

# H. 7060 Protecting Sapowet Marsh Wildlife Management Area Waters

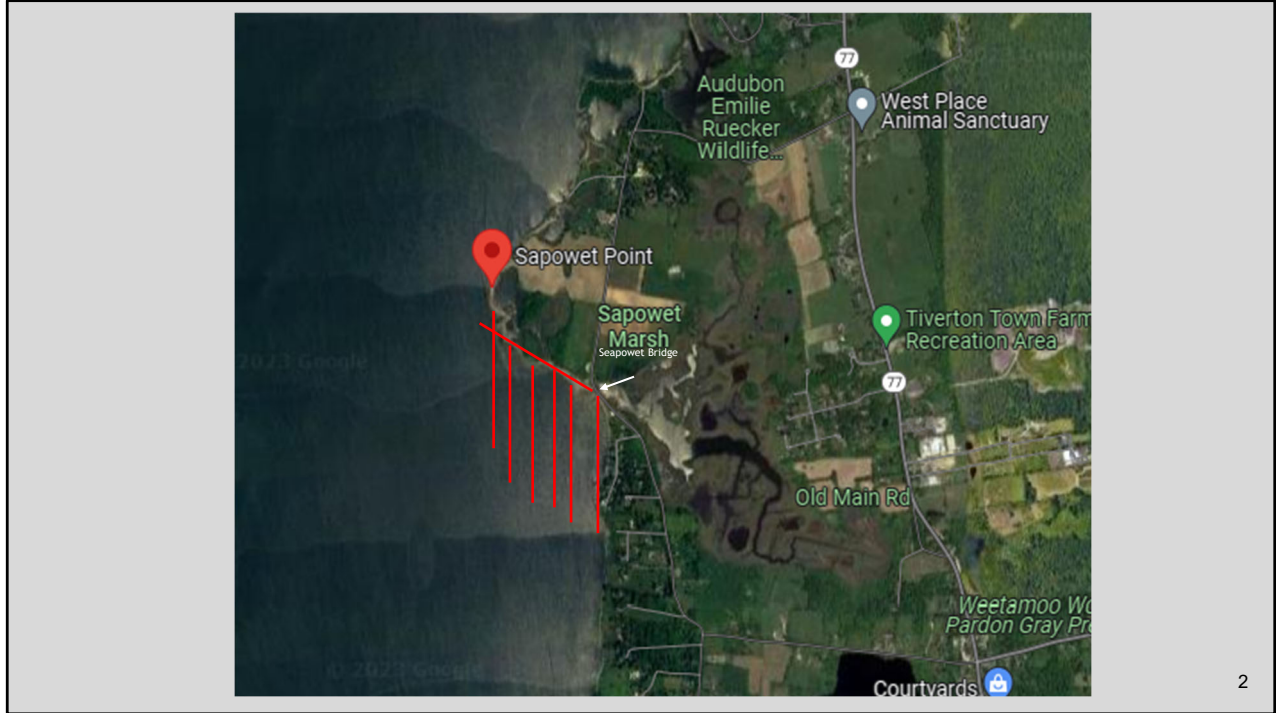
Prepared for  
House Committee on Municipal Government and Housing  
By Kenneth Mendez, Tiverton  
February 14, 2024

