



GRAY'S REEF NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY ADVISORY COUNCIL WEBINAR – JANUARY 31, 2018

Sanctuary Advisory Council (SAC) Attendees

Michael Denmark, Chair
Scott Noakes, Vice-chair
Mona Behl, Secretary
Peter Auster
Mary Conley
Rick DeVactor
Pat Geer
Anna George
Monique Gordon
Tim Henkel
Warren Hupman
Capt. Bob Lynn
Kevin Mitchell
Jene Nissen
Mark Padgett
Suzanne VanParreren

SAC Members Absent

LT Warren Fair
Tim Tarver

Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary (GRNMS), and Office of National Marine Sanctuary (ONMS) Staff

Chris Hines
Elise Georgeff (GRNMS Intern)
Jody Patterson
Kim Roberson
Becky Shortland

Public in Attendance

Lemuel Patterson
Tom Wright

Incoming council chair Michael Denmark called the Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary (GRNMS) Advisory Council meeting to order at 2:00 PM with a roll call of attendees. He welcomed members, staff and public in attendance. Michael recognized the members of the outgoing Executive Committee and thanked them for their service and welcomed Jessica White as Acting Superintendent of GRNMS. Michael briefly reviewed the agenda and outlined the meeting objectives. The November 29, 2017 SAC webinar summary was unanimously approved with no changes, although Peter Auster later noted some omissions from the summary (*see page 2, Visitor Use Letter*).

Debrief of SAC Chair Summit – Michael Denmark provided a summary of the annual meeting of the Sanctuary Advisory Council chairs from each of the 13 national marine sanctuaries. The summit was conducted in early January in San Francisco. This meeting presented an opportunity for Michael to meet the other SAC chairs and the members of the Marine Protected Areas Center (MPA Center) Federal Advisory Committee. Michael delivered two presentations during the meeting—one on GRNMS efforts centered on recreational fishing and the other on GRNMS visitor use data. During his first presentation, Michael highlighted the activities and achievements of the recreational fishing working group to date, outlined potential next steps that may be taken, and learned what other sanctuaries are doing on this front. In his second presentation, Michael provided an overview of the history behind the visitor use

letter, which was provided to the SAC chairs for review prior to Michael's talk. Michael found that this is a common issue among most sanctuaries that are further offshore. Michael's takeaway is that there is interest on the part of John Armor and the SAC chairs in having GRNMS continue this effort and develop strategies for the measurement and evaluation of visitor use. GRNMS could be used as a model for other sanctuaries as they work to better understand their own unique visitor use situations.

One of the major themes of the meeting was the importance of the "Blue Economy" and the significant economic and cultural importance of marine sanctuaries to their local and regional areas. Each sanctuary has been asked to factor in the need to demonstrate the value of our oceans to the greater community moving forward. Michael outlined how a better understanding of the number of visitors to Gray's Reef can be quantified and translated into the value of the sanctuary to the local economy. Peter Auster stressed that conservation and protection of the sanctuaries for mixed uses also has value, in addition to direct uses such as fishing. Mary Conley concurs and encouraged the group to think broadly on this issue, i.e. factoring in activities that take place outside of GRNMS, such as the film festival.

Visitor Use Letter – Chris Hines provided an update on the proposed visitor use letter. The impact of visitor use on GRNMS was initially discussed during the February 28, 2017 SAC meeting, where concern was expressed regarding the challenges inherent in identifying the degree of present and future human activity in GRNMS, any related impacts, and the identification of human-use and associated ecological indicators when patterns of use significantly impact GRNMS resources. As an output of subsequent SAC discussions and the efforts of the Science Advisory Group and a separate subcommittee charged with streamlining communication on this topic, a letter addressed to John Armor was drafted, reviewed, revised and ultimately approved by the SAC during the November 29 webinar. Chris informed the group that the letter was sent. John Armor responded quickly and positively, asking GRNMS to develop some proposals around this issue.

Peter Auster noted that the summary of the November webinar did not include comments from George Sedberry regarding potential funding resources available for further study of visitor use. Peter stressed that it is important to determine what the scope of funding will be before proposals are developed. Chris and Michael Denmark will follow-up with John Armor when he is in Savannah next week. Peter suggested that a phone call be scheduled following the discussion with John Armor so that the Science Advisory Group is fully informed and engaged. Kim Roberson offered to develop a draft document to help facilitate this call.

