

## Introduction to the Mannahatta Project

### *Background for Educators*

"The Countrey itself sends forth such a fragrant smell that it may be perceived at sea before [the ships] make the land." -- *Daniel Denton, early explorer*

Picture the morning of September 12, 1609, a few hours before explorer and trader Henry Hudson sailed into New York harbor for the first time. What do you imagine Manhattan island looked like then?

The purpose of the Mannahatta Project is to reconstruct the ecological history of Manhattan island in a highly detailed way. The project is rooted in the history, archaeology, ecology and geography of New York and the earliest days of our nation. Maps from the American Revolution, topographic surveys from the early years of the 19th century, bird-watching and plant surveys, and digital mapping have all been essential sources of information. After years of effort, accessing many unknown or under-appreciated resources in New York, Washington and Europe, the project is brimming with databases, maps and images that will enable people of all ages to envision what the past environment was like and what it means today. The project's purpose is to foster an appreciation for the remnants of the natural world – even in highly urbanized places like modern New York City – and encourage people to work harder to preserve them, here and across the globe.

The Mannahatta Project has created the most detailed scientific reconstruction of an ecological site ever attempted, recreating "Mannahatta" – "the land of many hills" in the Lenape Indian dialect – on the day that Henry Hudson first arrived. Hudson came to this part of the world looking for Oriental riches, but he found something infinitely more valuable. Mannahatta's natural wealth – old growth forests, stately wetlands, glittering streams, teeming waters, rolling hills, abundant wildlife – was prodigious and deep. Wolves, mountain lion, elk, deer and beaver, tens of thousands of birds, and a thoughtful and resourceful people all made Mannahatta their home. This research has uncovered the existence of 57 distinct ecological communities on the island, from chestnut oak forests to sandy beaches. Thousands of species of life called this island home.

The purpose of the Mannahatta curriculum is to make the results of this research available to teachers and students throughout New York State, in a form that easily integrates with classroom learning. This is a highly interdisciplinary research project, drawing on ecology, geography, history, personal narrative, and artistic representation, among other ways of interpreting the world. The curriculum, therefore, is also highly interdisciplinary – meeting New York State learning standards across a range of subject – and teachers are encouraged to adapt these lessons to fit their particular classroom goals. In this introductory lesson, students spend some time examining a variety of maps, in order to familiarize themselves with the ways they can gain information from maps; compare a reconstructed image of Mannahatta in 1609 with an aerial photograph of Manhattan today; become familiar with the idea of Manhattan's history as a natural environment; and become prepared to learn more about the ecology, geography, and social history of Mannahatta – and modern Manhattan – in future lessons.