

STELLWAGEN BANK NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY

FY16 Accomplishments

BACKGROUND

Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary was established in 1992 to protect and preserve one of the most biologically diverse ecosystems in the Gulf of Maine. Renowned for its biological diversity and remarkable productivity, the sanctuary is a critical feeding and nursery ground for several whale and dolphin species and has become one of the world's premier whale watching destinations.

Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary is part of the National Marine Sanctuary System, which is a network of underwater parks encompassing more than 600,000 square miles of marine and Great Lakes waters from Washington state to the Florida Keys, and from Lake Huron to American Samoa. National marine sanctuaries are managed for the conservation of their natural and cultural resources, while supporting sustainable recreation, tourism and compatible commercial activities. The network includes a system of 13 national marine sanctuaries and Papahānaumokuākea and Rose Atoll marine national monuments.





Photo: NOAA

A BOWW patrol provides guidance on safer boating around whales.



Photo: Anne-Marie Runfola, NOAA

Researchers spent long days and nights studying the habits and habitat of the sand lance.



Photo: Anne Smrcina, NOAA

Salt entranced Maritime Aquarium visitors during her January visit.

Reaching out to boaters to protect whales

A new program to inform recreational boaters about safe operation around whales, called Boater Outreach for Whale Watching (BOWW), involves non-confrontational on-the-water engagement between sanctuary staff and visitors. The desire to view whales up-close can lead to conflicts when small boats interfere with whale watch vessel operation. Close approaches compromise whale safety, causing behavioral disturbance and in some cases, vessel strikes. The program also allows for the commercial whale watch fleet to proactively report high traffic areas where dangerous conditions may arise if recreational boaters do not follow regional whale safety guidelines.

Studying a keystone species: sand lance

The sand lance is a small, abundant forage fish that supports much of Stellwagen Bank's biological productivity, including many commercially important fish species (such as bluefish and cod) and iconic whales. This little fish is the foundation of the ecosystem, but until recently not much was known about its life cycle, optimal habitat, spawning locations, or the effects of changing environmental conditions. This past year, the sanctuary led a team from U.S. Geological Survey, University of Connecticut, and Boston University to better understand the tiny fish that supports the economic and ecological value of Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary.

An inflatable whale gains widespread fans

A life-sized inflatable whale serves as one of the sanctuary's premier outreach tools. "Salt," named after the grand dame of the sanctuary's humpbacks, reached over ten thousand people in her first year of outings, making visits to The Maritime Aquarium in Norwalk, Connecticut, Boston Harbor Islands National Park during "Get Into Your Sanctuary Day," and a variety of schools and community centers to raise awareness of marine mammal conservation. The sanctuary partnered with the South Shore Natural Science Center, Bass Pro Shops, and NOAA Fisheries to acquire the model.

Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary Looking Ahead to FY17

- With *On the Water* magazine and the advisory council, the sanctuary will develop a campaign to celebrate recreational fishing on Stellwagen Bank, to engage and expand a key sanctuary user group.
- Autonomous underwater vehicles and moored stations will record sounds in the sanctuary, including whale vocalizations, sound from other marine species and noise from boats and other anthropogenic sources. This will provide better understanding of the regional acoustic environment.
- The sanctuary will work with NOAA Fisheries and National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science to produce a Condition Report in advance of preparing for a new management plan. This report will evaluate the status of natural and historical sanctuary resources.