

By: Jody A. Thompson, Environmental Educator
Alabama Sea Grant/Auburn Marine Center

The importance of wetlands in our ecosystems is more apparent all the time. In order to protect and plan for wetlands, scientists, planners, engineers, and others must be able to identify and map each type of wetland, as well as other types of land cover, including transportation corridors and urban developed land. By comparing maps over a series of time, trends in habitat changes can be identified.

Scientists use aerial photography to map land cover, including wetlands. Early maps were made from black and white photographs, but current maps use color photography and, in some cases, color infrared photography. The most recent aerial photographs of Mobile Bay were taken in 2001 and 2002, and have been analyzed for land cover by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). This analysis can be compared to existing photography from the 1956, 1978, and 1988.

In order to expand knowledge about wetlands, their value and functions, as well as mapping skills, the USGS developed the Wetland Education Through Maps and Aerial Photography (WETMAAP) program. This program introduces teachers and their students to mapping concepts using aerial photography and digital mapping including geographical information systems (GIS). The program also assists teachers in integrating the activities into the curriculum.

The WETMAAP program features 17 sites across the US, with Mobile Bay being one of them. Educators participate in workshops around the country to learn the program and receive classroom materials. To learn more about the WETMAAP program, visit www.wetmaap.org, or contact the USGS office at the National Wetlands Research Center in Lafayette, LA at 337/266-8691.