

# FLOWER GARDEN BANKS NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY

## 2008 ACCOMPLISHMENTS



Photo: Joyce & Frank Burek

### Research Vessel *Manta* Commissioned

In June 2008, the sanctuary commissioned a new, custom-designed research vessel, the R/V *Manta*. Designed with flexibility in mind, the *Manta's* ability to adapt to the goals of a project make it a valuable tool for the sanctuary and its partners. The vessel greatly enhances the staff's ability to respond to natural events such as hurricanes, coral diseases and coral bleaching, as well as human disturbances such as oil spills, anchoring and illegal fishing activities. The *Manta* will also be used for education and outreach activities, including professional development workshops. The vessel leverages the resources of many partners in the Gulf of Mexico region, including other government agencies, academia and non-profit organizations. The *Manta* has already proven to be an asset to the local community by providing support to emergency response and recovery teams immediately following Hurricane Ike.

### Sanctuary Condition Report Released

The Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary Condition Report was released in 2008 following a year-long effort to assess and compile comprehensive information on the status of the sanctuary's resources and habitats. This condition report shows that even though the sanctuary is 115 miles offshore, it is connected to other habitats in the Gulf of Mexico that are also vulnerable to human activities. The report serves as a benchmark of the current health of the sanctuary that will help resource managers develop effective ways to preserve and protect it for future generations to enjoy.



Photo: Kellie Tsapalis

### New Catalog Helps Divers Report Manta Ray Sightings

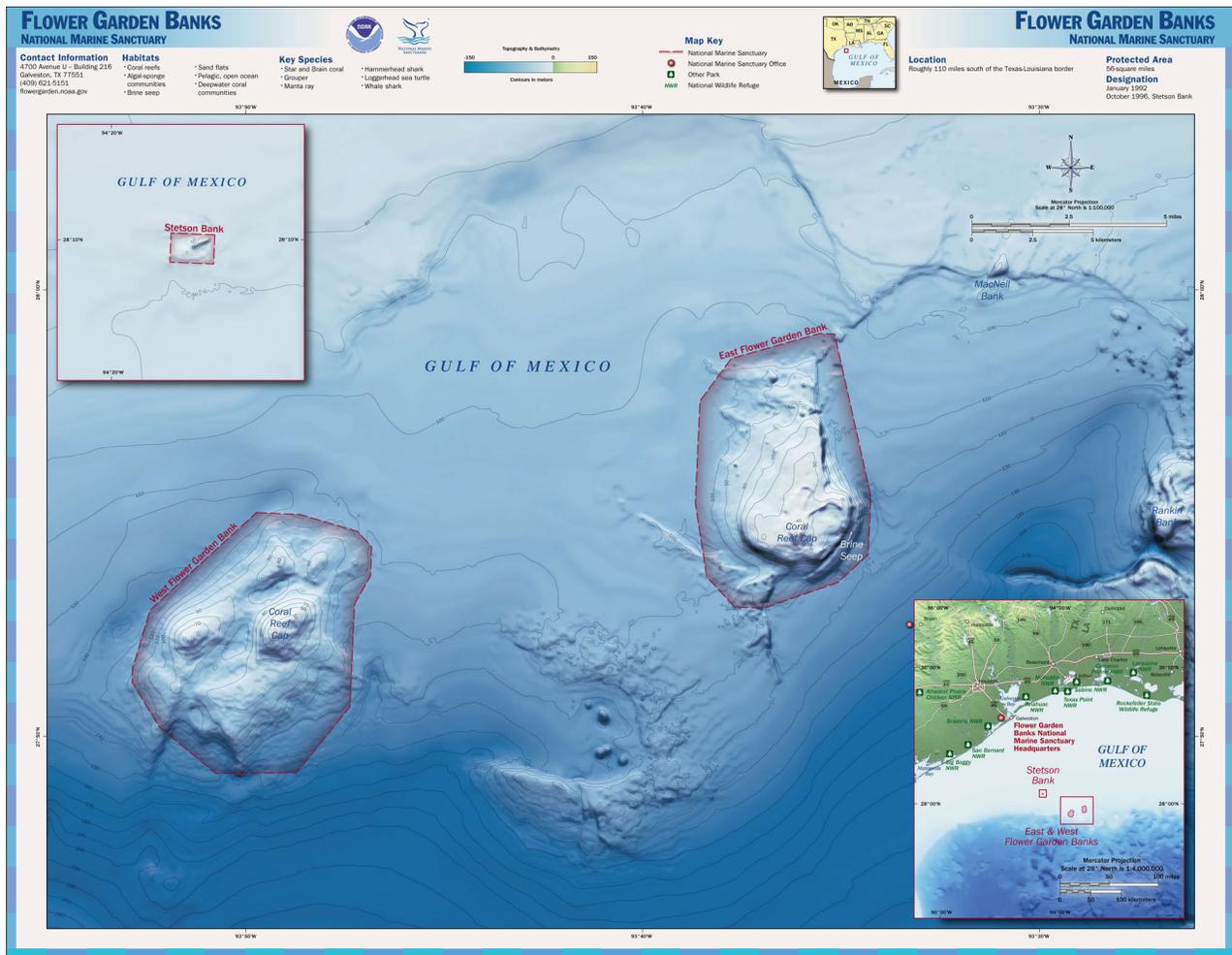
Manta rays are a key species in the Flower Garden Banks and Stetson Bank ecosystems, and sanctuary researchers are leading an ongoing effort to learn more about the population and habits of these little-known creatures. Sanctuary staff have collected photos of manta rays taken in the sanctuary over the past 25 years, and in 2008 the collection was released as both a catalog and a poster identifying numerous manta rays by their distinctive markings. The catalog will help divers report sightings of specific individuals, adding to the database and further enhancing scientists' understanding of the animals. Along with movement tracking data from the sanctuary's manta ray tagging project, this information will help resource managers identify important connections between the sanctuary and other ecologically important areas in the Gulf of Mexico.



Photo: Flower Garden Banks NMS

### Flower Garden Banks Featured in "Operation: Resilient Planet"

The Flower Garden Banks were featured in National Geographic's 2008-09 JASON Project, "Operation: Resilient Planet." The project is an ecology curriculum unit based on National Science Education Standards. Sanctuary education staff helped develop content for the curriculum and joined ocean explorer Dr. Bob Ballard and the Argonaut Team on an expedition to see the sanctuary's reefs. Once the curriculum was finalized, the sanctuary team coordinated and hosted a professional development workshop for the JASON Alliance of Southeast Texas teacher-trainers. For 12 days in early 2009, sanctuary staff and volunteers will give presentations to over 8,000 students participating in a day of learning and virtual exploration coordinated by Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas.



Sanctuary maps available at [sanctuaries.noaa.gov](http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov)

### Researchers Analyze 15 Years of Data

University researchers and sanctuary staff have collected data from Stetson Bank, located within Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary, for a combined 15 years. Discreet segments of the data have previously been analyzed and synthesized, including a five-year segment that was presented at last year's International Coral Reef Symposium. However, 2008 saw the first analysis of the entire 15 years to reveal long-term trends in the health of the bank. The resulting information will be the basis for future management decisions regarding human activities at Stetson Bank.

To learn more about these and other accomplishments, visit [sanctuaries.noaa.gov](http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov)

