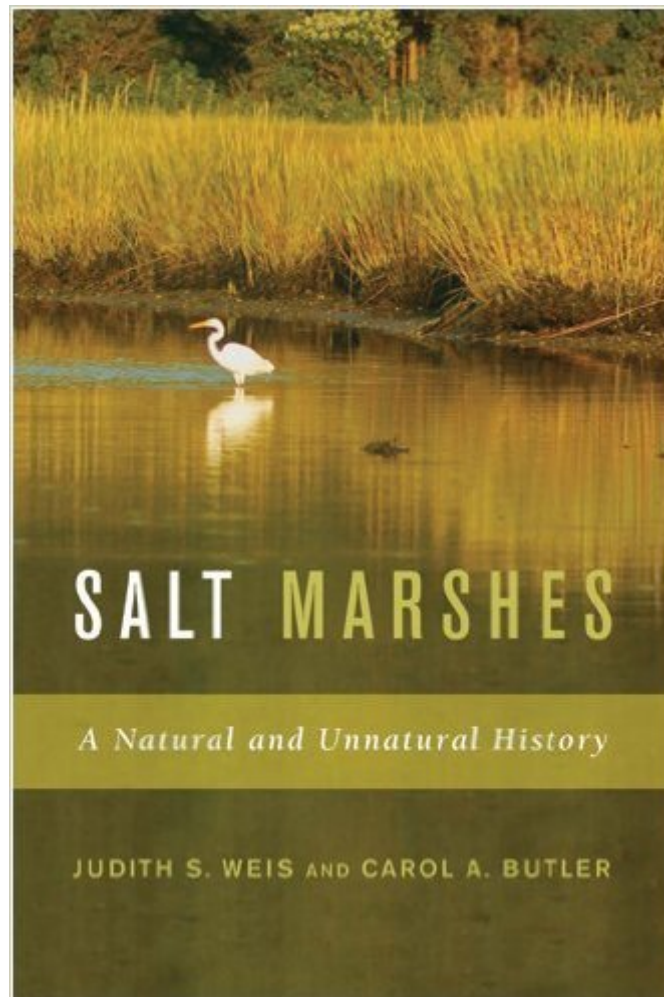


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# Salt Marshes: A Natural And Unnatural History



## Synopsis

Tall green grass. Subtle melodies of songbirds. Sharp whines of muskrats. Rustles of water running through the grasses. And at low tide, a pungent reminder of the treasures hidden beneath the surface. All are vital signs of the great salt marshes' natural resources. Now championed as critical habitats for plants, animals, and people because of the environmental service and protection they provide, these ecological wonders were once considered unproductive wastelands, home solely to mosquitoes and toxic waste, and mistreated for centuries by the human population. Exploring the fascinating biodiversity of these boggy wetlands, *Salt Marshes* offers readers a wealth of essential information about a variety of plants, fish, and animals, the importance of these habitats, consequences of human neglect and thoughtless development, and insight into how these wetlands recover. Judith S. Weis and Carol A. Butler shed ample light on the human impact, including chapters on physical and biological alterations, pollution, and remediation and recovery programs. In addition to a national and global perspective, the authors place special emphasis on coastal wetlands in the Atlantic and Gulf regions, as well as the San Francisco Bay Area, calling attention to their historical and economic legacies. Written in clear, easy-to-read language, *Salt Marshes* proves that the battles for preservation and conservation must continue, because threats to salt marshes ebb and flow like the water that runs through them.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Four decades ago, John and Mildred Teal published their seminal study of tidal wetlands, *Life and*

Death of the Salt Marsh (1969). They noted: "Marshes are generally considered useless land that must be made useful as quickly as possible. 'Useful,' of course, means destruction of the marsh in most cases and conversion of the area to ground on which people can stand, and water on which they can float boats." Weis and Butler's book describes the unfortunate results of this traditional view. It also discusses the impact of the recent consensus that salt marshes (the authors' "favorite places for many years") are valuable habitats, worth preserving and restoring. The book's chapters are divided into salt marshes' natural history (1. ecology, 2. plants, and, 3. animals), and their "unnatural" history -- the impact of humans (4. physical alterations, 5. pollution, 6. introduction of non-indigenous species, 7. restoration and management), closing with a case study of the "Death and Rebirth" of northeastern New Jersey's Hackensack Meadowlands. The book is a worthy successor to the Teals' classic work. It is accessible to the general reader, and would be a valuable resource for any college- or graduate-level course dealing with Ecology, Environmental History, or Urban Studies

A good book to have on the subject in the 1970's I worked for an environmental company that did surveying and water analysis in and around the salt/freshwater marshes of northern NJ including the infamous mercury polluted site know as the Ventron Site in around the Hackensack Meadowlands. Dr. Butler does a good job of examining and talking about these marshes and the pollution problems of this area... If you want a good basic understanding of urban marshes and the problems they are undergoing this is the book to have...!

This is a general introduction to salt marshes, their uses, and their current status, with what amounts to a case study of the Hackensack meadowlands. The writing is good, the science understandable. The most interesting part (to me) is the endocrine disrupters, which may affect various species (including humans) in differing but significant ways. These include pollution originating in birth control pills, tranquilizers, Prozac, statins, as well as the usual array of drugs--excreted in human urine and as inadequately processed sewage, infiltrating the marsh ecosystem. There's plenty else--PCBs, dioxins, oil, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, and general pollution from leaching dumps. The impact of these things on body systems varies but may be vast. There is more than this, but somewhat more general. The book discusses the magnitude of wetland loss, their inherent bioproductivity and environmental value. This last includes breaking waves and absorbing the energy, absorbing waterborne pollution. There's also a rather good section on invasive species, which is a bit scary. Some of the book is a bit technical but it is all

accessible.

From a review in BioScience by Edwin Grosholz: "...Overall, I found Salt Marshes to be a good resource and a pleasure to read. The authors balance an attention to detail with engaging stories about fiddler crabs, tidal regimes, and other subjects. They also weave important research results into the conceptual storyline, an approach that fosters a broader understanding of what controls these dynamic systems. But Weis and Butler really hit their stride in the final two chapters, on marsh restoration and management; the last chapter, "Death and Rebirth of an Urban Wetland," makes clear to the reader that this topic is a central interest of the authors. The pace and intensity of the prose pick up markedly here, as does the level of detail and documentation. The authors explore the history of the Hackensack Meadowlands as it rose like a phoenix from centuries of neglect and decades of assault, including dumping, filling, polluting, and invading. From the ashes of human abuse and mismanagement came rebirth in the form of salt marsh restoration. The book documents impressive growth in biodiversity and ecosystem function in both terrestrial and aquatic habitats of the Meadowlands, and makes a very compelling case for the future of salt marsh restoration. It's hard to imagine an estuarine landscape as heavily altered as this one "an area better known for the New Jersey Turnpike, toxic waste dumps, and sports stadiums" recovering so dramatically. However, as the authors repeatedly affirm in the final section: "Miracles do happen...." This is an excellent book, which packs a lot of information in 254 pages. Anyone interested in salt marshes should read this book and every library should have it. Midwest Independent Research, [mwir-earthscience.blogspot.com](http://mwir-earthscience.blogspot.com).

This book is both engaging and accessible. The quotations heading each chapter set the tone nicely, and the photographs provide further useful information. I'll be keeping this in mind in my work with environmental education.

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