Dear Chairman Casey and Members of the House Committee on Municipal Government,

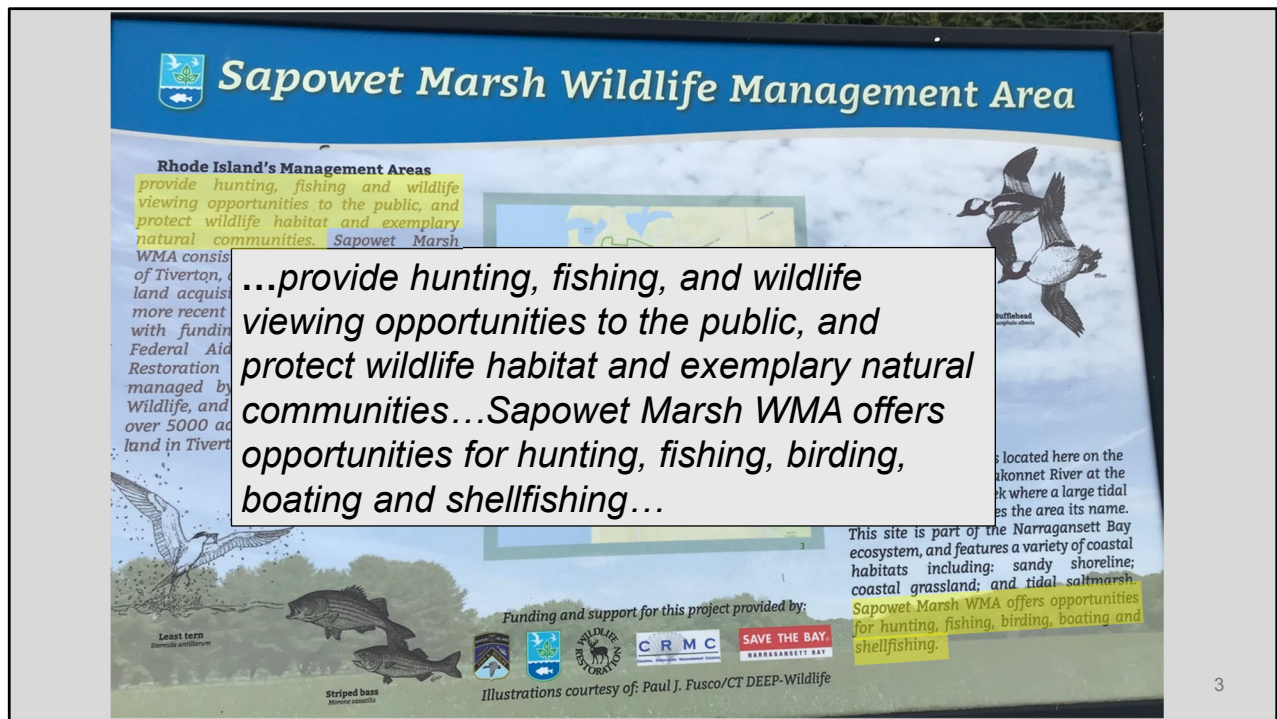
Please accept these materials as background for my public testimony on why I support H. 7060. Thank you taking the time to review and for the opportunity to provide these materials.

Sincerely,

Kenneth Mendez  
Tiverton



- Here is an overview of the Sapowet Wildlife Management Area. The red lines show the waters of Sapowet Cove that H. 7060 will protect.
- I support this bill for two reasons:
  1. It protects waters in an area that, for generations, has been meant to be preserved for recreational use, and
  2. The bill also preserves one of Rhode Island’s most important ecological areas for rare and threatened species.



- This DEM sign from the Sapowet parking lot describes the story of the area. The bottom of the sign shows the partners that provided support for Sapowet.
- A series of five federal grants given to DEM created the area for fishing, hunting, and enjoying wildlife.
- The federal grants came from the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program.
- When someone buys a fishing rod or lure, they pay an excise tax into this program. The money from these taxes are used to create and to improve public areas for fishing and hunting.
- The first grant application was filed in 1949.
- The vision for the area was not only for recreational fishing and hunting but to preserve the beauty and unspoiled character of Sapowet.

