek, which flows into the Mobile-Tensaw Delta.

The proposed project aims to protect bottomland hardwood wetlands and riparian areas that provide habitat for species such as the American black bear and alligator snapping turtle. The first phase would seek to safeguard this important ecosystem while creating opportunities for outdoor recreation and environmental education.

In the Three Mile Creek Watershed, Mobile County has acquired Lewis Landing, a nearly two-acre site located at Conception Street along the historic streamway. The site is being developed into a park with kayak and fishing access and will serve as the first stop on the Africatown Blueway Connections trail. "Lewis Landing will help reconnect people with Africatown's natural beauty, history, cultural legacy, and future opportunities," said Mobile County Commissioner Merceria Ludgood. "We hope it becomes a place where families gather, neighbors meet, and visitors come to experience the richness of this community."

In the Eastern Delta Watershed, the City of Spanish Fort is planning Honor Park, a 142-acre site along Bay Minette Creek bisected by Highway 225. The City recently introduced a conceptual plan for the Park, to be completed in multiple phases. The first phase will open nearly 100 acres for passive recreation and will include walking trails, a fishing pier, a kayak launch, restroom facilities, and scenic vistas of the Bay Minette Basin and the lower Mobile-Tensaw Delta.

Since 2020, ADCNR has significantly expanded its commitment to both boating and shoreline access across coastal Alabama. In Mobile and Baldwin counties alone, ADCNR has constructed or funded 24 separate boating access projects totaling nearly $44 million. Even more remarkable, ADCNR has invested over $304 million in 44 projects that enhance shoreline access for residents and visitors without boats. These projects include the acquisition of property for public use, improvements to existing access points, the construction of fishing piers, beach renourishment, and the development of blueway trails. These investments, made possible through programs such as GOMESA, oil spill-related funding from NRDA, RESTORE, and NFWF, as well as other ADCNR funding sources including ACAMP, underscore the State's recognition that quality access to water resources is fundamental to public enjoyment and stewardship of our coast.

These substantial public investments highlight the importance of coordinated planning and community engagement in expanding access to Alabama's coastal resources. Through watershed-based strategies and funding from GOMESA and other restoration programs, the State of Alabama, the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program, local governments, and community partners are working together to connect people to nature. Whether through new boat ramps, fishing piers, preserved shorelines, or scenic blueway trails, these efforts help keep our coastal waters open and welcoming to everyone. They also foster a deeper sense of environmental stewardship, provide more opportunities for outdoor recreation, and strengthen the long-term health and resilience of our communities and natural systems.

Alabama current connection

About the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program: The Mobile Bay National Estuary Program's mission is to lead the wise stewardship of water quality and living resources of Mobile Bay and the Tensaw Delta. The MBNEP serves as a catalyst for activities of estuary stakeholders, helping to build community-based organizational capacity for sound resource management and leveraging commitment and investment to ensure the estuary's sustainability. For more information, please contact the MBNEP office at 251-431-6409.

About ADCNR, State Lands Division, Coastal Section: In an effort to enhance coastal resources through advancing conservation efforts and positive economic impacts the Alabama Coastal Area Management Program (ACAMP) was approved by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in 1979. The ACAMP is administered through the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, State Lands Division, Coastal Section. For more information, contact the Coastal Section office at 251-621-1216.

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MBNEP Proficient – EPA Evaluation Gives High Marks

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has completed its 2025 Program Evaluation of the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program, covering the review period from October 1, 2018, through September 30, 2024. The MBNEP was rated "proficient," the highest of the two possible ratings, and will continue to receive EPA support. With the outcomes limited to "Proficient" or "Not Proficient," it is safe to say we got high marks.

The Program Evaluation process assesses whether each of the 28 National Estuary Programs is making adequate progress in implementing their *Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan* (CCMP). The review considers narrative submissions, NEPORT data, annual work plans, end-of-year reports, site visits, and discussions with program staff.

The review highlighted strengthened monitoring through pre- and post-restoration assessments, protocol testing, and expanded work with Alabama Water Watch. The EPA team recommended expanding successful initiatives, such as the watershed-scale litter abatement project. An updated Monitoring Framework will address trends in water quality, sedimentation, habitat, and living resources. The 2025 site visit also noted strong relationships with the engineering, contracting, and business community. In outreach, the *Create a Clean Water Future* campaign provided consistent branding for regional trash reduction and has been adopted by multiple local governments and organizations.

The EPA recognized the MBNEP as a regional leader in watershed planning and project implementation, citing the delisting of an impaired segment of Joes Branch, the first coastal stream in Alabama removed from the impaired waters list due to restoration. Other achievements include advancing thin layer dredged material projects with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Governance and partnerships were praised, with active committees and strong intergovernmental cooperation. Public outreach, through social media, traditional media, and community events, was credited with effectively engaging more residents and reaching broader audiences and potentially into private business partnerships. They also suggested completing a regional water needs assessment, similar to an effort by the San Francisco Estuary Program, to strengthen partnerships.

The EPA found overall that MBNEP is, proficiently, making significant progress toward its goals, building on past successes, and continuing to provide leadership in protecting and restoring the Mobile Bay estuary and its watersheds. Completing a modified CCMP by the end of 2025 is our next milestone, covering, ideally, the next decade of work. The next time we are evaluated, it will be to measure the success of what is, right now, only a vision.