Office of National Marine Sanctuaries
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

Proposed Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary Newsletter Feb 2024

Kelp at Point Conception
Photo: Robert Schwemmer/NOAA

About the Designation

A nomination for the proposed Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary was submitted to NOAA in July 2015. NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries (ONMS) is currently considering sanctuary designation to protect the region's important marine ecosystem, maritime heritage resources, and cultural values of Indigenous communities. The proposed sanctuary stretches along the coastline adjacent to most of San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties, and would provide a haven for marine mammals, invertebrates, sea birds, and fishes, create an overarching framework for community-based spatial management of any threats, invite collaborative co-stewardship with local Tribes, and recognize Indigenous and tribal history and culture in the area.

Public Comment on the Draft Designation Documents

The public comment period for the draft designation documents of the proposed Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary (CHNMS) closed on October 25, 2023. NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries received an impressive 2,221 individual submissions to Regulations.gov representing a total of 110,551 individual oral, electronic, mailed comments, and petition signatures. Staff have spent the last few months carefully reviewing these important comments, drafting responses and incorporating document updates that will appear in the final management plan, final environmental impact statement, and final rule.

Mid-2024 remains the target goal for a final NOAA decision on designation and, if approved, the publication of final designation documents for the proposed sanctuary.

NOAA Ocean Guardian Programs

Are you looking for ways to connect children to the ocean or watershed in your area? Are your children excited about making a difference in environmental conservation? Then check out the NOAA Ocean Guardian Programs! There are many different Ocean Guardian programs, from a Kids Club to school and classroom programs and even a Dive Club. Each Ocean Guardian program provides children with a personal connection to the ocean and the watersheds they live nearby. Parents with children who have participated in an Ocean Guardian program have seen an increased commitment to the environment in their child. They also demonstrate an increased sense of community and interest in volunteering. These programs are available to anyone, regardless of whether they live near a national marine sanctuary. To learn more about the various Ocean Guardian programs, visit the Ocean Guardian website.

NOAA OCEAN GUARDIAN School

NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARIES

National Marine Sanctuary Foundation

ONMS West Coast Region Priorities

Each year, ONMS West Coast Region leadership meets to set annual priorities. These priorities focus on areas in which two or more west coast national marine sanctuaries are involved. On average, about 10 priorities are chosen each year (some are repeated) and a staff lead and other staff participants are assigned to each priority. Two priorities to highlight that would likely be relevant in the proposed sanctuary are Kelp Forest Restoration and Monitoring, and Benthic Habitat Conservation.