Peter also noted that some details regarding vessel identification systems and the retrieval of historical visitor use data were omitted from the same webinar summary. Chris and Kim stated that staff has been discussing these issues in depth and some ideas will be shared at the next meeting, including the availability and utility of satellite data and imagery available through other NOAA resources.

Pat Geer offered that the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) recently conducted an angler satisfaction survey that included questions about offshore fishing. Pat shared some preliminary results of the survey, during which 1965 recreational anglers were interviewed. The survey found that 27% of these anglers fished offshore. Of this 27%, 18% had fished at Gray's Reef an average of 5.7 days with a median of 3 days. This indicates that a little under 5% of the surveyed anglers are fishing at Gray's Reef. Pat noted that there are approximately 800,000 registered anglers in the state. The report will be finalized within the next several days and will then be available to the public. Pat will send the report to Chris Hines when available.

Kim Roberson thanked Pat for the information and said that the data will be very helpful. Pat responded that it's a good first step and the data collected will allow specific targeting of anglers utilizing Gray's Reef when future surveys are conducted.

Mary Conley asked if there are plans to include social ecology or other areas of expertise in these efforts, and if so, that potential partners in these areas should be included in the March meeting of the SAC. Michael offered that he

will share with Peter the names of people who have expressed an interest in helping. Kim suggested that she, Michael, Peter and Chris have an offline conversation about how to best prepare for the March meeting. Kim will take point on scheduling a call. Peter stressed that this discussion should take place soon so that any outside experts can be invited to attend as far in advance of the March meeting as possible.

SAC Action Plan - Chris Hines outlined the updates to the refined action plan. This action plan is a product of the SAC questionnaire that was completed by 13 SAC members in July/August of 2017. The initial plan was reviewed during the November 2017 SAC webinar, where several recommendations for refinement were made, and the document was updated accordingly. Updates to the document include alignment with the GRNMS management plan and ONMS strategic plan, prioritization, notation of initiatives with the potential for the most benefit, and the addition of ecotourism engagement. Outstanding needs include review and critical feedback from SAC members and volunteers to lead priority initiatives. Council members should contact Chris with comments and to register interest in leading specific initiatives.

Council Working Groups

Recreational Fishing Working Group Update – Becky Shortland, reporting on behalf of Tim Tarver, provided an update on the recent activities of the Recreational Fishing Working Group, which is charged with finding better ways to communicate and promote collaboration with recreational fishing interests, raise awareness of GRNMS, enhance compliance, and obtain more visitor use information. The working group most recently met in early January to discuss two key areas of focus: the development of the recreational fishing video(s) and engagements/workshops with fishing groups. These workshops are intended to foster relationships between GRNMS and anglers, to better understand the needs of the recreational fishing community, and to expand knowledge and use of descending devices. In support of the last objective, Warren Hupman and Georgia DNR made a video of three different descending devices and identified one device (the SeaQualizer) as the most promising for use by recreational anglers. Warren stated that the SeaQualizer was deemed superior because it actually grabs the fish, is versatile and easy to use, and can be used with a fishing pole. He also noted that it was the most expensive of the 3 devices tested, at a price of approximately \$100 each.

The working group will develop a proposal for submission to the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation to request a portion of the settlement funds to support educational efforts and perhaps the distribution of descending devices to recreational anglers. The goal is to have funding in place and initiate the program by this summer. Michael Denmark will contact the working group regarding a potential opportunity for collaboration with Yamaha Motors.

Law Enforcement Working Group Update – Ben Hughes of NOAA Office of Law Enforcement informed the group that he is aware of 2 recent patrols at GRNMS. Ben joined Georgia DNR on one of these, during which they found one vessel that had intended to go to Gray's Reef but abandoned the trip due to engine trouble. This same vessel was cited for 6 undersized sea bass found onboard. A separate DNR patrol encountered a different vessel at GRNMS with undersized sea bass. Ben recently met with the commanding officer of the Coast Guard cutter *Chinook*. They discussed the potential for the *Chinook* to spend several consecutive days at Gray's Reef. Ben feels this is likely to happen.

