



OUR VISION FOR AMERICA'S TREASURED OCEAN PLACES

A five-year strategy for the National Marine Sanctuary System



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABOUT US

2

PREAMBLE

4

MISSION

6

VISION

7

OUR CORE VALUES

8

GOAL 1: ENSURE HEALTHY AND RESILIENT SANCTUARIES AND OTHER MARINE PROTECTED AREAS

10

GOAL 2: PROTECT MORE AREAS OF NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

12

GOAL 3: INCREASE AND BROADEN PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR OCEAN CONSERVATION AND THE SANCTUARY SYSTEM

14

GOAL 4: DEEPEN UNDERSTANDING OF SANCTUARIES

16

GOAL 5: INVEST IN INFRASTRUCTURE TO MEET CURRENT AND FUTURE SYSTEM-WIDE NEEDS

18

GOAL 6: ENSURE AN INCLUSIVE AND INNOVATIVE WORKPLACE

20

MAKING IT HAPPEN

22

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Cover Photos (top to bottom, left to right): Matt McIntosh/NOAA; David J. Ruck/NOAA; Nick Zachar/NOAA; Nathan Coy; Ed Lyman/NOAA

ABOUT US

We are a network of 15 national marine sanctuaries and two marine national monuments, encompassing more than 600,000 square miles of ocean and Great Lakes waters. We seek to protect the extraordinary scenic beauty, biodiversity, historical connections, and economic productivity of these areas so they may continue to serve as the basis for thriving recreation, tourism, and commercial activities that drive coastal economies. As stewards of these places, through domestic and international partnerships, we help ensure a healthier ocean, now and for future generations.



The Office of National Marine Sanctuaries headquarters and the Marine Protected Areas Center are located in Silver Spring, Maryland.



Photo: Matt McInosh/NOAA



PLACES

We protect amazing places. Our comprehensive and community-based approach ensures the long-term protection of nationally and internationally significant areas in the ocean and Great Lakes, while supporting sustainable recreation and commercial uses.



SYSTEM

Our sanctuaries and monuments are part of a larger system of protected areas across the United States and around the world. Together, we connect and strengthen these treasured places for more effective protection.



PARTNERS

We depend on partners across town and around the globe to fulfill our mission. Key partners include the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation and other nonprofits, state and federal resource management agencies, over 470 advisory council members, and 10,000 volunteers. In turn, our small boats, visitor centers, and exhibits support community interests.

“As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the National Marine Sanctuaries Act, we used this moment to put forward a new plan that we hope will transform this system for generations to come.”

— John Armor, Director, Office of National Marine Sanctuaries

From here forward, unless otherwise qualified, the terms “sanctuary” and “sanctuaries” are used to collectively refer to or include all national marine sanctuaries and marine national monuments managed by the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries.

PREAMBLE

National marine sanctuaries and other marine protected areas (MPAs) thrive in and contribute to regional and broader ecosystem health. We must fully realize the potential that these areas can provide to our nation.

In this plan we set forth the first five years of a 20-year vision to fundamentally change how national marine sanctuaries and other MPAs contribute to meeting the challenges ahead, preserve places our nation entrusted to us and leave the generations that follow a model to emulate for marine conservation.



Photo: Ed Lyman/NOAA

This transformational change requires us to commit to fundamental priorities to meet emerging challenges:

- Embracing Indigenous, cultural, and tribal significance, and investing in meaningful engagement with tribal and Indigenous communities that rely on the ocean and Great Lakes as an integral part of their identity, culture, and well-being.
- Investing in infrastructure for marine conservation to understand, monitor, interpret, and protect the best of our nation's waters, which will be the front line for greener operations at our facilities and on the water.
- Making diversity, inclusion, and representation central to who we are as an organization and to representing the communities' national marine sanctuaries serve. This includes valuing all views, interests and beliefs, and being welcoming and accessible to all.
- Enlisting more partners because we cannot do this alone. We need strong, inclusive partnerships across all levels of NOAA, federal agencies, state agencies, academic institutions, sovereign tribal nations, and private institutions and nonprofits to conserve and protect these treasured places.

Mindful of our mission and vision, guided by our values we hold dear, we commit to these transformative changes that will guide the National Marine Sanctuary System to meet the challenges ahead and leave these places better than we found them.



