



Science, Service, Stewardship

Critical Habitat



What is “critical habitat” and why is its designation beneficial?

Habitat loss is a significant threat to most imperiled species, including Atlantic salmon and a number of other sea-run fish species. Accordingly, the Endangered Species Act (ESA) requires both the National Marine Fisheries Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (collectively, the Services) to designate specific areas as "critical habitat" for all threatened and endangered species at the time or within one year of listing. The rationale for designating critical habitat is that some habitat, when lost, can be disproportionately limiting to populations and therefore must be prioritized for protection.

As species cannot exist in the absence of habitat, designating critical habitat is sometimes perceived as duplicating protections already afforded under an ESA listing. However, critical habitat affords species additional and very important protections. For instance, when designating critical habitat, a determination must be made regarding the adequacy of the range currently occupied by a species or if additional habitat within its historic range is required to ensure its continued existence into the foreseeable future. Designating unoccupied habitat essential for a species' recovery is one mechanism under the ESA that can provide habitat protection and availability to the species.

Another benefit of designating critical habitat is that federal agencies are forced to clearly identify what habitat features are essential for conservation, as well as the specific geographical area these features are associated with. Understanding a species' needs places the Services in a better position to identify what is needed to preserve, protect or enhance those features.

How to submit public comments

Critical habitat designation has been proposed for Atlantic salmon within the Gulf of Maine Distinct Population Segment in 45 specific areas ranging from the Androscoggin to the Dennys river. NMFS is soliciting comments from the public on all aspects of the proposed critical habitat designation. All comments received are part of the public record and will generally be posted to <http://www.regulations.gov> without change. All personal identifying information (for example, name, address, etc.) voluntarily submitted by the commenter may be publicly accessible. Do not submit confidential business information or otherwise sensitive or protected information. NMFS will accept anonymous comments (enter N/A in the required fields, if you wish to remain anonymous). Attachments to electronic comments will be accepted in Microsoft Word, Excel, Word Perfect, or Adobe PDF file formats only.

The proposed rule, list of references and supporting documents, including the Biological Valuation, Economic Analysis, IRFA Analysis, and 4(b)(2) Report, are also available electronically at the NMFS Web site http://www.nero.noaa.gov/prot_res/alsalmon/.

Public comments should be identified as RIN 0648-AW77 and may be submitted by several methods.

Electronic Submission: Submit all electronic public comments via the Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov>. Follow the instructions for submitting comments.

Mail: Assistant Regional Administrator, Protected Resources Division, NMFS, Northeast Regional Office, Protected Resources Division, One Blackburn Drive, Gloucester, MA 01930

Facsimile (fax): Fax to (207)-866-7342, Attention: Dan Kircheis