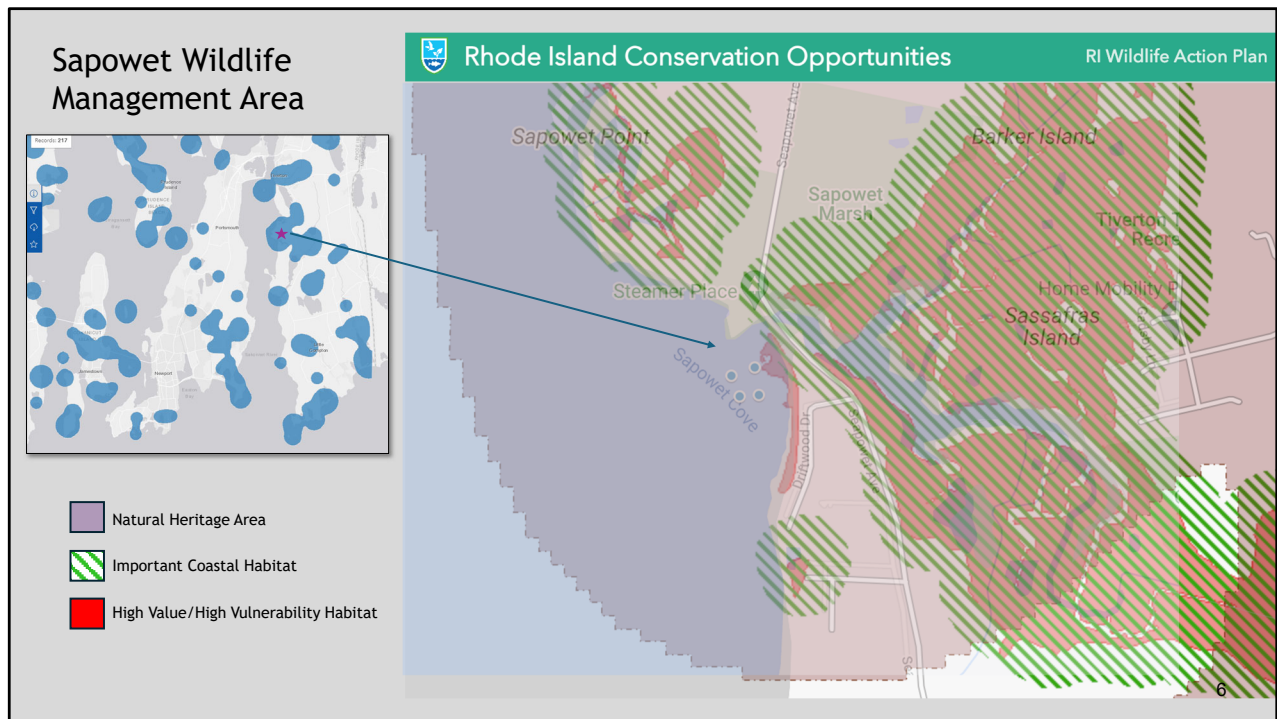


- Here's what Sapowet Cove looks like at low tide.
- The water in the 260 acres of the marsh drains through one spot, an opening under Sapowet Bridge.
- Then, two very long, narrow sandbars form a channel where many anglers fish.
- There's a unique fishing hole at the end of the channel.
- This fishing hole is where fish congregate to feed on nutrients and baitfish coming out of the marsh.
- Adjacent to this channel, you'll see a boat launch and a parking lot, funded by federal grants.
- I regularly fish this outflow at night when striped bass feed.