Photo: David Ruck/NOAA

MISSION

WE PROTECT TREASURED
PLACES IN THE
OCEAN
AND GREAT
LAKES

VISION

A THRIVING SANCTUARY
SYSTEM THAT PROTECTS OUR
NATION'S UNDERWATER
TREASURES
AND INSPIRES MOMENTUM FOR
A HEALTHY OCEAN

OUR CORE VALUES



Photo: Douglas Croft



COMMUNITY

We strive to be more representative of and accessible to our communities and to reach, educate, and connect with everyone about the future of our ocean and Great Lakes, because when working together we have a better chance of saving spectacular places.



CONSERVATION

We come from different places and backgrounds, but all of us are connected in one way or another to the ocean and Great Lakes. We are committed to maintaining, protecting, and restoring these special places, which are critical to communities and to a healthy planet.



COLLABORATION

Sanctuaries bring people together and help build healthy partnerships. We join with a diverse and broad coalition of partners and Indigenous communities to build networks and pursue ocean and Great Lakes interests that will help preserve these special places for future generations.



RESPECT

The communities and places in which we work reflect diverse cultures, values, and ideas. We move forward by acknowledging the past, learning from our different cultural values and experiences, and striving to include more diverse perspectives. We are committed to increasing the diversity of our workforce to better represent the communities we serve.



TEAMWORK

Our success depends on the contributions from everyone on our team. We strive to create a workplace that embraces and celebrates our passions and talents, and fosters a culture of trust, continuous learning, and professional development.



RESPONSIBILITY

We honor our commitment to the American public as stewards of their treasured underwater places. We deliver results, practice transparency, and strive to exceed expectations.



INNOVATION

Adaptability, new ideas, and new insights are essential to our success in conserving and protecting these special places in a rapidly changing climate.

“ We are privileged to serve our nation as caretakers of some of the most precious places in our ocean and Great Lakes waters.”

— Sarah Fangman, Superintendent, Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary

GOAL ONE

ENSURE HEALTHY AND RESILIENT SANCTUARIES AND OTHER MARINE PROTECTED AREAS

National and international leadership for effective management is essential to protecting marine ecosystems, cultural resources, and the benefits each provides to current and future generations.



Photo: Matt McInosh/NOAA

OBJECTIVE 1.1: Protect sanctuary ecosystems, maritime heritage resources, and cultural landscapes.

TO ACHIEVE THIS, WE WILL:

- Strategy 1: Prioritize management actions that reduce the most harmful human impacts and protect ecosystem structure and function.
- Strategy 2: Foster meaningful engagement and relationships with Indigenous communities to fulfill trust responsibilities, reflect Indigenous perspectives and values, and conserve cultural heritage resources.
- Strategy 3: Develop and implement a national resource protection agenda that identifies and prioritizes a subset of current and future challenges affecting the health of national marine sanctuaries and other MPAs.

OBJECTIVE 1.2: Manage national marine sanctuaries as part of a resilient, adaptive network of marine protected areas within changing ocean and Great Lakes environments.

TO ACHIEVE THIS, WE WILL:

- Strategy 1: Understand, identify, and implement actions to reduce climate vulnerability and increase the resilience of sanctuary habitats, species, ecosystem functions and services, communities, and cultures.
- Strategy 2: Engage with local, regional, and international partners to implement actions to reduce impacts to sanctuaries and other marine protected areas.
- Strategy 3: Develop and implement an approach to adaptively managing marine protected areas as a network.

OBJECTIVE 1.3: Restore key habitats and species in national marine sanctuaries to ensure long-term resilience and ecosystem benefits.

TO ACHIEVE THIS, WE WILL:

- Strategy 1: Identify, prioritize, and implement projects to restore wildlife, habitats, and ecosystems to enhance biodiversity, ecosystem services, and climate resilience within sanctuaries.
- Strategy 2: Develop broad-based partnerships within and outside NOAA to support restoration efforts.

GOAL TWO

PROTECT MORE AREAS OF NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

Nationally and internationally significant areas in the ocean and Great Lakes need comprehensive and coordinated protection through a community-based approach.



Photo: Robert Schwenmer/NOAA

OBJECTIVE 2.1: Protect more places in the National Marine Sanctuary System to promote climate resilience, support a healthy ocean, and conserve areas of historical and cultural significance.

TO ACHIEVE THIS, WE WILL:

- Strategy 1: Consider climate resilience and vulnerability within the criteria used for sanctuary nomination and designation.
- Strategy 2: Build on efforts to identify and prioritize areas important for biodiversity, maritime and cultural resources, and climate resilience, and identify mechanisms to protect these places through networks of marine protected areas.
- Strategy 3: Examine ways to expand the National Marine Sanctuaries Act to broaden the types of designations and levels of protection throughout the National Marine Sanctuary System.