In addition to the two incidents above, Ben reported that there have been many cases of undersized sea bass in the area. This may be due to the transition to the new Fish Rules app, which is somewhat more complicated to use. Educational efforts are being employed with anglers to address the learning curve. Ben also reported that there was a right whale case in South Carolina where prohibited gear was positioned past the ColRegs line. NOAA Law Enforcement participated in a week-long operation in Charleston with the Coast Guard checking grouper catches of commercial boats. Ben also noted that Georgia DNR conducted several patrols during the government shutdown and found that the fishermen they encountered were surprised to see them. Three cases were made that day.

Captain Bob Lynn of Georgia DNR Law Enforcement reported that 7 patrols were conducted at GRNMS from July through December 2017. During these patrols 11 vessels and 37 people were checked. There was one case at GRNMS and it has been referred for prosecution.

Other Business

Update on Outer Continental Shelf Oil and Gas Leasing Program – Chris Hines kicked off this topic with a bit of background information. The initiation of the development process for a new national outer continental shelf program is managed by the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) and it is a key aspect of the implementation of the America First Offshore Energy Strategy authorized by an executive order signed by the president on April 28, 2017. A recent draft proposed program released on January 4 includes 47 potential lease sales in 25 of 26 planning areas, including 9 in the Atlantic region. The public comment period on this proposal is now open and will close on March 9. This 60-day window represents the first of two public comment periods in the process. The second, which will be open for 90 days, follows publication of the draft environmental impact statement.

Becky Shortland explained that the previous administration had exempted the South Atlantic from any oil or gas leases. Under the most recent executive order, the South Atlantic is once again open for exploration. There are currently three options being considered by BOEM: 1) lease all areas with no conditions for conservation measures or any coastal buffers (BOEM's preferred option); 2) elimination of some canyon areas; 3) some conservation conditions and a 25-mile coastal buffer (reduced from the 50-mile buffer which was the previous standard). Seismic testing would precede the issuance of any leases and the National Marine Fisheries Service is currently considering permits for "harassment" of marine mammals. Becky noted that exploration and production of oil, gas, and minerals is prohibited within all marine sanctuary boundaries.

Becky stated that there is strong and wide-spread opposition to the proposal from an array of constituencies, including municipalities, fishing groups, fishery managers, conservation organizations, and private citizens. In addition, many sanctuary advisory councils have submitted or are considering submitting letters in opposition of this plan. Becky stated that over 47,000 public comments have been received to date. BOEM has scheduled one public input meeting in the capital of each coastal state. The meeting for Georgia is in Atlanta on February 28 and the South Carolina meeting will take place in Columbia on February 13. Peter Auster noted that registration is required for these meetings.

After group discussion, the SAC members in attendance unanimously voted to develop a letter for submission during public comment period. A small subcommittee consisting of Peter Auster, Mona Behl, Mary Conley, Michael Denmark, Scott Noakes, and Mark Padgett will develop two drafts of the letter. One will register concern for the waters around the sanctuary and the other will be in full opposition to any exploration or drilling in the planning area. Becky will provide the subcommittee with copies of letters developed by other sanctuaries as a point of reference. An emergency meeting of the SAC, which must be open to the public, will be scheduled in February to discuss the letters and determine which to submit via a majority vote. The two versions of the letter will be submitted to the SAC members in advance of this meeting. SAC members who are affiliated with state or federal agencies may not be able to be signatories to the letter.

2017 Hurricane Season – Given the recent active hurricane seasons, Mona Behl asked if the SAC should consider developing an action plan for GRNMS following significant weather events, i.e. an impact assessment that would take place following a hurricane to evaluate factors such as water quality and marine debris. Mary Conley stated that this was a topic of conversation during the recent climate vulnerability workshop. This may be a topic of interest during the upcoming meeting of the Science Advisory Group (SAG). Mona will discuss further with Peter Auster, Scott Noakes, and Kim Roberson in preparation for the SAG meeting.