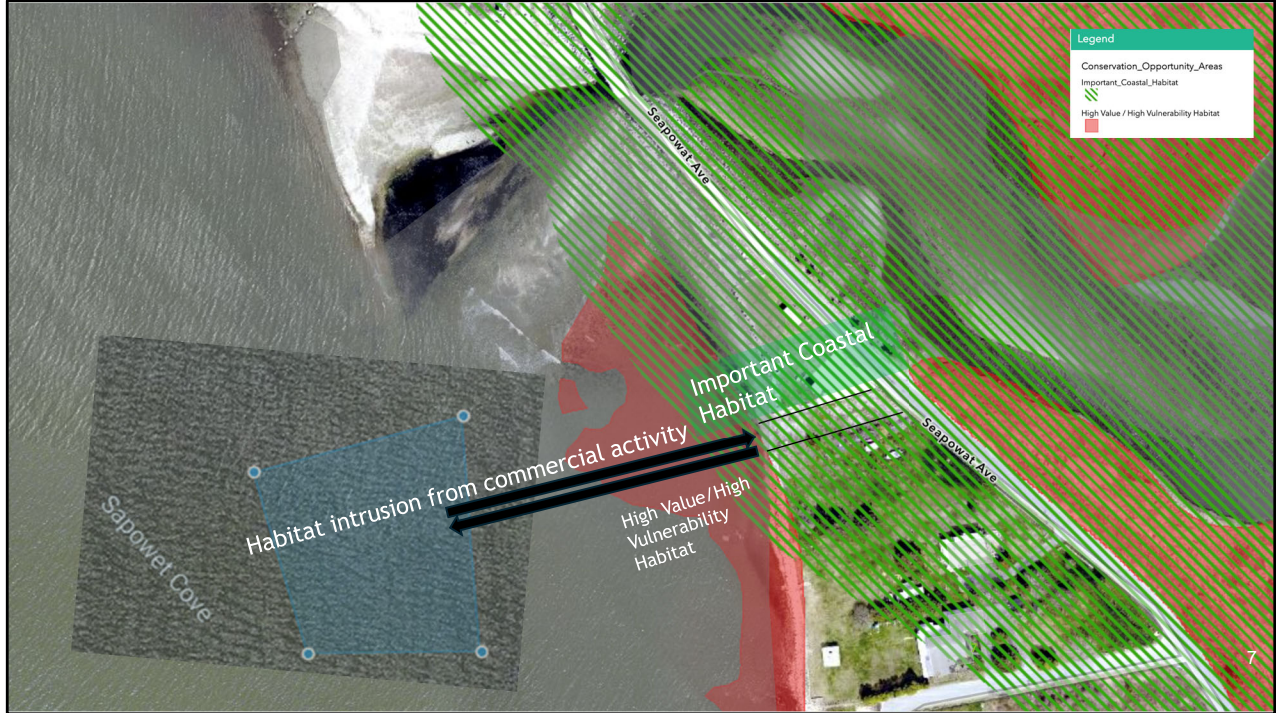




- In addition to recreational angling, the waters are heavily used for activities like kayaking, wading, swimming, boating, kiteboarding, and simply enjoying the pristine natural setting.
- Parking is free.
- Sapowet attracts a diverse, multicultural group of users.
- This bill protects what Sapowet Cove fosters: beaches, shellfish beds, fishing areas, the salt marsh and ponds that combine to serve as a valuable recreational and scenic resource for those from near and far.



- DEM has a Wildlife Action Plan that defines “Important Coastal Habitat” and “High Value/High Vulnerability Habitat” within Natural Heritage Areas.
- Natural Heritage Areas are where DEM has identified species that are rare or threatened.
- Sapowet and its waters are one of these Natural Heritage areas.
- If you ask bird experts, Sapowet is one of the most important salt marshes in Rhode Island and New England.
- Outside the marsh, there is a long piece of this critical habitat on the coastline that runs the length of Sapowet Cove to the south.
- This area in Sapowet Cove would be protected by this new legislation.



- This slide shows an example of potential commercial use that could negatively impact the “Important Coastal Habitat” and “High Value/High Vulnerability Habitat.”
- The blue shape is an aquaculture application where a small sliver of waterfront property might be used to operate the farm. This activity could impact the natural heritage area. Increased foot traffic and dragging heavy bags and cages across the shoreline would potentially trample through critical habitat.
- The location of the commercial operation has become a lightning rod because of the significant conflict it would create with people who use the waters in Sapowet Cove.
- The Town of Tiverton doesn’t want it located there because of the recreational use and because the area has always meant to be .
- The outcry against the location has been so strong it caused the CRMC to revise its public notification policies.
- Even the aquaculture industry spoke out against this poor location.
- This bill addresses all these issues.





- The proposed farm boundaries overlap with the popular fishing hole at the end of the channel.
- A commercial operation would take away that prime fishing spot.
- The grants' purpose was to create opportunities for fishing and recreation, not restrict them by leasing away those waters.





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- These are pictures of commercial oyster farms on Cape Cod that are farmed in shallow waters.
- The waters at Sapowet are very shallow and, in some low tides, cages at the shallow end of the proposed location may be exposed.
- Cages and bags dragged over “Critical Coastal Habitat” could have negative consequences on wildlife.



- Let's be clear. Some may want you to believe that this bill is anti-farming or anti-aquaculture, but nothing can be further from the truth.
- The bill would protect and preserve a unique, sensitive, and scenic wildlife area.

Improvement project, Sapowet Marsh Management Area:

“We're thrilled to begin this project which will greatly improve this important coastal area to benefit our families and wildlife as well as strengthen our resilience. Coastal fish, herons, egrets, waterfowl and so much more wildlife call this special place home. It's important we preserve it.”

Janet Coit, RIDEM Director, Press Release, October 26, 2016

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- Janet Coit, former head of DEM, sums it up best in her press release about the Sapowet Improvement Project.
- We need this legislation because protection for these unique waters has fallen through regulatory cracks between the CRMC, RIDEM, and federal government.
- As Janet Coit said about Sapowet, “It's important we preserve it.” H7060 will do just that.