OBJECTIVE 2.2: Support community, Indigenous, state, federal, and international efforts to protect national marine sanctuaries and additional ocean and Great Lake places.

TO ACHIEVE THIS, WE WILL:

- Strategy 1: Support the community-based nomination process to broaden community leadership on marine conservation and ensure nominations reflect the nation's diverse communities and their needs.
- Strategy 2: Communicate the benefits of sanctuaries to increase awareness of and generate stronger nominations from a broad spectrum of communities.
- Strategy 3: Build and strengthen relationships with Indigenous communities to provide more opportunities for Indigenous-led and collaborative conservation.
- Strategy 4: Support international efforts to identify, designate, and manage marine protected areas, and protect shared species and habitats.

“These places represent the innovation, tenacity, and entrepreneurial spirit of generations of Americans.”

— Russ Green, Superintendent, Wisconsin Shipwreck Coast National Marine Sanctuary

GOAL THREE

INCREASE AND BROADEN PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR OCEAN CONSERVATION AND THE SANCTUARY SYSTEM

Broad and diverse public communication, education, interpretation, and engagement programs are key in the creation of effective, long-term and lasting protection, sustainable use, and enjoyment of ocean resources and the National Marine Sanctuary System.



OBJECTIVE 3.1: Use national marine sanctuaries as places to educate and engage the public in ocean and Great Lakes stewardship and climate action.

TO ACHIEVE THIS, WE WILL:

- Strategy 1: Enhance the protection of sanctuary resources by expanding and evolving education, communication, and engagement programs to inspire individual and community actions.
- Strategy 2: Use sanctuary education and outreach programs and visitor centers to highlight the value of sanctuaries and other MPA systems as solutions to climate impacts and other threats.
- Strategy 3: Engage with local communities through sustainable tourism, to enhance ocean stewardship and economic stability.

OBJECTIVE 3.2: Expand recognition and appreciation of the National Marine Sanctuary System.

TO ACHIEVE THIS, WE WILL:

- Strategy 1: Develop and implement a national communications strategy to increase awareness of the value of national marine sanctuaries and other marine protected areas.
- Strategy 2: Use partnerships to increase the visibility of the National Marine Sanctuary System and enhance education, communication, and engagement programs.
- Strategy 3: Develop collaborative interpretation strategies and use new technologies and media to inspire connection with and protection of sanctuaries.
- Strategy 4: Create a sustainable funding model for the National Marine Sanctuary System.

OBJECTIVE 3.3: Diversify engagement efforts.

TO ACHIEVE THIS, WE WILL:

- Strategy 1: Assess accessibility barriers and take action to increase equitable access to sanctuary recreation, products, and services.
- Strategy 2: Leverage and expand tools and partnerships to increase engagement, especially with Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), LGBTQ+, persons with disabilities, and other communities who are historically underrepresented or underserved.
- Amplify diverse voices including those of tribes and Indigenous communities and governments.

“ Investing in national marine sanctuaries is essential to engage the public in ocean conservation and promote their participation to protect these treasures.”

— Julie Bursek, Education and Outreach Team Lead, Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary

GOAL FOUR

DEEPEN UNDERSTANDING OF SANCTUARIES

A multidisciplinary, integrated approach to science is critical to the conservation, management, and sustainable use of the National Marine Sanctuary System.



Photo: Greg McFall/NOAA

OBJECTIVE 4.1: Increase and share our understanding of sanctuary resources.

TO ACHIEVE THIS, WE WILL:

- Strategy 1: Conduct baseline ecosystem and cultural resource assessments, characterization, and research to help inform management actions and prioritize research needs.
- Strategy 2: Use community science to help fill research and data gaps.
- Strategy 3: Promote and expand partnership research linked to sanctuary management needs.

OBJECTIVE 4.2: Track and predict conditions, trends, and threats across the National Marine Sanctuary System.

TO ACHIEVE THIS, WE WILL:

- Strategy 1: Develop a national natural and social science research agenda that addresses both the research needs of individual sanctuaries while also increasing the impact and effectiveness of research across the system.
- Strategy 2: Develop a consistent approach to monitoring that tracks resource conditions and trends, and supports analysis of management effectiveness for individual sanctuaries and the system.
- Strategy 3: Work with local communities and partners to co-produce knowledge to address management questions.

OBJECTIVE 4.3: Understand the uses and values of the National Marine Sanctuary System.