Kelp Forest Restoration and Monitoring

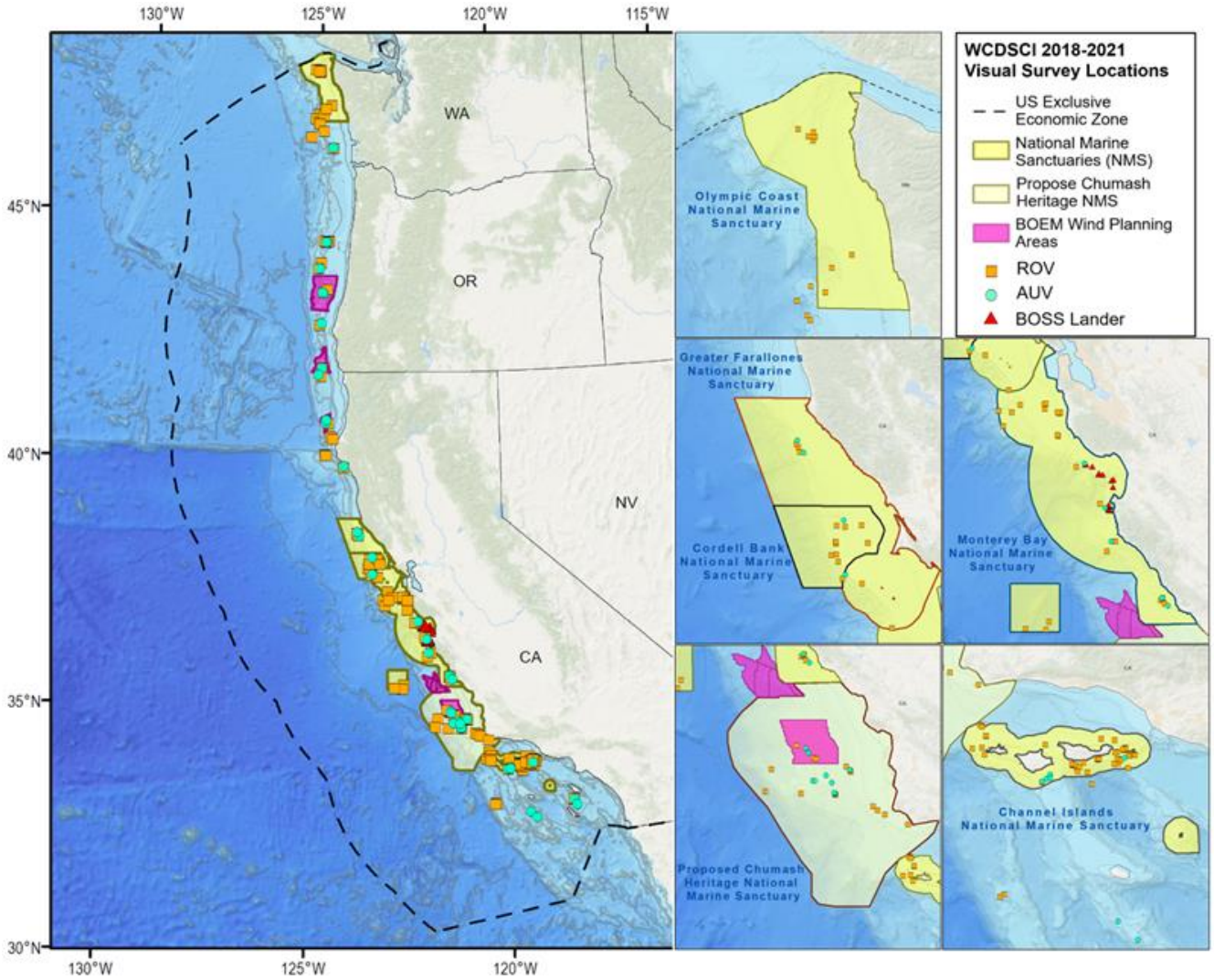
Sanctuary scientists are working on kelp forest monitoring and restoration of kelp ecosystems. Long-term monitoring (LTM) programs provide a foundation for tracking the status and trends of resources within kelp forest communities, highlighting questions to pursue with targeted short-term research (STR), and in the face of dramatic environmental changes, if and when to implement effective and efficient restoration programs.

In southern California, Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary contributes staff time to collect kelp and water samples to better understand nitrogen cycling in kelp forest ecosystems; vessel time to support LTM with the Partnership for Interdisciplinary Studies of Coastal Oceans (PISCO) at UC Santa Barbara and the National Park Service Kelp Forest Monitoring Program; and has applied for grant funding with partners to scope and model kelp dynamics informing kelp forest restoration decisions by resource management agencies. In central California, Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary contributes staff and vessel time to PISCO LTM and restoration of kelp at Tanker Reef (a California Department of Fish and Wildlife collaboration). In northern California, Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary (GFNMS) staff launched a STR project to test various kelp restoration techniques; are investigating bull kelp out-planting techniques and the influence of environmental variables on kelp establishment/growth; and the Greater Farallones Association has received $4.9M from NOAA's Office of Habitat Conservation for kelp restoration in GFNMS. And in Washington, Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary contributes staff and vessel time to partners from the Northwest Fisheries Science Center to conduct the only annual kelp surveys along the outer coast of Washington state.

NOAA Hollings Scholar trains how to count juvenile rockfishes seeking refuge under the kelp canopy at Hopkins Marine Station, Monterey, CA. Photo Credit: Steve Lonhart/NOAA

Benthic Habitat Conservation/West Coast Deep-Sea Coral Initiative

Deep-sea habitats are extremely long-lived and vulnerable communities that provide a number of benefits critical to the health of the ocean, as well as the economic systems they support such as recreational and commercial fishing. Each of the five west coast national marine sanctuaries contain deep-sea coral and sponge habitats, but due to the costly nature of deep-sea exploration and research, they remain largely unexplored and uncharacterized. To address this data and knowledge gap, west coast sanctuaries have been working together to take advantage of various ships of opportunity for deep-sea work, and using those ships to address both regional and site-specific priorities. For example, the West Coast Deep-Sea Coral Initiative (WCDSCI) was a four-year research program that took place from 2018 to 2021, supported by NOAA Fisheries Deep Sea Coral Research and Technology Program. Owing to regional expertise and strong partnerships between ONMS and various federal, state, and non-governmental agencies, sanctuary staff played a significant role in planning and implementing this regional initiative alongside NOAA Fisheries. The initiative was designed to support work with partners to explore, map, characterize, and conduct research on deep-water coral and sponge habitats off the U.S. West Coast, and specifically aimed to: (1) gather baseline information from areas subject to fishing regulation changes, (2) improve understanding of known, high DSCS bycatch “hot spots", and (3) explore and assess deep-sea coral and sponge resources within national marine sanctuaries.



