



Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary

Annual Accomplishments



Fiscal Year 2023

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Cover photo: Scuba divers from the Georgia Aquarium and Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary ascend from a research dive off the Georgia coast. Brandon Schleiger/NOAA

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From the Superintendent

Dear Partners and Friends,

On behalf of our incredible team at Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary, I am delighted to share what we have achieved throughout Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 towards meeting our management plan goals and objectives. FY2023 was a pivotal year for the sanctuary being the first full-year of post-COVID 19 operations and a transition to a new management paradigm. The acquisition of our incredibly capable research vessel (R/V *Gannet*), and opening of the Gray's Reef Ocean Discovery Center in Historic Downtown Savannah, GA have forever changed how the sanctuary engages with the community and carries out scientific research and monitoring activities. Once again, we were able to engage (in-person) with local communities, visitors to Savannah and sanctuary waters, and deliver impactful education and outreach programs and events.

In our new paradigm, we made great strides improving recognition and reach of our management organization including resource protection, scientific research and monitoring, education and outreach, and vessel and dive operation functions. We are striving to be a convener and leader in ocean conservation and management across the South Atlantic Bight from Cape Hatteras, NC to Cape Canaveral, FL and out to the Blake Plateau while conserving and protecting our important sanctuary resources. Engaging stakeholders across the region is critical to conserving and protecting resources within our national marine sanctuary and across the range of live-bottom habitats and highly-migratory species of fish, sea turtles, and marine mammals including the critically-endangered North Atlantic right whale.

Through collaborative efforts with scientists, local communities, and dedicated stakeholders, we've made significant strides to

- (1) maintain or improve the condition of all sanctuary resources,
- (2) increase the awareness of, and support for the sanctuary, and
- (3) advance collaborative and coordinated management to achieve objectives in our management plan.

This document highlights a few of our key accomplishments towards meeting these objectives and underscores our unwavering dedication to conserving and protecting Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary, connected habitats, and cultural values across the South Atlantic Bight.

We are grateful for the continued support from our dedicated partners, stakeholders, and our growing connection with the community we serve.



Stan Rogers, Superintendent

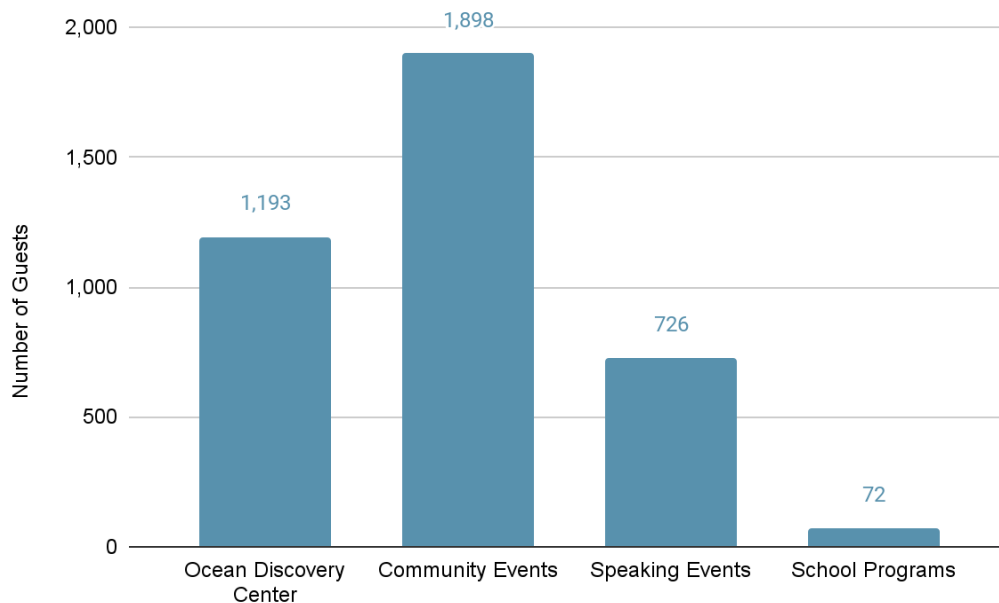
NOAA Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary

Education and Outreach

The education and outreach program of Gray’s Reef National Marine Sanctuary brings the wonders of the sanctuary’s habitats into the communities that steward them. Our mission dictated by the sanctuary’s management plan is *to enhance public awareness, understanding, sustainable use, and appreciation of the sanctuary, while connecting people to the unique resources of Gray’s Reef National Marine Sanctuary.*

By fostering a deeper understanding of marine ecosystems, biodiversity, and conservation principles, such programs empower communities across the southeast U.S. to actively engage in the protection and preservation of these ocean habitats. The Gray’s Reef Ocean Discovery Center in downtown Savannah, Georgia cultivates a sense of responsibility and environmental stewardship among the public through education programs. Outside partners, exhibits, public events, social media and a volunteer corps further bridges the gap between scientific research and the broader community, ensuring that the sanctuary’s goals and achievements are communicated effectively.

