



## NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries Accomplishments of 2017-2022 Strategic Plan

In 2017, NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries released [Our Vision for America's Treasured Ocean Places: A Five-Year Strategy for the National Marine Sanctuary System](#), which set a course for managing our nation's most amazing ocean and Great Lakes places. Although not designed to capture everything we do, we used this plan to: keep ourselves organized, effective, and efficient; concentrate our people and resources on empowering communities to protect these important areas; improve our collaboration within NOAA and expand our partnerships with other government and non-governmental partners; more effectively bring ocean issues to the public; plot our course for our 50th anniversary in 2022; and make our office a more diverse and inclusive place to work. At the heart of the document were five overarching goals which, along with objectives, outlined the specific actions we aimed to take through 2022:

- Goal 1: Ensure Thriving Sanctuaries And Other Ocean Parks
- Goal 2: Safeguard More Underwater Treasures As National Marine Sanctuaries
- Goal 3: Increase Support For Sanctuaries
- Goal 4: Deepen Our Understanding Of Sanctuaries
- Goal 5: Ensure The Office Of National Marine Sanctuaries Is A Great Place To Work

As we look to the future, it is important to reflect and celebrate our accomplishments of the last few years in order to be prepared to face the challenges of the future.

### **Goal 1. Ensure Thriving Sanctuaries And Other Ocean Parks**

Over the last five years, sanctuary staff have worked hard to reduce threats to key species and marine habitats. In California, we successfully mitigated noise impacts to acoustically sensitive marine mammal species and implemented vessel strike reduction strategies through our [Blue Whales and Blue Skies](#) initiative. Since 2017, the cooperation rate of large vessels participating in the program has increased from 36% to 64%, which has resulted in a reduction of 5 decibels of ocean noise per transit, and an estimated 50% reduction in whale strikes from participating vessels. In 2019, NOAA took steps to complete the rezoning process for [Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary](#), which protects the only coral barrier reef in the continental United States by releasing the [Restoration Blueprint](#), which took into account more than 20 years of science, management achievements, technical experience, and local community involvement. In 2022, the next iteration of the [Restoration Blueprint](#) was released for public comment.

In order to enhance protection of sanctuary resources, sanctuary staff worked internationally to establish sister sanctuary agreements between the [National Marine Sanctuary of American Samoa and the Palau International Coral Reef Center](#), and between [Stellwagen Bank National](#)



[Marine Sanctuary and the government of the Netherlands](#). Sanctuary staff also worked closely with regional MPA networks in North America, the Caribbean and Latin America to effectively manage shared species and habitats and address common challenges.

The Office of National Marine Sanctuaries is continuing to protect significant maritime heritage and cultural resources by strengthening partnerships with Tribes and other Indigenous peoples by expanding the inclusion of indigenous knowledge in decision-making, such as by collaborating on [Ma Ka Po Mai](#), the Native Hawaiian Plan for the management of Papahānaumokuākea, and the inclusion of a [Chumash ecosystem services assessment](#) in the Channel Islands Condition Report. Additionally, a [shipwreck avoidance program](#) was piloted in Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary to protect historically important shipwrecks from damage by fishing gear.

To promote responsible human uses, a recognition program to encourage resource protection for dive and snorkel operators was expanded to include charter fishing operators in the Florida Keys. [Blue Star Fishing Guides](#) was launched in 2018 and now recognizes 20 charter boat operators who have committed to responsible fishing practices within the sanctuary. In Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary, a [network of mooring buoys](#) was installed to prevent damage to sensitive cultural resources. In 2021, the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries released new [Wildlife Viewing Guidelines](#) in English and Spanish. The goal of the guidelines is to engage and educate the public on how to have an enjoyable adventure while reducing the chance of wildlife disturbance. Compatible use of national marine sanctuaries, such as responsible recreation, can be a critical tool to create awareness and promote stewardship of sanctuary resources.

In order to promote resilience and adaptation within the National Marine Sanctuary System, Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary was designated as a [sentinel site](#), which brings together science, management, and technologies to monitor and raise awareness about ocean acidification. In early 2021, the sanctuary hosted the first meeting of the Olympic Coast Ocean Acidification Sentinel Site, which served to inform resource managers and coastal communities about the impacts of ocean acidification on marine resources, cultures, communities, and economies to ensure they are prepared for a changing ocean. To address climate impacts, the sanctuary system developed and began implementing a [Climate Resilience Plan](#) to address science and assessment, adaptation, education and outreach, and green operations.

## **Goal 2. Safeguard More Underwater Treasures As National Marine Sanctuaries**

In early 2021, building on more than three decades of scientific exploration, public input, and coordination with the sanctuary advisory council, Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary was [expanded](#) from 56 to 160 square miles. The expansion added 14 additional reefs and banks in the Gulf of Mexico that provide important habitat for recreationally and



commercially important fish, such as red snapper, mackerel, grouper, and wahoo, as well as threatened or endangered species of sea turtles, corals, and giant manta rays. Then, in 2022, NOAA initiated the process to potentially designate three new National Marine Sanctuaries: [Papahānaumokuākea](#), [Chumash Heritage](#), and [Hudson Canyon](#). Initiating designation of these new sanctuary sites will ensure that additional nationally significant resources are incorporated into the sanctuary system.

