



GRAY'S REEF NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY SANCTUARY PROGRAM REPORT



Reporting Period: December 2013 - February 2014

Sanctuary Advisory Council

Officers

Rick DeVictor, Chair, NOAA Fisheries Service
Southeast Regional Office Representative

Michael Denmark, Vice-Chair, Sport Fishing
Representative

Dr. Anna George, Secretary,
Conservation Representative

Other Non-government Members

Dr. Peter Auster, Living Resources
Research Representative

Dr. Scott Noakes, Non-living Resources
Research Representative

Capt. Warren Hupman, Charter/Commercial
Fishing Representative

Mary Conley, Conservation Representative

Randy Rudd
Sport Diving Representative

Emily Kroutil
K-12 Education Representative

Dr. Timothy Goodale, University Education
Representative

William O. Cliett
Citizen-at-large Representative

Christine Laporte
Citizen-at-large Representative

Government Members

Patrick Geer, Georgia Department of Natural
Resources, Coastal Resources Division
Representative

Suzanne VanParreren, Sapelo Island NERR
Representative - non-voting

LT Mike Mastrianni, U.S. Coast Guard
Representative - non-voting

Capt. Doug Lewis, Georgia Department of
Natural Resources, Law Enforcement
Division Representative - non-voting

Al Samuels, NOAA Office of Law Enforcement
Representative - non-voting

Dr. Charles Hopkinson, NOAA Sea Grant
Representative - non-voting

Jene Nissen, U.S. Navy Representative -
non-voting

Hot Off the Press

Welcome New Sanctuary Advisory Council Member!

Gray's Reef welcomes Peter Auster to the Sanctuary Advisory Council. Peter, a research partner with Gray's Reef, has been newly appointed to serve as the Living Resources Research Representative and will replace outgoing member Danny Gleason.

Resource Protection

Gray's Reef Draft Management Plan and Proposed Rule Released

Gray's Reef released a proposed new management plan, environmental assessment, and proposed rule which was published in the *Federal Register* on December 10, 2013 and was open for public comment through February 10, 2014. Three public meetings were held January 7-9 with no attendance but a few written comments were received. Through an evaluation of the 2006 management plan, current resource conditions and trends, protection issues, implementation of the research area, new technologies and emerging issues, public scoping and public awareness needs, the framework was set for the plan with consideration of recommendations received from the GRNMS Sanctuary Advisory Council.

Right Whale Ship Strike Protections to Continue

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) published its final regulation to continue measures that appear to be preventing mortalities of highly endangered North Atlantic Right Whales. Known as the "ship strike rule", the regulations require that vessels measuring greater than 65 feet in length slow to 10 knots in specific locations and at specific times of the year when right whales are likely to be present. The rule was slated to "sunset" on December 9. The Gray's Reef NMS Advisory Council deliberated extensively and sent comments in support of the proposal to continue the regulations. However, a petition has now been submitted to NMFS to exclude federally-maintained dredged entrance channels and pilot boarding areas for ports from New York to Jacksonville from vessel speed restrictions.

Right whales are the most endangered large whale and the coastal waters off Georgia and northern Florida are their only known calving grounds. Pregnant females migrate south from waters off New England and Canada in the winter months to give birth. There are an estimated 450 individual whales left in the population. Gray's Reef is within their calving grounds and portions of the sanctuary are in the seasonal management area where vessels must slow.

Sanctuary Superintendent News

Acting Sanctuary Superintendent George Sedberry has been active in meetings recently. At the quarterly meeting of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, he gave a presentation to the Snapper/Grouper Committee on the recommendation of a Marine Protected Areas Expert Workgroup to reduce bycatch of speckled hind and warsaw grouper. The Committee moved that the recommendations be reviewed by the Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel in the spring and the amendment to designate MPAs be released for scoping in August 2014.

George joined other experts in a review of the status of 465 species of fish in the Gulf of Mexico region at a meeting of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The panel reviewed existing data on natural history, distribution and abundance of these species and fisheries, management and conservation status of these fishes. Fish species were then assigned to specific IUCN categories (Extinct, Extinct in the Wild, Critically Endangered, Endangered, Near Threatened, Least Concern, Data Deficient or Not Evaluated). In light of potential disasters such as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and the invasion of Pacific lionfish in the Gulf, the goal of the IUCN is to better understand the chance of extinction for these species within the Gulf.