In 2023, education and outreach initiatives celebrated the first year of the Ocean Discovery Center, continued long-standing teacher workshops “Rivers to Reefs”, unveiled a new sanctuary website, established exhibits in local libraries, and attended ocean-focused public events. Throughout the year, over 3,800 guests learned about the sanctuary through Center visits, public events with virtual dives, invited speaking events, and K-12 school programs.



First full year of the Gray's Reef Ocean Discovery Center



Mary Quinn, Education and Outreach Coordinator leads a small group through the Ocean Discovery Center. Photo: NOAA

A year has passed since the dedication of the Gray's Reef Ocean Discovery Center, marking a milestone in our commitment to marine education and outreach. This moment gives us reason to celebrate the achievements of the past year and instills an even greater sense of anticipation for the future.

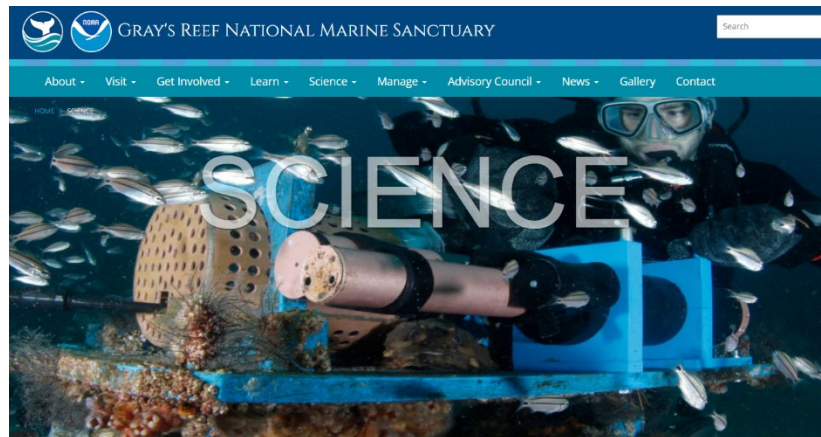
With the efforts of our center staff and volunteers, the Ocean Discovery Center now extends its welcome to the public every Thursday through Saturday from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm, providing a unique and engaging space that encourages learning and discovery. Admission to the center is free to ensure access for all members of our community. This inclusivity aligns with our broader mission to share the wonders of the marine world with as many people as possible, and foster a sense of connection and responsibility towards our oceans.

Throughout the year, the center has been a dynamic venue, hosting a variety of events that have enriched the experiences of our visitors. School groups have had the opportunity to delve into marine science through specially tailored programs, while summer camps have provided a platform for young minds to explore and appreciate the marine environment. The center has also been a gathering place for the sanctuary advisory council, facilitating discussions about the preservation and management of Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary. Additionally, our science symposiums have served as forums for the exchange of ideas and the promotion of scientific knowledge related to marine conservation.

Looking ahead, the Gray's Reef Ocean Discovery Center is poised to continue its vital role in marine education and outreach. In 2023 through our partnership with the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation, we invested \$800,000 in new and immersive exhibits for the center. The exhibits will be designed and fabricated in 2024 and installed during the winter of 2024/2025. We are eagerly anticipating a grand re-opening of the Ocean Discovery Center with these new exhibits. As we reflect on the accomplishments of the past year, we remain committed to fostering a deeper understanding of our oceans, inspiring a sense of stewardship, and nurturing a community that actively participates in the protection of our precious marine ecosystems.

[Plan your center trip today](#)

New website design



Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary is a catalyst for research. Universities, aquaria, state and federal researchers conduct studies inside and outside the sanctuary, utilizing the sanctuary's research area.