TO ACHIEVE THIS, WE WILL:

- Strategy 1: Assess historical, current, and future uses in the National Marine Sanctuary System.
- Strategy 2: Determine the economic and social values of natural, historical, and cultural resources across the National Marine Sanctuary System.
- Strategy 3: Evaluate the value of national marine sanctuaries in protecting special places and mitigating impacts of climate change and other stressors on sanctuary resources and communities.

“The only way to win the race to save this fast-changing world is to turn what science has taught us into conservation action, setting aside places where we take our foot off the gas and work in concert with the ocean’s intrinsic resilience to restore nature’s balance.”

— Steve Gittings, Chief Scientist, Office of National Marine Sanctuaries

GOAL FIVE

INVEST IN INFRASTRUCTURE TO MEET CURRENT AND FUTURE SYSTEM-WIDE NEEDS.

Protecting places requires an investment in infrastructure, technology, and tools to equip ONMS to understand, monitor, interpret, and protect the best of our nation's waters.



Photo: Matt McIntosh/NOAA

OBJECTIVE 5.1: Identify current and future infrastructure needs and opportunities.

TO ACHIEVE THIS, WE WILL:

- Strategy 1: Develop system-wide planning tools to identify current and future infrastructure needs.
- Strategy 2: Identify new technologies that could make our use of infrastructure more effective and efficient.
- Strategy 3: Prioritize infrastructure investment that reduces our negative impact on the environment.

OBJECTIVE 5.2: Implement infrastructure projects.

TO ACHIEVE THIS, WE WILL:

- Strategy 1: Prioritize investment in facilities, vessels, and operations that are needed to meet our changing work environment and mission requirements.
- Strategy 2: Form strategic partnerships to meet infrastructure priorities.



Photo: David Ruck/NOAA

GOAL SIX

ENSURE AN INCLUSIVE AND INNOVATIVE WORKPLACE.

Our people are our most important asset. Their commitment, competence, diverse perspectives, and creativity are vital to achieving our mission and making NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries a great place to work.



Photo: Sarah Fangman/NOAA

OBJECTIVE 6.1: Build a culture of collaboration, inclusion, equity, and respect.

TO ACHIEVE THIS, WE WILL:

- Strategy 1: Incorporate the principles of diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and justice throughout ONMS.
- Strategy 2: Create new opportunities for interdisciplinary and cross-system collaborations.

OBJECTIVE 6.2: Recruit and retain diverse staff, advisory council members, and volunteers that represent our communities and nation.

TO ACHIEVE THIS, WE WILL:

- Strategy 1: Develop and implement a hiring strategy that targets qualified individuals whose diverse backgrounds, experience, education, and skills will advance the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries' mission.
- Strategy 2: Retain our workforce by building and maintaining an inclusive workplace to further a sense of belonging among all staff.

OBJECTIVE 6.3: Invest in our people and build a workforce to tackle current and future challenges.

TO ACHIEVE THIS, WE WILL:

- Strategy 1: Ensure staff have the skills they need to effectively contribute to our mission and adapt to the changing needs of the National Marine Sanctuary System.
- Strategy 2: Provide opportunities for all members of our integrated workforce including preparation for roles in other MPA agencies and organizations.
- Strategy 3: Maximize the effectiveness of our volunteer force by increasing opportunities for and contributions of volunteers across the system.
- Strategy 4: Identify and evaluate potential innovative strategies to recruit and train a diverse MPA workforce that is equipped to address the management challenges of MPAs in the future.

“To be effective stewards of these significant natural and cultural resources, we must ensure our workforce reflects the communities in which we live, work, and play.”

— Anne-Marie Runfola, Senior Advisor, Office of National Marine Sanctuaries

TO DO SO, WE WILL:

- Create an environment that invites our staff and partners to be active participants in achieving our mission, objectives, and priorities.
- Prioritize the actions identified in existing planning documents that align with this strategy.
- Align revisions to sanctuary management plans and employee performance plans with the intent of this strategy.
- Use this strategy to guide future decisions, including resource allocation and staffing prioritization.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

A strategic plan must be put into action. The ideas, initiatives, and priorities in this plan are only of value when we collectively integrate them into our day-to-day activities throughout NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries.

We are committed to having our team and our partners recognize the goals set out in this plan and, more importantly, their role in helping to achieve them. We intend to track results, ensuring our actions are having the desired impact. We look forward to working with all of you to make this happen.





NATIONAL MARINE
SANCTUARIES