Overall health

Overall, Coastal Georgia received a B, a moderately good score (74%). The twelve indicators that examine human health, fisheries, and wildlife are used to define Coastal Georgia health. The highest scoring indicators were red drum and sea turtle nesting, and both had perfect scores (100%). The lowest scoring indicators this cycle were blue crab (18%) and bald eagles (48%), which are due to factors that are explored further in this report.

Fisheries index

The fisheries index scored 69% in 2022. Red drum and shrimp had good scores, and spotted seatrout had a moderately good score. Blue crabs had a poor score most likely due to high salinity conditions trigger movement upriver to areas that are outside of DNR’s stationary sampling areas.

Sea turtle index

The sea turtle index scored an 87%, an A, in 2022. Overall, sea turtle indicators are good. Sea turtle nesting had a perfect score of 100%, while sea turtle hatching had a moderately good score. Sea turtle management is promoting populations and maintaining excellent nesting.

Water quality index

The water quality index scored an 86%, an A, in 2022. Overall, water quality indicators are good, meaning that it is generally safe to swim and to eat local shellfish, and that there are oxygen levels that support fish and other species. Fecal coliform and enterococcus had good scores, while dissolved oxygen had a moderately good score.

Bird index

The bird index scored a 53%, a C, in 2022. Wood storks had a moderately good score. American oystercatchers had moderate scores likely due to significant mammalian depredation and tidal flooding at some nesting locations.
Report card scores from 2014–2022

In Coastal Georgia, report card scores vary from year-to-year. By tracking health over time, we can evaluate changes in the environment and prioritize management and restoration. For example, DNR actively manages wood stork and American oystercatcher populations by considering habitat creation, predator management and nesting area closures to prevent disturbances.

Coastal Georgia is a gem of biodiversity and natural wonders

Marshes, wetlands, and barrier islands make up the diverse habitats of Coastal Georgia. The region is rich in abundant wildlife like sea turtles, fishes, shellfish, birds, and mammals. Recreational opportunities abound, such as boating, fishing, bird watching, kayaking, and swimming. Protecting the ecosystems and their inhabitants helps support not only recreational opportunities, but also the local economy, seafood industry and tourism.

Environmental report cards are used around the world to describe ecosystem status, increase public awareness, and inform and influence decision makers to act to improve the health of a watershed. Developing rigorous, quantitative assessments is beneficial to support environmental protection efforts. A five-step process is used to develop report cards.

**Importance of a report card**

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### Conditions in Coastal Georgia have been relatively good over the last eight years.

**Report card highlights in 2022**

**Sea turtles**

Sea turtles continue to fare well on the Georgia coast. The nesting score has remained at 100% since the Report Card’s inception, and this year, sea turtle hatching improved by 14 points from 59% to 73%. This increase was attributed to a record number of nests in Georgia this cycle, the absence of major storm events, and human intervention through nest protection and predator management.

**Land conservation**

DNR added more than 24,000 acres of conserved land to the Ceylon Wildlife Management Area in Camden County. This area is home to multiple important species, such as gopher tortoises, wood storks, Florida manatees, and bald eagles.

**Marine fisheries**

Annual species abundances in DNR’s sampling can be affected by natural variability in environmental conditions. This is especially true for blue crabs and high salinity, where populations move away from DNR’s stationary sampling stations. DNR fisheries staff observed above average salinity at sampling sites in 2022, likely causing blue crabs to have migrated to other areas not sampled by DNR with lower salinity.
Visit CoastalGaDNR.org to learn more.

About the Coastal Resources Division

The Coastal Resources Division of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, headquartered in Brunswick, is committed to balancing development and protection of the coast's natural assets, socio-cultural heritage and recreational resources for the benefit of present and future generations. DNR photo by Tyler Jones.

You can help protect the coast

Septic maintenance
Maintaining your septic system prevents bacteria from entering waterways and can help reduce beach advisories and shellfish harvest closures.

Lighting rules
Preventing sea turtles from becoming disoriented by artificial light is the law, and beach lighting ordinances occur during nesting and hatching seasons.

No litter
Taking trash with you after visiting recreation areas will help keep waterways and parks free of debris that could harm wildlife.

Fishery management

CRD ensures that saltwater fishes, crustaceans, and shellfish popular with anglers and commercial fishmen remain abundant, healthy and accessible for present and future generations. We achieve this through surveys, research projects, monitoring water quality and representing Georgia in federal and interstate fishery management processes.

Data collection and surveys

The Division conducts a variety of surveys to collect data for effective fishery management. Our fishery-independent surveys, such as the Ecological Monitoring Trawl Survey conducted aboard the 56-foot Research Vessel Reid W. Harris, and the Coastal Longline Survey, are conducted by CRD biologists to learn about the health of fisheries populations. Fishery-dependent surveys are similarly important, but rely on the public's participation. Dependent surveys include the Cooperative Angler Tagging Project, and the Recreational Angler Survey. CRD shares the data it collects with federal and interstate fishery management bodies.

Protection of marshlands and shores

The vast coastal marshlands, tidal waterways, and barrier island beaches are irreplaceable treasures delivering ecological and human benefits ranging from seafood to hurricane protection. To protect them, the Division administers the Coastal Marshlands and Shore Protection acts, issues revocable licenses for waterbottoms, and coordinates with other state and federal agencies to implement sound regulatory policy. Since 1997, many of these functions have been carried out by the Georgia Coastal Management Program, a partnership with the federal government and a mandate from the state legislature.

Purchase licenses
Buying a Georgia hunting or fishing license supports research and conservation of coastal species and habitats.

Catch limits
Following recreational fishing catch-and-size regulations helps sustain a healthy community of fish species.

Citizen science
Participating in monitoring and clean-up activities in local waterways can help alert managers to potential issues.

This report card was produced by the Integration & Application Network, University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science and Georgia DNR and published in April 2023. Data were collected by Georgia DNR's Coastal Resources Division and Wildlife Resources Division. This report card provides an assessment of coastal Georgia ecosystem health for 2022. This report card was funded by grant award # NA22NOS4190152 from the Office for Coastal Management, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The statements, findings, and conclusions do not necessarily reflect the views of OCM or NOAA. All photos from Georgia DNR's Coastal Resources Division, unless otherwise specified. For detailed information on indicators, thresholds, and methodology visit CoastalGaDNR.org/ReportCard. Cover photo provided by Tyler Jones.