Gray's Reef is a representative area of natural, live-bottom habitat commonly found in the coastal southeast. Studies on coral growth, research on loggerhead sea turtles, and the long-term monitoring of fish populations help make informed management

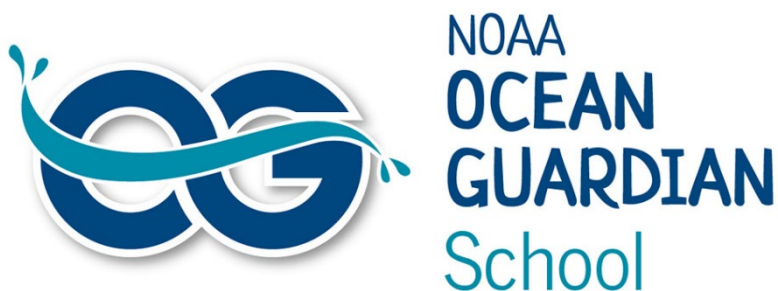
The refreshed sanctuary website focuses on sanctuary visitation, scientific research, resource protection, and multimedia. Photo: NOAA

The year started with a new digital face for the sanctuary. Part of the system-wide website redesign, the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries web team launched a freshly redesigned website for Gray's Reef. The new design aids explorers, divers, anglers, researchers, educators, volunteers, students, and others in learning about research, history, happenings, and resources in the sanctuary.

The goal of the redesigned website is to provide concise content and an accessible platform to foster a sense of unity among individuals with varied interests. By catering to the needs of a broad group of stakeholders, the sanctuary aims to empower and inspire a collective effort towards the preservation and appreciation of Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary. As we navigate this digital landscape, the redesigned website stands as a testament to the sanctuary's commitment to transparency, accessibility, and the ongoing journey of sharing the wonders of the sanctuary with the virtual world.

[Explore the website on your own](#)

Georgia's first Ocean Guardian School developed in partnership with Georgia Aquarium



NOAA's Ocean Guardian Schools advocate for ocean conservation that benefit sanctuaries and the world's oceans. Photo: NOAA

NOAA Ocean Guardian Schools make a commitment to the protection and conservation of its local watersheds, the world's ocean, and special ocean areas, like national marine sanctuaries. The Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary, and Georgia Aquarium entered into a partnership to establish Ocean Guardian Schools in the State of Georgia. In 2023, the sanctuary and Georgia Aquarium enrolled with the first two Georgia schools, Oglethorpe Charter in Savannah and McClesky Middle School in Atlanta. These two schools are the first in the state and committed to maintaining watersheds connected to Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary. Educators are the main drivers behind the success of the NOAA Ocean Guardian School program, often spearheading stewardship projects to ignite positive environmental change on campuses and in surrounding communities.

The NOAA Ocean Guardian Program extends beyond the classroom, incorporating various elements such as a youth ambassador program, kids club, dive club, and specialized classrooms. These initiatives serve to create a comprehensive network of environmental advocates who, through diverse channels, contribute to the overarching goal of preserving our oceans and promoting sustainable practices. In this way, the NOAA Ocean Guardian Program emerges as a holistic approach to environmental education, empowering young minds and fostering a collective sense of responsibility towards the well-being of our marine ecosystems. Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary and Georgia Aquarium will certify Oglethorpe Charter in Savannah and McClesky Middle School as official Ocean Guardian Schools in late summer 2024.

[Learn more about Ocean Guardian Schools](#)

Georgia Aquarium sponsors Rivers to Reefs teacher workshop



The Rivers to Reefs teacher workshop brings teachers on an adventure from the headwaters of the Altamaha River near Atlanta, Georgia to the coastal salt marshes. Photo: NOAA

In July, 16 science teachers from Title I schools across Georgia embarked on a week-long workshop connecting rivers of Georgia's Piedmont to ocean habitats hundreds of miles east. The Rivers to Reefs program was developed by Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary in 2010 immersing teachers in a free six-day, jam-packed teacher's workshop of fantastic field experiences and empowering classroom lessons. Through river canoeing, marsh treks, and ocean expeditions, the workshop begins in Atlanta with a visit to the Georgia Aquarium's Learning Loop. This year, the sixteen participants followed the course of the Altamaha Watershed from its headwaters near the Georgia Aquarium to Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary with numerous field experiences along the way. Once on the Georgia coast, the University of Georgia Marine Extension and Georgia Sea Grant hosted the teachers to coastal rivers and marsh tours. Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary couldn't show the teacher the reef in person, but provided a segment about ocean currents from Georgia's coastal rivers, ongoing research on microplastics, and sea turtle Arc StoryMaps hosted by the sanctuary. In 2024, the sanctuary will have the capability to host two Rivers to Reef Workshops aboard the R/V *Gannet*!