As the National Ocean Service co-chairman of the Southeast and Caribbean Focus Area Selection Team for NOAA's Habitat Blueprint, George is helping to lead the Team to select one or more habitat areas to include in the Blueprint, which will address the growing challenge of coastal and marine habitat loss and degradation to:

- support of sustainable and abundant fish populations for recovering threatened and endangered species
- protect coastal and marine areas and habitats at risk
- support resilient coastal communities
- increase coastal/marine tourism, access, and recreation

Supporting at least one of these five outcomes is a fundamental requirement for any candidate Habitat Focus Area. The Team will be refining these and additional selection criteria and will select areas in need of NOAA's attention for conservation or restoration.

George joined NOS Assistant Administrator Holly Bamford for a meeting with education and research staff at the Georgia Aquarium in Atlanta. NOAA and Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary have worked cooperatively with the aquarium to design and construct public displays and exhibits that highlight Gray's Reef, lionfish and other invasive species, North Atlantic Right Whales and ocean habitats of the South Atlantic. In addition, Gray's Reef and NOAA participate in several jointly-run workshops for educators on watershed connections to Gray's Reef, remotely-operated vehicles and ocean exploration. Aquarium scientists also briefed NOS staff on current research being conducted on marine mammals, including work on diseases and contaminant levels. Former NOAA Administrator Conrad Lautenbacher, a member of the Georgia Aquarium's Board of Directors, was in attendance for the briefing.

Outreach and Education

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY GRAY'S REEF NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY!

Gray's Reef is proud to reflect on a productive year for research and publications, education and outreach programming, and for new protective regulations proposed to our existing management plan. We would like to thank our Sanctuary Advisory Council for your continued support!

Cathy Sakas Retires from Gray's Reef

On January 31, 2014, Education Coordinator Cathy Sakas retired from her position following a highly productive 15 years with NOAA Gray's Reef NMS. Originally hired on as a marine educator for a short 18 month commitment, she transitioned into full-time federal employment as Education Coordinator on January 2, 2001. With great enthusiasm, Cathy describes her work at Gray's Reef; "It has been a terrific magic carpet ride and one that I never imagined would be so enjoyable! I always thought working for the federal government would be boring, with pushing a lot of paper, but much to my delight, my job has been anything but that!" Working collaboratively with colleagues around the world, and having forged necessary partnerships for Gray's Reef, she has developed and led high quality educational programming throughout her tenure. Impassioned for environmental education and armed with knowledge of our coastal wildlife and habitats, Cathy has inspired countless students, interns, colleagues and members of our community and has left her very special mark on each individual, prompting them to listen



carefully for their own unique call to action. Serving on many research and work dives at Gray's Reef as a NOAA scientific diver, she is further admired and respected in the marine science and dive community as a pilot of the submersible DeepWorker 2000 with Dr. Sylvia Earle and as an aquanaut in the underwater Aquarius Habitat in 2001. As is quite obvious, Cathy has a rare collection of fascinating stories which she will happily share in marvelous, colorful detail with anyone interested in learning of her personal accounts and experiences.

Although Cathy's endearing smile and lovely voice will be dearly missed in the office since she has officially retired from NOAA Gray's Reef NMS, she is not likely to be found sitting in a rocking chair on the porch of her "Treehouse" quite yet. She will not only continue to work through contracts to produce documentaries, she will also be working independently to compose books and short stories and to teach classes and guide wilderness camping and paddling trips as a naturalist.

Contact Cathy via her home e-mail account at CathyJoSakas@gmail.com.

New Coastal Advocacy Group Beckons Our Attention and Collaboration

Gray's Reef Resource Protection Coordinator Becky Shortland and Communications and Outreach Coordinator Amy Rath attended a reception of "100 Miles", a new coastal advocacy group dedicated to working collaboratively with existing programs and agencies to support efforts to protect, preserve and enhance the Georgia coast by encouraging stewardship by its community members and visitors; advocating in politics to protect the natural, historic and cultural resources; offering constructive alternatives to development plans in sensitive habitats and promoting sustainable economic development; pushing for the enforcement of environmental regulations and zoning laws; and providing scientific, technical and legal support to other organizations and advocates of the Georgia coast who may not have ready access to such expertise.

For more information: <http://www.onehundredmiles.org/about-100-miles/>



Gray's Reef staff attended 50th Anniversary of the Coast Guard Air Station Savannah

Gray's Reef NOAA Corps Officers LTJG Chris Briand and LTJG Jared Halonen and Communications and Outreach Coordinator Amy Rath attended the celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the Coast Guard Air Station Savannah in commemoration of five decades of the search and rescue efforts of these Low Country Life-Savers.

Gray's Reef representatives spoke with the Commanding Officer of Air Station Savannah CDR Greg Fuller and Operations Officer and Chief Pilot CDR Louie Parks about the potential continuation of over-flight

operations for monitoring activity in the sanctuary and met briefly with Rear Admiral John Korn, the honored guest at the celebration, who serves as the Commander of the Seventh Coast Guard District.