The US West Coast, depicting all visual survey dives or camera drops accomplished with support from WCDSCI within and beyond NOAA’s west coast national marine sanctuaries (yellow) and BOEM wind energy planning areas (pink).

https://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/chumash-heritage/

Although sanctuaries afford protection to deep-sea coral and sponges through the prohibition of seafloor disturbance (i.e., oil/gas exploration or extraction, other types of seabed construction), climate change impacts (warming and ocean acidification) and marine debris remain significant threats to these habitats across the California Current. Nine different cruises were conducted within the five existing sanctuaries and the proposed CHNMS across the four-year WCDSCI. These cruises included use of remotely operated vehicles, autonomous underwater vehicles, drop cameras, and gathered hundreds of biological, geological, and water samples to address a variety of research questions related to deep-sea corals, sponges, and fish. Data from regional initiatives like these have contributed to the design, designation, and management of sanctuaries for over a decade, including the proposed CHNMS. Additional deep-sea research took place in the proposed sanctuary during the NOAA Ocean Exploration's *Okeanos Explorer* mission in 2023, where autonomous underwater vehicles were used to further map deep-sea communities. On that cruise, two members of the Coastal Band of the Chumash Nation sailed on the large NOAA vessel to bring together traditional ecological knowledge with Western science. Mia and Keli Lopez shared their knowledge, traditions, and connections to the ocean during live streamed events as well as an organized "ship-to-shore" outreach event at the Cabrillo High School Aquarium in Lompoc, California. Sanctuaries are uniquely poised to bring together various stakeholders to participate in the planning and execution of science and outreach missions such as these.

A final report on NOAA's West Coast Deep-Sea Coral Initiative was produced in 2023 and a blog written by Mia Lopez of the Coastal Band of the Chumash Nation has been shared online.

Sanctuary Volunteer Programs

Also germane to the potential designation of the new sanctuary are volunteer opportunities. Volunteers are an integral part of many aspects of sanctuary management, with numerous opportunities for those interested in informing and inspiring the public about ocean conservation and engaging in citizen science. Citizen Science volunteer opportunities include collecting water samples from runoff during the first major rainfall and recording dead marine life on beaches. There are opportunities to interact with the public as a docent at a visitor center or educating passengers about a sanctuary and its local wildlife aboard whale watching vessels. There are opportunities to educate the public from kayaks or along key viewing points near a sanctuary. Volunteer opportunities vary from sanctuary to sanctuary depending on the needs of the sanctuary. In 2023, national marine sanctuary volunteers contributed 74,366 hours across the entire system, which is equivalent to 41 full-time federal employees, at a value of $2.4 million. To learn more about volunteer programs across the national marine sanctuary system, visit the ONMS Volunteer website, which has direct links to volunteer programs at available sites across the sanctuary system.

Did You Know?

Vessel strikes are a leading cause of whale mortality and central California is an important habitat area for many whale species. If you are regularly on the water, you can help protect whales! Whale Alert is a citizen science tool geared towards reducing the risk of vessel strikes with whales. The app uses whale presence data from users who enter verified sightings, acoustic equipment, and aerial surveys to produce a map. The data is collected via cell phone or tablet and helps establish speed zones, warnings, and other measures to reduce vessel speeds and reduce the risk to whales and mariners. Would you like to contribute to this citizen science effort? Download the Whale Alert app today from the App Store or Google Play or visit their website for more information.

Rocky reef off Point Estero.
Photo credit: Robert Schwemmer/NOAA

View of Diablo Canyon Power Plant.
Photo credit: Laura Ingulsrud/NOAA

Poppy fields at Montaña de Oro State Park.
Photo credit: Laura Ingulsrud/NOAA

The Designation Timeline

Step 1: Public Scoping

November 10, 2021 – January 31, 2022

Step 2: Review of Public Comments and Preparation of Draft Documents

February 2022 – Winter 2022/2023

Current Step: Release Draft Designation Documents and Provide for Public Comment Period

Target: Summer 2023

Step 4: Prepare Final Designation Documents

Winter 2023 – Mid-2024

Step 5: Publish Final Designation Documents

Target: Mid-2024

Step 6: Sanctuary Designation

Target: 2024

If you have questions regarding the proposed Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary, please email chumash.heritage@noaa.gov.