[Additional teacher resources](#)

Gray's Reef returns to community events



Georgia Department of Natural Resources hosts the annual CoastFest in Brunswick, Georgia. This is the first year since the COVID-19 pandemic that Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary attended the event giving away commemorative posters and letting guests explore the sanctuary through virtual dives. Photo: Ben Prueitt/NOAA

Throughout the year, sanctuary volunteers and staff reconnected with the community by participating in a variety of events, engaging with a diverse audience of over 1,800 individuals. These events provided unique opportunities for attendees to explore virtual dives, collect commemorative posters, and deepen their knowledge about the sanctuary's ecological significance. Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary attended the Savannah Boat Show, Georgia DNR's CoastFest in Brunswick, BugFest at the Savannah Children's Museum, Earth Day in Savannah, Skidaway Marine Science Day, and the Hope Summit in Charleston, South Carolina.

Attending these events represents a strategic partnership with community organizations that share a vested interest in environmental conservation. These collaborations play a pivotal role in fostering public awareness, appreciation, and the sustainable use of the sanctuary's resources. Through these booths and events, the sanctuary staff and volunteers effectively communicated the importance of preserving marine ecosystems and underscored the role that each individual can play in ensuring the long-term health of Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary. These types of outreach not only served as platforms for education but also as forums for building lasting connections with the community, cultivating a shared commitment to the stewardship of our oceans.

[Volunteer at an upcoming event or the Ocean Discovery Center](#)

Resource Protection and Management

Resource protection is at the heart of national marine sanctuaries and ocean conservation. Resources being the rocky foundation, ocean life, and waters located in (or moving through) the sanctuary all reserve protections under the National Marine Sanctuaries Act. Through the sanctuary management plan, resource protection goals include:

- *protect, maintain, restore, and enhance the natural habitats, populations, and ecological processes in the sanctuary;*
- *coordinate with federal, state, and local governments, international organizations, and other public and private interests to develop and implement plans to protect the marine environment and the sanctuary, and encourage the conservation of these resources;*
- *allow uses of the sanctuary not prohibited pursuant to other authorities, and consistent with resource protection.*

Over the last decade, sanctuary resources and environmental conditions have changed, creating new challenges and requirements for protecting resources and facilitating compatible use. At the same time, new tools for effective management have emerged, driven by scientific advances, technological innovation, and new partnerships. A re-evaluation of requirements and approaches, both current and future, will ensure that the sanctuary and its partners are making the most effective use of programmatic resources. Public engagement is central to NOAA's community-based approach to managing sanctuaries.

Assessing sanctuary health through the condition report



Scott Kathey, Resource Protection Coordinator, summarizes one of the conditions of the sanctuary in front of an expert panel. Photo: Ben Prueitt/NOAA

Knowing the current state of the sanctuary is a key factor as the management plan review process approaches. This assessment lays the foundation for informed decision-making and effective conservation strategies. In a collaborative effort involving sanctuary researchers, stakeholders, and educators, a comprehensive three-day workshop was conducted to compile data from numerous health markers. The workshop served as a hub of knowledge exchange,

bringing together the expertise of over 55 regional professionals representing government agencies, academia, businesses, and non-governmental organizations.

The workshop's primary objective was to gather insights into the sanctuary's overall health by evaluating a plethora of indicators. These health markers covered a broad spectrum of ecological, biological, and environmental parameters. Through presentations, participants delved into the intricate details of these markers, sharing their findings and observations eventually rating each with a status and trend rating. This inclusive approach facilitated a holistic understanding of the sanctuary's status, allowing for a multidimensional analysis that considered various perspectives and areas of expertise.

The diverse assembly of regional experts contributed to a rich discussion on the sanctuary's condition, offering valuable perspectives on its ecological trends and overall well-being. Their collective expertise, drawn from different sectors, not only ensured a comprehensive evaluation but also fostered a collaborative environment where participants could share knowledge, exchange ideas, and collectively draw conclusions. As the sanctuary prepares for the management plan review, the outcomes of this workshop stand as a robust foundation, providing essential insights that will inform decision-makers, guide conservation efforts, and shape the future direction of the sanctuary's management strategies. Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary anticipates finalizing and publishing the condition report in late 2024 or early 2025 ahead of scoping for management plan and regulatory review.

