

High-Ranking Defense Official Explains Why Salt Marsh Is Critical for Military and Communities

Natural habitats help to buffer bases and installations from storm surge, flooding, and sea level rise

ARTICLE

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Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Environment and Energy Resilience Richard Kidd takes a break during a backpacking trip at Ice Lake in the Eagle Cap Wilderness, Oregon.

Courtesy of Richard Kidd

Richard Kidd witnessed the horrors of war as an Army soldier, an international emergency relief worker, and a diplomat in countries ranging from Afghanistan and Bosnia to Rwanda and Mozambique. After some of the worst weeks, he would escape to climb a mountain, go on safari, or just walk in the woods. Nature brought him peace and perspective.

In his moments of reflection in the wilderness, Kidd understood that wherever he traveled, conflicts had their origins in more than political differences: The fighting often was rooted in a competition for scarce natural resources such as land, energy, and water. So after two decades in the Army, the United Nations, and the U.S. State Department, Kidd decided to attack some of the world's conflicts from a different angle.



Richard Kidd has held high-level posts in the military and federal government focusing on the sustainable use and protection of valuable natural resources, such as salt marsh.

Department of Defense

Today, the 57-year-old U.S. Military Academy (West Point) and Yale Management School graduate, who hails from a family that has served in the military and militias for more than 300 years, is the deputy assistant secretary of defense for environment and energy resilience, a top-ranking Department of Defense position that manages, among other things, the agency's climate change programs, compliance with environmental laws, pollution prevention, and energy resilience, including renewable energy.

This interview about Kidd's work and the [South Atlantic Salt Marsh Initiative](#)—an effort to protect shorelines, military installations, and wildlife by conserving a million acres of coastal habitat from North Carolina to northern Florida—has been edited for clarity and length:

Why is it important for the Department of Defense to address climate change, particularly in the Southeast?

We exist in this large ecosystem of planet Earth, and it's changing dramatically. No entity or area or activity is going to be immune.

The Department of Defense is concerned about saltwater intrusion, sea level rise, and storm surge. In the Southeast, we have basic and advanced training for our Marines who go to the Atlantic, and the region is also the base for major portions of the submarine fleet and training grounds for the Navy and Air Force.

What role do you see salt marsh playing in any solutions?

As the sea advances, it compresses existing infrastructure and encroaches on our installations, so we need to preserve buffer land around them. Salt marsh can serve as a buffer because nature has a way of protecting the coasts: Salt marsh and some other coastal habitats help reduce storm surge and flooding. And protecting the marsh helps conserve ecosystem services. Salt marsh is where fish, birds, oysters, and other wildlife grow—and it's an area that sequesters a great deal of carbon. If there's no salt marsh, we release more carbon into the atmosphere, and climate change grows even worse.

Plus, service members like to fish, paddleboard, and participate in many things that are so nice to do around a salt marsh.

You speak like a man who enjoys salt marsh and the great outdoors.

Being outside and being in nature was part of my childhood. I grew up in rural Oregon hunting and fishing with my father and friends, and as a young boy I'd vacation at my granddad's place in Fort Walton Beach in northwest Florida. I'd visit the inland waterways, where I liked to watch the fish and hermit crabs as big as my fist. Nowadays my wife likes to take us for a few weeks in summer to Cape Cod, where we've visited a refuge that has a huge salt marsh. I remember taking my son there when he was small and admiring his fascination with all the wildlife. Now he's 17, and he and I sometimes head to the mountains out west on backpacking trips.

What's the best way for the Department of Defense to protect salt marsh in the Southeast—and work with communities around the country to prepare for climate resilience?

The Department of Defense can't protect salt marsh acting alone; we have to cooperate with partners, to be a team with organizations like Pew, the states, and groups like the Southeast Regional Partnership for Planning and Sustainability, or SERPPAS, which is organizing the South Atlantic Salt March Initiative. SERPPAS is composed of state and federal agency representatives and the DOD and is bringing partners together to develop a marsh conservation plan that will help the military and communities. Organizations like SERPPAS give us a way to channel input, engineering expertise, money, and other resources to local communities around the country that are working on resilience projects to protect key ecosystems and natural features.

The president has requested doubling funds (an additional \$75 million) for climate resilience to help preserve boundaries and buffers around military facilities. For example, one of our programs, the [Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration Program](#), has funded community oyster and shoreline restoration projects that help protect military installations while boosting the health of some coastal habitats. We hope partnerships like these can strengthen the human-to-human bonds between our installations and local communities. If we can preserve land together, that's the sweet spot of cooperation.

Why is your mission of sustainability so important?

From the military's perspective, it's to keep the faith and trust of the American people. The American people and this country give us three things: First, the people give their lives and the welfare of their sons and daughters. Second, the public gives us tax money; we have to ensure we appropriately spend the funds. Third, this country gives us a tremendous natural endowment of land, water, and air space, and all the ecosystems and the services they provide.

We want to ensure future military leaders have the same choices and options we do. We want to preserve choices and trust over time. We have an obligation to protect all of these assets for us and the future.

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