

So, what is a coastal wetland?

By Briana Malloy-Walker

A coastal wetland is an area that has wet and spongy soils, and is located in the “transition zone” between dry land and the ocean. Examples of coastal wetlands are marshes, swamps, or bogs. Wetlands don’t necessarily need to be wet all year round; they can be wet for as little as two weeks in a row and still be considered wetlands. Coastal wetlands can be in fresh water, salty water, or places that are between salty and non-salty. Coastal wetlands have characteristics of both upland (high, dry land) and aquatic areas, but they are neither land nor water. Wetlands are land areas with water over or around them. These unique characteristics mean that wetlands contain a diverse variety of wildlife and plants.

Coastal wetlands help us by being habitats for fish, shellfish, blue crabs, and shrimp, to name a few. A habitat is a place or environment where a plant or animal usually lives or grows. All of the species listed above need salt marshes to get food. Salt marshes exist in the transition area between dry land and the salty water of the ocean.

Another way coastal wetlands help us is by cleaning the water we use. Wetlands act as a natural filter to remove chemicals and pollutants from the water by trapping them in the plants and soil. In the past, this natural filtering system was balanced and pollutants, such as animal waste, were removed from the water and did not harm animals living in the wetlands. Unfortunately, farming and other human activities now result in large amounts of chemicals and harmful pollutants making their way to the wetlands. This means that while the wetlands continue to act as a filter, amphibians, fish and other organisms living there may be hurt by the chemicals that are left over after the filtering.

Even though we get all this help from Coastal Wetlands they are still being destroyed at an alarming rate. Humans destroy wetlands by polluting them, and also by draining and filling them to make more room for houses and farms. Wetlands serve as buffer zones in the event of a storm. Their large area helps to slow storm surges before they reach dry land. When wetlands are drained or destroyed to make room for cities, houses and farmland, the natural barrier is lost. For example, over half of Florida’s wetlands have been destroyed in the past few hundred years. This has left people in Florida much more vulnerable to destruction during storms! Read more about storms and the benefits of wetlands in “The Biggest Sponges Around.”