[Read more about the condition report process](#)

Sanctuary Advisory Council

The Gray's Reef Sanctuary Advisory Council is a community-based advisory group that provides advice and recommendations to the superintendent of the sanctuary on issues like management, science, community engagement, and stewardship. Advisory Council involvement plays a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary, fostering collaboration between stakeholders and contributing to the achievement of key milestones. The Council facilitated educational and outreach, scientific research and monitoring initiatives, and resource protection, underscoring its dedication to preserving the important marine environment of Gray's Reef.

One noteworthy Council initiative was the establishment of the 30X30 Working Group. This group played a crucial role in aligning the sanctuary's objectives with the Executive Order "Conserving and Restoring America the Beautiful" and the Administration's goal of conserving 30% of the US lands and oceans by 2030. By leveraging expertise and diverse perspectives, the Council offered suggestions of how Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary may contribute to this goal and principles of the executive order.

A significant development within the Advisory Council's structure is the appointment of a new chair, Russel Kent. Kent has served on the Council as Conservation seat since 2022. The new chair brings fresh perspectives and a wealth of experience in the coastal southeast to guide the council in its efforts. This transition not only reflects the dedication of individuals to the

sanctuary's mission but also signifies a commitment to adaptability and innovation in addressing evolving challenges.

Furthermore, the Council actively engaged with the United States Coast Guard (USCG) Auxiliary Air Overflights to enhance the monitoring and protection of Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary. By collaborating with the USCG Auxiliary, the council ensures greater coverage and understanding about the use of sanctuary resources by boaters, fishers, and divers. This collaboration highlights the importance of interagency cooperation in safeguarding marine sanctuaries. Through these initiatives, the Sanctuary Advisory Council continues to be a driving force in guiding Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary toward a sustainable and resilient future.

[Contact your SAC representatives with your ideas](#)

New sanctuary staff



Mary Quinn, Katie Sandefur, George Poole, and Kathy Liu joined the Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary staff in 2023. Photos: Ben Prueitt/NOAA

2023 brought three new affiliate staff to support the sanctuary's mission. Mary Quinn assumed the role of Education and Outreach Specialist, bringing a wealth of experience and enthusiasm. In this capacity, Mary oversees the day-to-day operations of the Ocean Discovery Center, developing and implementing education and interpretive programs and coordinating a dedicated team of volunteers. Mary is poised to enhance sanctuary educational initiatives ensuring that visitors, students, and the community have access to engaging and informative programs that promote an appreciation of marine ecosystems.

Further supporting the Ocean Discovery Center is Katie Sandefur, Education Assistant at Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary. With a background in educational program development, Katie is well-equipped to contribute to the growth and enrichment of the sanctuary's educational offerings and interpretation. Her role involves implementing daily educational programs and providing interpretation of key themes and sanctuary resources to foster an environment of curiosity and learning for all those who engage with the Ocean Discovery Center.

Another critical addition to the sanctuary's team is Captain George Poole. Contracted through Cardinal Point Captains, Captain Poole brings significant maritime expertise as the Captain of the R/V *Gannet* and the R/V *Sam Gray*. Captain Poole's role is instrumental in facilitating research and monitoring, and educational expeditions, ensuring the safe and effective operation of sanctuary vessels and dive missions, and contributing to the overall success of the sanctuary's offshore mission.

Lastly, Kathy Liu, serves as the 2023-2024 Georgia Sea Grant Fellow—the fifth year Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary has hosted a fellow in partnership with the Georgia Sea Grant Program. This position supports the sanctuary research, resource protection, and education and outreach initiatives while providing an immersive and challenging learning environment for the fellow. These new staff elevate Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary mission towards marine conservation, education, and community engagement.

[Meet our staff](#)

Mapping and characterization of benthic habitats

The sanctuary's ocean mapping effort plays a crucial role in understanding and managing the diverse marine ecosystems across the South Atlantic Bight. Gray's Reef National Marine sanctuary is located on the continental shelf of the Bight that extends from Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, to Cape Canaveral, Florida. It's important for sanctuary managers and researchers to know the locations of similar bottom habitats and the ecological connectivity between this extensive area as well as the overall health.