Other – Peter Auster expressed concerns regarding two pieces of pending legislation related to the reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act—H.R. 200 and S.B.1250. Peter wondered if NOAA has had any consultation on these bills and if there is any interest among the SAC members in submitting comments before the bills reach the floor for a vote, which could be soon. Rick DeVictor stated that NOAA Fisheries does not have an official stance on the legislation, but that the regional fishery councils have provided comments. Peter will forward copies of the 2 bills to Becky to distribute to the SAC. Mary Conley recommended that if the SAC is to take a more active role in legislation a subcommittee be formed to monitor legislative initiatives and develop standards for how to address.

Council Member Reports

NOAA Fisheries Update –Rick DeVictor informed the group that an amendment that would open red snapper to harvest in 2018 is in the decision and rule making process. Regulations would be the same as in the past—a commercial trip limit of 75-lbs gutted weight and recreational limits of 1 fish per person on weekends only. If implemented, these regulations would go into effect in July. Two exempted permit requests for lionfish have been received for areas off the Florida and South Carolina coasts. One proposal, submitted by a Florida-based fishing group, would test 4 trap designs currently used for spiny lobsters and would include an education and outreach component to teach the public about the invasive nature of lionfish. The other, submitted by Reef Savers, is for the deployment of 5,000 purse traps over 2 years at depths of 90' to 500'. Both proposals are currently in a 30-day comment period. There was a death of a North Atlantic Right Whale off the coast of Virginia near North Carolina. A necropsy will be performed to determine the cause of death. Seventeen whales (4% of the population) have been lost in the last year.

Georgia Sea Grant – Mona Behl reported that Georgia Sea Grant graduate training program has a pool of funds available to any graduate student in Georgia who wants to conduct marine, coastal, or ocean science research. Georgia Sea Grant is currently seeking additional partners to contribute to this process. Also, Sea Grant has developed a briefing book for congressional outreach in March. One of the sections outlines regional partnerships and highlights partnership with NOAA and Gray's Reef.

Eco-tourism Initiative Update - Mark Padgett reported on the ongoing eco-tourism initiation, the goal of which is to encourage eco-tourism operators to include information about GRNMS in their various trips and programs. The group compiled a list of local eco tour operators and has contacted several of these. An information paper on GRNMS has been developed and will be shared with ecotourism partners. The goal is to encourage ecotourism operators to include information about GRNMS in their various trips and programs.

Speakers Bureau Update – Jody Patterson reported that there have been several talks over the past quarter. There are several upcoming talks, including one on March the 10 as part of the opening of the new Gray's Reef exhibit at the University Georgia MAREX Aquarium. Michael Denmark encouraged the SAC members to contact Jody if they are aware of any groups that might be interested in scheduling a presentation on Gray's Reef.

GRNMS Report

Superintendent's Report – Reporting on behalf of Acting Superintendent Jessica White, Chris Hines updated the group on the search for a new superintendent. The process is well underway with interviews of the 4 finalists scheduled for February 6 in Savannah. The new superintendent is expected to be in place this spring.

Research Area Report – Kim Roberson update the group on the Research Area Synthesis Report that is currently in development. It has been formatted, is currently undergoing some editing, and will soon be sent back out to the authors for review.

Gray's Reef Film Festival Week – Chris Hines provided an overview of the upcoming Gray's Reef Film Festival, which kicks off in Savannah on Thursday, February 8 with the Founders Reception hosted by the GRNMS Foundation. The event will feature two evenings of films at the Trustees Theater (February 9 and 10) and closes with an afternoon screening at the Tybee Post Theater on Sunday, February 11. In addition, over 500 local students attended a free screening of the films on January 30.

Next Meetings

An emergency meeting of the SAC will be scheduled within the next few weeks to address the letter concerning the outer continental shelf oil and gas leasing program. The next regularly-scheduled SAC meeting will be an in-person meeting on March 28 in Savannah, preceded by a meeting of the Science Advisory Group (SAG) on March 27. Potential topics for upcoming meetings include visitor use data, SAC action plan, and the need for a subcommittee focused on legislative issues.

Public Comment

- Tom Wright sees the national outer continental shelf program as a 2-step process. The first step is surveys and exploration to see what exactly is in each area and the second to obtain permits. Tom feels many people are in favor of the surveys to see what's there but are not at all supportive of oil and gas production.
- Tom Wright remarked on an interesting sighting of a Right Whale in the Gulf of Mexico, west of the Florida panhandle.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:12 PM.