The Office of National Marine Sanctuaries has implemented designation processes for new areas, including designating [Mallows Bay - Potomac River National Marine Sanctuary](#) in 2019 and [Wisconsin Shipwreck Coast National Marine Sanctuary](#) in 2021. Additionally, NOAA is considering a new national marine sanctuary in [eastern Lake Ontario](#) to protect, research, interpret, and improve public access to its natural and historical resources. In 2021, NOAA released a draft environmental impact statement and a draft management plan to continue the designation process for the proposed [Lake Ontario National Marine Sanctuary](#).

### **Goal 3. Increase Support For Sanctuaries**

In order to expand recognition of national marine sanctuaries, NOAA collaborated with partners to upgrade and establish visitor centers across the country, including opening a new learning facility on the Hawaiian island of Kauai to increase the [Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary's](#) outreach and impact on the island by supporting tourism and expanding volunteer programs and partnerships. In 2020, the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries launched [Sanctuaries 360°](#), an innovative program to bring national marine sanctuaries to viewers around the world.

In 2018, in response to the significant amount of marine debris left in the wake of Hurricane Irma, Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and partners launched "[Goal Clean Seas Florida Keys](#)," enlisting Blue Star dive operators, citizen scientists, and volunteers in locating and removing underwater marine debris. To date, the program has removed over 50,000 pounds of debris from sanctuary waters, and increased sanctuary engagement with the community.

As part of the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the National Marine Sanctuary System, the U.S. Postal Service and NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries teamed up to showcase our nation's underwater treasures with [16 new Forever® stamps](#). The stamps feature scenes that showcase the diverse and abundant wildlife and ecosystems that can be found throughout the National Marine Sanctuary System.

In collaboration with the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation, we launched [Save Spectacular](#), a campaign to celebrate the approaching 50th anniversary of the National Marine Sanctuary System. This highly successful outreach campaign included the launch of new educational



resource collections, media resources, a poster series, and signature articles and publications to celebrate the past 50 years of ocean and coastal conservation.

## Goal 4. Deepen Our Understanding Of Sanctuaries

To learn more about our sanctuaries, we partnered with Ocean Exploration Trust, the Global Foundation for Ocean Exploration (GFOE), and Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute to perform exploration missions within National Marine Sanctuaries via telepresence technology. Since then, the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries has facilitated hundreds of educational programs and live, ship-to-shore interactions with youth and adults in classrooms, community centers, museums, zoos, and aquariums, including for the recent [Valor in the Atlantic expedition](#) with GFOE. NOAA also took steps to ensure capacity to study sanctuary resources by investing in much needed [small vessel infrastructure](#) in the Florida Keys, [Olympic Coast](#), and [Monterey Bay](#).

In order to better track and predict conditions and trends within national marine sanctuaries, we developed [Condition Reports](#) for Channel Islands, Stellwagen Bank, and Olympic Coast national marine sanctuaries that documented the status and trends of natural and cultural resources in conjunction with management plan review processes. Along with the traditional publications, NOAA also launched [web-enabled versions](#) of the report, which pairs artwork with data to make it easy to explore the changing conditions within National Marine Sanctuaries. Then, in early 2022, the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries and partners [launched a new web portal](#) that allows users to learn about and listen to underwater sounds throughout the National Marine Sanctuary System. Understanding underwater sounds helps NOAA track and predict conditions within National Marine Sanctuaries to better protect these special places.

We have also worked to develop and implement plans to control invasive species within sanctuaries, including by continuing to support the [Lionfish Response Plan](#). A major advancement in controlling the lionfish population, sanctuary scientists [developed and released designs](#) for deep water traps, which are now being integrated into the commercial fishing fleet.

To understand the value of sanctuaries to our nation, we [completed assessments](#) of the type, distribution, and intensity of human uses of Wisconsin Shipwreck Coast, Mallow's Bay-Potomac River, Flower Garden Banks, Florida Keys, Monitor, Thunder Bay, Stellwagen Bank, and the proposed Lake Ontario national marine sanctuaries. The Office of National Marine Sanctuaries was also able to assess, document, and communicate the value of the sanctuary to [whale watch operators](#) in Channel Islands and Stellwagen Bank national marine sanctuaries.



## Goal 5. Ensure The Office Of National Marine Sanctuaries Is A Great Place To Work

In order to encourage a culture of collaboration, inclusion, and respect, the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries enlisted diverse and talented professionals through fellowships, internships, and volunteer opportunities, including continuing support for the [Dr. Nancy Foster Scholarship](#) program, [Ernest F. Hollings Undergraduate Scholars](#), and creating new partnerships with minority serving institutions. In addition, our Diversity and Inclusion Committee has created a Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan to help lead transformational change in our organization, such as identifying and eliminating barriers to inclusion by improving accessibility, implementing diversified recruiting and hiring strategies, and increasing paid internship opportunities.

The Office of National Marine Sanctuaries has made a huge commitment to forwarding racial equity by applying for and committing to a two-year national [Working Toward Racial Equity](#) program, in which our team will receive support to foster an equitable, inclusive, and culturally relevant work environment. The sanctuary team has offered learning and development opportunities for staff members, and is currently drafting recommendations to address inequities and transform our organizational culture.

We are committed to increasing staff satisfaction and performance, and to investing in our workforce and their professional development. By developing a Core Policies and Procedures handbook, sanctuary staff now have a better understanding of the role and responsibilities inherent in a federal agency. The Office of National Marine Sanctuaries has also implemented improvements in leadership communication and professional development opportunities, such as hosting leadership office hours, introducing new mechanisms for staff suggestions and feedback, and increased awareness of employee reward and recognition programs. Other recommendations are embedded in our new strategic plan to continue to improve our workplace culture for all.