In 2023, Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary mapped 31 square miles outside of the sanctuary. The importance of mapping and characterizing seafloor habitats in the region lies in the valuable insights it provides for ecosystem management and ecological connectivity and contributes to the U.S. goal of mapping the United State's Exclusive Economic Zone. Underwater mapping technologies create detailed maps that highlight the distribution and composition of the seafloor, and provide ocean scientists with a snapshot of where new studies

may be advantageous. This information is essential for understanding significance of different areas, identifying critical habitats for vulnerable species, and assessing the role of ocean currents and tides on the seascape. Effective management strategies can then be developed to mitigate potential threats and preserve the biodiversity and productivity of the South Atlantic Bight. Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary further leverages mapping data to generate habitat classification maps

Future activities will continue to make progress towards the NOMECS strategy (National Strategy For Mapping, Exploring, And Characterizing The United States Exclusive Economic Zone) to map and explore the entirety of the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (200 miles from all coasts). Technological advancements have allowed researchers to collect high-resolution data to later be processed into viable bottom maps. This progress not only contributes to scientific knowledge but also supports sustainable resource management practices, ensuring the long-term health and resilience of the marine environments within the South Atlantic Bight.

[Discover technologies used at Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary](#)

Scientific Research and Monitoring

The scientific research and monitoring program aims to enhance the understanding of the sanctuary's complex ecological processes and dynamics. By employing comprehensive scientific methodologies, including data collection, characterization, and continuous monitoring, the program seeks to provide valuable insights into the sanctuary's environmental conditions. With these initiatives, the sanctuary's research and monitoring aligns with the management plan goal *to support, promote, and coordinate scientific research, characterization, and long-term monitoring to enhance the understanding of the sanctuary environment and processes and improve management decision-making for optimal sanctuary resource protection.*

First annual science symposium



The legacy of scientific research at Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary stretches back over 40 years. In October, we convened scores of researchers for a two-day symposium addressing the ongoing research and future priorities of the sanctuary. This exchange, discussion, and sharing is a vital part to the scientific process and strengthens the effectiveness of studies conducted in and around the sanctuary.

The inaugural symposium convened researchers and students who studied Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary as early as 2003, exemplifying the long-term monitoring happening in the sanctuary. Presented research included ocean acidification, predator-prey relationships in fishes, ocean currents, artificial reefs, ocean gliders, microplastics, North Atlantic right whale monitoring, and ocean sound topics.

The symposium not only served as a platform for sharing current research but also as a nexus for cultivating interdisciplinary collaborations. By bringing together experts with various specialties, the event catalyzed cross-pollination of ideas and methodologies. This dynamic exchange not only fortified ongoing investigations but also sparked innovative approaches to

tackle emerging challenges facing Gray’s Reef National Marine Sanctuary. As the legacy of research continues to evolve, the symposium stands as a time to synthesize our current understanding, and plan for future conservation of sanctuary’s marine ecosystems for the benefit of present and future generations.

[Discover the sanctuary’s research](#)

NOAA Ship Nancy Foster expedition–2023



The NOAA Ship Nancy Foster science party composed of researchers and divers from seven different organizations. Photo: Allan Quintana/NOAA

Each summer, Gray’s Reef National Marine Sanctuary invites researchers aboard the NOAA Ship Nancy Foster for a multi-day research expedition in the South Atlantic Bight. This year’s expedition focused on exploring live-bottom habitats outside of the sanctuary’s boundaries. Partners from the Georgia Aquarium dive team, University System of Georgia, and NOAA explored 34 areas collecting video transect, species surveys, and ledge shape measurements.

Central to the mission was the commitment to contribute to the long-term goal of mapping 100 percent of the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone. This strategy gained momentum as the NOAA Ship Nancy Foster mapped over 31 square miles of the Atlantic Ocean and eastern continental shelf. The mapping effort advances the understanding of the marine habitats within the South Atlantic Bight. By extending the scope beyond the sanctuary’s boundaries, the researchers aimed to provide a more holistic perspective on the ecological connectivity in the region, contributing valuable insights to the broader scientific community.

The partnership between various agencies during this expedition exemplifies the importance of collaboration in advancing marine science across the southeast US. The inclusion of expertise from the Georgia Aquarium dive team, the University System of Georgia, and NOAA ensured a multidisciplinary approach, enriching the quality of the studies. The synergy between these organizations not only facilitated the execution of various research tasks but also laid the groundwork for future collaborative initiatives.