We recognize that partnerships, such at this one, are instrumental for effectively accomplishing our missions in our current economic climate.

Gray's Reef Education Team Educates Middle and High School Youth in Marine Science and Technology

The education and outreach team has been active in informal education programming, engaging thousands of students and directly mentoring three high school interns in just the past few months. From phytoplankton monitoring with the environmental sciences program at Islands High School to ROV clubs at the new STEM Academy in Savannah, Georgia and the Mayport Coastal Sciences Middle School in Jacksonville, Florida, the education-outreach team has been reaching out to students with mentorship opportunities, to spark enthusiasm for upcoming Gray's Reef Southeast Regional MATE ROV Competition, to guide identifications of microscopic marine algae, and to increase students' knowledge of and involvement in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.



In cooperation with Savannah State University, Gray's Reef staff have further extended their reach to our youth in the region through participation in events such as GIS Day, an event that introduces GIS education to our local school children and promotes the capabilities and use of GIS to the general business community, and the Regional Science and Engineering Fair.

Rain Barrel Workshop and Donations

After attending a workshop to learn to construct rain barrels, Gray's Reef staff put their finished products to use in local gardens at the Oatland Island Wildlife Center and the Starfish Garden in Savannah, Georgia. We encourage the use of rain barrels to capture rainwater from rooftops which reduces excess run-off and provides a free source of non-potable water for use in gardening, lawn care, car washes, etc. This effort is just one of several new partnership opportunities in conversation with Oatland Island Wildlife Center.



Celebrating the North Atlantic Right Whale

Gray's Reef staff were proud to share information about Right Whales with the community of Jacksonville Beach in Florida at the 2013 Right Whale Festival to celebrate the southward migration of North Atlantic Right Whales along the eastern coast of North America. We support these Right Whale Festivals not only because we care about the health and protection of Right Whales but also because the waters off the coast of Georgia and Florida are the only known calving grounds for the North Atlantic Right Whale!

Gray's Reef is coordinating the upcoming "Farewhale Festival" on Tybee Island, Georgia in March 2014 to again celebrate and educate our community about the whales as they make their way back to the North Atlantic!

Marine Operations

GRNMS Vessel Operations have had 0 days at sea due to both vessels being down for repairs. The R/V Joe Ferguson has been down since the end of FY13 with a catastrophic failure on the starboard engine. Securing funds during this period has been difficult. Funds were secured in January 2014 through the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation and efforts are moving forward to repair the engine with hopes to be operational by mid-March. In December of 2013 the R/V Sam Gray developed a hole in the hull under the fuel tank due to corrosion. Some funds have been allotted for partial repairs but the hopes are that more funds can be secured in order to perform more thorough repairs that will significantly increase the usable life span of the vessel. The hopes are that R/V Sam Gray will become operational by mid-March if funds are secured.

Gray's Reef NOAA Corps Officer is Now Divemaster

After completing the two week NOAA Divemaster training course in Key West, Florida, LTJG Jared Halonen is now qualified to lead dive operations at Gray's Reef.

NOAA Gray's Reef is Called Upon for Vessel Support in a FBI Training Exercise to Prepare for Maritime Acts of Terrorism

In the event of an actual emergency, Gray's Reef marine operations may be called upon to assist in transport of response personnel. We understand that extending a hand across agencies for maritime training allows us to provide support while keeping our vessel crew proficient in vessel operations.



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The Office National Marine Sanctuaries

The Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary is one of 14 marine protected areas in the National Marine Sanctuary System. The Office of National Marine Sanctuaries (ONMS) was established under the National Marine Sanctuaries Act of 1972 which authorizes the Secretary of Commerce to designate as national marine sanctuaries areas of the marine environment or Great Lakes with special national significance due to their conservation, recreational, ecological, historical, scientific, cultural, archeological, educational, or aesthetic qualities. Visit the ONMS web site at: <http://www.sanctuaries.nos.noaa.gov/>

Learn More about Your Sanctuary

To learn more about the sanctuary please visit our web site at:
<http://graysreef.noaa.gov/>.

To learn more about the Sanctuary Advisory Council please visit:
<http://graysreef.noaa.gov/management/sac/welcome.html>

Visit Your Sanctuary!

For information on visiting Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary please see:
<http://graysreef.noaa.gov/visit/welcome.html>

This page has information about visitor centers, sanctuary regulations, and recreation in the sanctuary, and about the sanctuary's unique resources and how you can help protect them.