[Explore our past Research Expeditions](#)

Vessel and Dive Operations

Vessel operations and scuba diving provide Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary the ability to maintain equipment, study seafloor habitats, and manage and protect sanctuary resources. The sanctuary's fleet now consists of the 52' research vessel (R/V) *Gannet*, and the 36' R/V *Sam Gray* conducting scientific research and resource protection missions in the sanctuary. These operations support all aspects of the sanctuary's management plan, in particular to dedicate appropriate infrastructure and resources to support all programs, including the creation of models and incentives for conservation of sanctuary resources, and the development of innovative management techniques.

R/V Gannet (R5202) acquisition



The R/V *Gannet* brings versatility and range to scientific research, education, and resource protection in the South Atlantic Bight and coastal southeast US. Photo: Ben Prueitt/NOAA

The research vessel (R/V) *Gannet* is a 52-foot NOAA class III boat that brings a new era of ocean research, monitoring, education, and discovery to the southeast U.S. On Saturday, Feb. 10, 2024, the sanctuary dedicated the research vessel *Gannet* with support from NOAA Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, National Marine Sanctuary Foundation, and Skidaway Institute of Oceanography.

The aluminum hull boat designed to serve the mission of Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary and partners. The vessel is designed to deploy ocean monitoring instruments like underwater robots, ocean gliders, and seafloor sensors. It can also support science diving operations and the exploration of new seafloor habitats on the continental shelf. The *Gannet* can accommodate 15 passengers for scientific research, educator workshops or student day-trips.

The R/V *Gannet* comes at a critical time for NOAA and the Gray's Reef NMS team as significant investments are being made by NOAA and partners to map and characterize the Blake Plateau and deep sea corals, as well as increasing understanding of live-bottom habitats along the continental shelf. As with all sanctuary small boats, the R/V *Gannet* will contribute to our local blue economy through operations and maintenance, greater research and monitoring activities, as well as enhancing ocean literacy and education programs across the Southeast U.S.

[Learn about the sanctuary's vessel fleet](#)

Decommissioning the R/V Joe Ferguson



The research vessel *Joe Ferguson* (right) was first dedicated in 2002 to honor the tragic loss of the Sustainable Seas Expedition on September 11th, 2001. The original *Joe Ferguson* boat was decommissioned and a new *Joe Ferguson* boat (left) began her service to Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary in 2006. Photos: NOAA

The R/V *Gannet* replaces the R/V *Joe Ferguson* which was taken out of service in October 2023 after 17 years of service to the sanctuary. The *Joe Ferguson* operated regularly throughout her tenure providing for a versatile platform for scuba divers, underwater robots, uncrewed airplanes, among other missions.

The vessel was named after the late Joe Ferguson. Ferguson was the director of the National Geographic Society Education and Outreach Program. Ferguson and Ann Judge were accompanying three teacher-student pairs as part of the Sustainable Seas Expeditions from Washington, D.C. to Los Angeles, CA. The flight they were on—American Airlines Flight 77—was hijacked and flown into the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Ferguson was 39. The education expedition was on their way to Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary near Santa Barbara, CA. The Sustainable Sea Expedition explored Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary for two weeks in 1999. All students on the expeditions were sixth-grade students, 11 years of age.

Sanctuary amasses over 55 hours of dive time



Scuba divers completed 175 dives throughout the year, cumulatively collecting over 55 hours of dive time. Missions of these dives included equipment maintenance on the sanctuary hydrophone and receiver arrays, exploration of live-bottom habitats on the continental shelf and regular training. The sanctuary relies on volunteer divers, and reciprocity divers from the University System of Georgia. A new diving partnership came about this year with The Georgia Aquarium providing aquarium tank divers during the NOAA Ship Nancy Foster expedition. These volunteer and reciprocity divers accounted for 63% of all dives throughout the year.

As the sanctuary continues to rely on the dedication and expertise of its volunteer and reciprocity divers, these efforts highlight the significance of fostering a shared commitment to marine conservation. The synergy among these divers not only enhances the operational efficiency of the sanctuary's initiatives but also cultivates a deeper sense of stewardship and responsibility toward the marine environment. Looking ahead, the success of these endeavors serves as a testament to the power of community engagement in conserving the ecosystems of Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary.



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